Planeyo Journal of Arts and Humanities (PLANJAH), Volume 2 No.3, 2025
Online ISSN 2672-507X
Print ISSN 2651-5954

Arnold Udoka and the Non-Polar Gender Approach to Niger Delta Postcolonial Ecocritical Problems

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Abstract

The fading green status of the Niger Delta has engendered the proliferation of literature by male and female writers across Nigeria over the last two decades. These writers have rummaged through the repository of solutions and emptied every possible formula into their oeuvres for the resolution of the many problems ravaging the oil-rich region. Among the various approaches deployed, this paper interrogates Arnold Udoka's non-polar gender approach to the postcolonial and ecological problems of the Niger Delta in *Inyene* and *Rainbow over the Niger*. Employing the theoretical underpinnings of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffins's postcolonial ecocriticism, specifically the tenetthat environmental justice is proportionate to social justice, the analysis adopts a comparative research methodology to delineate how the playwright tackles the foremost problems of the Niger Delta, focusing on the all-inclusive gender mode of operation outlined in the selected plays. It is discovered that Udoka's plays strategically employ dialogue (in a non-dramatic literary genre sense) as a tool for social change, aiming to dismantle divisive polarities and promote inclusive solutions. The playwright further showcases the strength of constructive dialogue, advocating collaborative problem-solving between natives and multinational companiesand between men and women. Towards the end of the selected plays, gendered divisions are replaced by a shared commitment to environmental justice and economic equity. Essentially, Udoka's commitment to a non-polar gender approach, along with his emphasis on dialogue, is a seminal blueprint for advancing a more equitable and sustainable future in the Niger Delta and beyond.

Keywords: Postcolonial ecocriticism, gender equality, environmental justice, Niger Delta, Arnold Udoka

How to cite this paper:

Usoro, E. A. (2025). "Arnold Udoka and The Non-polar Gender Approach to Niger Delta Postcolonial Ecocritical Problems". *Planeyo Journal of Arts and Humanities (PLANJAH).* Volume 2, Number 3, 132-148.

Introduction

Texts in the body of ecocritical literature are undeniably vital in their documentation of anthropogenic environmental degradation, but over the years, they have risked becoming a chronicle of ruin and a relentless litany of ecological decay. Although the insistent focus on deterioration is crucial for casting light on the urgency of planetary crises, it threatens to eclipse the inherent aesthetic and ontological richness of the natural world. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) stresses that 'we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe …' (p.xx). Consequently, ecocriticism faces a potential hermeneutic imbalance where the poetics of ecological devastation overshadow the equally compelling narratives of nature's inherent beauty and restorative power.This is understandable because recent events have not been in favour of the ecosphere — eco-conscious Nigerian literature has not always been laced with ecocidal images, and this is evident in such poems as Gabriel Okara's 'The Call of the River Nun' where the poet's persona tells the river: 'I want to view your face/again and feel your cold/embrace' (Okara,1978, p.16).

If the River Nun were desecrated, the persona would not yearn to 'inhale' its 'breath' (p.16). Unfortunately, years later, Ibiwari Ikiriko's 'Okara's Nun' reveals thatthe once 'Silver-surfaced / Nun' is now 'Crude-surfaced' (Ikiriko, 2000, p.25). To portray how almost useless the river has become, the persona says 'It lumbers / Reflecting nothing / Invoking nothing (Ikiriko, 2000, p.26).Thus, harbouring no sea creatures, the water can neither reflect, at least, nor serve as a conduit by which the gods and goddesses of rivers can be invoked. This shows a disconnection of the primal unityof the transcendental and physical domains, and this is mostly prompted by (the effects of) colonialism.One way or the other, virtually every literary scholar who has attempted the definition of literature has associated it with life and living, which means that whatever is projected in literary writings has ties to life, whether or not the subject of discourse harbours life or is alive itself. This extends to an expansive range of such entities as people, fictional personae, mountains, water bodies, plants, animals and geographical locations, including the Niger Delta which constitutes 'nine states, namely, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo,Imo, Ondo and Rivers' (Dele Babalola, 2014, p.119).

The region poses paradoxes, some of which have been addressed by scholars within and beyond the Niger Delta. One such paradox lies in its position in Nigeria: 'While the region is oil-rich, it isalso the most marginalized and the least developed' (Oyeniyi Okunoye, 2008, p.414). In this regard, this region accommodating all South Southern states and a few South Eastern states defies the popular Biblical dictum that to whom much is given, much is expected. According to John Ejobowah (2000, p.33), 'Nigeria extracts about 93.1 millionmetric tons of oil annually from its soil to account for 2.9% of world production. TheNiger Delta and the sea gulf off its shores, which host over a dozen oil companies,produce what accounts for 80% of Nigeria's annual revenue'. The Niger Delta, therefore,presents an unsettling contradiction to the principle of commensurate

responsibility, fuelling Nigeria's annual revenue yet marked by persistent underdevelopment. The ecological problem of the Niger Delta cannot be divorced from its economic problems, for as Benson Omojimite (2011, p.47) puts it, 'The economic life of the people of the Niger Delta is largely determined by their environment'.

The dissonance where abundance translates into deprivationdoes not bespeak conventional notions of economic justice and resource distribution. It is out of place that the source of national prosperity (Niger Delta) is itself a victim of systemic neglect and a centre of pornography of poverty, with attempts to solve this problem being met with political harangues and aggressive suppression. As the hen that lays the golden eggs, the region's resources shouldcatalyse centrifugal development and *joie de vivre*, but they have spawned conflicts and contentions, (re)igniting grievances that have erupted into violence and instability. There is also the emergence of fine, flowery, and lush literature from an environment whose green and aquatic life are fading. This is what Joe Ushie (2006) spotlights in his submission that the 'Niger Delta literary landscape has continued to flourish even as its physical environment is wilting' (quoted in Okunoye, 2008, p.413)

Despite man's status as the most intelligent creature using human-centric metrics, his existence is threatened by the depletion of his environment, for he cannot survive independently of other natural components, animate or inanimate. With literature, writers mirror society in their attempts to ignite change. Ecologically, they assume the responsibilities of an environmentalist by advocating the protection of the environment. Given the above, Friday Okon (2020), in his foreword to Onyeama's *Journey with Me?*, asserts that 'In the case of art and literature, from time immemorial, it has been at, and in the service of man and his environment, mirroring the beauty and the ugliness as well as the glories, and triumphs of man over the sordid details of his unwholesome and bleak environment' (p.vii).As opposed to the idea of representing only the ideal, Okon posits that the business of art and literature entails casting back reality, whether in its utopian or dystopian state.

The reflection of the level of damage done and possible outcomes of inordinate activities like hydraulic fracturing creates awareness and reinforces the attempts to create an environment where the human and the inhuman 'can coexist, cooperate and flourish' (William Rueckert, 1978, p.107). In Niger Delta literature (which in this case means literature set in the Niger Delta and not literature by Niger Delta writers), authors of different genres have addressed issues ranging from the economic marginalisation of the Niger Delta to the 'deterioration of the environment through the depletion of resources such as air, water, and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife' (Chiedu Mafiana et al, 2020, p.42). The damage 'occasioned by government and multinationals' (Paul Ugboma, 2015, p.76) in their quest to provide enough energy from natural resources and amass wealth for themselveshas altered the primeval serene state of nature, resulting in 'oil spills, blowouts, gas flares, and other forms of ecological despoliation' (Tanure Ojaide, 2013, p.vi).

Before colonialism, communities in the Niger Delta had self-sufficient economies based on fishing, farming and local trade. In the wake of colonialism, these traditional systems were disrupted by reorienting the economy towards the extraction of raw materials for the benefit of the colonising power, and sustained decades after Nigeria's independence in 1960.The adoption of the merger between postcolonialism and ecocriticism as the theoretical framework for this paper is not informed solely by the imbued postcolonial issues addressed therein, but also because ecocriticism was believed to be an 'offshoot of American studies' (Rob Nixon, 2005, p.234). And since postcolonialism rejected ecocritical concerns 'implicitly as, at best, irrelevant and elitist, at worst sullied by "green imperialism"' (Nixon, p.235), it is difficult to sacrifice one for the other, as 'openly antagonistic' (Susie O'Brien, 2009, p.1) as the two fields may appear, especially because African plays are involved here.

Travis Mason (2012, p.105) notes that 'the first critical introduction to postcolonial ecocriticism is acollaborative effort by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin', and the duo asks: 'Is there any way of narrowing the ecological gap between coloniserand colonised, each of them locked into their seemingly incommensurable worlds?' (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p.2). This question signals the vast disparity in environmental impact and suffering between the historically colonising nations (the Global North) and the historically colonised nations (the Global South). As plays set in the Niger Delta, Udoka's *Inyene* and *Rainbow over the Niger* are a direct artistic representation of this 'ecological gap' thatdepict environmental devastation as a legacy of colonial and neocolonial resource extraction. This critical approach accommodates several aspects, but this paper is anchored to one of the tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism that there is no social justice without ecological justice (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p.39), a re-echo of Deane Curtin's (2005, p.7) submission that 'environmental justice, social justice, and economic justice … [are] parts of the same whole'.

There are a myriad of both literature and literary critiques that engage discourse on the challenges crippling the Niger Delta. However, the approach used in tackling these problems is many times torn between male-authored narratives where male characters are the heroes that save the day, and female-authored texts where women champion the cause to prevent ecocide. Following the idea that 'All literature is propaganda' (George Orwell, 2009, p.37), Ekikereobong Usoro (2024) argues that 'The domain of gender studies is a saturated field that has lodged arguments about the "evil" nature of women by male writers and the "devilish" character of men by female writers' (p.38). This mode of representation is extant even in eco-conscious intercourse. And even at the level of literary criticism which, of course, is also art, critics have taken sides along gender lines in the representation of environmentalist ideas, using it as a form of propaganda to show how men or women are either marginalised or underrated.

A case in point is Elizabeth Nyager's (2019, p.128) critique on how women in Onwueme's *What Mama Said* and Atta's *Everything Good will Come* are presented as 'environmental/psychological "Others" whose "bodies" have become the objects of social

injustice in our own social domains of Nigeria'. This gender-based marginalisation is more problematic for Niger Delta women than men because they face subalternity on double sides — based on region and gender. In Methuselah's (2010) critique of Onwueme's *Then She Said It*, the playwright creates a female character who defies the traditional depiction of women in Nigerian plays as typically voiceless and servile.ArnoldUdoka, one of the finest writers from Akwa Ibom, has dedicated his literary brainchildren to the problems of the Niger Delta, approaching these problems with an all-gender inclusive approach which, although acknowledges the proclivity for marginalisation, embraces everyone, young and old, man and woman.

An all-inclusive gender representation is not common in Niger Delta eco-literature as many writers more often than not focus on environmental justice so much that they do not pay attention to how gender-polarised their narratives are. Sequel to the belief that 'Women and nature have an old-age association, and affiliation that has persisted throughout culture, language, and history' (Carolyn Merchant, 2010, p.294), many texts, in their attempt to level patriarchal strictures and create an equal society, end up raising matriarchal structures, becoming the very problem they had sought to solve. Because 'literature should lead, not be led' (Dorothy Hall, 1941, p.397), Udoka uses his plays to encourage a non-polar gender approach to solving Niger Delta economic and ecological problems even in plays with eponymous characters like *Inyene* (the male protagonist) and *Akon* (the female protagonist).

As a prolific writer, appraisals on Udoka's dramatic oeuvre within the context of the Niger Delta are not lacking, but these critiques keep their critical lens mostly on ecological issues, contributions of men to the cause, or the role of women in environmental justice. How Udoka balances the gender scale while simultaneously tackling issues of grave concern in the Niger Delta has been underexplored, and this essay examines the ways in which the playwright uses *Inyene* and *Rainbow over the Niger* to address the postcolonial ecocritical issues in Niger Delta without playing the gender-bias card. The comparative analysis methodology is used to distinguish the idiosyncratic features of the primary texts, even as they are both bound by the same gender approach.

Udoka's All-Inclusive Gender Approach in Niger Delta Discourse

The aftermath of the discovery of oil has posed problems ranging from unemployment, environmental degradation, sexual exploitation and destruction of lives and property, among other things; a situation of 'oil boom that has become doom' (Sunny Awhefeada, 2013, p.96). Precious Ona (2009, p.35) affirms this when she posits that 'The Delta's oil economy has generated several moral contradictions'. Most Nigerian ecocritical literary texts often show the degeneration that has struck the once serene and green environment of the Niger Delta. In Udoka's *Inyene*, for instance, Priest (one of the major characters) highlights the fact that the people were happy before the introduction of oil-related activities into the community:

> We were a very happy people until one day, a strange and violent tide swept from the depths of the ocean to our shores. None of us knew what type of dam to build to stem that tide. …Where then do I as a priest appease our gods? In the water or on 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? (Udoka, 2009, p.23).

Priest contrasts the prelapsarian harmony of the community with the catastrophic disruption caused by external exploitative forces occasioned by colonialism. Before the arrival of this 'strange and violent tide', the community was integrated with its environment, living in a state of ecological and social equilibrium, which is central to postcolonial ecocriticism.

The initial state of the environment was characterised by traditional practices that respected the balance of the ecosystem. The sudden and devastating arrival of the tide signals a shift that triggered the anger of the gods over the intrusion of exploitative activities (reckless industrialisation and resource extraction) which have tampered with marine life. That no one could tell how to contain the tide underscores the community's vulnerability and lack of preparedness in the face of this unprecedented ecological assault. The community's traditional relationship with the natural world has been disrupted, a relationship the priest does not know how to restore. He is unable to find a place to appease the gods, and this demonstrates the complete breakdown of the community's connection to their environment. Members of Bawkeng community who are purely farmers and fishermen engage in agricultural activities and fishing respectively, but with the discovery of oil in the region, the activities of oil explorers mar than make lives.

This also manifests in Udoka's*Rainbow over the Niger*where oil spillage destroys their source of livelihood and has led to protest and agitation, compelling Ekpawd's lament: 'My people protest the environmental impact of oil prospecting, exploration, drilling and spillages, which have reduced everything around us to nothingness; and this includes our lives! Yes, a lot of money is derived from crude oil, but where are the dividends among my people?' (Udoka, 2010, p.25). The fact that the people are not compensated even when enough profit is made off crude oil goes on to show the insensitivity of multinational companies and capitalists in the Niger Delta. The menace of pollution that is presented in the text is very alarming, as it causes total damage to the vegetation that it covers. This is illustrated by Ekpawd when he wonders: 'Fishing is the only trade most of us in the creeks learned from childhood. Today, we can barely feed our families. Must our growing men and women turn to petty stealing or robbery for survival?' (Udoka, 2010, p.26). Hence, environmental degradation affects man since he is also a part of nature.

As indicated in Ekpawd's statement, because man has polluted the environment and his means of survival have been deprived of him, he is tempted to use other means to survive,

whether fair or foul. Thus, the result of man's tragedy-inflicting activity is not limited to the dangers it poses but the vices it breeds in society. Beyond ecological damage, the occurrence of pollution also contributes to food poisoning and poses adverse health challenges to people. Ekpawd asks:

> Farming? Even the farmlands are dotted with septic sores. Let it be known here that our soil now kills every seed that is unfortunate to find itself beneath it. My people die in scores daily because of the poisonous fumes from gas flaring. Is all this not a recipe for famine and genocide? (Udoka, 2010, p.27).

The lives of the people are at stake for two reasons: they die either because of the emission of poisonous fumes/dangerous gases into the air which is detrimental to their health or because the two main occupations of the people — fishing and farming — have been denied them due to the fact that fishes have been killed or forced to migrate, while the soil has been contaminated enough to kill whatever is planted.

To worsen the situation, the people are supposed to endure whatever danger they face without protesting — peaceful demonstrations by the people are met with arrest and police brutality as Ekpawd affirms: 'Only last week, five young men were arrested for attempting to ask for a review of the policies of the oil explorers. The week before, six men were imprisoned for protesting against slavery in their fatherland' (Udoka, 2010, p.27).Consequently, the people die in silence because they are not meant to fight for their lives; because whatever problems they have, irrespective of how disastrous they are, must be endured even at the cost of their lives. Udoka also clarifies that what befalls a community due to the activities carried out in such environments is aided and abetted by some community members who care only about how much they can gain from such exploitations to the detriment of many others.

One of the characters in Udoka's *Inyene* who plays the role of an engineer claims that the effects of oil spillage are no one's fault and not a big deal. He boldly assures that '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…' (Udoka, 2009, p.26). However, this is a pointer to how myopic the people are sometimes, without taking into consideration what might be in the long term. Engineer is a representation of those who fail to understand that even if there are other wells, land, and water, it is only a matter of time before they also are despoiled. The tragedy that features the aftermath of environmental degradation is pinpointed in the play as Preba says:

> Young men. All we are asking for is our ancestral land, rivers and ocean. We must farm and go fishing. That's all we know here. We cannot die of hunger on our motherland! Is that too difficult for you and your master to understand? You have been given weapons to cut us down, but we have been given nothing except hunger, pain, diseases and poverty (Udoka, 2009,p.31).

Thus, when water is polluted as a result of oil spillage, fishes die and fishermen surf the waters with nothing to go home with because the 'waters now are red from… carnage' (Udoka, 2009, p.29).

The soil is also polluted, which causes infertility; plants cannot grow on such soil, and farmers have no good harvest after the planting season. Famine becomes a reality for the people, and some are forced into impoverishment. It must be noted here that it is not the extraction of natural resources that makes the land infertile and the waters inhabitable to sea creatures; it is man's unwillingness to control his activities that leads to the destruction of the physical environment. This is what the playwright reveals at the end of the play. If oil rigging were the bane of people's existence in Bawkeng community, the resolution at the end of the play would have featured the excommunication of Adam (the White man) and his company from the community. The problem, as noted by Inyene, is in 'the way and manner you [Adam] throw your waste on them. That's all! We must find solutions to these mishaps and poverty' (Udoka, 2009, pp.50-51).

Thus, containing the damages in the Niger Delta situation does not necessarily mean shutting down oil rigging companies, but requires setting up effective waste management control systems, adequate pipeline repair systems, abstinence from oil theft which leads to oil spillage, and oil bunkery surveillance systems. With a social justice system in place, ecological justice can be realised. Natural resources are blessings that are meant to improve man's standards of living, but when extracted with levity and carelessness, they become a curse. As stated earlier, both men and women are equally engrossed in the fight for environmental justice in Udoka's approach to solving some of the recurring problems of the Niger Delta. In fact, although the play has a male eponymous protagonist, it is Preba and Preye, two female characters, who pay the ultimate price with their lives. At Preba's death, Priest says: 'She it was, who told us that our natural wealth should never be allowed to become our permanent curse. It seems that is the case now, for the land of Bawkeng is at the twilight of its life. You see, ...we have strangely become refugees on our motherland' (Udoka, 2009, p.35).

It is contradictory that a region endowed with abundant resources, primarily oil, has become synonymous with environmental devastation and human suffering. The situation now appears to be a 'permanent curse' because of its persistence for decades. The Niger Delta has shown signs of terminal decline, indicated by the use of the 'twilight' which suggests a gradual yet inexorable decline. This region is marked by alienation and displacement experienced by the indigenous populations of the Niger Delta. In Ikiriko's 'The Palm and the Crude', the persona states that crude oil 'Was of us / But by them / And with them' (Ikiriko, 2000, p.32). Analogously, the characters in Udoka's *Inyene* are now 'refugees on . . . [their] homeland' (2009, p.35). The condition where people are rendered homeless in their ancestral lands underscores the marginalising impact of environmental destruction on cultural identity and social cohesion, stressing the forced migration and displacement that often accompany resource extraction, transforming once-sprightly

communities into enclaves of despair.

It is the misuse of oil wealth, not the oil wealth itself, which has resulted in the depleting condition of the ecosphere, and the conversation between a worker and the foreman demonstrates this:

FOREMAN: Hold it tight, hold it tight
Keep the elbow tight
Spill no oil now
No, no errors now.
WORKERS: We will do our best…
Over here
Something has gone wrong
If master sees, I will be sacked.
FOREMAN: What?
You've spilled the oil?
WORKERS: Not my fault
Pipes don't think (Udoka, 2009, pp.24-25).

The indifference on the part of Engineer shows one of the root causes of the problem — when he is told that oil is flowing 'on the ground, on the water, and the farmland' (p.26), he says it is 'no one's fault' and 'no big deal' (p.26).

The levity with which Engineer addresses such a grave situation aggravates environmental degradation. He circumnavigates his life around making money, notwithstanding the negative consequences. Not dismissing incompetent workers is another problem, because even when told to hold it tight, the worker claims that 'it is a tough job'. If companies employ workers based on merit to handle the job, there would be minimal occurrences of oil spillage since they would be competent enough to hold pipeline 'elbows' and not accuse pipelines of not thinking when the damage has been done. The degeneration that has struck the characters has culminated in protest and demonstration, and they use resistance to fight against those who have destroyed the land and water. For Tony Bennett(1998, p.171), resistance is 'an essentially defensive relationship to cultural power that is adapted by subordinate social forces in circumstances where the forms of cultural power in question arise from a source that is clearly experienced as external or internal'.

Udoka uses his play to affirm Foucault's (1982, p.782) submission that 'the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared'. In *Inyene*, it is evident that the struggle for what is right knows no gender — both genders should play active and significant roles in fighting for the right cause. Preba is seen spearheading the protest with words that spur the women into action: 'Since our men have turned to worms and cannot stand the sight of guns, it is now our duty to redeem this land' (p.31). Here, the weak/fragile feature of worms is used to describe the men of Bawkeng who cower at the sight of guns. The women are willing to protest in the face of armed men who could end their lives with the pull of the trigger. Preba's charge to the women and snide remark against men serve as

the playwright's honest inclusions which acknowledge the tendency for polarisation between men and women. This initial setup is not Udoka's way of bolstering it but painting a realistic portrait of how things are in the Niger Delta within the context of gender discourse.

Preba charges the Foreman to tell his father, Timi, that the whole village is sad because 'of his greed. Like a tornado, he has invoked destruction on our land. The shark that he is, our waters are now red from his carnage. The toad that invokes the rain must be drenched by the rain' (Udoka, 2009, p.29). Preba uses the destructive feature of a tornado to describe Timi's actions that support inhumane activities in Bawkeng. Like a tornado, his actions leave destruction as a legacy. This is a spinoff from the proverb about the toad used by Preba to affirm that actions have repercussions; evil begets evil, and goodness begets goodness. Nonetheless, the protest and demonstration by the women evolve into violence, which leads tothe death of some of the members of Bawkeng. Since the protesters would not yield to the resisting voice of the guards and vice versa, what starts as a peaceful protest and demonstration erupts into violence.

Before this happens, the playwright gives an insight into the build-up of events: '(They [the natives] keep vigil at the foot of the gas flaring pit until two fishermen enter with soiled fishing nets. One of the fishermen becomes sick all over the floor, convulses and dies) (Udoka, 2009, p.28). Not only does the degradation of the environment cause infertility, but it is also hazardous to health. This stirs the women into violence, and as 'the women stealthily encircle the armed men… PREBA launches towards the door to the ENGINEER's office, but she is manhandled by the guards. The shouts and cries of the women fall on deaf ears. She is severely beaten up and shot, and life slowly ebbs out of her to the consternation of the crowd' (Udoka, 2009, p.34).Udoka's narrative choice to give Preba, a woman, such a strong role demonstrates that he does not reinforce traditional gender roles by presenting men as natural leaders or women as those who should be relegated to the background. Instead, he shows that both genders are capable of strengths and weaknesses and that all have a role to play in the fight for social and ecological justice.

The play transcends the narratives of male dominance or female victimhood and presents a clear message: the environmental and economic challenges facing the region are too formidable to be addressed by any single gender. The fight requires a collective, unified, and all-inclusive approach where men and women work together, leveraging their diverse skills and experiences to forge a sustainable and equitable future for the Niger Delta. In the play, the despoliation of the environment births unrest, protests, and demonstrations, and these snowball into violence and death. The Priest recounts:

> For challenging environmental crisis, Preba was killed. Demanding for practices to maintain the health and survival of life, Preye 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 (Udoka, 2009, pp.34-35).

A surface reading of this play might lead some to conclude that the deaths of Preba and Preye are a theatrical cul-de-sac, their ultimate sacrifice seemingly ineffectual when contrasted with Inyene's later successful dialogue with the oil company.

This interpretation, however, risks an overly simplistic understanding of protest and change, and, more significantly, would inadvertently diminish the elevated and catalytic role of martyrdom in postcolonial environmental struggles, a legacy embodied by figures like Ken Saro-Wiwa whom Nixon (2005, p.233) fittingly describes as 'Africa's first environmental martyr'. To argue that Preba and Preye's deaths are a waste and therefore render the thesis about a non-polar gender approach questionable is to ignore the complex nature of resistance against entrenched power structures. Their sacrifice is far from being futile and is argued here to be the indispensable shock that creates the necessary moral and emotional groundswell for subsequent action. In the context of the Niger Delta where environmental struggles are often met with brutal state and corporate violence, the death of protestors, while tragic, frequently serves as a grim but potent stimulant.

Considering the historical precedent which reveals that 'the nefarious activities of Nigerian government that led to the murder of Saro Wiwa and other eight members of Ogoni land are still on'(Macaulay Mowarin, 2013, p.217), Saro-Wiwa's relentless advocacy for the Ogoni people against ecocide culminated in his execution. While his death did not immediately halt oil extraction or fully remediate the environment, it catapulted the Niger Delta crisis onto the international stage, galvanising global outrage, sanctions against Nigeria, and unprecedented scrutiny of multinational oil companies. Saro-Wiwa's martyrdom, like that of Preba and Preye, was not an end to the struggle but a recalibration of its terms. His death became a symbol and unignorable testament to the severity of the injustice which empowered subsequent movements and forced dialogues where none existed before. Similarly, in Udoka's play, Preba and Preye's ultimate sacrifice injects an undeniable moral weight into the narrative.

The deaths of the two women, among others, transform what appeared as an abstract struggle into a tangible, horrifying reality of human cost. It is precisely this shock of ultimate sacrifice that shifts the calculus for both the community and the oil company. The normalcy that Inyene eventually restores through dialogue is neither achieved in a vacuum nor is it merely a result of his masculine agency, buta ripple effect caused by Preba and Preye's blood. Hitherto dismissive, the oil-rigging company now faces the undeniable consequence of its actions. This elevates the stakes and increases the pressure for genuine engagement since Inyene's dialogue gains moral leverage precisely because it is underwritten by the cost paid by Preba and Preye. As such, he is not only negotiating terms about the environment but also demanding accountability for lives lost; social justice and ecological justice become equally proportionate.

The non-polar gender approach, in this light, becomes even more critical as it allows readers to examine how all characters, regardless of their unique roles or outcomes, contribute to the struggle. Through their self-sacrificial action, Preba and Preye embody the transformative courage that enables Inyene's successful negotiation. Their deaths ignite the necessary preconditions for the change that follows, and the playwright, in depicting this sequence, is not privileging one gender over another but illustrating the interdependence of different formsof agency and sacrifice during oppression. Simply put, the deaths of the female characters redound to the male protagonist's success.

On the other hand, Udoka's *Rainbow over the Niger* further demonstrates how the ecological state of the Niger Delta has compelled women to take an active part in their quests for environmental justice. The 'efforts of communities to defend them against the dumping the toxic waste, (as well as the harmful contamination of their air, food and water)' (Richard Kerridge, 2006, p.531) become a means of advocating for nature and dialoguing with it. However, in doing this, Udoka deconstructs the representation of women as passive characters who cannot be innovative, creative, and resilient, while the men remain in the spotlight as active characters. The women in the play are initially confined to the kitchen and regarded as second-class citizens incapable of rational thought in proffering solutions to ecological issues.

When the aggrieved women come out to join the protest against environmental degradation, the men present at the meeting undermine their relevance, with Ogbuefi saying thus: 'Women generally do not have anything to offer in a meeting like this. I would advise that you help yourselves by walking out of the door quietly; go home, cook for your husbands and make children (Udoka, 2010, p.37). This is what Ruth Sheila (1980) refers to in her submission that 'The patriarchal images of women reflect them as human beings with less intelligence . . .physically almost disabled, less able physically, psychologically and spiritually; small of body, mind, and character; often bad or destructive' (p.65). In light of Sheila's position, women in the play are underrated and are thought of as being incapable of triggering positive change or being a conduit of revolution. The men insist: 'Olurunmaje! Women! Instead of staying at home and taking care of the children God has given to them, they are coming to our meeting to ask who the leader is. Ha-ha-ha-ha, miracles will never end' (p.37).

The women in *Rainbow over the Niger* are initially relegated to domestic spaces as it is very surprising to the men that the women left their houses to join the protest. Through Funmi, Udoka projects women who defy patriarchal stereotypes by igniting the flames of revolution for environmental justice: 'Almost? No! We are sufficiently embarrassed. Are these still the days for women to give birth only and take care of the house? If you, men, had taken care of things, what the hell will we be doing here? Eh?' (p.38). Mina, another strong female character in the play, reprimands institutions that suppress children and women who cannot speak for themselves. To achieve this, she does not stop at championing the cause of Child Rights Foundation which she represents in Udoka's play, but also goes on tolevelthe

patriarchal stricture which has kept them subservient: 'These young ones have no voice of their own, especially when no one is willing to listen to them or their problems. As mothers, we desire that they be heard, helped and rescued from …poverty, slavery and inhuman conditions' (Udoka, 2010, p.39).

Mina asserts that 'men have turned our children to slaves and vagabonds and we will not accept that anymore. No!' (Udoka, 2010, p.38). The dauntless resilience demonstrated by the women is laudable, and Funmi suggests: 'Chief, it is time we think and deconstruct the restrictive roles that have been, not naturally but socially, ascribed to us, women' (Udoka, 2010, p.42). With Funmi's submission, it is deduced that the second-class status of women is not congenitally natural but socially constructed by patriarchy to limit them and what they can do. At the end of this disagreement between both parties, the men and women agree to work together, and a woman, Madam Pepple, is elected to lead the newfound organisation, Rainbow over the Niger.

Comparing *Inyene* to *Rainbow over the Niger* reveals that the non-polar gender approach operates more subtly in the former, embedded within the primary narrative of confrontation between indigenous communities and multinational oil companies. While the play highlights the collective struggle against ecocide and the violence perpetrated by external forces, it begs for a kind of reading that transcends rigid gender binaries in understanding resilience and resistance. The actions of Preba and Preye whose ultimate sacrifice lends weight to subsequent negotiations may have been depicted as a female protest, but they are essential contributions within a broader, shared fight for survival. The analysis of *Inyene* through a non-polar gender lens thus focuses on how diverse forms of agency, irrespective of conventional gender assignments, coalesce to address the overwhelming environmental and social injustices.

Conversely, *Rainbow over the Niger* presents a more direct avenue for deploying the non-polar gender approach as it wholly engages the gendered tensions within the indigenous community itself. It unpacks the struggles between men and women and reveals how traditional gender roles and power imbalancesinfluence their collective response to ecological issues. The focus shifts from the basic external 'us vs. them' in *Inyene* to an internal examination of 'us' in *Rainbow over the Niger*, highlighting how environmental crisis exacerbates existing gender inequalities and forces a re-evaluation of gendered responsibilities. Here, the non-polar gender approach becomes instrumental in dissecting how the community's capacity for unified action is either strengthened or fragmented by its internal gender politics, demonstrating that a holistic approach to postcolonial ecocritical problems must also account for these internal socio-gendered relationships. It is undeniable in both plays that, just as the postcolonial ecocritical tenet adopted in this paper upholds, social justice is key to ecological justice.

Conclusion

Arnold Udoka's dramatic works examined in this paper are evidently rooted in the socio-

ecological realities of the Niger Delta, projecting the region's struggles against environmental degradation and economic exploitation. Central to Udoka's artistic vision is the strategic deployment of dialogue within a dialogic literary genre, not as a literary device but as an instrument for social transformation. Through carefully crafted exchanges, he dismantles the rigid polarities that often hinder progress, advocating an inclusive approach that transcends gender divisions and fosters collaborative solutions. The plays, in their dealings with conflict and resolution, underscore the importance of dialogue both in the confrontation between protesters and oil companies, and in the internal struggles between men and women within the affected communities. *Inyene* suggests that the oil companies which are often perceived as monolithic entities are not impervious to reason. *Rainbow over the Niger* focuses more on the gendered dynamics of the struggle, further reinforcing Udoka's commitment to inclusivity.

The initial exclusion of women from the fight for environmental justice that was rooted in patriarchal assumptions and exclusionary practices mirrors the divisive tendencies that often undermine collective action. However, the playwright's interventionpresents a counter-narrative where men and women engage in open dialogue, confronting their prejudices and reaching a consensus. The dialogue issubsequently marked by mutual respect and recognition of shared interests, culminating in a unified front and demonstrating the transformative power of collaborative action. Udoka, in this context, advocates a paradigm shift where gendered divisions are replaced by a shared commitment to environmental justice and economic equity. His plays, therefore, build bridges, forge sustainable solutions, and empower inclusivity to reclaim agency and chart a course towards environmental restoration and economic prosperity. Udoka's commitment to a non-polar gender approach provides a blueprint for advancing a more equitable and sustainable future in the Niger Delta and beyond.

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