



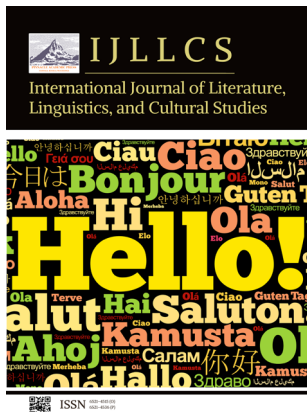
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Marxist Ecopoetics in the Poetic Creation of the Niger Delta

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Abstract: As one of Africa's largest wetland ecosystems, the Niger Delta serves as a central arena for the creative practices of its poetic community. The poetry of three successive generations of poets in this region embodies distinctive and profound ecological-political insights. The first generation employs the metaphorical system of water folds to allegorize the alienation of nature, establishing an imaginative framework that reflects environmental estrangement. The second generation advances this exploration by utilizing the topological structures of land mazes to portray ecological violence, revealing the complex interactions between human activity and environmental degradation. The third generation further evolves this trajectory through the reconstruction of oil-ravaged landscapes, transforming depictions of ecological devastation into visions of ecological revolution. This iterative engagement with environmental ruin has gradually coalesced into a poetics paradigm marked by resistance and critical reflection. These poetic works not only illuminate the distinctive ecological perception of African poets but also expand the practice of Marxist Ecological Poetics in the Global South, offering a literary critique of oil capitalism while envisioning alternative pathways for ecological thought and cultural intervention.

Keywords: the Niger Delta; poetic creation; Marxist; ecological poetics

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1. Introduction

As the largest economy in Africa, Nigeria has fostered a wealth of outstanding writers and has emerged as a significant intellectual hub for Marxist thought following its introduction to the continent [1]. Nigerian literature, particularly its poetry, has internalized ecological concern as a vital dimension of social ideals, forming a notable theoretical resonance with eco-Marxism, which emphasizes "taking the interests of all mankind as the value criterion" [2]. Eco-Marxism is committed to reconstructing the relationship between humans and nature and revealing the inherent tension between the logic of capital and ecological protection. Within this context, the Niger Delta, as one of Africa's largest wetland ecosystems, has been degraded into an ecological wasteland due to environmental disasters such as the disorderly exploitation by transnational oil capital, exemplifying ecological alienation. Confronted with this ecological violence, poets from the Niger Delta have wielded their pens as instruments of resistance, forging a distinctive ecological poetic community.

The literary trajectory of this community spans three generations of poets. The first generation employed river-based metaphorical systems to allegorize the estrangement of nature, the second generation depicted ecological violence through spatial displacement and the topological structure of land, and the third generation furthered the notion of ecological revolution by reconstructing oil-ravaged landscapes and memories. Collectively, these poetic creations not only expose the constraining mechanisms of capital

on ecological civilization but also reconstitute the subjectivity of the oppressed through innovative poetic language, highlighting the distinctive ecological perception characteristic of African poets. This body of work facilitates a cross-temporal dialogue with eco-Marxist theory and broadens the framework for practicing Marxist ecological poetics in the Global South.

2. Natural Alienation within the River Metaphor System

2.1. Postcolonial Ecological Critique in Nigerian Literature

The modern English literature of Nigeria that emerged after World War II constructed a literary paradigm within the postcolonial context, marked by a distinctive ecological critique. The first generation of poets from the Niger Delta pioneered the integration of partial perspectives of eco-Marxist theory into local narratives, with creative practices oriented towards revealing social truths and exposing societal ills [3]. The concretization of capitalist globalization in the Niger Delta first manifests as the systematic alienation of natural landscapes. In the view of Nigerian writers, "nature" has become a battlefield torn apart by capital and power. Resource exploitation by multinational oil companies under the guise of "progress" has transformed the original "tropical rainforest world interwoven with coastal lowlands, swamps, lagoons, and water networks" into a victim of "cheap nature" [4,5]. Traditional African livelihoods, heavily dependent on land and water, are disrupted, with water culture playing a pivotal role in the development of local communities [6]. Through metaphorical representations of aquatic ecosystems, this generation of poets highlights the displacement of traditional African notions of natural water rights by rational and pragmatic frameworks, exposing the alienating impact of colonial and capitalist interventions [7].

2.2. Poetic Representation of River Alienation

Gabriel Okara's pioneering use of binary imagery in *The Call of the River Nun*, contrasting "the river of life" with "the capital channel," exemplifies the poetic depiction of ecological alienation. He thematizes the river flowing through the region to showcase the rich landscapes of the Niger Delta, while excavating the cultural and spiritual significance of the Nun River. The transformation of the river's "silver flow" into resource transportation pipelines, and of its "complex channels" into linear paths of economic development, reduces "the river of life" to a "capital channel," evoking a call for harmonious coexistence between humans and nature [8,9]. Similarly, John Pepper Clark, in his poem *Tide-Wash*, contrasts the joyful "racing down with the sun along the laughing stream" with the appearance of "steam," exposing both ecological depletion and the capitalist appropriation of natural life [10].

2.3. Ecological Resistance through Local Cosmology and Modernism

In response to natural alienation, Niger Delta poets developed ecological resistance strategies blending local animism with modernist structures. Okara, in particular, emphasized that a writer's role includes shaping the national consciousness [11]. In *The Fisherman's Invocation*, the act of "fishing for hope" metaphorically reflects the poet's meditation on the complex interactions among humans and nature, tradition and modernity, past and future:

"Cast the net to the starboard side of the boat / Is there nothing? / It's empty
Try casting it to the port side / Still the same? / No hint of a response
Then cast it towards the stern / I gently paddle and move forward slowly / Carefully
draw in the net / Is it still an empty one?
It's just the silhouette of bygone times / Entangled tightly by today's mesh"

Through these ritualistic reconstructions, Okara illustrates the dilemmas of modernization and implies a path aligned with historical redemption. He concludes with imaginative prescriptions, such as "Learn to sing songs that are both familiar and strange

/ Learn to dance to the rhythm of half-baked dreams," using traditional ritual as a medium for ecological and cultural renewal. Clark similarly integrates Western modernist imagery with local ecological cosmology in *Night Rain*: "Hand in hand with the ocean's hand / We will sink into a sleep of innocence and freedom" [12].

2.4. Theoretical Depth and Ecological Critique

Through river metaphors, Niger Delta poets achieve significant theoretical depth in ecological critique. Clark's imagery of "freshwater embracing saltwater" evokes the ideal of original material metabolism, while depictions of the "river that never dries up" serve as ironic commentary on the commodification of natural resources [13,14]. The displacement of fishermen and boats symbolizes not only physical movement but also the cultural anxiety caused by ecological alienation. The dominance of capital-driven ecological unconsciousness traps laborers in a cycle where "the more they possess nature, the more they are oppressed by it" [15].

The first-generation poetic tradition in the Niger Delta transcends regional trauma narratives to address the structural crises of global capitalism, using natural alienation as a lens to expose colonial capital's simplification of nature into a resource repository [16]. By invoking traditional ecological wisdom, these poets articulate a vision of ecological socialism, exemplified by images such as "mangroves shaking hands" [17]. This synthesis of Marxist critique and local cosmology establishes a theoretical foundation for postcolonial ecological poetics, demonstrating that capital's imperative for expansion is inherently at odds with ecological protection.

3. Ecological Violence in Land-Space Transformation

3.1. Post-War Oil Economy and the Emergence of Spatial Ecological Critique

Following the brutal Biafran War from 1967 to 1970, Nigeria entered a period of oil-driven economic growth during the 1970s. Within the context of post-war reconstruction, the second-generation cohort of Niger Delta poets further developed the paradigm of ecological critique. Poets such as Tanure Ojaide, Femi Osofisan, and Niyi Osundare extended Marx's critique of capitalist primitive accumulation to ecological dimensions, revealing the entanglement of environmental exploitation with racial and social oppression. Their works reconstruct cultural memory while simultaneously indicting the ecological violence perpetrated by multinational corporations.

The expansion of oil capitalism in the Niger Delta represents a continuation of colonial ecological violence. As one account notes, "Africa became a commercial hunting ground for blacks-all of which marked the dawn of the capitalist production era. These processes were major factors in primitive accumulation" [18]. In *Labyrinths of the Delta*, Ojaide reproduces this process with epic scope, depicting the suffering and awakening of local populations under ecological violence while constructing a framework of resistant poetics through spatial narratives [19]. The poem juxtaposes images of colonial warships and cannons "destroy[ing] the fetus gestating in the womb / and open[ing] up the land into a white lace sanctuary" to critique both the brutality of primitive accumulation and the contemporary strategies of oil companies in masking ecological destruction. The transformation from "tropical gardens" to "oil ruins" symbolizes the transfer of ecological costs onto society, exemplifying the "second contradiction of capitalism" in which capital commodifies public nature [20,21].

3.2. Environmental Racism and Spatialized Exploitation

Ecological violence intertwines with environmental racism through spatial practices. Although Nigeria is one of the largest crude oil producers within OPEC, the Niger Delta population often cannot access the wealth generated by oil, leaving the region economically marginalized. Statistical data indicate that the Niger Delta accounts for 7% of Nigeria's population while bearing 90% of the country's oil pollution burden [22]. This

disparity highlights the human and environmental toll embedded in oil extraction. Spatial transformation narratives in Ojaide's work depict the displacement and helplessness of villagers: "We set out without considering where we were going / Yet the path beneath our feet opened up for anxious footsteps" [19]. The recurring image of "fugitives" portrays ordinary people struggling under ecological violence, forced to flee degraded lands while seeking a livable homeland.

3.3. Body Politics and the Intersection of Ecological Violence

With the intensification of capitalism and the commodification of nature, ecological violence intersects with body politics. Ojaide illustrates this dynamic through vivid imagery such as "stuffing flames into men's throats", highlighting the overlap between historical systems of control and contemporary labor alienation in the oil era. Violence, compounded by state and corporate collusion, extends beyond ecological degradation into the fundamental rights and security of local populations. Femi Osofisan's *These Stunted Flowers-After Baudelaire* further develops this critique by employing plant imagery to metaphorically represent the dual imprisonment of natural and human cognitive capacities [14].

3.4. Cultural Spatial Resistance and Poetic Imagination

In response to systemic ecological violence, Niger Delta poets have cultivated strategies of cultural and spatial resistance. Ojaide, for instance, transforms oral traditions into instruments of ecological struggle through migratory narratives such as "Ariton (memory)" and "Uhagwa (song)". The replacement of indigenous deities with mythic figures, such as "Uriapele" with "mermaids," reconstructs resistant subjectivities through magical realism. Scenes where "lizards run like gods" depict ecological polyphony, challenging anthropocentric and capitalist logics. The repeated declaration of "crossing a thousand boundaries to become ourselves" signifies a rejection of homogenizing forces of global capital. The poet's depiction of warriors "fighting under the protection of leaf shields" conveys a vision where nature is both material and spiritual foundation of resistance. In the performative closing sequence, "Come, let us dance / We dance here / Come, let us dance / We dance on this land / Come, let us dance / We dance on this soil," the act of dancing becomes a metaphor for resilience, ecological reclamation, and hope [23].

3.5. Spatial Narratives as a Localized Path for Ecological Marxism

Through narratives of land-space transformation, second-generation Niger Delta poets have developed a localized ecological poetics. By analyzing ecological violence within the spatial logic of oil exploitation, they reinterpret Marx's theory of primitive accumulation under globalization. Simultaneously, by reconstructing ecological communities across physical and cultural dimensions, these poets articulate a vision of dual liberation from the control of nature and the control of people [24]. Their works not only respond to regional ecological traumas but also provide a prophetic framework for the pursuit of ecological justice in the Global South.

4. The Ecological Revolution in the Reconfiguration of Petroleum Capital

4.1. Military-Petro Collusion and the Rise of Radical Ecological Poetics

The collusion between Nigeria's military regimes and petro-capitalism during the 1980s and 1990s catalyzed a more radical paradigm of ecological critique among third-generation Niger Delta poets. Emerging ecological poetry during this period bore pronounced political undertones, reflecting resistance against deteriorating living conditions. Under the pressures of Babangida's economic collapse and Abacha's dictatorship, poets such as Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Onookome Okome, and Remi Raji denounced political corruption, foregrounded the plight of the populace, and

infused ecological Marxist principles into local resistance poetics. Utilizing imagery of nooses, blood, and oil lamps, these poets exposed ecological violence perpetrated by multinational corporations while constructing a three-dimensional framework encompassing traumatic memory, capital deconstruction, and revolutionary reconstruction. This network of ecological imagination resonated as a defining voice of the era.

4.2. *Collective Trauma as Revolutionary Weapon*

Third-generation poets transformed collective traumatic memory into instruments of ecological struggle. In *The Oil Lamp*, Ifowodo's opening poem, "A Waterscape," contrasts the former scenic beauty of water bodies with the desolate living conditions depicted in subsequent village-centered stanzas. In the series *Jese*, the poet gives voice to flora and fauna, articulating the aftermath of oil spills and explosions: "We are not yet ripe / Do not harvest us" and "Take your cooking oil / We are neither pots nor cauldrons". Similarly, Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil, But it was Blood* uses "blood" both as the life imprint of the sacrificed and as a metaphor for the earth's own suffering. This dialectical representation elevates local trauma into a spark for revolutionary consciousness.

4.3. *Memory Politics and Polyphonic Resistance*

This politics of memory evolves into a polyphonic narrative wherein individual traumas merge into a collective archive of resistance. In *Ogoni*, Ifowodo adopts a mediator-like voice, interrogating villagers: "Do you truly believe you own this oil?". By transforming Marx's critique of private ownership into a debate over land control, the poet exposes the suppression of collective struggle by the military government, exemplified in lines such as "continuing to fire until all oil lamps gasp for breath." The "dying oil lamp" symbolizes faint yet persistent hope amidst systemic oppression, linking local struggles to the broader ecological crises produced by global capital expansion.

4.4. *Deconstructing Capital Logic through Ecological Resistance*

Under the protection of military-political collusion, petro-capitalism thrived, yet poets achieved profound critique through ecological resistance poetics. Oil, once celebrated as a source of wealth, is recast as a symbol of curse under capitalist exploitation: "Oil is my curse / Oil is my doom" [13]. This critique emphasizes that the roots of the "oil curse" lie not in oil itself but in societal structures, highlighting how authoritarian regimes and resource-rich regions become focal points of capital's exploitative reach [25-27]. The recurring imagery of drilling rigs as gallows and oil wells as wounds exemplifies neo-colonial exploitation in the Niger Delta.

4.5. *Revolutionary Reconstruction and Global South Solidarity*

With the outbreak of the ecological revolution, radical poets achieved revolutionary reconstruction through rebellious discourse. Following the judicial execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Niger Delta literature garnered global attention, with his memory becoming a thematic archetype addressing ecological destruction, political persecution, and minority rights [28]. Ifowodo, in *The Agonist*, dedicates several poems to Saro-Wiwa, reconstructing his resistance as both condemnation of environmental destruction and affirmation of humanity's pursuit of justice. In *Cesspit of the Niger Area*, Ifowodo portrays the residents' plight under capitalist and ecological oppression:

"And we / are merely inhabitants of stagnant ditches and swamps /
The Niger River pours floods upon us / with the terrifying offerings of seasonal
massacres in the fields /
Swelling our rivers / we float by trampling on tears /
Reclaiming our foothold with the humus of hatred and jealousy".

These lines depict the dual alienation of humans and nature under capitalist expansion, while emphasizing the necessity of collective resistance [29].

4.6. Dialectical Adaptation of Marxist Ecological Principles

Resistance poetics nurtured amidst oil ruin extends towards revolutionary alliance in the Global South. Bassey declares in *I Will Not Dance To Your Beat*, "unless Mother Earth is respected / we will never dance". Ifowodo's *Let Us Pretend We Can Write It* transforms the dialectics of martyrs and oppressors into literary practice, reframing ecological disaster in the Niger Delta as a collective concern for the Global South [30]. By adapting Marxist principles to local contexts, these poets demonstrate that the complete abandonment of capital logic requires reconstructing ecological communities from the "humus of hatred and jealousy." Their work exemplifies Marx's assertion that social reconciliation is a prerequisite for harmony between humanity and nature [31].

4.7. Literary Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The ecological revolutionary writings of third-generation Niger Delta poets during military-petro collusion have refined a distinct paradigm of "resistance poetics." Through lamentation, metaphor, and performative imagery, these poems dissect the violent essence of capital's reduction of nature to instrumental resources. Lines such as "the oil lamp gasps and succumbs to the night" symbolize literary sparks igniting hope amid darkness, constituting both a retelling of regional traumas and an innovative development of Marxist ecological poetics [32]. As the contemporary fossil fuel civilization faces crises, these works continue to serve as cautionary and inspiring beacons for ecological consciousness and activism in the Global South.

5. Conclusion

African literature, as a mirror reflecting both the original historical and cultural features and the present and future trajectories of African nations, has increasingly demonstrated its research value. Within the framework of Sinic African Literary Studies, the core concept of "Africanity"-referring to the profound identification of African and African-descendant peoples with the historical and cultural heritage of the African continent, along with a deep attachment to their ancestral homeland-reveals the profound connections between African literary narratives and Marxist theory. African colonial diaspora writers have employed Marxist class analysis to transform colonial legacies, such as racial discrimination, cultural conflicts, and class struggles, into central issues of literary critique. Therefore, the cultural implications embedded in African poetry, as a significant literary form, warrant in-depth exploration.

In their poetic creations, the Niger Delta poets utilize rivers, land, and oil as media to reveal natural alienation within metaphorical systems, ecological violence amid spatial transformations, and ecological revolutions in the restructuring of capital. By transforming local ecological crises into critiques of global capitalism, they construct an autonomous ecological resistance poetics within African literature. This poetic practice links the emancipatory theories of ecological Marxism with the real-world struggles of oppressed groups, continuously expanding theoretical boundaries amid the interplay of historical traditions in the Global South, colonial experiences, and internal social contradictions. The collision between proletarian consciousness and indigenous culture not only forms textual strategies for deconstructing class inequalities but also serves as a cross-cultural attempt to bridge racial divides. Consequently, the Marxist ecological poetics in the works of Niger Delta poets not only broadens practical pathways for addressing ecological crises in the Global South but also enriches world literature and cultural diversity through profound interpretations of ecological civilization.

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