

APOCALYPTIC RHETORIC IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF ELECHI AMADI'S THE GREAT PONDS

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Abstract

The study explores the theme of apocalypse in Elechi Amadi's The Great Ponds. Apocalypse as a critical idiom envisions the world in an imminent danger of destruction end occasioned by violence. In Amadi's text being studied here, it is also occasioned by the brutality, pride and greed of members of both Chiolu and Aliokoro villages of Erekwu clan, leading to wanton destruction of lives and their environment. The study discusses millennial, secular and environmental aocalyptism as the three major classifications of the concept of apocalyptic rhetoric and asserts that the novel projects both the secular and environmental forms of the rhetoric. It links the apocalyptic vision of the novel to the war of the Great Ponds of Wagaba. The study avers that though the mention of the 1918 influenza is an intrusion that weakens the plausibility of an otherwise closely knit and convincing plot, it links the novel to the class of novel of environmental consciousness. The ecocritical approach adopted in the study of Amadi's The Great Ponds does not only inject a fresh reading of the novel, it also brings to the fore the relevance of both Elechi Amadi as a great writer and the novel as a narrative of environmental consciousness.

Keywords: *Apocalypse, Rhetoric, Environmental, Millennial, Secular.*

1. Introduction

Apocalypse, as a term, is not new in literature; it has been a dominant theme in literature long even before the birth of eco-criticism. The World War literature carries the apocalyptic theme. The theme of apocaliptism runs through every war literature. The renowned African critic, Charles Nnolim, describes African literature as lachrymal because of the motif of death and suffering replete in it. It is noteworthy that the Existential philosophy expressed by most writers carry the theme of apocalypse. Furthermore, the Bible, most often described as Jewish literature, is also replete with apocalyptic themes. The story of the deluge in Genesis in which all lives die except samples of all the species saved by Noah in his ark is the first glaring instance of apocalyptic incident in the Bible. The book of “Matthew 24” in which Jesus prophesied the end of the world is apocalyptic. The most brilliant and most recognised instance of apocalyptic book is the “Revelation”. The Great Ponds is the second of Amadi’s trilogy, set in the pre-colonial Ikwerre society highly animistic and anthropomorphic. Life was highly valued and kept sacred and therefore not only revered, but also protected. The groves, the streams, animals, humans and spirits are legitimate members of the Ikwerre cosmic universe portrayed in the trilogy. The brutish and wanton destruction of lives in The Great Ponds portrays man as not only wicked, but also senseless, greedy and proud. These negative attributes of man have always caused wars the world over and led to the destruction of lives and the environment.

Amadi is widely read and studied world over with his first three novels being rated higher above other contemporary works of same early writers as Lindfors attests 167. However, due to his refusal to follow the trend of historical and political events in Africa, Amadi’s rating nosedived (Lindfors 109-119). Critics believed he had exhausted his creative talent and usefulness. This might not be true, however, as shown in the current critical movement of environmentalism or ecocriticism which opens up yet another critical window to re-read and re-examine his works. Truly, the ecocritical perspective reveals the relevance of Amadi’s creative endeavour in the corpus of African writings. The present study adopts ecocritical/environmentalist approach. Apocalypse is a favoured critical idiom in environmentalist conception. Buell asserts that “apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Incidentally, the numerous critical attention accorded Amadi in the past notwithstanding, his works had hardly been studied using ecocritical approach, hence the relevance of the present study.

2. Conceptual Framework

Apocalypse, derived from a Greek word ‘Apocalyptein’, meaning “to unveil” (Garrard 86) or unveiling (Sabhawal 33), It originally referred to as mystical revelation of spiritual truth, but currently refers to as the mystical revelation about the end of the world (Sabhawal 33). This end however, is temporary as the world is renewed or transformed and thus continues to exist even if in another realm. Sabhawal declares “All apocalyptic narratives are by their nature eschatological” (34). By eschatology, we mean a visionary expectation of the last days or the end of the world, life after death and the “Last Judgment” (Sabhawal 134). Theologists believe that the world will either be renewed or transformed. According to Alfred Bertholet (in Anyadike 372), the end of the world leads to the renewal of the world, and the end of a thing, a being or a phenomenon marks the beginning of another.

Euroasians have not always believed that the world would end (Garrard 86), because “man could not permanently abandon his belief in the continued existence of the circumstances and environment in which he lives (Bertholet in Anyadike 372). In eschatology however, the end and subsequent renewal of the world is mediated through a priestly agent who decides to make sacrifice to bear the consequences of other people’s actions. This is the perspective Anyadike interprets Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Arrow of God and Elechi Amadi’s *The Great Ponds*. It is also the notion of eschatology in the bible. The book of Leviticus describes the process of expiation of the sins of the Israelites through the High Priest who atones or bears the burden of their sins. This theme is also expressed in the New Testament through the death of Christ who bore the sins of man through His Death on the Cross.

The apocalyptic transition or transformation is usually cataclysmic either naturally or humanly induced. Thus Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English describes apocalypse as a situation in which a lot of people die or suffer, and a lot of damage is done. The cataclysmic events of the First World War gave rise to apocalyptic writings of the modernists both in America and Europe. T. S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*, James Joyce *Ulysses*, W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming”, portray both the colossal destruction of the war and the cataclysmic upheaval that characterised the war. The war novels of Saro-Wiwa (*Sozaboy*), Okpewho (*Last Duty*), Eddie Iros (*Toads of War*), Aniebo (*Anonymity of Sacrifice*), Adiche (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), etc present the theme of apocalypse.

Greg Garrard identifies millennial, secular and environmental apocalypse. Millennial apocalypse according to Greg Garrard is identified with Christians who believe in the ultimate coming of Christ and the consequent end of the present world, followed by the millennial reign of Christ on earth. This millennial apocalypticism is preceded and followed by crises as prophesied in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The book with profound apocalyptic expectation however is the book of Revelation written by Apostle John. According to Garrard (87): “The second coming of Jesus Christ would occur on the cusp of the Sabbath of the Great Week (6,000 years after creation, or Anno Mundi 6,000), ushering in the 1,000 years of his reign on earth announced in Revelation of St. John” (Rev. 20:1-6). However, this prophecy was not to be taken literally, but figuratively, hence “The end would occur as prophesied, but it was not for humans to second guess God’s timetable”.

There are both tragic and comic millennial apocalypticism. In tragic mode of apocalyptic rhetorics, there is the struggle between the good versus the evil. The tragic actors choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil” (Garrard 87). However, the comic eschatology is non-catastrophic, emphasising a drawn out moral struggle going on within the faithful themselves and not between good and evil. The ethical subtlety of this comic mode of apocalypticism supplies sounder moral ideology because it emphasises the will of the church which may have been wary of the light of the possibilities while still refraining from relinquishing their worldly duties in a fit of utopian hysteria. Tragic narratives of the end on the other hand are “radically dualistic, deterministic and catastrophic and have tended historically to issue in the suicidal, homicidal or even genocidal frenzies” (Garrard 88).

Secular apocalypse is attributed to the romantic writings of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelly and William Blake who appropriated the rhetoric for political and revolutionary aims. This can also be said of the modernist writers of the early twentieth century. Such writers as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats

raised apocalyptic motif in their writings. Secular apocalypticism is mostly concerned about or preoccupied with the fate of human culture. Note that most of these writers were humanists whose concern was about the improvement of human conditions and human centred values. Romantic poets however, extol the beauty of the natural world.

The First and Second World Wars shook the European and American world and destabilized their trust in their western civilization. While T. S. Eliot in his *The Waste Land* and James Joyce in *Ulysses* demonstrate the destabilized western civilization in their writings through their “destabilized style”; W. B. Yeats was direct in his portrayal of apocalyptic vision in his “The Second Coming”. The work, both in title and in theme alludes to the millennial theme of apocalypse because its reference to the biblical theme of eschatology is very clear. War novels project secular apocalypticism, because wars are caused by social and cultural factors or humanitarian issues. Such issues as tribal politics, marginalization, corruption, greed etc. have always led to civil wars and hence colossal destruction of lives and property.

Environmental apocalypticism may have been inaugurated by the writings of D. H. Lawrence. As affirmed by Garrard, in the works of D. H. Lawrence “We find a congruence of environmental themes and apocalyptic rhetoric. Hence his writings have exercised a particular fascination over deep ecologists (89), who claim that Lawrence saw man as part of an “organic universe, living best by acknowledging its wonder and rejecting the temptation to force his will upon it” (Qtd. in Garrard 89). Lawrence therefore stands as the precursor of modern post humanist tradition and of literature of environmental consciousness.

Environmental writings were preceded and thus prompted by apocalyptic threats among which include climatic change, emission of atmospheric carbon, desertification, disappearance of species of both plants and animals etc. The truth however, is that not all the threats are conspicuous, thus many people do not perceive or seem not to perceive the threat and yet the earth deteriorates at an alarming rate. Lawrence Buell cannot be more correct when he says that “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). Buell therefore proposes arousal of environmental consciousness through adequate depiction of the grave danger of environmental crisis: “The most dangerous threat to our global environment may not be the strategic threats themselves but rather our perception of them, for most people do not yet accept the fact that this crisis is extremely grave” (Al Gore in Buell 285).

Notwithstanding, the denial or seeming people’s ignorance of environmental threat, the earth is in real danger. There are writers who have genuinely depicted the real state of the earth. Rachel Carson is one of such writers. In her *Silent Spring*, Carson paints a vivid and horrifying picture of nature under human attack. She argues that:

The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognised partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life (qtd in Garrard 95).

Elechi Amadi’s *When God Came* (Science Fiction) is another text that raises serious environmental concern and so deserves attention of environmental literary scholars. In the text, Amadi, like Carson also warns man of the imminent danger

glaring at the human race and ready to wipe man out of the globe. Though projected into the far future, *When God Came* (Science Fiction) presents the possibility of the earth being drowned, the possible replacement of man by another creature – the Dolphin; the sure deterioration of man's intelligence to that of dog etc. (52). Amadi names the threats to man among which are nuclear holocaust, environmental changes, biological deterioration, replacement by another dominant animal and others. The real and basic causes of the threat, are the radioactive ashes from the crude nuclear reactors of the early nuclear age which were dumped in the sea, "And so the earth's watery girdle, its main source of life after the sun becomes increasingly radioactive" (70). Of course, the radioactive ashes increase the sea temperature by Newton, melting the polar ice which increases the volume of water that drowns the earth. Amadi thus warns that "for every ounce of pleasure you extract from nature via science (and technology), you feel an exactly equal amount of pain" (72). The text raises palpable fear about the environment, the futuristic time setting notwithstanding. One can see the apocalyptic rhetoric of the text as the most potent.

The three forms of apocaliptism, though emanate from different sources and different epochs, are linked in one way or the other. For example, millennial apocaliptism relies on the occurrences of natural disasters such as flood (Gen. 7), earth quakes, drought, tsunami, famine, etc. (Glotfelty). The secular apocalyptic rhetoric in Yeats "The Second Coming" makes reference to the millennial apocalyptic rhetoric of the book of Revelation. D. H. Lawrence's secular apocalyptic texts anticipated environmental apocaliptism. Although war literature is generally classified under secular apocalyptic rhetoric, environmental apocaliptism can also be linked to warfare technology. Both Carson and Amadi link environmental pollution to the nuclear holocaust, the most potent war arsenal. Carson reports that the chemical pesticide that poisoned the water of the silent spring was manufactured by a private oil company which bought over the Army Chemical Corps of the German nerve gas program after the Second World War. Of course the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima produced instant malignant diseases of the blood forming tissues starting with leukaemia which was contracted by the survivors of the bombing (Buell 293). The chemical pesticide has so perversely permeated every living organism (Buell 291). The scenario plays out in Amadi's science fiction as the nuclear ash containers dumped in the sea begin to leak, causing radiation of the sea at an alarming rate. The fishes become radioactive, and thus contaminating the entire global population (WGC 69).

Amadi's Biodata

Elechi Amadi is an acclaimed prolific writer, whose works are not only read world over, but are also translated into many languages of the world. He is such a versatile artist whose works cut across the genres. He is a novelist, a playwright, a poet and an essayist. His novels include; *The Concubine*, (1966), *The Great Ponds*, (1969) and *The Salve* 1978, *Estrangement* (1986). The first three novels are referred to as his trilogy. His plays are *Isiburu*, (1973), *Pepper Soup*, (1977), *The Road to Ibadan*, (1977), *Dancers of Johannesburg*, (1978), and *A Woman of Calabar*, (2002). Amadi has also written a science fiction entitled *When God Came* (Science Fiction), (2011) in a collection of short stories, one the first in African creative circle. His collections of essays and poems are published under the titles, *Speaking and Singing* (Essays and Poems), (2003). He also wrote a war diary, *Sunset in Biafra*, (1973) and a philosophical text, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*, (1982).

Textual Analysis: Apocalyptic Rhetorics in the Great Ponds

We have earlier described apocalypse as a situation in which a lot of people die or suffer and a lot of damage is done. Going by this definition, *The Great Ponds* is an apocalyptic narrative. We have also posited that most if not all war novels are apocalyptic, and *The Great Ponds* is a war novel per excellence. Apocalypticism, is seen in the subject and theme, plot, characterisation, setting and other elements of the novel. The plot of the novel is replete with fear, danger and insecurity, violence, destruction of life of both human and non-human members of Chiolu and Aliokoro villages. The characters are mainly warriors who have little or no regard for the sanctity and dignity of human life. The warriors display insensitivity and callousness characteristic of brutes and villains. They are blinded by what Joseph Meeker calls abstract values such as: patriotism, heroism, valour, pride etc. According to Meeker, these abstract ideals have always led man to his tragic end (149-154). Olumba, the leader of Chiolu suffers both physical and psychological torture and Wago, the leopard killer, leader of Aliokoro commits suicide; Olumba's defence of the Great Pond of Wagaba is out of pure patriotism, but Wago is simply prompted by pride, greed, callousness, cruelty and malice. These make him a villain, instead of a hero.

Wazha Lopang (162-168) and Charles Anyadike (372-380) however, applaud Wago and describe him as a hero, and his act of suicide as eschatological. Wosa does not see Wago as a hero, but a villain (100-101). He argues that the characteristics Wago displays are purely villainous and far from coming out of patriotism and sacrifice as both Lopang and Anyadike argue. In line with Wosa's view, this paper opines that eschatological issues of the novel are rather attributable to Olumba who makes genuine sacrifice out of patriotism.

The motifs of the novel are those of death, violence, suffering, destruction, because Chiolu and Aliokoro know nothing but war, killing, wailing, sorrow, maiming, hatred, bitterness, prompted by claim and counter claim over the Pond of Wagaba. While the people of Chiolu, led by Olumba, try to defend the pond as the current owners and users, the Aliokoros, led by Wago try to (re)capture the pond and (re)possess it as they claim to have possessed it before. The narrator lends credence to the fluid situation as he tells us that each of Chiolu and Aliokoro have possessed the pond at one point or the other (83). This situation makes the claims weak and eclectic and at the same plausible and strong, as each person quotes his father as telling him that the pond belongs to his village (12). This irreconcilable position escalates to fights and full blown war, as can be seen in the following dialogue:

"I have never seen a pond so full of fish"

"A pity it does not belong to Aliokor ..."

"It my one day ..."

Eze Okehi, our chief intends to claim it. He said that Chiolu's claim to it is dubious and from what his grandfather told him, the pond rightly belongs to us (12). That will mean a lot of fighting.

The dialogue reveals mixed attitude of fear, doubt and hope, and the scene foreshadows the events of the entire novel as the first fight ensues even as the dialogue is going on. Though no life is lost in this first encounter, some persons are captured and taken hostage. The encounter, like several others reveals the strength and strategies of both Olumba and Wago in terms of leadership and planning and execution of war. It shows Olumba as an experienced fighter and planner. The defeat Wago suffers in the encounter propels him unto unforgiveness and vengeance throughout the narrative. Thus while Aliokoro fight to reclaim the ponds, Chiolu fight to retain them. The result of this is tension anywhere and

anytime the two villages meet. There is always violence and threat both in their speech and action due to their claims and counter-claims over the ownership of the great ponds.

During the negotiation of ransom for the abducted poachers from Aliokoro there was tension arising from their actions and reactions. The elders and chiefs among them cannot even help matters as none want to shift their grounds. As Eze Okehi, and Eze Diali argue over the ownership of the ponds and ransom to be paid for the release of the two captured prisoners from Aliokoro (23), Olumba and Wago jump into the scene with their threat and more dangerous exchanges "... At this point Olumba sprang forward and said, if they are ready to withdraw their false claims I think we can consider lowering the ransom" (23). Wago counters immediately, "we will not withdraw our claims ... if you like, you can make the ransom twenty times eight hundred manilas". Olumba immediately draws closer to Wago with suppressed anger and swears by Amadioha, the god of thunder and the skies to cut off the head of anyone who suggests the lowering of the ransom. Wago does same by swearing by Ogbunabali, the god that kills by night to cut off clean the head of anyone who comes forward to pay any ransom. The two men glower at each other, and:

Slowly Wago's right hand sought the sheath of his machet. Olumba noticed this and began to do the same retreating a short step as he did so. Wago retreated too, his deep set eye revetted on his opponent. Many held their breaths, their hearts beating wildly. Diali watched grimly the men of Aliokoro fingering the handles of their matchets. He glanced at his men with the corner of his eyes. They too were doing the same... The two camps were poised like snakes ready to strike (24).

At this point a sound, a slight movement or even a deep breath from anybody could provide stimulation for the fight because they have done all their reasoning and have come to the conclusion to fight. Their minds are no longer working, but their tensed muscles are ready to go into action.

Eze Diali saves the situation by pleading with both sides to sheath their swords, but he refuses to accept a suggestion to share the ponds which Eze Okehi proffers, as a solution to the conflict. His refusal triggers off another round of tension or aggravates the tensed atmosphere:

'Now that this is over', Okehi said, 'I want to make it quite clear that we intend to stick to our claims. It is necessary that we arrive at a compromise over the pond of Wagaba'.

What compromise? Diali asked.

That is for us to work out. For instance our two villages might share the pond'.

Never! Not in my lifetime!' Diali exclaimed.

Well my men will fish there as of right in my lifetime.

Okehi declared. 'Infact, they will be there tomorrow' (25).

Tension is roused again as the two leaders bet. This scene is just the prelude to the rest events of the wars, deaths, killing, and general insecurity in the land, just as the chapter is the expositon of the plot.

The next encounter between Chiolu and Aliokoro is a deadlier encounter as people are fatally wounded and outrightly killed. The two warriors, Olumba and Wago fought to prove their mettle. Again, Wago and his Aliokoro are defeated as they lose some of their warriors and Wago runs away. From then on both villages decide to declare war against each other. In the next battle, Aliokoro hire warriors from Abii, a neighbouring village in the same Erekwu clan. Both Chiolu and Aliokoro suffer casualties, even though Chiolu put up stiff resistance. As Elendu, a mercenary warrior from Abii attests. "... we have suffered more than trice their casualties. Many of my best fighters are dead or seriously wounded" (49). To

compensate themselves, the Abii warriors plan to go into the village of Chiolu at night to kidnap Chiolu women. Olumba's wife and Eze Diali's daughter are kidnapped and sold off to the riverine slave buyers. In a reprisal attack Chiolu warriors kidnap Wago's daughters, Eze Okehi's wife and another woman (59).

results both from and in a feeling of insecurity, fear, danger and death. So the situation slowly but steadily degenerates into a hopeless state of uncertainty, insecurity, fear, danger and imminent death. Knowing the Aliokoro would lose if they go openly, Wago chooses to harass Chiolu by making it unsafe for any member of the village to walk the forest and highways at any time of day or night. He posts men along important paths to kill or capture any straying villagers. Chiolu is always surrounded at night by men ready to kill (73).

Quickly, the inter-village fight assumed alarming proportions. Open day light raids were carried out by both villages and life became a nightmare. Farms were deserted. Those who had barns in their farms suffered heavy losses for their enemies looted their yams and cut down barns. Starvation was not long way off. Women kept strictly indoors. No escort of any size offered enough protection. Even water was a problem... (76).

It is as if the world is coming to an end in both Chiolu and Aliokoro villages, as death lurks behind every bush. In moonless night, "the curtain of charcoal black darkness instils as much fear into the minds as if it is one vast unsubstantiated ubiquitous enemy ready to slay any who left the security of the closely guarded houses". In the war, men, beasts and crops suffer. "It was a long war, a bitter war, a war of attrition" which holds no hope of abating, ceasure or out right end. Apart from the death of people, destruction of crops, there is the general feeling of uncertainty, insecurity, with the aura of death pervading the entire environment. Before negotiation comes to stop the fight, many lives have been lost and more damage done. People suffer both physical and mental or psychological torture mourning the loss of their loved ones. Olumba suffers psychologically over the disappearance of his pregnant wife and the consequent worry of his only son (whose mother has been carried away).

Intervention in the matter by other villages of Erekwu clan, though stops the war momentarily, opens up another phase of agony for Olumba in particular and Chiolu in general. Olumba is chosen by Aliokoro to swear to Ogbunabali divinity to prove Chiolu's ownership of the disputed ponds. Immediately Olumba takes the oath his countenance changes and the fear of uncertainty grips him. For the entire duration of time of the oath, he has no rest of mind. The feeling of uncertainty and fear of the divinity of Ogbunabali torments him. As the narrator tells us "Olumba came out of the shrine dazed ... His feelings were numb and his thoughts scattered" (86). Every person is surprised to see Olumba degenerate so fast immediately after the oath but it is credible and palpable because, Olumba has earlier informed us that he could fight the whole village but would not be able to withstand the tiniest god or spirit (9). His belief in the power of the gods and spirits makes him to revere and venerate them. His fear is aggravated by the uncertainty surrounding Chiolu's claim over the ownership of the great ponds. Recall Eze Diali's statement among others: "Might is not right but who can tell now who was right and who was wrong" (23). The implication of the statement is that no village can claim for certain or prove that it outrightly owns the ponds because each village has controlled and used it exclusively at one time or the other. This is even claimed by both parties at the settlement ground at Abii (83). Thus the uncertainty surrounding the origin and ownership of the ponds generates the feeling of doubt coupled with his pathological fear of gods and spirits which torment him mentally.

His mental health degenerates to a hysteria as he hears a phantom voice challenging his chance of survival (116, 117). This continues till the end of the story (186-189).

More suffering and deaths come as an epidemic or rather a pandemic ravages the villages of Chiolu, Aliokoro and the entire Erekwí clan. Within the context of Chiolu and Aliokoro it is believed that the disease is caused by Ogbunabali deity to whom Olumba has sworn. This is attested to by the old Ochonma, when she loses her grand-daughter, and corroborated by both Achichi the dibia of Chiolu and Igwu, the dibia of Aliokoro. As Ihunda, Ochonma's grand-daughter is to be buried, Ochomma let out a heart rendering cry which arrests the corpse bearers. She laments and foretells "... a great calamity is coming. The gods have run wild and we shall know nothing but tears. I saw it all plainly last night and I see it now ... I need not cry for I shall join her soon, soon when there are still people to bury me" (150). Achichi's divination also shows that "The gods are angry with the whole of Erekwí clan. No individual sacrifices will do. The whole clan must get together to avert further loss of life" (151). Ochomma's words raise apocalyptic fear. It implies that there might be no person to bury the dead in the nearest future, so it is better she dies while people that would bury her are still living. Achichi lends credence to Ochomma's revelation and heightens the fear as he declares that no individual sacrifices would be able to avert the doom. In Aliokoro, the same warning of impending calamity is foretold, which cannot be averted. The truth then is that the villages stand the risk of being wiped out.

True to the revelation the pandemic known as 'Wonjo' in the local parlance ravages the two villages of Chiolu and Aliokoro. The scourge which symptoms include acute fever, dry chesty cough, acute headache, throat sore and catarrh, spreads faster and claims so many lives. Starting from its first victim, Ochomma's granddaughter the pandemic spreads to Olumba, Nyoma and Wogari, his wives, Olumba's son down to Eze Diali, Chituru, Eze Diali's two wives and children. Olumba and most people in Chiolu believe Ogbunabali is behind the calamity, even when Achichi exonerates the deity (156). Everybody is sick in the village. There is real threat and danger. Olumba decides to meet Eze Diali for solution and therefore sees the need to summon the village meeting. "The village was being threatened and his fighting spirit was up. His private fear vanished in the face of the village-wide consternation" (157). The narrator's description of Olumba points to the apocalyptic theme of the narrative. "Olumba was a sight as he beat the Ikoro. With his sunken eyes and wild beard he looked like a risen skeleton beating the Ikoro for the last time to announce the end of the world" (157).

End of the world indeed. The fear is real and palpable as a babel of voices indicate that their children, wives, neighbours are at the point of dying (158). Olumba's mind races in all directions as he decides to check on other neighbours to see how the malady can be combated. Olumba is appalled by the prevalence of the disease as only very few compounds seem not to be affected and no solution to the problem (161) and soon the sick started dying. A man's wife dies and the meeting is dispersed (160). A woman loses her only son and blames the death on Ogbunabali (161). The same fate befalls Aliokoro as Omenka and his delegate company discover on their way to negotiate the release of Olumba from the oath. They see several new graves and bereaved families. Even Eze Okehi loses his own children (164-175).

The villages face the danger of being wiped out. It is clear that the disease is contagious and its spread is fast as the effect is devastating, hence its greater number of victims. The narrator informs us that "Grave diggers were getting scarce.

Many volunteers fell ill soon after the burial and it was not long before grave digging was regarded as a sure way of catching the disease” (172). As a result of this, the numerical strength of potential grave diggers diminishes daily as Ogbunabali is alleged to be behind the onslaught of the villagers. Even beyond Erekwu clan it is believed to be the cause of the pandemic. As attested to by the returnee female fugitives – Chisa and Oda, Olumba’s wife, “They know Ogbunabali is responsible. They have heard about the wars of the Great Ponds, the swearing and so on. When the disease started at first they cursed Chiolu and Aliokoro and threatened to offer us as sacrifices to Ogbunabali” (182). The damage done by the combined effects of the wars and the pandemic is colossal. Damage of such great proportion defines apocalyptic event. Within the context of the world of the novel, the damage is irreparable and the loss irreversible. Life is worthless then, bringing to the fore existential realities facing man. Albert Camus and other existential philosophers see life as meaningless, starting with nothing and ending with nothing. To them “the wretched man is alienated from his life and cast into the alien universe” (Abrams and Harpham 1). That is the true picture of life in *The Great Ponds*.

To think of it, no one possesses the ponds for which the people kill themselves in the end as Wago, the leader of Aliokoro drowns in one at the wake of the new moon that announces Olumba’s survival of the oath of Ogbunabali divinity. This act of Wago’s is sacrilegious for, as Eze Diali explains, “it would be an abomination to fish in a pond in which someone committed suicide” (192). Pollution and defilement of the Great Pond of Wagaba constitute great damage and thus, a colossal loss. The pond is a big asset to the people of both Chiolu and Aliokoro. It is an indispensable heritage, source of pride and livelihood of the people. No wonder then, the people try to possess it while the other people try to defend it at all cost. Seen in this light, we weigh its damage or loss as apocalyptic.

We can recall at this point the various types of apocalypse as discussed earlier. We mentioned and explained millennial, secular and environmental apocalypse. We also asserted that most war situations result from and in (secular) apocalypse. From this perspective, we classify the novel under secular apocalypticism, since the events leading to an evolving from the apocalypse are social rather than religious. However, the announcement/revelation that Wonjo is an influenza ravaging the world links the pandemic to the First World War of 1918 which was attributed to the environmental pollution occasioned by dangerous weapons of the war. This thinking makes us see the apocalyptic rhetoric of the novel as partly environmental. The influenza or Wonjo as called by the natives is air borne and highly infectious. It is transmitted through sneezing and coughing. This explains why it spreads so fast and gets too many casualties. It can only be compared to the 2019 covid-19 pandemic. Of course both are caused by the same virus (corona) and produce the same symptoms; sneezing, coughing, catarrh or cold, throat sore, acute headache and high fever.

Both Ebele Eko (170) and Wosa fault Amadi’s inclusion of the World War of 1918 into the plot of the novel which is set in a pre-colonial African rural community. Both argue that the information weakens an otherwise strongly knit plot, making it implausible. Describing Wonjo as an effect of the World War of 1918 contradicts the consciousness of the pre-colonial African rural community dwellers who believe in the influence of the gods as the controller or decider of the fate of man. Readers and even the characters believe that the suffering of the people is caused by the deities and spirits. Of course Olumba’s torments are perpetrated by his Aliokoro enemies, as revealed by Anwuanwu, the great dibia of Abii.

The injection of the World War effects into the plot of the novel however links *The Great Ponds* to modern novels, especially novels of environmental consciousness. In both the First and Second World Wars fighters made use of sophisticated weaponry which consequences brought environmental pollution. The chemicals used in manufacturing the bombs were pollutants that could kill both human and non-human beings. Although the use of bomb is not mentioned in the novel, the 1918 influenza disease is a consequence of the First World War. Whenever bombs are used in a war, the air, the water and the land are polluted and diseases surface to destroy more lives. As Buell tells us, the Hiroshima bombing during the Second World War produced leukaemia which affected the survivors of the bombing (293). In Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, Dukana water is polluted by the bombs thrown by the Nigerian Army causing cholera which kills more people than the bombs and bullets (174). Influenza therefore is a possible effect of the weapons of the World War I. Presence of Wonjo or influenza which kills many people in the novel makes a case for environmental apocalypse.

3. Conclusion

The brutish and wanton destruction of lives in *The Great Ponds* portrays the male characters as not only wicked, but also senseless, greedy and proud. These negative attributes of the men are the causes of the war and have led to the destruction of lives and the environment. Life then becomes meaningless to them as they are alienated from the environment, their natural home. They move from nothingness to nothingness. The pursuit abstract values such as honour, heroism, passion etc end them nothing but failure, sorrow and death. The First World War which chronologically coincides with the War of the Great Ponds is also attributed to the same factors of human errors. We have earlier stated that *The Great Ponds* is a war novel in all ramifications with its attendant apocalyptic vision, and our study rightly proves it so. The study also proves that the apocalyptic rhetoric portrayed is both secular and environmental. The Great Pond therefore belongs to the novel of environmental consciousness.

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