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The Un Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs): What Role for Nigerian and African Literature?

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Keywords: post-independence disillusionment literary criticism, sustainable development goals (SDGS), environmental literature or eco-criticism, feminist criticism utopian literature etc.

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The Un Sustainable Development Goals (Sdgs): What Role for Nigerian and African Literature?

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I. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were set up in September 2000 as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the United Nations to achieve certain objectives that could optimally raise the standard of human existence on planet earth and thereby enhance the dignity of the human race. These Goals were to be achieved within a decade, commencing from 2005 through 2015, although it became impossible to achieve this dream within this specific period. Darah (2012:33) sums up the cardinal points of this global agenda:

> Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger
> Promoting gender equality and empowering women
> Reducing child mortality rates
> Improving material health
> Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
> Ensuring environmental sustainability
> Developing a global partnership for development.

However, this vision is pivoted on education as the only reliable and viable instrument of social change and welfare in the course of history of societies. In line with the aims of this programme, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are billed to beget a new system of education known as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and again the Universal Basic Education (UBE). It is hoped that these well tailored functional educational policies should be capable of transforming the face of humanity. Nzeneri (2010:52-53) in reaction to the SDGs acknowledges the aspirations of the Adult Education Department (AED) of the University of Port Harcourt in the ensuing ESD blue print:

> The Adult Education Department of this University has been fully committed to teaching and research in environmental adult education and environmental literacy to ensure that people are well informed about their attitudes and behaviour that guarantee environmental safety and sustainability which are important issues in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

To ensure that the aim of the international community in SDGs, as lofty as it is, is realised, efforts have been geared towards organising various awareness campaigns both at national and international levels, which have given a boost to this noble vision. On the global arena, ever since the inception, such conferences as "World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002" (Nwamuo:2010:7) and some others are meant to help the programme succeed. And 'The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil"

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(Eheazu: 2011:42), as well as the "Kyoto Protocol" in 1997 on Greenhouse Effects (Eheazu: 2011: 45) were all prelude.

At this juncture, pertinent questions we should ask are: what are the roles of Nigerian or African literature can play in the dawn of the SDGs? Through which perspective could such roles achieve enough visibility and/or perceptibility in the eyes of readers? However, this paper has sufficiently demonstrated that the SDGs literary criticism is an off-shoot of the post-independence disillusionment literary criticism which will be discussed in details hereafter. By and large, a brief definition of literature in the offing is quite necessary to help us relate literature to the laudable enterprise of SDGs. Charles Nnolim (2009:2) defines literature as:

> …that writing we regard as 'verbal works of art', that writing that is remarked by its fictionality and imaginative import; that writing in which ideas are wrapped up in symbols, images, concepts; that writing which normally catapults us into another world of appearance and reality through the powers of the imagination.

Abrams (2005:152) notes that literature "designates fictional and imaginative writing – poetry, prose fiction and drama". To support that literature is a complex phenomenon, he adds that it could expand its frontiers to philosophical, historical and scientific writings addressed to a wide audience. It is this wide purview of literature that makes it possible for it to embrace other fields of knowledge and have vital roles to play there. So, this relationship between literature and other human endeavours is a creed that has made Nigerian and African literature very relevant par rapport the SDGs. Having said that, let us examine the SDGs literary criticism in the prism of political disillusionment in African literary discourse.

II. Political Disillusionment in African Literature and SDGs

To state that African literature is proactively bearing criticisms in favour of the SDGs in the larger spectrum of political disillusionment polemics, which dates back to the early sixties and seventies after rounds of independence celebrations across the continent, is to say the least. To call such criticism the SDGs literary criticism is another truth. The SDGs literary criticism, now a modulated version of post-independence disillusionment literary criticism, therefore was pre-existent as violent diatribes, admonitions, reprehensions and vituperations that hit so hard on governments of nations at the wake of African independence. Such governments perceived as erring regimes were led by voluntarist nationalists and patriots bearing in their spleen anti-colonial angst before independence and who immediately after turned to be the first generation politicians and leaders in the post-independence era. Unarguably, their governments were characterized by sheer contrast leading to proverbial and outrageous breach of contract between the rulers and the ruled emerging from gruelling colonial experiences only to have their hopes and aspirations crushed further by corrupt and dictatorial autochthonous regimes. Rousseau (Perry et al 1985:407) argues that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains". This statement is a good match for the African situation as people thought that by emerging from the colonial shackles liberty had been won for keep, but they were proved wrong by history. The highhandedness of African leaders choked them with oppressive powers. This ironical paradox further exploits the fate of a race betrayed by her own sons who took over the mantle of leadership from her former colonial masters and made life most unbearable for the people, sowing away to the wide winds that dream of terrestrial paradise, that egalitarian society and that vision of promise land that were by the corner at the eve of *uhuru*.

Prior to the SDGs literary criticism, post-independence disillusionment critique has engaged African writers in a dramatic turn from the antagonistic criticism of the colonial era to the post-independence search for meaning in the ensuing prodigal political jamboree noticed after independence. Self-criticism and self-appraisal which became the order of the day in literary circles were meant to assess the rulers saddled with the onerous duty of reconstruction, renovation and rehabilitation of the image and psyche of the African. Young (1973:30) makes reference to these fast waning colonial diatribes:

> But didacticism and propaganda have become decreasingly outwardly directed and Achebe's projection of his image of the Ibo past towards Ibos and such internally preoccupying political concepts as Pan-Africanism in such novels as William Conton's *The African* (1960) and Cyprian Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* (1963) have begun to replace the inevitably out-ward directed propaganda of anti-colonialism.

Political disillusionment in African literature, meant to show that the hope of El Dorado is totally elusive, appears so often in works of literature authored by both Africans and non Africans. Some of them are *The Interpreters*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah, The Devil on the Cross, A kind of Fool*, *The New Man*, *Return to the Shadows*, *La Vie et Demie, Les Coupeurs des Têtes*, *Il n'y aura pas de paradis*, *Le Vieux Gagne la Belle* and including *Animal Farm* which is a proactive fabulous and satirical tale of all struggling colonies all over the world that eventually won their independence and had to feverishly manage their domestic imbecilities. Other works of independence disillusionment in African literature include a floodgate of critical commentaries, thesis and dissertations. The

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issue of independence remains a complex one for the fact that even before its great betrayal by African leaders some Africans according to Kenny (1969:185) worked against total decolonisation. Thus, he writes that South Africa for having been threatened by the unfolding process led the effort:

> Il s'agit d'une organisation financée par les Sud-Africains pour défendre les Blancs en Afrique centrale et en Afrique australe …W.W. signifie White Wall, c'est-à-dire Mur Blanc. Mais le paradoxe, c'est que cette organisation n'est pas composée uniquement de Blancs; elle comprend également de très nombreux notables noirs qui luttent maintenant, par une alliance avec les Blancs de l'union Sud-Africaine, de la Rhodésie et du Portugal, pour que ceux-ci puissent rester en Afrique.
>
> (It is an organisation financed by South Africans for the defense of Whites in central and south Africa …W.W.W. which means White wall. But the paradox is that this organisation is not made up of only Whites ; it equally includes a large number of Blacks, who now fight in alliance with Whites from South African union, from Rhodesia and Portugal, in order that these ones could remain in Africa).

The failure of African leaders to deliver the promise made to the people has doused enthusiasm across the land and the ovation that greeted the liberation from the yoke of colonialism has also suffered similar fate leaving in its trail sober silence and lethargic shock on one hand and violent reactions on the other. Ohaegbu (2000: 171) aptly recognizes this fact:

> The narrator in Le *Pleurer-Rire* laments that 'since independence nothing has changed"; Wali, the heroine in *La Nouvelle Romance* calls independence 'colonization readjusted' where "a handful of the privileged' rely on ancient and out-moulded customs and practice to exploit their people, especially women.

And the predicament arising from the disenchantment continues to stoke caustic criticism underpinning the general ineptitude of the political class and the absurd neglect of the masses. African critics and writers, in their works, ask questions if Africa has truly gained independence. Adejir (2000:117) insists that although a change of guard has taken place, the woes persist:

> The African writer has always been forced by circumstances of the political and social situation around him to be combatant. The problems against which he fought during the colonial time have with the coming of independence, simply changed the people creating them and not their nature.

Kapuścińki (2003:155) supports the view of the critics while analyzing Africa's crises after independence. He doubts the ability of African politicians to lead their countries out of the stalemate and conduct the affairs of the states with the expected seriousness and vision. So he confirms the fears of African writers when he recalls the inexperience of the leaders at independence:

> Cette politique chaotique est l'œuvre d'hommes sans expérience qui ne sont pas encore en mesure de prévoir les conséquences de leurs décisions, qui ne sont pas imprégnés du sérieux et de la prudence des vieux baroudeurs de la politique.
>
> (This chaotic politics is the work of men without experience who are not yet in a position to foresee the consequences of their decisions, who are not serious and do not have the intelligence of the old political bigwigs).

No doubt the African novelist has an axe to grind with the political elite–setting the people free from their grip through killer novels, novels that shoot guns, novels that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons, leaving them dead, to paraphrase Amiri Baraka. Echenim (2010:4) in his own contribution posits that this freedom is an imperative:

> Le problème de la liberté est devenu plus aigu après l'acquisition de l'indépendance politique. Ainsi la littérature africaine post-coloniale est-elle caractérisée par une double tendance qui traduit à la fois la frustration et l'espoir des nouvelles données socio-politiques et économiques.
>
> (The problem of freedom has become more serious after the acquisition of political independence. Thus post-colonial African literature is characterized by a double tendency which at the same time represents frustration and the hope of new socio-political and economic indices).

Having taken a critical look at the situation in Africa with the conclusion that African leaders are responsible for the political and economic crimes against the people, Koné (1997:58) wishes the stubborn greenhorns and tyrants in firm control of governance should change their mind to embrace democracy:

> Il nous faut la rigueur démocratique si les puissants n'ont plus peur de Dieu. Il faut les amener à craindre les institutions. Il faut que les puissants aient peur de piétiner les faibles parce que ceux–ci seront effectivement protégés par les institutions. Quand les hommes politiques, et autres potentats sauront que le moindre abus, la moindre faute, mensonge, mot mal placé peut leur coûter leur place, ils compteront alors avec la population qui les aura mis à la place qu'ils occupent et la démocratie se conquiert.
>
> (We need democratic rigours if the powerful have no more fear of God. It necessary to make them fear the institutions. It is necessary for the powerful to be afraid of trampling upon the weak because they

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> should be effectively protected by the institutions. When politicians and other power brokers know that the least abuse, the least mistake, lie, wrongly used word can cost them their position, they can therefore count on the population that put them in the position they occupy and democracy wins).

As a point of duty, African writers form a united front to tackle the problem of selfish and visionless leadership of the political class. Serumaga's (1969:142) interrogative character, Moses reflects on this problem: 'who talked about suffering? I'm talking about solution. What are we to do to solve this endemic political mess?' So, the African novelist has penchant for speaking out rather than remain mute in the face of abrasive annihilation of our collective heritage and destiny. Just like Camara Laye was profusely upbraided by Mongo Beti for silence over colonialism in *The African Child*, contemporary critics have spoken against the danger of mutism and passive posture in the current political anomy that besieges African society. One of them is Jinadu (2007:14), who warns:

> It is this cowardly attitude of keeping quiet, refusing to raise an alarm that encourages impunity, not only among armed robbers and petty criminals but also, and more dangerously for our collective security and our fledgling democracy, among our public functionaries.

Armah approaches the topical issue of political disillusionment in post-colonial Africa with all seriousness. For him, it is life commitment and ideological pessimism (cynicism) caused by utter distaste for political hypocrisy in governance. He protests against the rot and decay and deception of the people as opposed to the positive wind of change they hoped for. The author denounces massive penury which is quite contrastive to the ostentatious living and stupendous wealth of the leaders, the flamboyant life-style of their relations and allies. Sister Maanam complains in *The Beautyful Ones:* "They have mixed it all together! Everything! They have mixed everything. And how can I find it when they have mixed it all with so many other things?" (Armah, 1968:180) This frustration is coming on the heels of woeful failure of Osageyefo's (Nkrumah's) government to deliver the gains of independence. The same fate befalls Baako in *Fragments,* who fails to bring economic salvation to his people after his sojourn abroad for further educational studies and training. On his return, he faces crap poverty-driven materialism that chokes his very being. The greed that affects all strata of society is yet to dawn on him. In this novel Armah presents lust as the safety valve for warped corruption in society (Armah 1969:41-71). One critical question he poses in *Why Are We So Blest* is the essence of leadership without the people being carried along. In the case of Africa the people are left behind and this is done in the interests of the West which are uppermost in the policies and priorities of African governments. Modin (Armah 1972:221), states:

> The main political characteristics of African leadership since the European invasion is its inability and unwillingness to connect organically with the African people because it always wants first of all to connect with Europe and Europeans.

Kourouma also levels unmitigated criticism against selfish and corrupt clique of professional thieves who run the affairs of governance in Africa with sheer impudence and unconscionable spirit. The kleptomaniacs have bungled the future of the continent and dashed the hope of the living. This potent danger threatens the survival of the race. In *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1970:25), he highlights the absence of infrastructures that make life meaningful:

> Sans égouts, parce que les indépendances ici aussi ont trahi, elles n'ont pas creusé les égouts promis et elles ne le feront jamais; des lacs d'eau continueront de croupir comme toujours et les nègres colonisés ou indépendants y pataugeront tant qu'Allah ne décollera pas la damnation qui pousse aux fesses du nègre (*Les Soleils des indépendances* (1970:25-26).
>
> (Without gutters because the leaders here have also betrayed us, they have not dug the gutters they promised and they will never do it ; pools of water will continue to gather as always and the colonized or independent negroes will flounder through them as much as God will not dispell the curse that puffs on the buttocks of the negro).

Kourouma condemns the breach of confidence between the leaders and the people who turned to be their victims. This happens as a result of the spate of dictatorship and life presidents that litter the continent. Ilagha (2009:141) calls for the heads of the corrupt leaders:

> The dilemma couldn't have been better expressed, and yet the solutionis clear. What Africa requires is that corrupt leaders in the mould of Maduabebe and Obasanjo should be hanged on the taut ropes of greed. Let the mind of God take over from there.

Even without proposing outright execution, Kourouma's arguments are full of vigour and violence amid satire and humour; he raises alarm over the height of political deception, disorder, repression and woeful failure of the machinery of governance right from the dawn of independence. The leaders have shown their malicious intention to do the people in in this bargain. This anger is not peculiar to Ilagha. *Les Soleils des indépendances* marshals out a set of premonitions that will likely set off social unrest in the fictitious Ebony Republic and, by implication, in all the independent African countries if things fail to improve in the

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calculation of the ordinary man. This fact is highlighted by Britwum (1979:160):

> Fama's failure to heed the warning signals of imminent danger is anallegory of what will befall the rulers of the Ebony Coast if they fail to heed the omens of future political upheavals. Thus, Kourouma expects the reader to draw implicit parallels between the omens of Fama's approaching fate and the signs of political unrest in the Ebony Coast Moreover, in the same way the oracular pronouncements and omens of disasters are always proved right in the novel, Kourouma insinuates that future political upheavals in the Ebony Coast are inevitable precisely because, unlike traditional Africans, 'the Republics of Independent Africa haven't set up institutions like the fetish or oracles to deal with disasters.'

This chaotic state of government policies and activities which was generally observed among many newly independent African states led to outbreak of civil wars and the emergence of war lords. The main objective of the war lords, contrary to national stability, is the takeover of power to be able to command allegiance and control national resources for self-aggrandizement. Birahima (*Allah n'est pas Obligé* 2000:51) sums it up: 'Quand on dit qu'il y a guerre dans un pays, ça signifie que des bandits de grand chemin se sont partagé le pays. Ils se sont partagé la richesse; ils se sont partagé le territoire; ils se sont partagé les hommes'. (When we say there is war in a country , it means that high way robbers have shared the wealth among themselves; they have shared the territory among themselves; they have shared the men among themselves), Given the Liberian and Sierra Leonean tribal wars in the novel, synonymous with display of brazen, brutal and bestial animalism, Kourouma surmises that God is not obliged to bar men from extreme and uncanny brutality, but has given them the freedom and conscience to act with discretion or perish. In the same manner, they could manage their affairs in this world with humanistic tenets or alter them with utter inhumanity. *Allah n'est pas Obligé* hence cautions erring African leaders not to wait for divine or Western intervention in cases within their control such as the necessary mechanisms that should be put in place to stem this tinderbox of reckless blood-letting and self-extirpation. They should take on the challenge of curtailing the tide of ethnic strife, pogrom, genocide and political treachery that is the root of Africa's failures. *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages* (Kourouma1998:52-100) reveals in a weird title the bestiality of African leaders and their bastardization and dehumanization of the Africans especially during elections. The novel portrays Africa as the den of all manner of horrible dictators and despots. It specifically treats the rise of President Koyaga of the Golfe Republic to an absolutist Machiavellian ruler through the barrel of the gun. As it has become the norm, he joins the notorious clique of old reprobates of the continent dissimulated in fictional anonymity like Emperor Boussouma of Pays aux Deux Fleuves, Tiécoura of la République du Grand Fleuve, Tiékoroni of la Répulique d'Ebènes and Nkoutigui of la République des Monts and a host of others. These older political dragons tutor and initiate the relatively younger and inexperienced impish dictators into their cult and club. *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages* (1998:183) rather compares their fraternity or the African political arena with the traditional world of hunters where the more experienced train the less experienced in an adventure of life or death:

> La politique est comme la chasse, on entre en politique comme on entre dans l'association des chasseurs. La grande brousse où opère le chasseur est vaste, inhumaine et impitoyable comme l'espace, le monde politique. Le chasseur novice avant de fréquenter la brousse va à l'école des maîtres Chasseurs.
>
> (politics is like hunting, one enters into politics like into the association of hunters. The big forest where hunters operate is vaste, inhuman and unkind like space, the world of politics. The amateur hunter before entering into the forest goes to the school of the master hunters).

Indeed, the SDGs literary criticism is an essential part of the post-independence disillusionment critque, a cell of interwoven body of mega-criticism and a part giving anciliary support to the whole. At the waning of post-independence disillusionment literary criticism the SDGs literary criticism takes over the relay baton, firmly positioning itself in a moderate tone by shrinking from the hysteria and tension associated with its source, but sustained the truly lofty culture of its practiced role as the attorney of the African masses.

III. Post-Independence Disillusionment Criticism Now Vehicle of the SDGs

The SDGs could conveniently rely on the success of post-independence disillusionment literary criticism to make a political statement on the need for African leadership to provide enabling environment for the success of their programmes. Total political goodwill at national and international levels is what is needed for success in this direction. Literary gurus especially in Africa through their writings remind governments that allegiance to the UN amounts to nothing, unless they oblige to good governance in order to make the noble objectives of the SDGs triumph. Literature has been there proactively with political disillusionment criticism and mention must be made of pioneer writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Wa Thiong'o, Armah, Jared Angira, Mongo Béti, Odia Ofeimum,

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Sembène Ousmane, J.P. Clark and a host of others. These critics have played the intervention role of the arbiter between the people and their leaders for good governance and common welfare. In the dawn of the SDGs, the criticism is unabated. Wa Thiong'o (2007) in *Wizard of the Crow* slams dictatorship or leadership that appears insensitive to the plight of the masses. The fictitious country of Aburĩria where it thrives is naturally plagued by unemployment. The 'Ruler' is seen plying the ego trip and strategising on firm hold on power. Wa Thiong'o's major character, Kamĩtĩ contemplates his parents in the midst of his travails in the city: "Write to them stories of the number of times he had been thrown out of offices like a stray dog? Tell them that those degrees for which they had paid with years of toil and frugal living could not secure him even bus fare? Oh why didn't he allow the garbage collectors to bury his body?' (Wa Thiong'o 2007:61). Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* writes that sustainable development cannot be realised in crisis-ridden civil war situation, a lesson for Nigeria and a country that might not repeat a mistake in history if it were to face better time in the new millennium. Okediran in *Tenants of the House* reminds politicians that power is transient and leaders who lack decorum and fight like touts in supposedly hallowed chambers of the National Assembly and before the prying lens of press cameras will never command the people's respect. Amaraegbu (2009:132) decries the rate of poverty in the country in 'Victim of Poverty':

> Now I recall his handsome face/Endowed with prowess
> Physically empowered and enabled/He was a victim of poverty
> Like a tramp he wandered about/A stranger in the capital
> His dream of abundance/ Was besieged and blocked.

The persona above is struck with the same fate Kamĩtĩ faces. So it is an indication that both disillusionment poets and novelists are united in this fight against man-made hunger and impoverishment in the land, hence advancing SDGs' view of poverty as a disease and supporting the programme for its eradication. Gomba uses poetic rhythms from the Niger-Delta to condemn the pauperisation of the people of the area by political leaders and oil companies. He submits that robbery, looting and pillaging are taking place; and as far as that trend continues unabated, poverty must be the lots of the land. In *The Ascent Stone*, Gomba (2014:179) accuses the international community of conspiracy of silence in the face of harsh conditions and pain the Ogoni and the Niger-Deltans live in while oil wealth is being carted away from their domain:

> The world dances on our skulls/ Foul is fair in the politics of oil I weep for the children of Oloibiri and Ogoni/They eat dust the children eat dust/But up there in Abuja and Lagos/ Their oil oils sex and power But faraway in London and Washington/Their oil lubricates power and Sex/ I weep for the children of the Niger Delta/They are the children of the ravaged nations/The world has cotton in its eyes/The world applauds the trophies of robbery/ Soldiers and hangmen are sent to calm us The world has cotton in its ears/The blood of my people keeps record The blood of my people bears witness

Gomba (2014:128) joins the militants with the culprits claiming they compound the people's woes under the pretext of fighting for their freedom and welfare while they steal the oil themselves for selfish ends:

> We collude with those who pillage the land./We collude with those who who murder us./It is time to purge this house of thieves. Amongst our loudest guns, where is the border/ Between militants and miscreants?/It is time to clean the house. There is a problem With us, more with us, perhaps much more.

At this juncture, Gomba's poetic invocation, as powerful as it is, becomes admonition to whoever goes to the house of equity that must come with clean hands. This is the evidence of his fairness in judgement and clarity of vision. And this stealing motif pervades the length and breadth of his poetic universe.

IV. Specific Literary Structures for the SDGs Campaign

Without a modicum of doubt we reiterate the fact that literature in general and the post-independence disillusionment literary criticism in particular are at the service of the SDGs. Among such structures they provide for this special UN programme are eco-criticism, feminist criticism, utopian literature and literature of social awareness etc. The SDGs may have become contingent for poor countries at the turn of the millennium, yet they remain basic infrastructures and features existing in advanced societies. African literature has continued to beckon on governments across the continent to come up with programmes that will improve the lot of their people. This clarion call comes in specific forms of literary criticism. Let us examine them in turn and see how they relate to the SDGs.

a) SDGs and Eco-criticism

All modern literary criticism in Africa based on material or ecological welfare which we know as eco-criticism emanates from post-independence disillusionment criticism. Eco-criticism has emerged as a new trend in literary criticism in Nigeria and Africa, especially in the Niger-Delta to support the clamour for better economic and environmental conditions of living for people in coastal regions. Besides, it inadvertently fits into the master plan of the SDGs for sustainable

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environment. Eco-criticism cuts across the traditional genres of prose, drama and poetry. Nwamuo (2010:9) buttresses this point:

> Environmental sustainability is of course very topical in contemporary literature owing to its support to animate an inanimate species. This realisation has in fact led to the development of the concept of eco-cri-ticism which deals with the relationship between literature and the physical environment.

Okpewho (1993:18) criticises the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta as he deplores the exploration activities of oil giants which have left the area devastated and the people in hardship since their agrarian and marine life has been truncated. Tonwe, one of the characters of his epistolary novel, *Tides* writes that an activist, "Bickerbug had begun to show pictures of the devastation done to the Niger Delta environment by oil exploration, deforestation of on-shore sites, desecration of traditional shrines, evacuation and tearing up of whole villages and farmlands, vast area of oil spillage and great quantities of aquatic life destroyed in the wake…"

Agary (2006) makes a huge contribution to environmental literature and the creation of its awareness. The eponymous heroine is a cultural hybrid born of a Greek sailor and an Ijaw lover. Her complexion has blended with the environment that is rapidly losing its lush greenness and turning yellow due to soil degradation resulting from oil exploration and the accidents of spillage and gas flaring. In *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary conceives of ubiquitous phenomenon of one colour which characterises Ijawland and the entire Niger-Delta ecosystem. The narrator of the novel, Zilayefa, a.k.a. Yellow-Yellow, describes one of these disasters:

> During my second to last year in secondary school, one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilled oil over several hectares of land, my mother's farm included…"Zilayefa, bring me my bathing soap and sponge."…"What happened?" I asked."And bring my towel too," she said, ignoring my question. "What happened?"…"Oil, Zilayefa, she said, and turned away from me, walking toward the river…A group of people, painted in the same black as my mother covered from head to toe, was marching to see the Amananaowei, the head of the village. I joined them to find out what had happened. It turned out some of them had also lost their farmland that day (Agary:2006:1-2).

Agary treats environmental degradation as a real menace to life and a source of despair and worry to the victims. The people the work presents here are such that their destiny is tied to the environment that sustains their numerous aspirations. But the destruction means cutting them off from the umbilical cord that links them to that life. To this extent, Yellow-Yellow informs her audience that

> The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither, but she carried on watering it with hope. The black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unravelled the thread that held together her fantasies for me. She was able to find new farmland in another village, but it was not the same (Agary: 2006:10).

The fact that this new farmland is not the same with the destroyed one indicates that there is alteration in its natural chemistry and in the owner's hope and aspirations toward it and which has come to stay; this definitely has damaging consequences. It is the destiny of nature itself that man through his economic activities has changed, which echoes in the ecological and biological systems. It also suggests that humans who are meant to survive in these systems have been alienated from them. As the chances for the sustenance of the environment slip, the survival of human beings in it dims:

> Farming and fishing, the occupation that had sustained my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother no longer provided gain., I had witnessed lands claimed by massive floods during the rainy season, the earth slowly melting into the rivers. Women rowed their canoes farther and farther away to find land for farming (Agary: 2006: 39)

Akpan (2009) pays his dues to environmental literature by dedicating "Luxurious Hearses" largely to eco-criticism. He goes on first announcing the rapid encroachment of desertification to the southern coastal region of Nigeria by capturing the movement of cattle rustlers southward in search of water and green vegetation which is indicative of this fact:" Shehu, was a cowherd who had migrated with his cattle from Khamfi in the north, away from the widening Sahara, to the rain forest of the delta" (Akpan:2009:211). From that springboard, Akpan (2009:213) launches himself into the heart of his criticism: "But these were hard times. Due to decades of oil drilling, the soil was losing its fertility. Rivers no longer had fish, and, worse still, repeated oil fires annihilated hundreds of people each time". In the dialogue between two passengers of the bus in the story, Akpan (2009:285). recounts various activities of the major oil companies that negate the sanctity of the ecosystem:

> "I am going back home to farm as my ancestors did before oil was discovered in my village!" "which farm?" Monica said. Farmland no dey for delta o! Mobil, Shell, Exxon, Elf……All of dem done pollute every grain of sand." "I will fish, then." "Fish *ke*? Dem done destroy the river…no fish".

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I fowodo has also made a long standing contribution to eco-criticism and the damage done to the Niger Delta area by reckless destruction of amphibious and agrarian life in that part of the world. In 'Homeland', he writes:

> What are the things that grow here?/Those that grow from stone, lacking Life and root, flesh and water/Things cut as caps/For the baldness of Stone/ And what are the harvests here?/Of corn crippled before teething Of tuber poorer than the planted head…(Otiono and Okenyodo 2006:159-160)

Osundare is a pro-earth poet and crusader. He is one of the trail blazers among the younger generation of writers; he joins political and eco-criticism in this poem entitled 'They too are the Earth':

> They too are the earth/the swansongs of beggars sprawled out in brimming gutters/ they are the earth/under snakeskin shoes and mercedes tyres/ the sweat and grime of/millions hewing wood and hurling water/they are the earth/moody every pore like naked moles (Orji:2003:51).

Osundare criticises extreme poverty and indirectly calls the attention of the leaders to the woes of the down-trodden in society. At the same time, he makes reference to the earth as a sign of his concern on the environment. However, environmental literature in Nigeria could not be justifiably discussed outside the works of Ojaide, who has, by all standards, proved to be one of the greatest and most insightful writers of this field. However, it could rightly be said, without any fear of contradiction, that he like Osundare is a leading light among artists and critics with keen interest in the quest for awareness on environmental degradation and the search for permanent solutions. His poetry has gone a long way in highlighting these problems and raising concern about their ugly consequences. "The Community development officer" decries the use of indigenous elements by the so-called Multi-national companies to frustrate the yearnings of the host communities to obtain justice after outright destruction of both terrestrial and aquatic lives:

> I met one community liaison officer/transformed from a stick into a fat neck/ & when there was an oil slick/ it didn't matter to him/there was a gas explosion/it didn't matter to him/his people died the death of grasshoppers/it didn't matter since death is their portion/for as long as he sat in a big chair of/ the air-conditioned office with a fat salary (Ojaide:2006:29-38).

It is plain to perceive a cry against, first, betrayal, then, calamity behind the major concern which is environmental disaster. And guided by a special technique of irony, the poet trains his tone to the climactic device, within which he demonstrates how the community development officer could sacrifice the entire community and its ecosystem for self-indulgence, symbolised herein by his haunch stature and fat salary. "The Activist" also highlights the theme of betrayal. Here the villain is Professor Ede, a native of Roko and a consultant to Bell Oil Company. Fire has gutted the community as a result of the exploration activities of this firm. Having been commissioned to enquire into the cause of the accident, he ends up with the following report:

> The villagers set their village on fire because they wanted to extort money from Bell Oil Company. People have become lazy and want an easy way to make money. None of those villagers has a farm as they used to; none of them carrys (sic) out fishing in waters proverbially rich with all kinds of fresh and salt water fisher. The villagers only sit at home drinking illegal gin and playing both drafts and *eko* games (Okoroegbe: 2012: 187).

In 'At the Kaiama Bridge', Ojaide further laments the adverse effects of exploration activities on not only the physical environment, but also on the people's culture and tradition, their belief system and superstition. All the people get in return are poverty, disease, poor infrastructures as shown by 'the wobbling Kaiama Bridge' in line 48 and the frustration of helplessly seeing resources being taken away from their land. So he writes:

> Oil spillage has fuelled water hyacinths/ to multiply astronomically across rivers/Refuge gods are taking the last route/before the entire waterway is clogged. /Neighbours are surrendering their homes/to destruction by the fires from above./Others have the soil burning underfoot,/their shield of green mere ashes (Ojaide: 2007:25-32).

Drama is not left out in the eco-criticism. Mbajiorgu (2011) has left a print in the sand of time with an exhilarating piece on climate change entitled: *Wake up Everyone,* set at the fictitious Ndoli L.G.A. located in a coastal region under the menace of environmental disaster arising from unprecedented flooding. Like Osundare, Mbajiorgu integrates political criticism into eco-criticism. He flares the multi-national oil companies for politicising their atrocities against host communities by sponsoring candidates that will protect their interest in elections while human lives and the entire ecosystem perish. In a similar way, they are behind the election victory of the chairman of Ndoli who is an ex-militant. Apart from paying him three hundred million Naira for his father's death in a case of oil spillage, they bankroll his campaign to the office in order to help them defeat other victims clamouring for justice. Chairman Ochonkeya is there for his pocket as his name signifies and for those of his former colleagues in the creek who come from where they hide to join him to loot the treasury, For this reason, he feels very reluctant to sponsor an environmental protection project spearheaded by a round character, Prof. Aladinma, an

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agriculturist and theatre artist who uses the stage to sensitive people on the hazardous effects of climate change. The Professor highlights the problems facing Ndoli.

> Chairman: How, for instance?
> Prof, Aladinma: Good, that is why I am here. You see, as it concerns this area, Ndoli land, which is under your care, I foresee flood because of the likely overflow of the river. Already the farmers are complaining that their farmlands have become unproductive, and the fishermen say fishes have disappeared from the rivers and streams (Mbajiorgu: 2011:14).

However, it is worthy of note to state that this drama is well sketched and the theme will never be boring; and the characters are named in a bid to reflect whatever values they stand for. Looking at it critically, one observes that the SDGs especially ESD as well as sustainable environment are well spelt out in its themes.

b) The SDGs and Feminist Criticism

Many literary works are replete with the SDGs ideals for gender equality. Most writers have taken the lead in the emancipation of women by creating virtuous female characters that are imbued with the qualities that exceed those of men. As we have earlier noted that there are already existing structures into which the SDGs can fall, one is reminded of the awareness created by feminist works of pioneer African authors in this field. Their imagination brings about female characters that refuse to be gagged by tradition owing to their education. Some of these women are Juliette in Guillaume Oyônô Mbia's *Trois Prétendants…un mari* (1964), Wanja and Nyakinyua in Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, Wali in Lopes's *La Nouvelle Romance*, Aïssatou in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. Feminist writers especially in Nigeria include Flora Nwapa *(Efuru*:1966) , Buchi Emecheta (*Second Class Citizens*:1975; *The Bride Price:*1976), Phanuel Egejuru (*The Seed Yams Have Been Eaten*), Ifeoma Okoye (*Behind the Clouds*:1982; *Chimere*:1992), Zainab Alkali (*Stillborn*); other female critics are Helen Chukwuma, Akachi Ezeigbo, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Rose Acholonu, Chioma Opara, Chinelo Ojukwu and Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo. Moreover, some feminist writers no longer create women characters who bemoan their fate in fiction, but those whose capacity is enhanced, so that they can compete with men. Achebe could now be counted among such writers despite his antecedents in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1960). In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), there is a new vision and laudable female characters with laurels abound such as Beatrice, who obtains a first class Honours in English from the University College, London. She has a good job, a car, a flat and a maid to tender her domestic chores. Comfort has got her flat where she accommodates her fiancé and is able to push him out when she discovers that he is not intelligent enough to be addressed as her man. Elewa, a lady of a low estate is able to find her way into the love world of Ikem, a renowned poet and editor of the National Gazette (Achebe:1988:78). All these give the women in the novel prime status. Moreover, the main female character in the novel, Beatrice is portrayed not only as a modern educated lady, but one who is wise and knows her rights. Chris, her fiancé could not get away with his disposition to silence and indifference in the wake of Beatrice's unanticipated invitation by Sam, the de facto ruler of Kangan. Chris receives a thumping rebuke for this behaviour when the fate of her girl friend hangs in the balance and for waiting for the worst to happen to her before he reacts. Beatrice is able to notice that Chris is simply and most cowardly encysting himself from danger and by so doing he exposes a woman he claims to have loved to risk:

> 'BB, you never told me it was to Abichi.' 'Please, let me finish. I am carried off to this strange place and my future husband retires to his bed, sleeps well, wakes up and listens to the BBC at seven, has his bath, eats his breakfast and sits down afterwards to read the papers. Perhaps even take a walk in the garden. And then, finally at midday you remember the girl you asked to keep all the options open. You pick up the phone and tell her oh, you're back!'(Achebe: 1988: 112).

By attacking male chauvinism, Achebe drives home the objective of the SDGs on gender equality and women empowerment.

Nwachukwu–Agbada is another feminist writer by virtue of his avowed criticism of patriarchy. His novel, *God's Big Toe* is a harsh admonishment of traditional adherents who place too much emphasis on the male child with a resultant slight on the female child. He lays bare the ugly consequences of relying on the male child since in most cases it turns out to be an illusion. This is the case of Azu Anuka, who pampers Onwubiko for being an only son. The author berates the gender imbalance depicted in Azu Anuka's neurotic behaviour—equating his eight daughters and even his wife to nothing, ready to sacrifice them for the hedonist joy, life and survival of Onwubiko. He attacks further the bestial act of always getting a woman pregnant and dragging her to the theatre more often than necessary in search of one or more male children. Thus, he decries Azu Anuka's reaction each time he is repelled by fate:

> The first issue was a female. The second was also female. Third, the fourth. The fifth. All girls. On each day of delivery, Azu Anuka's face was as long as a fiddle. Nobody questioned his reaction. It was normal to be sad at the arrival of a female issue. When the sixth child came, it was a boy, Azu went into his bedroom, brought out his double barreled gun and shot several times into the air (Arungwa:2008:103).

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In one of her essays, Helen Chukwuma argues that men and women are of course different but complementary. Therefore the striving of one to be like the other is no doubt defeatist and irrelevant. And capping one superior or inferior can apply to any sex depending on the circumstance. Therefore eliminating these complementarities creates this futile notion of superiority and inferiority (Chukwuma: 2007: 144). In sum, all these feminist apologists automatically provide very vital avenues for gender equality.

c) The SDGs and Utopian Literature

When too much had been probably written on political disillusionment in African literature and there were calls for a truce in order to avoid boredom, a strand of it branched off to become utopian literature. Utopian literature came as psychological therapy to cushion the effects of monotonous repetitions and make Africans forget the enormity of the present and look up to the future for its promise. In the era of the SDGS literary criticism, utopian literary criticism has become another facility literature offers them in their drive to change the world for a better place. It is a special project for the future also known as literature of escape. For instance, in Africa, and because of the ugly historical experiences, especially since independence, many a critic has canvassed for the use of utopian literature to soothe the pain of Africans by luring them to the world of El Dorado. Nnolim (2009:101) calls for a change in vision by African writers owing to his belief 'That African literature in the 20th century was not a happy one: it was lachrymal: it was a literature of lamentation, a weeping literature following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism'. Osundare supports Nnolim when he writes that "the cry is deeper than the wound"(Uwatt:2005:378). According to Nwamuo (2010:11-12), to concentrate themes of the corpus of writings on novelties like the domains of film and video studies, performance art, detective fictions, children's literature and Sustainable goals is how to tune in to utopian literature. He agrees with Nnolim that the millennium literature should be forward-looking and able to redefine the African personality in the 21st century and give it a new image, so that we will no longer busy ourselves talking about where the rain started beating us by harping on the twin evils. As part of *retour aux sources* (Back-to-Africa movement), Nnolim (2009:21) argues that it is likely to impede African and world development plans and directly the success of the SDGs.

d) The SDGs and Literature of Social Awareness.

This is a new approach to literary criticism that appears beneficial to the SDGs. It sensitizes the public especially on current issues pertaining modern life and which affect society. Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* rebukes Chris for trying to have sex without condom. Similarly, Wa Thiong'o latest novel, *Wizard of the Crow* could easily be so classified for its campaign against HIV/AIDS virus, the search for whose solution is one of the Sustainable Goals. Kamĩtĩ also receives a stern rebuke from Nyawĩra for thinking of love-making without adequate protection. In the novel, we see a kind of feminism typical of Wa Thiong'o (2007:91):

> Don't you know about the virus? Pregnancy is life. The virus is death.' 'I don't have the virus.'
> How do you know? And if you know about yourself, how do you know that I am not carrying AIDS, Syphilis, gonorrhea (sic) or any other STD?

The author here targets perhaps a local population in Kenya and East Africa where there are reports of endemic incidence of AIDS virus.

V. Conclusion

It is very clear that just as literature has social functions it has important roles to play in the realisation of the SDGs especially in Africa. By playing the role of a watch-dog to governments, political leaders and democratic institutions, under the auspices of the post-independence disillusionment and the SDGs literary criticisms, literature contributes to change that goes a long way in improving the welfare of society and mankind. Such change has multiplying effects that could go around the SDGs. For instance, good governance no doubt means improved health conditions and social infrastructures; it has to do with eradication of diseases, reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates. Literature, writers and literary critics should not waiver in this great onus and so should governments of nations, the UN and its Agencies as well as international organisations indicate willingness to be partners in progress in the efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, literature, by virtue of its nature and function, plays a vital role as an umpire, urging African leaders and their people to recognise their respective and mutual obligations in the contract. Nevertheless, African literature has displayed its capacity to toe ethnic lines. In other words, partisanship manifests in literary productions as most writers utilize the medium of SDGs literary criticism to defend and protect either personal or regional interests and/or bring to the fore group protests and recriminations. The gamut of literary works from the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria has conferred on itself a peculiar identity in this regard. Almost all critics of eco-criticism cited above, namely: Okpewho, Ojaide, Ifowode, Akpan, Agary, Gomba and Ilagha; including those without mention, like Ikiriko and Saro-Wiwa, the forerunner are indigenes of the area. What we have noticed over the years is that a large number of works and writers have sprung from there using literature and the SDGs literary criticism as instrument of combat and echo chamber for what they perceive as ignominious

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government's neglect of the goose that lays the golden egg. The Niger-Delta example shows that literature can easily be put to the service of militant ethnic nationalism and by so doing it assumes a political posture. This could give readers clues on why Achebe should write *Anthills of the Savannah* to correct his former records flawed by gender stereotype and publish his swan-song, *There was a Country* before he died to gallantly registers his conviction of and appertaining to Biafra. In the same vein, we see the reason female writers all over the world always incline to feminism. They are peculiar cases anyway. Literature is not all about partisanship or sectionalism. Pioneer writers like Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark are of the Niger-Delta extraction, but not eco-critics. All the same, there are enough proofs that literature itself, disillusionment criticism or the SDGs literary criticism could not in any way be apolitical, especially in the Nigerian and African set-up.

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