



**The Uncanny, Environmental Crises and the Unheard Voices in Ebi Yeibo's
A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems**

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Abstract

The Uncanny is Freud's aesthetic concept, which is dismantled in deconstruction, and it becomes applicable in various literary discourses. As a psychoanalytic approach to criticism, the uncanny reflects a state of being and a state of mind. When taken into environmental studies and literature, the double appearance presents in every uncanny situation is recognized in the changing images of the environment from the pristine to the polluted. This study is an evaluation of environmental images in Ebi Yeibo's A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems. Postcolonial ecocritical issues like economic marginalization of the Niger Delta people dominate studies on Niger Delta literature. This study evaluates the connection between the environment and its inhabitants, especially women, as both are held captives in patriarchal capitalism. The captivity of the environment and its inhabitants renders the people voiceless and the non-human permanently unheard. From ecofeminism, poems show that only in the concept of the uncanny, the imageries of the Niger Delta environment is aptly captured. This exhibits the given state of the environment and that of the people. As home has been defamiliarised and the ecosystem now becomes strange to the inhabitants.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Environmental Marginalization, Ecofeminism and Niger Delta.

Introduction

The study of the environment in relation to the local people (the inhabitants) as an interdisciplinary approach to literature proves inexhaustible and continuous. The condition of the environment in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has become a provocative issue in almost every sphere of the people's life. The environment as a figuration in most literary works of the Niger Delta is recently perceived and described by writers and critics in some related terms like polluted, degraded, destroyed, distorted, devastated, mangled, exploited, oppressed and uninhabitable, good for nothing. These are the words in which the present condition of an environment, which was originally eulogized and adored by writers in rhetoric of the following images: the face of the beauty queen, paradise, home, mangrove of the Delta, the South-South Savannah, land of the living, etc.

It is uncanny how an environment known for the latter acronyms turns out to be depicted in the former sense of words. For this study, an effort is made to give a logical account of the representation of the environment and the inhabitants' state of mind through an understanding of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytical experiment of the state of being and the state of the mind, called 'the uncanny'. Our focus is on the condition of the environment, which is aptly described in the words of ecofeminists as exploited, polluted, and uninhabitable. This environmental state is considered in this study as the bane behind the incessant crises in the Niger Delta region.

The crises, which like the harmattan fire, escalate from ecological to socio-political and economic protests and therefore attract some immeasurable attention, locally and internationally. The federal government of Nigeria and some international communities, especially Europe and America, employ every possible means to quell the chaos of the agitating youth and women. This is for the fact that Shell and Chevron are the major oil operators in the area. Often, these youths are killed and arrested while women are raped and violated, all in an effort to take what is not theirs from the land. In sum, the protesters are often suppressed by the military. Many voices are therefore silenced and literally unheard. The conscious voice reverberates through the words of the persona as Ebi Yeibo leads us on, in his collection: *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems*. It is the complexity and ambiguity entwined in the situation that leaves this subject open and continuous for varied and further studies.

The Uncanny: As a State of Being and a State of Mind

Freud already marginalizes, in his characteristic way, the issue that would later gain more importance. "It is not very usual for a psychoanalyst to explore such phenomena, he works in other strata of mental life and has little to do with the subdued emotional impulses which, inhibited in their aims and dependent on a host of concurrent factors" (1), says Freud. Nevertheless, Freud feels obliged to do so. And although he claims that he is going to touch only upon some aspects of the subject, he ends up treating "the uncanny" as a whole. Freud invariably deals with the conditions and the ways we experience them. This is the state of

mind and the state of being. He is the first to tackle the problem of the uncanny. "*Das Unheimliche*" which is of German origin and meaning: "the uncanny", and this, he says, belongs to the realm of the frightening, but occupies a somewhat detached space from what seems to be merely fearsome. This somewhat detached space is what foregrounds the uncanny as distinct from fear and whatever is qualified in it.

It is according to *The New Webster Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language*: Weird, unnatural, eerie, dangerous, and severe as a wound. Some of the most recent works treating aspects of the uncanny include Kendall Walton's essay "Fearing Fiction" and Peter Lamarque's "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?". These essayists, however, work with a concept of fear which is very different from what Freud outlines. While these philosophers of art treat a kind of fear that is experienced when contemplating art in terms of the pretence and the willingness to subject one-self to sensations of fear for one's life or safety generally, the uncanny, as Freud experiments, supersedes any act of will and strikes in a strange form and difficult to reorganize. It is overwhelming when encountered and often detested. The concept easily extends from the area of literature or art to real life. Still, it remains undesirable, instinctual, fearful situation and experience. According to Jentsch Ernst, "It is as if there is an instance of schizophrenia embedded in the language. Words like "weird", "strange", "odd", "alien", "unhomely", "queer", and "funny" – the synonyms of the "uncanny" – also involve multiple readings, meanings, and schisms" (12).

The uncanny embraces a sense of uncertainty of one's experiences, of oneself, and of the situation itself. Therefore, the experience of the Niger Delta people is well captured. In an instance, they are overwhelmed by one instance of wealth discovered beneath their land and waters. In another, they are frightened and disgusted by the polluted and devastated condition of their paradisaical enclave. On the universality of this concept, Freud agrees that analysis might tell why and in what way something is uncanny. For, just as there is no universal concept of beauty – in the sense that one thing might be beautiful for a person and ugly for another, Freud stresses, there is no universal uncanny. This argument, therefore, follows that the uncanny stems from an individual perception or experience of an unlikeable state. So, the uncanny can be either of the two: a state of being or a state of the mind. For the uncanny is, in reality, nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind but has become transfigured by the process of repression and distortion. Example is the Niger- Delta environment and experience of the inhabitants as depicted in the poem under study. Freud suggests that, as far as literature is concerned, the uncanniness of the subject-matter depends on the extent to which the illusion of reality is bought by the reader. On the other hand, if the author blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, the experience of the uncanny is possible. As an offshoot of cultural criticism, ecofeminist theory has the capacity to bring literature and reality into a close discourse.

The Uncanny in Ecological Context

Not only does 'The Uncanny' demonstrate a method of psychoanalytic thinking, it has also become a very important tool for thinkers of relative criticism. Nicholas Royle in *The Uncanny: An Introduction* draws a line and theorizes the differences between the "fantastic", "marvelous", and "uncanny" in a chapter titled, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Here, the uncanny ceases to be just a matter of aesthetics, especially with the emergence of deconstructive thinking, but appears in matters like culture, literature, art, philosophy, and gender.

The introductory chapter of Royle's book provides the terms in which the uncanny might work when applied. Royle emphatically worked with the term *ostranenie*, which is defamiliarization or "making strange"; Bertolt Brecht, according to Royle, emphasizes the alienation-effect, again, making the ordinary strange. Harold Bloom conceives of literature as confronting readers with 'an uncanny representation rather than a fulfillment of expectation. He therefore proves situational ironical texts, uncanny.

In literature, deconstruction itself is uncanny. Deconstruction blurs the limits of the once-known and has the power to make it different, precisely as the word the uncanny does. The uncanny says Royle, "is necessarily bound with analyzing, questioning, and even transforming what is called everyday life with issues of sexuality, class, race, gender, age, imperialism, colonialism as well as about notions of automaton and technology" (xiii).

The common denominator of all uncanny phenomena appears to be repetition – the doubling of a subject of any sort, with the second instance of it occurring as a strange one.

The environment as a study of the twenty-first century is quite captured in Royle's theorization of the uncanny. Although deconstruction, the uncanny is dismantled and diversified to be located equally, in issues like culture, gender, and other literary subjects. Secondly, the depiction of the environment in contemporary literature is often ironical. For instance, the Niger Delta environment is like a paradise for the inhabitants and this paradise unknowingly to the people is handed over to foreigners with the promise of Western development. This promise is scarcely or never fulfilled. Instead, the pristine abode of all kinds of lives, including aquatic animals, appears in arts and reality as the defamiliarized, strange, engulfed areas of oil sludge and gas flares. Foregrounding the double appearance present in every uncanny is the later representation of the Niger-Delta environment. Lastly, it is only in ecofeminism that the issues of class, race, gender, age, and imperialism have come to terms with nature studies. Ecofeminism necessarily analyses and questions the existing images of these familiar beings. The metaphor of the land as a woman is of some critical significance for the ecofeminist.

Alexander Vera, in "Environmental Otherness: Nature on Human Terms in the Garden", refers to the uncanny as the 'unnatural'. Alexander believes that the

natural environment features the normative background in which the uncanny, according to her, unfolds its monstrous potentials. She tries to connect the commonly referenced nature, which includes plants, animals, weather, land, and water, as considered as antagonists to human beings. She further aims to expand the notion of otherness by considering alterity as an environmental problem that opens up a range of unresolved dichotomies. In the 20th century, says Alexander, man's undaunted attempt to control and manipulate nature with his only partly understanding of nature's course is increasingly experienced as the source of the actual threats to global stability and this she refers to as uncanny experiences.

Her study explores a prime site where human beings come into contact with these issues, and that is in the gardens. She argues that the gardens exemplify the relationship between human beings and nature, where, in the course of decoration and recreational and even perfection, the image of the garden encompasses histories of displacement and violence. Here, she maintains, unwanted plants and animals are exterminated for the sake of aesthetics, and in gardens generally, lives are manipulated and uprooted from their natural habitats. This liminal space shows an awareness of the limitation of man's knowledge and his perception of his control over the 'othered'. Nature is beyond human control; it is not only in this sense that gardens appear to be the uncanny representation of the human-nature relationship. Gardens are symbols of human effort that impose some uncomfortable questions like: Does nature belong to human beings or human beings to nature? How has man controlled that which is natural, and what does this suggest about the Western need for power control? It simply suggests that the garden, as an ideological product of Western civilization, is nature made uncanny.

According to Nwagbara Uzoechi in his "Poetics of Resistance: Ecological Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*", the wake of the unbridled assault of the Niger Delta environment resulted in an environmental state which is best described as the uncanny. This region's traditional economies, cultural practices and socio-political wellbeing were mauled into disquiet. This environment says Nwagbara, has witnessed one of the uncanny forms of neglect and marginalization.

In "Unmasking Ecological Imperialism" a sub-section of the article under review, Nwagbara describes ecological imperialism in this neo-colonial era as more monstrous and sinister. He believes that the present language of neo-colonialism makes it intractable to understand the peril of ecological imperialism as it comes in guise of foreign donor packages, foreign partnership deals and multinational corporations. These constitute an ambiguity to distract any attempt to identify the evils that accompany this contemporary form of colonialism. As a result, the Niger Delta has been left, environmentally battered and defamiliarized. This constituted ambiguity can be very well handled in ecofeminism, where ecological exploitation and other socio-cultural exploitation and marginalization are treated as gender issues. Borrowing Royle's expression, ecofeminist criticism "is necessarily bound with analysing, questioning, and even transforming what is culturally constructed as normal for

everyday life in relation to issues of sexuality, class, race, gender, age, imperialism and colonialism". From the ongoing, the uncanny is not only found in the present ecological context, it is rather well capture in works of many ecological conscious writers like Ebi Yeibo.

The Uncanny and Environmental Crises in Yeibo's *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems*

Helen Johnson suggests in her contribution at the Georgia Political Science Association conference, entitled "Can Rationality Embrace the Uncanny: New Ways to Manage Conflict in the South Pacific". The concept of the uncanny, according to Johnson could be employed in order to manage and resolve conflicts in non-Western regions. The renouncing of rationality in favour of more uncanny thinking models of the indigenous people of a region in Johnson's proposal is a key to understanding and solving the problems that may emerge.

With the interlocking relationship between environmental degradation, poverty, female reproductive health, and violent conflict, ecofeminism has been a viable literary tool in pursuit of sustainable development and conflict resolution since the 1970s to date. While some analysts argue that the effects of environmental degradation are not limited to women, the poor, and the deprived, many conclude from various studies that the devastation of environmental pollution is inextricably intertwined. And only in the interdisciplinary perspectives, like ecofeminist theory, can they be adequately handled. Such criticism must take cognizance of the complications present in such uncanny situations and life interconnectedness as demonstrated in the texts under study.

In *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems*, Yeibo shows that environmental degradation is central to the Niger Delta crises, as it disrupts rural economic activities and poses a threat to human security. The poem "Eagle" is an epitome of an ecological paradise, where according to the persona, a fisherman paddling his canoe down a creek in a silent cascading water through mangrove roots sees some exciting birds conversing, monkeys jumping from one tree to another, a great eagle towering far, far above the trees in majestic shrieks and a hosts of the swamps raising their heads in a wonderful spectacle while the forest remains silent and the waters still (line 1-15). Again in "Barren rivers", the voice laments the pristine environment in what he calls /yesterday/ saying: How can we forget

The stirring songs of crickets
That ushered us
To the open hands of down?
How can we forget
The warm dews that paved
Untrodden paths to the shore?
The hooks and nets we carried
On padless heads;
The bare feet on which we strutted;

The bilge water we baled? (1-10)

In the next stanza, the voice continues to meditate on his memories of past life. He remembers fresh breath of fishes that splash the water to their ultimate desires in the morning sun. There are turtles and alligators the fishers often exchange with farmers for cassava produce in their local markets (13-20).

It is apocalyptic that, the dwellers of such perfect place for perfect people wake up the following day to find the condition of their environment, as what is available to us in the next lines: Fishermen sweat for nothing/ They say: / Oil has poisoned the river (21-24). This environment, in an exaggerated tone of the persona is made not only useless for the inhabitant but uncanny in the sense of estrangement, queer and unhomely. This sense of estrangement guides the voice through a poem titled: "Testament" and in an anguish lamentation, he says:

The rainbow in the sky
Overwhelms the eye
And humanity crumbles
On a platter of nothing (1-4).

Without loss of words, these people and their environment are devastated. Their lives have no essence since the rainbow overwhelms the eye and humanity crumbles for no cost. For their environment is now a ghoulish valley which looks like mere ashes where fire burns without ceasing and in the words of the persona:

...we learn a new song
Like children learning to walk-
With unsteady, uncertain steps-
For a new tomorrow. (29-32)

Learning carries the burden of defamiliarization, unhomeliness, as can be seen in the imagery of children learning to walk with some unsteady steps. In this context, there is estrangement resulting from a strange condition of a people's interconnected life, including ecological, socio-cultural, and economic life, thus, it is uncanny. With no further contemplation, the much talked about crises, including some ecofeminist movements of the Niger Delta women are justified. They resolve to make use of every power within their reach to see that their environment is at least managed to an inhabitable level. The voice in "A Song for Tomorrow" encourages the people to fight the despoilers heroically saying: /Let us gag the crocodile/ No, snuff out its deadly breath/ And bury it still/ (6-8). The summary is that the uncanny is not only a state of being; it is also a state of the mind. One visited with the uncanny has no option but to think and act uncanny. In an effort to gag the crocodile, the federal military troupe is deployed with the instruction: shoot aside. In "Warri Crisis I," the air is tensed as the people are killed and arrested in their numbers. The protesting women and youth are no equals to the army, who according to the persona is on /"Operation Wipe" basks in curfews/ Tearing through infernal nights/ In search

of mischief- makers.../ And making cells a market/.While “Warri crises ii” is endowed with imagery of scattered and littered corpses on the open street begging to be buried. The people’s violent attempts to disrupt the activities of the multinational oil companies have a truncating effects on the federal military pulse; for this, their situation is worse, much uncannier than devastating. The people get physically and emotionally broken, overtly dislocated and their voice becomes silenced or completely unheard in their environment. Attention is given to the people’s state of mind in the following sub-heading.

The Unheard Voice of the Dislocated and Devastated in *A Song for Tomorrow and Other Poems*

In *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, Judith Plant puts it clearly that ecofeminist credo has the capacity to create a worldview that incorporates the value and wisdom of the non-dominant ‘othered beings’ among which are the female, the chthonic, the voiceless or the unheard. This will foster a new consciousness of life integrated. In “Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature”, Greta Gaard notes that the unheard voices of the ‘othered’ beings can only be heard through literary works and social movements.

Socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant investigates the devastation and dislocation suffered by nonhuman nature and likened it to the suffering of women in a patriarchal society and that of the poor in a capitalist society. For Merchant, the oppression of the poor in a capitalist society and that of the female under patriarchy are also connected to the human domination of nature. She maintains that the three are socio-economically and culturally constructed as the ‘other’. It is Merchant’s opinion that the interconnected web of the condition of the silenced poor, especially women and children, and the unheard voices of the nonhuman nature under ecological oppressions are made manifest in the Western cultural dualism that separates culture from nature, the rich from the poor, and male from female. In our context, ecofeminism, therefore, investigates and appreciates the uncanny implications embedded in a text where the image of the ecologically and socio-culturally oppressed is depicted as the devastated and dislocated. Often, such people are found voiceless or unheard, as Plant mentions, and in ecofeminism, such wounds can be healed. A look at the later stanzas of “Testament” reveals the emotional condition of a depressed voice:

Since then, our senses
Have ever played the plague:
Either incoherent or numb or both
Like skeletons, nibbled neat and dry,
Pleading, unsure, betrayed, thrashed bare ... (Line 13-17)

We are presented with a conglomeration of imageries bearing some uncanny manifestations, where the people’s reasoning is ever afflicted with the plague of incoherence or non-functionality. Again, they found their existential being similar to that of skeletons, sapped and completely dry. This is enough for any living thing, both human and nonhuman to plead for mercy. Having been

betrayed, they are quite unsure if their appeal can make any difference. Thus, thrashed and dejected, both sound appropriate for the present condition. It is only in literature following Gaard's words that one so defeated can find voice or simply be heard. In the third stanza of "Tears in the home", the voice laments:
See what horrendous hoax

These patriots have played on us
Perforating our world
Like hungry caterpillars
Scattered over green leaves.

Also, in "Even bones are mightier than us", the last three lines read, /...to make us remain,/ Like motionless waters,/ In the pool of perpetual beggarly servitude/. It shows they are like slaves in their own land. In "Ghost in the Ivory Tower", native women carrying water jars to the streams are frustrated by the polluted condition of the water. The women's psychological state is illustrated with the allusion to the biblical foolish virgins who are said to be locked out of paradise forever. These women are deprived of their natural source of water, invariably linked to other sources of livelihood. The children are called to mind in the last lines of "For my son yet unborn". Though devastated and emotionally broken, the voice urges the people to be steadfast in their hope to get their environment restored. Undoubtedly, /The apocalypse of darkness;/ ...The moon is submerged / By sullen clouds/. The people should still hope for a better future, so: / That our children may find/ The tickling harmonies of old/ When they come / (Line 25-34).

A particular degraded site in the second stanza of "Ila- orangun" is compared to a shrunken old woman who has survived patriarchal oppression until she is:

Dull and idle...
In plain silence, waiting for nothing;
A bald head at sunset
Where modern hairs hesitate to grow-
Making insignificant impressions;
A padded head at dawn
Carrying bowls of festal fruits
And vegetable, with dew-bathed breath.

Woman with good experience of feminist ordeal in a patriarchal society can be quite associated with the expressions: 'dull and idle, silent and hoping for nothing lives at old age'. The reason is that such women were never economically or emotionally supported. They labour both economically and maternally. Theirs is to labour until disused at old age. They are presented as voiceless and dull. This type of feminist condition shares commonality with a particular degraded piece of land. Its head is bald at sunset, for, no meaningful crop grows on it. Yet, modern development takes too much time to come, no matter who promises it. The land here is idle like the old women; sometimes, the site is used as an arena decorated with bowls of artificial trees bearing fruits and leaves. It is yet uncanny how the earth, which is known for bearing and

nurturing plants and fruit, is made barren only to be decorated with the artificial form of that which it is deprived. If only the earth could be heard? Her story would have been better told by herself and any other person.

Obviously, this state of voicelessness, the earth environment shares with women and other marginalized and unheard people. Alice Walker makes a summary of all inquiries bordering ecofeminists in her poem called, "Who?" Walker wants to know who has not been suppressed by the world's most intruding and exploitative machinery- imperialism, and the answer goes:

Not I, said the people.
Not I, said the trees.
Not I, said the waters.
Not I, said the rocks
Not I, said the air.
Moon!
We hope
You are safe. (Line 4-11)

Conclusion

Our observation proves that the study of the uncanny in an ecological context goes further in the memory of the people than the everyday appearance of all that is strange, distasteful, and defamiliarized. Ecofeminist uncanniness is more encompassing and holistic. It sees the uncanny in the condition of the environment and as an experience of the people, including the nonhumans occupying the environment. Wherever it is found, the uncanny tends to be gross in effect than it appears. The reason is that human action reflects their state of mind. One reacting to the uncanny always acts uncanny, thus leading to a possible crisis. A violation of the environment is a violation of all whose lives are dependent upon the environment. From the poems analyzed, some insight is given into the cause and a possible way out to the issues of environmental crises, other socio-economic and gender problems of our time. Violence has never been the best for conflict resolution, and so should not be an option in the handling of some delicate issues like the environment, class, and gender, as they exist as an interconnected web. According to ecofeminists, women and the poor are by all means the worst victims of environmental pollution and degradation. This study finds in the uncanny what the environment has become in the process of oil exploration and proves that the same depicts the experience of the people inhabiting the environment, which includes women, the poor, and nonhuman beings.

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