



An Eco-Critical Analysis of Environmental Degradation in Yerima's *Hard Ground*

Abstract

This study, "An Eco-Critical Analysis of Environmental Degradation in Yerima's *Hard Ground*" delved into the use of the theoretical construct of ecocriticism to understand how texts portray the relationship between people and the physical environment, and what those portrayals say about our ecological values. The study adopted qualitative research methodology, with content analysis as mode of data analysis. leaning on theoretical ideas of ecocriticism. Findings showed that, nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as evidenced in many creative works in almost all cultures of the world. The study concluded that climate change, conservation, deforestation and environmental degradation are rapidly impacting lives globally, and literature is a way to process and understand these issues.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Analysis, Environment, Degradation, Environmental Degradation.

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Introduction

Ecological issues are gaining attention in literary studies because they are reflecting real world concerns. Climate change, conservation, deforestation and environmental degradation are rapidly impacting lives globally, and literature is a way to process and understand these issues. Writers are exploring themes like nature, sustainability, and humanity's relationship with the environment, making literature a powerful tool for raising awareness and sparking conversation. In Nigeria, historical, political and sociological approaches to study of literature has received considerable attention. However, in

recent years, writers are gradually becoming aware of the nexus between literature and nature, geography and spaces, thereby drawing insights from the mutual study of literature and nature.

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evidenced in many creative works in almost all cultures of the world. For instance, nature symbols like forest and yam fields in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (first published in 1958) reflects the protagonist's connection to his culture and land. Today the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized in many departments of

knowledge and development. In literature generally, the relationship between the environment and literature is explored through ecocriticism, which examines how literature portrays human and nature relationships. Works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) have highlighted environmental degradation, raising awareness about the importance of conservation. Similarly, Nigerian writers like Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy* (1985), Niyi Osundare *City Without People* (2011), Helon Habila, *Oil on Water* (2010) and Tanure Ojaide, *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998) have explored nature themes in their works, reflecting the country's environmental concerns and the human experience within it. Some of these environmental concerns have received tremendous attention in recent times, with particular concern with the Niger Delta environmental degradation occasioned by oil spillage, militancy and bunkering activities.

The Niger Delta region's struggle with environmental degradation has been mirrored in works of many Nigerian writers, especially from the Niger Delta. For instance, Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) raises awareness on the devastating effects of oil exploration. The analysis of the poem shows how oil spillage, bombings and gas flaring through the activities of both the government and the oil companies are capable of affecting the environment. Similarly, Ahmed Yerima's trilogy, *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu* is a dramatization of the Niger Delta crises especially in the militant insurgency in the Niger Delta region. The region had been plagued by

years of violence, kidnapping, and oil pipeline vandalism, led by militant groups demanding greater control over the region's oil resources, environmental remediation, and better representation in the oil industry. Consistent with the above, some of the literary inspirations about the Niger Delta, registers the region as a site of historical interplay of the resources of water and oil, one that defines the people as been rich in resources but implicates the people and landscape of the region in the ever constant scuffle, struggle and attendant poverty defined by the experiences of these resources. To this end, this paper is conceived to highlight some of the environmental issues bedeviling the Niger Delta region through the dramatic lens of Yerima's *Hard Ground*.

Methodology

The researchers used content analysis to systematically analyze and interpret the meaning of the text with a keen bias for unbundling some of the environmental degradation issues highlighted in the text. The plays lay bare the misuse of nature and the effects of humans' degradation of the environment, particularly in the creeks of the Niger Delta region. The paper, drew its points of view generally from both primary and secondary sources of data, which included, the text, *Hard Ground*, journal publications, textbooks and Internet sources. The descriptive approach is adopted in our discussion and in presenting our findings.

The Concept of Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems; habitat destruction; extinction of wildlife and pollution. It is defined by Johnson *et al.*, as "any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable" (582). The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction defines environmental degradation as "the reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet social and ecological objectives, and needs" (*Wikipedia*). Environmental degradation is of many types. When natural habitats are destroyed or natural resources are depleted, the environment is degraded. Efforts to counteract this problem include environmental protection and environmental resources management. Miller and Spoolman conceptualized Environmental Degradation as: "depletion or destruction of a potentially renewable resource such as soil, grassland, forest, or wildlife that is used faster than it is naturally replenished. If such use continues, the resource becomes non-renewable or non-existent" (5)

The above confirms that, environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources which includes all the biotic and abiotic element that form our surrounding that is air, water, soil, plant, animals, and all other living and non-living element of the planet of earth. Pradip Kumar

Maurya et al confirms that, "the major factor of environmental degradation is human (modern urbanization, industrialization, overpopulation growth, deforestation, etc.) and natural (flood, typhoons, droughts, rising temperatures, fires, etc.) cause" (1). To Neelam Kumari, "environmental degradation refers to the deterioration of the natural environment due to human activities such as pollution, deforestation, over-exploitation of resources, and climate change. This phenomenon poses significant challenges to biodiversity, ecological balance, and human well-being" (78).

Extrapolating from the above, it can be inferred that environmental degradation occurs when there is an unchecked, uncontrolled and unsustainable extraction of natural resources. The rapid inclination for industrialization, population and economic development and unrestrained growth in urbanization adds to a litany of things that raises concern for environmental degradation. Barun Kumar Thakur, Himanshu Sekhar Rout & Tamali Chakraborty surmises that, "environmental degradation can be local, regional and global. Local as well as global environmental problems hurt poor people most. Local environmental concerns like water pollution and contamination, air pollution, waste disposal, deforestation and soil degradation have a direct impact on human-being (104).

Theoretical Framework

Scholars like, Cheryll Glotfelty, Jonathan Levin, John Loretta, Harold

Fromm, Peter Barry and Jonathan Bate have theorized about eco-criticism, and one of the underlying thread of argument in most of their submission is the admissible fact that, ecocriticism as a theoretical approach is different from the traditional approach to literature because, the critic explores the local or global, the material or physical, or the historical or natural history in the context of a work. In an attempt towards etymology, John Loretta in Fenn explains that:

"Eco", from the Greek root *oikos*, means "house" ... Just as "economy" is the management or law of the house (*nomos* = law), "ecology" is the study of the house. Ecocriticism, then, is the criticism of the "house," i.e., the environment, as represented in literature. But the definition of "house," or *oikos*, is not simple. Questions remain: What is the environment? What is nature? Why did the term "environment," which derives from the verb "to environ or surround," change to mean that which is nonhuman? Are not humans natural and a prominent environment in themselves? Where and in what does one live? Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies, all of which play a part in answering the questions it poses (115)

William Howarth quoted in Glotfelty & Fromm confirms the above when he says, "the *oikos* is nature, 'our widest home,' and the *kritos* is an arbiter of taste" (69). For him, "criticism judges the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination" (71). Thus the working definition of literary ecocriticism within the framework of

this work is the analysis of literature's expression of humanity's place on Earth, our *oikos* or home. This wholly includes the cultural aspect through literature and the biological aspect through the Earth as our ecosystem.

The above definition of ecocriticism is apt for this study because it is concerned with raising the necessary questions about space, existence, care and the role of man in nature and ecological issues. In line with that, the central thrust of this theoretical framework deals with ecological problems like pollution, species extinction and other ecological exploitation addressed in the play. Beyond that, it is associated with the desire to investigate and remedy the current environmental problems. As Mukhtah summarizes, ecocriticism deals with "literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental problems". (315) This paper, through ecocritical lens takes an exploration of hostile human activities on natural resources and their dreadful effects on the people living in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, as portrayed in the selected dramatic text, *Hard Ground*.

Synopsis of Yerima's *Hard Ground*

Hard Ground, the first play in Yerima's trilogy is set in Baba's sitting room, with most of the actions revolving around Nimi, Mama, Baba, Inyingifa and Father Kingsley. At the beginning of the play, Baba and Mama are asking Nimi questions regarding the

role he played that led to the massacre of twenty militants in the creeks. Incidentally, while six of the boys involved in the case have been executed, Nimi's uncle, Father Kingsley has paid some ransom to the Capone and rescued him out of the camp to Lagos. This escape does not douse the death threats around him, because different nefarious activities in the camp are still linked to him. With his family bent on dissuading him from returning to the creeks fearing for his life, his uncle Inyingifa, involved in the gun trading business is particularly distressed and unhappy with the escalating violence in the creeks, which is adversely affecting his business operations due to the heightened security presence in the creeks.

Nimi is however hell bent on returning to the camp to clear his name and prove his innocence to the Don. In the meantime, he absolves himself of the charges of guilt, insisting that the presence of a mole in the camp is responsible for the series of information leakages about their operations. He explains that the twenty militants were massacred by the soldiers upon their arrival to commence a well-planned pipe-line vandalisation. The plan for the operation has been kept close among the insurgents, so the presence of the soldiers in the oil pipeline installations indicates that a spy, or what they call vulture in the Niger Delta militant underworld, has given them away. Now, Nimi is convinced that a vulture is in their midst, and names Father Kingsley, his uncle and a fake Catholic Priest to whom he went for confession before the operation. His suspicion of

Father Kingsley is based on the grounds of his girlfriend Pikibo's information when she visited him in the police detention that the priest visited the camp two days before the raid, and left after their arrest.

With the failed attempts to please the Don and his escape from the creek, Don placed a death sentence on Nimi because everyone fingered him as the spy that leaked the information that led to the crackdown. Things quickly took an intense dramatic turn after Nimi learns of the death of his wife Pikibo and his unborn child in the hands of Don. Enraged by this act, Nimi vows to avenge their death by killing Don. When he finally got the chance, he pounced on the Don and slit his throat. Ironically, the Don, the most feared Don whom Mama calls unprintable name is Baba, Nimi's Father.

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From the play's exposition, the playwright subtly brings to fore the ecological situation of the Niger Delta creeks albeit through the lamentation of Nimi when he learned that he had been rescued from the creeks and brought to Lagos. Nimi's lamentation is saturated with poignant metaphors that beams light on man's inhumanity to man in the creeks and a ruthless description of violence that is both deep and worrisome. But beyond that, there is a legacy and a signature of degradation buried within Nimi's lamentation that invites the readers to understand the environment.

Nimi: I did not ask anyone to rescue me.
Now, I shall be labeled a vulture. And
any child with knife can butcher me,

tear me apart, or even hang me by the neck till life drips out of my body like river water, and I shall be left to die a slow and painful death. Ha, Ibinabo! They should have let me die with my friends for the sake of the land. Hmm, I smell now like a bad rotten fish. I smell... I smell the stench of coward in the swampy forest of green leaves and black oily soil. I smell they shall smoke me out like they do all vultures. They will be chased like a trapped rabbit. They shall fling me to the wolf boys who will spit on me first, like hungry crocodiles, their watery fangs shall await the bitterness of my flesh, oh god! Why did they rescue me? I should have been allowed to be shot and die for the glory of the land like my six brothers... the true warriors of the land (*Hard Ground*,11).

To begin with, of all the imageries the writer could deploy to drive home his point, he chose, "vulture", "bad rotten fish", "swampy forest", and "black oily soil". The researchers believe that, the choice of these images laced within Nimi's lamentation foregrounds the writer's aim of establishing not just the violent aspect of the Niger Delta militancy but also, the ecological conditions that may have arose from the violence.

Ecocritically, these images could represent many things, but within the context of this research, it mirrors the destructive impact of human activities (pollution, industrialization hazards) on natural ecosystem, emphasizing the darker aspects of human interaction with nature. The vulture, as a scavenger of death underscores the prevalence of death and decay. Instances of the prevalence of violence and blood bath is shown in the text, what is scare in the text is the question of proper burial. In

the heat of the gun fights, inter-militant clashes, tension and constant raids of the creeks by government's JTF, are the bodies properly disposed? For instance, on page 15 of the text, Nimi, while holding a conversation with Mama attempts to answer this question of proper disposition of dead bodies that, "...one thing we know is that if we die fighting, or accepting the way we find ourselves, it is six feet down the hard ground that we go. Lika", but Mama hurriedly corrects him, saying, "Lika? That is soft marshy ground". What follows is Nimi's attempt at justifying the reason why they have to dig through the marshy ground:

Nimi: Yes. The muddy land of periwinkles and mud-skippers that glide every day searching for food such as our flesh when we are buried. So we dig deep, when we bury, and we walk tall when we are alive. In our foolishness, we like to think it is hard ground. To us, at least God made it that way, marshy but firm, and we stand on it (*Hard Ground* 15)

Nimi's response to Mama confirms the researchers' suspicion regarding the militant's inability at properly burying their fallen warriors. The first two lines suggests that, periwinkles, crabs and mud-skippers scavenge on their dead bodies. Because on page 30, where Mama pleads with Nimi not to return to the creeks, she adds, "...you are all I have, son, your body is too young and supple for the crabs to have for dinner. Promise me you won't go back, son." This is further corroborated by Tingolongo on page 49 where he berates Nimi:

Tingolongo: That is all I take from here these days. young souls, old souls,

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maimed souls, littles boys and girls, whose destinies are still hanging forcefully dragged to me. Some headless, some faceless, some eaten up by fishes and periwinkles. Oh man, you are wicked! The gods are angry (*Hard Ground* 49).

In Nigeria, coastal areas, like the Niger Delta, where such ecosystems are common usually faces threats from oil spills, pollution, and overharvesting of resources. Based on these facts, the muddy land and the creatures' behavior is a direct consequence of oil spill which can devastate mangrove ecosystems, affecting species like periwinkle and mud-skippers. This devastation in turn, leads to a decrease in natural food sources, pushing animals to seek alternative, sometimes unconventional food sources. The above clearly paints a picture of an environment under stress, where in the case of the Niger Delta, the activities of humans negatively affects both the humans and the wildlife.

The use of the imagery of vulture to symbolize the prevalence of death and decay took a more sinister turn when into the play, the graphic death of Pikibo and the role the vultures play is unraveled. Beyond the establishment of the role of the vulture in scavenging, there is a more ominous interpretation to the image of vulture which is ecocritically hinged on the devastating role of the activities of humans on the region's environment. While describing the death by hanging of Pikibo, the playwright through Inyigifaa employs the most troubling of dictions to paint the performance of the gruesome death, while taking away from her the privileges of humanity and reducing

her to the inconsequence of bareness and inanity reserved for things. Inyigifaa recounts - First they hung it by the neck with a string of wire, and cut its skin slicing it out of the body, piece by piece, so that it could feel the pain of all lives it had sold out to die. (*Hard Ground*, 51). Elatedly, Nimi expressed his satisfaction with this act, which ultimately exonerate him from the many allegations leveled against him. However, Inyigifaa adds, "Ee... er... one more thing. The vulture was pregnant. Since the child of the vulture is also a vulture, they cut out the unborn child and beheaded it (*Hard Ground*, 52). This new revelation about the gender of the vulture pricks Nimi who is aware that, there were three women pregnant in the camp before his departure, his wife - Pikibo inclusive. The stark confirmation of his fears that his late wife is the vulture is punishing and unbearable. Consequently, he vowed to kill the Don any chance he gets.

In addition to the foregoing, the gruesome manner of Pikibo's death calls for a formal identification of what 'vulture' signifies within the broader framework of the play. In Yerima's *Hard Ground*, vulture is synonymous with anybody, organization, thing or activity that harms the land. Writing in the book, *Where Vultures Feast*, Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas argued that, Shell, Texaco and other Big Oil Corporations operating in the Niger Delta are the vultures that feast on the region's resources. The resources of the region - beginning with palm oil that was the subject of a devastating monopoly of the Royal Niger Company as early as

1900s to crude oil that was discovered in 1956 – have turned the region into a tragic prey for multi-national Anglo-American behemoths (in Ajumeze, 195-196). Tracing the origin of these companies scavenging activities, Okonta and Douglas further revealed that:

It is generally assumed that the exploitation of the peoples of the Niger Delta and the devastation of their environment began when crude oil was discovered in the area by Royal Dutch Shell in 1956. The truth is that Europe's plunder of the Delta, and indeed the entire environment, dates much further back, to 1444, when the Portuguese adventurer and former tax collector, Lancarote de Freitas, sailed to the West African coast and stole 235 men and women whom he later sold as slaves. De Freitas's trip was to trigger the Atlantic slave trade, which, before it was displaced by the trade in palm oil in the 1840s, saw several million able-bodied young men and women taken from the Delta and its hinterland and shipped to the plantations of North America, South America, and the West Indies (6).

Ecocritically, the designation of an entity as a 'vulture' precipitates a shift, wherein said identity is recontextualised as an antagonist to the territorial interests, concomitantly aligning it with the objectives of multinational corporations. Because, as Nnimmo Bassey cited in Ajumeze writes; "Nothing is allowed to stand in Shell's way: not trees, not swamps, not beast, not man. The people of the Niger Delta have been forced to live with a highly polluted environment: the result of practices that would not be permitted in Europe or the United States" (xi).

In *Hard Ground*, Yerima employed the notion of the vulture to

convey something metaphorical about the imperial relation that feeds on the God-given resources of the Delta. In the Niger Delta petro-culture, particularly among the insurgents, it has become a buzzword used to label a betrayer of the struggle. Thus, it measures the consequence of betrayal – perceived as an act of negation of militancy – with the destructions reserved for Anglo-American capitalism, and that is why, Nimi's reaction to the description of the gruesome death of the vulture was one of thanksgiving, unknown to him that, it was his wife. At a related level, it appears to assign the betrayer with the status of a collaborator with the oil corporation, making both predators that feed off insatiably on the resource-rich region. This perhaps explains why James Tsaaio states that, – Vultures are predatory birds of prey and are an apt metaphor for death (79). Taking the Niger Delta context into consideration, he notes that the presence of vultures – anywhere, everywhere necessarily suggests the presence of carrion or carcasses in which the one so designated – has lost legitimate claim to life and is in death throes (79). Ultimately leading to the constant pollution of the environment.

In addition, "bad rotten fish" and "black oily soil" are stark indicators of pollution, likely resulting from industrial activities or oil spills, which not only harm aquatic life but also render the soil infertile. According to Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega, "it is through the operations of the multinational oil companies that the greatest and perhaps, irreparable amount of damage has been done to the

ecosystem and the environment of the Niger Delta. Specifically, the pipes carrying crude oil from wells to flow stations, to terminals, and to refineries as well as those carrying refined oil to oil depots run through vast landscapes. Sometimes, they are shoddily laid out and burst as a result of pressure or they leak from age (19).

Apart from the activities of the multinational companies, *Hard Ground* also provides enough clues into the reprehensible activities of the militants which puts the environment in hazard. Reacting to the death of the over twenty boys killed under his command in the creeks, Nimi admits to been involved in breaking up of oil pipes. He reveals thus, "...I took over before Danger Arrow could send us a new Capon. I organized the braking up of some pipes... (*Hard Ground*, 15)". Inyingifaa on page 24, draws reader's attention to oil bunkering activities in the forest - "...my men were killed. Paraded on television that they were caught bunkering. But I never meddle in oil, only guns...". The activities of these multinational companies, oil bunkering and oil pipes vandalism poses significant threats to aquatic ecosystems, causing widespread harm to marine life and contaminating soil in coastal areas. Oil spills in these areas do not only spread out over a wide expanse of land, but also take out crops and aquacultures through contamination of the groundwater and soils. Also, the consumption of dissolved oxygen by bacteria feeding on the spilled hydrocarbons contributes to the death of fishes. In agricultural communities, often a year's supply of food can be

destroyed by only a minor leak, debilitating the farmers and their families, who depend on the land for their livelihood.

The impact on fish populations is particularly concerning, with several factors contributing to mortality. Oil coats the gills of fish reducing oxygen uptake and leading to asphyxiation, while toxic components like polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) can cause internal damage and disrupt physiological processes. These toxins can also accumulate in fish tissues, potentially affecting humans who consume them. In the novel, *Yellow Yellow* (2006), Agary recounts the effects of oil spillage on aquatic ecology and land thus:

And so it was that, in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance. However, I think she had lost that land a long time ago because each season yielded less than the season before, not unlike the way she and others in the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares, and who knows what else... (4).

In the above, the "main source of sustenance" isn't just a plot point; rather, it's a symbol of the intricate web between humans and nature. The land once fertile, now yield less with each season - a stark metaphor for the exploitation and slow degradation of the environment. This decline mirrors the broader narrative of environmental destruction in many Nigerian communities, where oil extractions has ravaged ecosystems. This narrative speaks to ecocriticism's core concern: the interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds. The loss of land

and fishes reflects the broader loss of biodiversity, livelihoods, and cultural/economic practices tied to the land and river. It's a powerful indictment of systems that exploit nature without considering the long-term costs.

Furthermore, the description of Olokun worship by Mama on page 59 of the play raises serious ecological concern because of the tendency it portends towards ecological harm and degradation. According to Paul-Kolade Tubi, "Olokun, (river goddess) is worshipped as a principal deity in some communities, while generally all communities revere stream and ponds as places, which are inhabited by spirits. Water is primed by the people as can be seen in their personal names like *Omidina* (water stopped me), *Omipidan* (water causes havoc), *Omisore* (water helps), *Oyatola* (*Oya* river is wealth), *Osunghemi* (Osun river is my strength), *Omiyale* (flooding), amongst others" (324) Olokun is worshiped among the Yoruba, Edo/Itsekiri people as deity of the sea, wealth and the deep – so worship is almost always done at beaches, rivers or the ocean, with water as the ritual medium. In her supplication to Olokun, Mama says:

Mama: Those who will confront evil must wear the shoes to run. Olokun, your daughter comes before you. I need more powers, more strength. Your sugarcane, sweets, biscuits and drinks have been sent to you at the bank of the Lagos beach. May his senses scatter, like the dust from your shrine... (*Hard Ground*, 59).

Deducing from Mama above, devotees of Olokun propitiates the goddess with different gifts such as bowls, bottles or

snacks. Fruits, palm oil, cowries, eggs, candles, sometimes animals etc. These gifts are often left at the riverbank or cast into the current. When food, plastics, candles, animals, sweets, sugarcane, biscuits and drinks are left in rivers or the sea, they can degrade water quality and litter water bodies. This practice could harm aquatic animals, cause environmental degradation and pollution. In fact, in Olokun worship, large ceremonies can require substantial amounts of animals or materials to be dumped into the water bodies. Ecocritically, harmful Olokun worship practices of leaving organic matter, plastics and animal remains in rivers and the ocean can pollute these ecosystems.

Conclusion

The world of literature is replete with works dealing with the relationship between humans' affairs and their effects on nature, and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity have caught the attention of writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that have given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism. It is a truism that environmental degradation is a global phenomenon. Therefore, reaction and opinion on the topic is evidenced in the fields of the Sciences, the Arts and the Humanities.

Ecocritical reading of the text shows that, environmental degradation is not a single-issue crisis but a convergence of material extraction and cultural practices, both of which treat ecosystems as disposable backdrops for

human ambitions. The industrial logic that profit over maintenance – exemplified by chronic leaks and corroded oil pipes in the Niger Delta have left the water covered in oil slicks and other toxic chemicals. The harmful practices of oil extraction, large scale killings, pipeline vandalism, and dumping of items into water bodies externalize harm: the oil industry displaces risk onto marginalized farming and fishing communities, reckless killings keep the air polluted, while certain religious performances displace waste onto rivers.

As our analysis has shown, Activities of characters in the text *Hard Ground* have moreover proved true the basic assumptions that degradation of the environment is a result of willful acts of human beings; and that consequences of the degradation such as poverty, breakdown of law and order, general insecurity and unabated devastation of the place is retributive.

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