

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

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8 **Abstract**

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

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21 *Index terms*— ecosystem, environment, ecocriticism, eco poetic

22 **1 Introduction**

23 literature, it is assumed, has become the mouthpiece of the hopelessly marginalized people around the globe. It
 24 has also through its various "fragmented pieces", mirrored the different segments of a deprived society. Dreams
 25 from the Creeks, has beamed its searchlight on the pitiable living condition and the abuse of the entire Niger
 26 Delta region by those holding it by the jugular due to its economic viability.

27 The unbridled desire by the nouveau riche Nigerians to exploit the 'black gold' which is the mainstay of the
 28 nation's economy has made the people of the region an endangered species due to environmental degradation.
 29 This has been aptly captured by committed writers who believe that natural resources in a region should
 30 rather be a blessing to the people instead of a curse. This paper is an effort to provide the reader with an
 31 ecological consciousness through an ecocritical study of Magnus Abraham-Dukuma's selected poetry to prove
 32 Bate's saying that "poetry is the place where we save the earth" (283). Ecocriticism is the study of literature and
 33 the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary texts which illustrate the environmental
 34 concerns are analyzed and examined in the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. It is the écopoetics
 35 approach which deals with the environmental and literary criticism There have been avalanche of literary works
 36 from the Niger Delta region with direct focus on the destruction of the ecosystem. Like his contemporaries who
 37 themselves have decried the destruction of the ecosystem and environmental degradation due to oil exploration,
 38 Abraham-Dukuma's focus is on the social implications in terms of the people's reaction in the face of this "death
 39 by instalment". Other writers in the region have equally embraced the challenge, thereby producing works that
 40 form a tradition within the larger corpus of Nigerian literature in English just like the literature on the Nigerian
 41 civil war. For instance, the novelists: Chukwuemeka Ike, I.N.C Aniebo, Elechi Amadi, Kaine Agary; the poets:
 42 Ibiwar Ikiriko, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Obari Gomba and Sophia Obi have all produced provocative works

1 INTRODUCTION

43 in this tradition, the tradition that focuses on oil exploration and environmental pollution in the Niger Delta
44 as issues of literary discourse. Dreams from the Creeks also lends a voice to the avalanche of artistic literary
45 composition decrying the 'sorry' state of affairs in the oil-rich Niger Delta. a) Sorrow, Blood and Tears in
46 Abraham-Dukuma's Dreams from the Creeks When we return to the concept of poetry and the usefulness or the
47 uselessness of the poets to the private and public lives of the individuals, in line with Pato and Aristotle's views
48 about poets, one may wonder whether poets and poetry could be of any use in the modern society. This will
49 indeed bring us back to Bate's view that "poetry is where we save the earth".

50 The opening poem, "Invitation" is a tearful call for an eye-witness of the deplorable condition of the people
51 who were once living a happy and fulfilled life despite their penury. But now those things that gave them life
52 have been destroyed: the flora and the fauna. "Come, see the lacerations on these path/come, see the gruesome
53 guests on these lands". The "eye-witness" is employed to do a fair and timely judgment of the situation, "A river
54 of blood flows through these hearts, judge fairly and timely." "Witnesses" echo their observation:

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

56 They came, saw, heard, felt and smelt what they were invited to witness. They witnessed a land devastated,
57 lacerated, and poisoned. In line 3 of "Witnesses", there is a tone of hope; the very cherished attribute of every
58 Niger Deltan -hope. This is expressed when they say: We'll keep watching and waiting For a haven of consolation,
59 For a music of salvation, For a caress of fortune For the breath of good air We'll keep watching and waiting. (
60 ??5)

61 But the question is how long are we going to keep watching and waiting when the people die daily from
62 "poisoned rivers and poisoned air". The land that was once filled with the beauty of nature (flora and fauna)
63 is now a mining field. "Mining field" is a dead and barren field. However, the "dead" field, because a mining
64 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
65 on the mining field: those who mine for liquid gold and those mining poverty: Some are mining oil Some have
66 mined penury Some mined pains Some have mined rifts Some have mined death Some are mining dreams. (??7)
67 "Mining Penury" has been the lots of the people of the region over the decades. Abraham-Dukuma in a flashback,
68 chronicles the losses of the people which he describes as "countless shadows of stabs", "sour reminiscence of dead
69 days" and "counted shadows of sad memories". "Chronicles" is a compendium of the natural beauties that was
70 once the music and breath of the habitats, but now has been polluted through man's insatiable crave for wealth.
71 Nature was inflicted with deep cuts, which left un-healing sores on the people psyche. A place that was once
72 the virginity of space and pristine of beauty is now "shows of sad memories" because virtues are dead and vice
73 borne.

74 Obari Gomba in "The World Has Cotton in Its Eyes" takes a look at the people of Niger Delta with deep
75 feeling. He weeps for the children of Niger Delta (Oloibiri and Ogoni as symbols) that eat dust for food. But in
76 Lagos, Abuja, Washington, and London, the same oil that results in the children eating dust "lubricates power
77 and sex", while soldiers and hangmen become the agents of calm. And in the words of Alamiyeseigha, the region
78 is the goose that lays the golden egg, "yet the Niger Delta remains pervasively poor and underdeveloped lacking
79 virtually all forms of social amenities and infrastructure." This corroborates Sophia Obi's poem "Oloibiri" in
80 which she describes Niger Delta, which Oloibiri represents as, "Desolate like a gloomy attire". In spite of all the
81 atrocities committed against the people and the region, the poet does not call for anarchy amongst the oppressed,
82 but rather a word of consolation for the soul and the mind. In "Weep not", the poet states: Weep not my soul!
83 Weep not! Bleed not my heart! Bleed not! Flow not my eyes! Flow not! Burst not my mind! Burst not! And
84 for this evil done my land, weep not my soul?. (??2)

85 Oloibiri, which is the centre of oil wealth in Nigeria is nothing but "a wealthy aged whore". More than fifty
86 years after oil was first struck in Oloibiri, there is nothing to show that it actually laid the "golden egg"; it has no
87 access to it, but in spite of these words of consolation, deluge of tears flood Oloibiri and run through the entire
88 Niger Delta. In "Tears from Oloibiri", the poet creates a persona in Oloibiri to tell the world of all it has gone
89 through as the consequence of oil exploration: I am Oloibiri I have lost my essence I breathe a morbid hybrid
90 air Sores and death slyly stare Legions had thronged to drink my milk. Now I am ravished, forlorn, weak and
91 sick. ??35) This is what happens to every mother who after several births and breast feeding is neglected by the
92 children. While they wine and dine, the giver of such life is left in "squalor and filth", "decay and putridity". And
93 so neglected she resigns to fate. "Ode to Oloibiri" portrays the pitiable condition and the total neglect visited
94 on the historical home of the nation's wealth. The persona points out those injuries and injustices it has suffered
95 over the years in spite of the "goose eggs" that are food for the nation and beyond, yet it is still "malnourished
96 and pale" after being milked dry. The persona vows to tell one of the world's richest producers of oil, Qatar,
97 what one of them is going through in Africa, that rather than enjoying a paradise on earth like Qatar, Oloibiri
98 is a paradox: I will tell Qatar your tale I will tell her your paradox I will tell your story I will always remember
99 you: Qatar must be surprised She could weep for you too, As I have wept daily. (40)

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

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

106 legal system failed to dispense justice in order to please their pay-master, instead the judge dispenses with one
107 Niger Delta agitator (Boro) and calls for another (Saro-Wiwa) whose case he wishes to also summarily dismiss:
108 Honourable Justice Judge (Hitting the gavel) We're done with Boro Let us now have Saro (54-57).

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

111 (Speaking with melancholy inflection and subs) "Tis the sword of devastation "Tis the sword of desolation
112 Our lands? raped and spoilt Our creeks? poisoned and spoilt All because of our black gold

113 We have had ordeals untold Our oil: our blessing, our curse, Daily our tale has become worse ? I spoke for
114 my people in humble defence I spoke not with the triggers witlessly stem But I spoke with the nobility of my pen
115 (63-64).

116 Sadly, in the face of injustice and miscarriage of justice in a system where vice is virtue, the accused are
117 condemned for speaking out against injustice and violence visited on the people and the environment through
118 oil exploration. To Boro, the Honourable Justice Judge's verdict reads thus: You shall die by the furtive cryptic
119 cruel, Mystery shall shroud your eternal sleep Then you shall be thrown to the obscure sleep And to Saro, he
120 pronounces: To the earth your corpse will be fed After you've been hung by the neck until you be dead.

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

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

132 Hear our cause and judge fairly; Our farmlands are despoiled The earth got angry Our crops withered away
133 We became jobless Our creeks were poisoned, Our fishes died, Our creeks stark We become jobless. (36) As if
134 this is not enough hardship, the crops, the fishes and the jobs are "turned" into black liquid running through
135 gigantic pipes criss-crossing the land, creaking huts and thatches, desecrating even the ancestral resting places,
136 through bushes to make "paradise" far away:

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

138 When tears are not noticed and words are not taken seriously, the personae still passionately appealing for
139 justice resort to helping themselves with the readily available resources: So we rattled the trigger and bored the
140 pipes; Now, we sell our brackish black crude, Now, we sell in spite of our marauders, Now, wield your gavel as
141 you will Also remember the pen robbers (36) This is the consequence of the grave silence by the powers that be
142 over the fate and future of the inhabitants of Niger Delta. They have borne their sorrows, spilt their blood and
143 shed tears for too long. Or would the region perpetually remain the goose without a gosling and a goose whose
144 eggs are hatched by someone else? If this injustice be sustained, then the "Dream Delta", of luxury beauty and
145 replete with silver will forever remain a mirage.

146 2 II.

147 3 Conclusion

148 Magnus' "proto-ecological" poems provide the modern man, who lives in a world haunted by fragmentations,
149 capitalist tendency, and illusory shadows of reality and technology, with a clearer view to witness the
150 interconnectedness and interdependence of man and Nature in a vast ecosystem. Artistic imagination, no doubt,
151 plays a dominant role in helping the artist to express his pure feelings and emotions, he also has a firsthand
152 experience as a member of the society as so encapsulated in his poetry, hence his ability like William Wordsworth,
153 to express his ideas of the dislocation of man from his ideal localities. This is as a result of man insatiable quest
154 for better life through the use of technological advancement that threatens the ecology. Oil exploration remains
155 for now the major technological advancement that adversely affects the environment.¹

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