

PETROFICTION AND SLOW VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF ALYSSA RAE'S *A REBEL STAR*.

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ABSTRACT

Energy Humanities is a relatively new realm of study where there is a confluence of objective scientific conclusions and the subjective paradigm of humanities. For Energy Humanities, oil is not just a physical entity, but a strong force binding all forms of human existence. The trickle of oil has spilled over literature too, spawning the new genre called petro-fiction. It focuses on the intricate relationship of energy forms and its socio- cultural impacts. Petrofiction is a term coined by Amitav Ghosh, encompassing the ways in which petroleum is portrayed in novels. Later Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi renamed the genre as Oil Fiction. Alyssa Rae's novel, *A Rebel Star* a Niger Delta petrofiction, tells the story of Marienela and her life in oil rich Delta. It is the chronicle of the land scuffled by the energy curse and neo imperial capitalist agendas. Besides the physical violence, oil in Delta perpetuates slow violence. Slow Violence, put forwarded by

Rob Nixon, happens gradually and is not necessarily palpable. Slow Violence steadily exacerbates ecological degradation, climate change and pollution. Beyond the violence militants spread in the land, Slow Violence also lurks in Niger Delta potentially enough to annihilate the whole community and ecology existing there.

Keywords: *A Rebel Star*, Petrofiction, Slow Violence, Niger Delta, Ecological degradation, Amitav Ghosh, Rob Nixon.

INTRODUCTION

A Rebel Star by Alyssa Rae centers on Marienela, a bright, British adolescent who goes by Mari to her pals. Mari is a member of the top class in London and has an affluent life. Her father is an international businessman with interests in several countries including the oil-rich Niger Delta. Mari's internal conflict begins in school when she discovers about Nigeria. It so happens that a recent significant business choice made by her own father would shortly have an impact on Nigeria. Nigeria, an oil-rich country, is being ripped apart by a range of avaricious and corrupt actors, from government officials to the oil companies looking to maximize their profits from the resource. Apart from the answers Mari seeks, discovering that her father directly contributes to the misery of its people.

Slow Violence, propounded by Rob Nixon, refers to the gradual, unseen, and often imperceptible harm caused by environmental and social forces. It is the long-term effects of climate change, pollution, and structural inequality. The victims of slow violence are often the "poor", including marginalized communities. It is the "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Petrofictions rightly address the Slow Violence caused by the oil pollution and anthropogenic activities.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the role of oil as a neo-colonial tool, latently affixing the foreign oil industry as the omnipotent colonizer, the delta community as the fragile colonized other; oil as a strong catalyst for the formation of power structures in socio-sphere.
- To examine Slow Violence, the imperceptible yet dangerous ecological jeopardy and the preponderance of toxic exposure exacerbated by the oil spillage and unbridled excavations.
- To assess the oil-induced devastations and resource curse in Niger Delta, one of the most oil producing regions in Africa.
- To assert the importance of Petrofictions as awareness mediums to expose the dangers of uncurbed dependence on fossil fuels and to showcase the paramount importance of proposing a sustainability- oriented resource management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed paper applies the tenets of Slow Violence, propounded by Rob Nixon, to analyse the invisible but gradual process of ecological devastations in Niger Delta region. The genre of Petrofiction sets the suitable framework for the study as it rightly records the dangerous and indiscernible ecological hazards caused by multinational oil industries. Theory of Neo-colonialism is also explored. Textual analysis of the primary text is conducted and the secondary materials are collected from articles and books.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Niger Delta, one of the richest oil producing premises in African continent is more prone to petroleum induced ecological hazards and cultural erosion. Mariana's journey to Ogoni land in Niger Delta to discover her mother's past, exposed her to the dark realities of oil exploration in the region. Rae (2015) deciphers Mariana's revelations about Niger Delta from her teacher at the onset:

Oil pollution is a great menace to the Nigerian environment. I wish to warn that the harm being done to the environment of the Niger River Delta must be ameliorated by the oil companies which prospect for oil there; the degradation of the ecosystem must end and the dehumanization of the inhabitants of the areas must cease and restitution be made for past wrongs. (p. 4)

The moment Mariana sets in Niger Delta, she sees "black smoke rose above the city from the fires blazing at the far end of the market" (Rae, 2015, p. 60). The dark clouds of smoke looming over the city chills her spine. The nearer she reaches the Ogoni land, she realises that "these flames were being shot out of pipelines leading away from large industrial plants" (Rae, 2015, p. 76). It was the gas flaring phenomenon from the oil company, which oozes out oil and all kinds of gases from the soil. They burn off everything useless, including methane or sulfur compounds. The combustion of toxic elements can perpetuate slow violence over the land and its people, though in a slow mode of action. Mariana herself recollects her science lessons, "those are like two of the most dangerous gases to breath in" (Rae, 2015, p. 77). The spread of these toxic components into the air may not have a sudden impact, but rather it wreaks Slow Violence, happening in a slow pace but potential enough to demolish the whole Ogoni community.

Mariana finds "a large plume of smoke rose into the sky like an omen above the village" (Rae, 2015, p. 83) where "the river water was dark" (Rae, 2015, p. 83). The sediments and the petroleum sewage from the oil companies are pumped into the river, making it detrimental to water life and Ogoni survival. The oil layer on the water surface is so thick that it even blackens the finger of Mariana. The oil spills spread a filthy film of coagulant in water surface, reducing the Oxygen availability underneath thus accelerating the process of eutrophication. Eutrophication may not be instantaneous, but it can slowly evade the water

life. The Ogoni life depending on the river will also be dismantled. “Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss due to ravaged habitats are all cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations” (Nixon, 2011, p. 3). Rae (2015) draws the image of a river, carrying the spilled oil, spawns the seeds of Slow Violence everywhere it stretches out.

The bodies of fish floated by us, their cloudy, dead eyes staring up at me, accusing me. This is your fault, they seemed to say as the oil clogged their gills. How many thousands of fish, birds, and other animals had my father murdered? How many people? Throughout my time spent in the village I saw the damage oil pollution caused. I saw the smoke and the flames from gas flaring.(p. 335)

Petroleum industries as a neocolonial tool, perpetuate enviro-economic disparities and geopolitical tension. Niger Delta, with its richest oil beds, suffers the resource curse, a repeated history of its colonial past. The gluttonous local government’s affinity towards the international oil companies stagnates the progress of the community, making them more prone to Slow Violence. Tess’s confession about educational system in the locale unfurls the plight of a place which is blessed with abundance of oil. “One of the closest schools is several miles away and nearly impossible for children here to get there everyday” (Rae, 2015, p. 133). Denial of basic education to younger generation accentuates the neocolonial agendas to retard their perception of the Slow Violence inflicted upon them.

CONCLUSION

The unspectacular Slow Violence constitutes substantial threat to the contemporary world. Oil extractivism in the Niger Delta region exacerbates the process of Slow Violence and the ‘poor’, Ogoni community suffers the most by the oil induced ecological scuffles and marginalisation. *A Rebel Star* from the genre of Petrofiction significantly addresses the neocolonial agendas of oil companies and their use of Slow Violence as the tool to accentuate their roots in the land. Alyssa Rae poignantly voices the environmental and social injustices inflicted upon the land of Niger Delta, smothered by the resource curse and unchecked extraction.

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