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Sorrow, Blood and Tears as the Leitmotif in Contemporary Niger Delta: A Study of Selected Poems in Magnus Abraham-*Dukuma's Dreams from the Creeks*

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Abstract- African literary discourse has shown its inherent aesthetics by giving meaning to its contents. This aesthetics revolves around the experiences of Africans as a people, which include among others, their environment, culture, socio-political and economic marginalization. Dreams from the Creeks is aesthetically structured to resonate the many unheard voices of the down-trodden people of the Niger Delta who have been suffering from political and economic deprivation over the decades, coupled with the environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration and exploitation. The language is expressed to effectively portray the lifestyle of the people thus adding beauty to an emotive discourse as a way of giving an explicit meaning to the contents as a way of soothing the psychological pain inflicted on their psyche. As a Romantic poetry, it expresses the nostalgia of human being as a result of man's dislocation from Nature, or better still, mother Earth.

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Sorrow, Blood and Tears as the Leitmotif in Contemporary Niger Delta: A Study of Selected Poems in Magnus Abraham-Dukuma's *Dreams from the Creeks*

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Abstract- African literary discourse has shown its inherent aesthetics by giving meaning to its contents. This aesthetics revolves around the experiences of Africans as a people, which include among others, their environment, culture, socio-political and economic marginalization. *Dreams from the Creeks* is aesthetically structured to resonate the many unheard voices of the down-trodden people of the Niger Delta who have been suffering from political and economic deprivation over the decades, coupled with the environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration and exploitation. The language is expressed to effectively portray the lifestyle of the people thus adding beauty to an emotive discourse as a way of giving an explicit meaning to the contents as a way of soothing the psychological pain inflicted on their psyche. As a Romantic poetry, it expresses the nostalgia of human being as a result of man's dislocation from Nature, or better still, mother Earth.

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I. Introduction

Literature, it is assumed, has become the mouthpiece of the hopelessly marginalized people around the globe. It has also through its various "fragmented pieces", mirrored the different segments of a deprived society. *Dreams from the Creeks,* has beamed its searchlight on the pitiable living condition and the abuse of the entire Niger Delta region by those holding it by the jugular due to its economic viability. The unbridled desire by the *nouveau riche* Nigerians to exploit the 'black gold' which is the mainstay of the nation's economy has made the people of the region an endangered species due to environmental degradation. This has been aptly captured by committed writers who believe that natural resources in a region should rather be a blessing to the people instead of a curse. This paper is an effort to provide the reader with an ecological consciousness through an ecocritical study of Magnus Abraham-Dukuma's selected poetry to prove Bate's saying that "poetry is the place where we save the earth" (283). Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary texts which illustrate the environmental concerns are analyzed and examined in the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. It is the écopoetics approach which deals with the environmental and literary criticism

There have been avalanche of literary works from the Niger Delta region with direct focus on the destruction of the ecosystem. Like his contemporaries who themselves have decried the destruction of the ecosystem and environmental degradation due to oil exploration, Abraham-Dukuma's focus is on the social implications in terms of the people's reaction in the face of this " death by instalment". Other writers in the region have equally embraced the challenge, thereby producing works that form a tradition within the larger corpus of Nigerian literature in English just like the literature on the Nigerian civil war. For instance, the novelists: Chukwuemeka Ike, I.N.C Aniebo, Elechi Amadi, Kaine Agary; the poets: Ibiwar Ikiriko, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Obari Gomba and Sophia Obi have all produced provocative works in this tradition, the tradition that focuses on oil exploration and environmental pollution in the Niger Delta as issues of literary discourse. *Dreams from the Creeks* also lends a voice to the avalanche of artistic literary composition decrying the 'sorry' state of affairs in the oil-rich Niger Delta.

a) Sorrow, Blood and Tears in Abraham-Dukuma's Dreams from the Creeks

When we return to the concept of poetry and the usefulness or the uselessness of the poets to the private and public lives of the individuals, in line with Pato and Aristotle's views about poets, one may wonder whether poets and poetry could be of any use in the modern society. This will indeed bring us back to Bate's view that "poetry is where we save the earth".

The opening poem, "Invitation" is a tearful call for an eye-witness of the deplorable condition of the people who were once living a happy and fulfilled life despite their penury. But now those things that gave them life have been destroyed: the flora and the fauna. "Come, see the lacerations on these path/come, see the

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gruesome guests on these lands". The "eye-witness" is employed to do a fair and timely judgment of the situation, "A river of blood flows through these hearts, judge fairly and timely." "Witnesses" echo their observation:

We'e seen
We' heard
We've felt
We've smelt (15).

They came, saw, heard, felt and smelt what they were invited to witness. They witnessed a land devastated, lacerated, and poisoned. In line 3 of "Witnesses", there is a tone of hope; the very cherished attribute of every Niger Deltan – hope. This is expressed when they say:

We'll keep watching and waiting
For a haven of consolation,
For a music of salvation,
For a caress of fortune
For the breath of good air
We'll keep watching and waiting. (15)

But the question is how long are we going to keep watching and waiting when the people die daily from "poisoned rivers and poisoned air". The land that was once filled with the beauty of nature (flora and fauna) is now a mining field. "Mining field" is a dead and barren field. However, the "dead" field, because a mining field has no life in it, is an oil field for the exploiters, but of pain for the exploited. Two sets of people are found on the mining field: those who mine for liquid gold and those mining poverty:

Some are mining oil
Some have mined penury
Some mined pains
Some have mined rifts
Some have mined death
Some are mining dreams. (17)

"Mining Penury" has been the lots of the people of the region over the decades. Abraham–Dukuma in a flashback, chronicles the losses of the people which he describes as "countless shadows of stabs", "sour reminiscence of dead days" and "counted shadows of sad memories". "Chronicles" is a compendium of the natural beauties that was once the music and breath of the habitats, but now has been polluted through man's insatiable crave for wealth. Nature was inflicted with deep cuts, which left un-healing sores on the people psyche. A place that was once the virginity of space and pristine of beauty is now "shows of sad memories" because virtues are dead and vice borne.

Obari Gomba in "The World Has Cotton in Its Eyes" takes a look at the people of Niger Delta with deep feeling. He weeps for the children of Niger Delta (Oloibiri and Ogoni as symbols) that eat dust for food. But in Lagos, Abuja, Washington, and London, the same oil that results in the children eating dust "lubricates power and sex", while soldiers and hangmen become the agents of calm. And in the words of Alamieyeseigha, the region is the goose that lays the golden egg, "yet the Niger Delta remains pervasively poor and underdeveloped lacking virtually all forms of social amenities and infrastructure." This corroborates Sophia Obi's poem "Oloibiri" in which she describes Niger Delta, which Oloibiri represents as, "Desolate like a gloomy attire". In spite of all the atrocities committed against the people and the region, the poet does not call for anarchy amongst the oppressed, but rather a word of consolation for the soul and the mind. In "Weep not", the poet states:

Weep not my soul! Weep not!
Bleed not my heart! Bleed not!
Flow not my eyes! Flow not!
Burst not my mind! Burst not!
And for this evil done my land, weep not my soul…. (22)

Oloibiri, which is the centre of oil wealth in Nigeria is nothing but "a wealthy aged whore". More than fifty years after oil was first struck in Oloibiri, there is nothing to show that it actually laid the "golden egg"; it has no access to it, but in spite of these words of consolation, deluge of tears flood Oloibiri and run through the entire Niger Delta. In "Tears from Oloibiri", the poet creates a persona in Oloibiri to tell the world of all it has gone through as the consequence of oil exploration:

I am Oloibiri
I have lost my essence
I breathe a morbid hybrid air
Sores and death slyly stare
Legions had thronged to drink my milk.
Now I am ravished, forlorn, weak and sick. (35)

This is what happens to every mother who after several births and breast feeding is neglected by the children. While they wine and dine, the giver of such life is left in "squalor and filth", "decay and putridity". And so neglected she resigns to fate. "Ode to Oloibiri" portrays the pitiable condition and the total neglect visited on the historical home of the nation's wealth. The persona points out those injuries and injustices it has suffered over the years in spite of the "goose eggs" that are food for the nation and beyond, yet it is still "malnourished and pale" after being milked dry. The persona vows to tell one of the world's richest producers of oil, Qatar, what one of them is going through in Africa, that rather than enjoying a paradise on earth like Qatar, Oloibiri is a paradox:

I will tell Qatar your tale
I will tell her your paradox
I will tell your story
I will always remember you:
Qatar must be surprised

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She could weep for you too,
As I have wept daily. (40)

Qatar is a symbol of wealth and health, of fulfillment and proper utilization of natural resources. Qatar would be surprised that a region, which shares similar nature's gift is a curse to its inhabitants rather than blessing.

In "Testaments", we see an unfolding scenario of injustice as witnessed in the process of our everyday legal system. A testament of injustice and deprivation of human rights. A reflection of the reality of the plights of the people of Niger Delta who are subjected to a process of illegality in a bid to muffle their agitations for greater attention towards the colossal damage done to the environment:

Boro:

Hear my cause,
Then lay your curse;
I am a man of Kaiama,
A town with a unique trauma
Kaiama, like Oloibiri, neglected
Lands and humid creeks dejected
Creeks despoiled and left to stink,
Lands killed and left to sink,
Fishes put out of age-long toil,
With hearts and stomachs left to boil,
Farmers left with void hands
Hungry stomachs and weeping lands.

State Prosecutor:

Objection! Pittance! Pittance!
Please do him riddance

Advocate:

Objection, my revered Lord!
The accused spoke no foul word.

But in spite of the defence, the flawed legal system failed to dispense justice in order to please their pay-master, instead the judge dispenses with one Niger Delta agitator (Boro) and calls for another (Saro-Wiwa) whose case he wishes to also summarily dismiss:

Honourable Justice Judge
(Hitting the gavel)

We're done with Boro
Let us now have Saro (54-57).

When the accused steps in the dock, he speaks also of the monumental ecological damage that has affected his people. He describes this as a "sword":

Saro:

(Speaking with melancholy inflection and subs)

"Tis the sword of devastation
"Tis the sword of desolation
Our lands… raped and spoilt
Our creeks… poisoned and spoilt
All because of our black gold
We have had ordeals untold
Our oil: our blessing, our curse,
Daily our tale has become worse
… I spoke for my people in humble defence
I spoke not with the triggers witlessly stem
But I spoke with the nobility of my pen (63-64).

Sadly, in the face of injustice and miscarriage of justice in a system where vice is virtue, the accused are condemned for speaking out against injustice and violence visited on the people and the environment through oil exploration. To Boro, the Honourable Justice Judge's verdict reads thus:

You shall die by the furtive cryptic cruel,
Mystery shall shroud your eternal sleep
Then you shall be thrown to the obscure sleep
And to Saro, he pronounces:
To the earth your corpse will be fed
After you've been hung by the neck until you be dead.

However, decades after the death of these sons of Niger Delta, the issue of environmental degradation still graces the front-page of our dailies, and each successive government has been more concerned with the prices of oil on the international markets than the slow death of the masses, massive poverty in the region, and the clean-up of the land, which has become imperative.

Violence, they say, begets violence. The violent scenario in the Niger Delta is only a fall-out from the total neglect and violence visited on the people by the power that be and the agents of oil exploration. This scenario is aptly captured and recast in "Black marketers". In the recent past, the issue of militancy pervaded the life of every inhabitant in the Niger Delta region, but today, it is pipeline vandalism, which the government in power refers to as economic sabotage, while the personae sees it as the only way open to the people to access their God-given resources for survival. We hear the echo of environmental pollution and economic deprivation with an appeal to whoever that sits in judgment to judge fairly:

Hear our cause and judge fairly;
Our farmlands are despoiled
The earth got angry
Our crops withered away
We became jobless
Our creeks were poisoned,
Our fishes died,
Our creeks starks
We become jobless. (36)

As if this is not enough hardship, the crops, the fishes and the jobs are "turned" into black liquid running through gigantic pipes criss-crossing the land, creaking huts and thatches, desecrating even the ancestral resting places, through bushes to make "paradise" far away:

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"Our bushes are still bushes
Yet we're the source of the wealth".

When tears are not noticed and words are not taken seriously, the personae still passionately appealing for justice resort to helping themselves with the readily available resources:

So we rattled the trigger and bored the pipes;
Now, we sell our brackish black crude,
Now, we sell in spite of our marauders,
Now, wield your gavel as you will
Also remember the pen robbers (36)

This is the consequence of the grave silence by the powers that be over the fate and future of the inhabitants of Niger Delta. They have borne their sorrows, spilt their blood and shed tears for too long. Or would the region perpetually remain the goose without a gosling and a goose whose eggs are hatched by someone else? If this injustice be sustained, then the "Dream Delta", of luxury beauty and replete with silver will forever remain a mirage.

II. Conclusion

Magnus' "proto-ecological" poems provide the modern man, who lives in a world haunted by fragmentations, capitalist tendency, and illusory shadows of reality and technology, with a clearer view to witness the interconnectedness and interdependence of man and Nature in a vast ecosystem. Artistic imagination, no doubt, plays a dominant role in helping the artist to express his pure feelings and emotions, he also has a firsthand experience as a member of the society as so encapsulated in his poetry, hence his ability like William Wordsworth, to express his ideas of the dislocation of man from his ideal localities. This is as a result of man insatiable quest for better life through the use of technological advancement that threatens the ecology. Oil exploration remains for now the major technological advancement that adversely affects the environment.

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