

## **Ecological Injustice and Solidarity in the Poetry of Selected Niger-Delta Poets**

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### **Abstract**

Niger-Delta poetry, since its inception, has been noted for tackling issues about the environment and the people that live in it. Such issues include environmental degradation, marginalisation and injustice stemming from the exploration of crude oil without commensurate recompense for the Niger-Delta environment and her people. This study, therefore, attempts to examine how Nnimmo Bassey, 'Ruvia Idase, Chukwuma Anyanwu, Greene Okome, and Martins Tugbokorowei have been able to engage their art in advocacy for earth's safety and preservation. This study adopts the second-wave Eco-critical theoretical standpoint which particularly argues that injustices to the environment and the marginalization of the people of the region should be exposed. The poems examined in the study are vocal in exposing the ruined environment of the Niger-Delta region and also aim at reawakening the people's sense of responsibility towards the need to protect, preserve and redeem the once serene environment.

**Keywords:** Eco-injustice, solidarity, Niger-Delta, Eco-criticism

### **Introduction**

Since independence, several incidents and crises have, at one point or the other, impeded the ecological and socio-economic development of the Niger Delta. The fallout from such crises has included the agitation for resource control as a result of the neglect of the Niger-Delta environment which is inclusive of its inhabitants. Uzoechi Nwagbara (2010: p.1) affirms this when he avers that Nigeria is at present, more than ever,

embroiled in environmental and ecological menace over resource control issues, neglect of the oil-producing regions as a result of ethnic apathy, and impropriety by the political class in the management of affairs, especially in the Niger Delta, a region marooned in the Nigerian social space.

The above view portrays the Niger-Delta as a region where ecological issues are dominant and the most in Nigeria because of crude oil exploration and exploitation. More so, this has constantly resulted in several ecological disasters during oil exploration by multinationals in connivance with the Federal Government of Nigeria. Several studies: Ikelegbe (2005), Nyananyo (2007), and Taiwo (2008) show that the region makes up about 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass and that fishing and farming are the major means of livelihood. Those also state that the region accounts for more than seventy-five per cent of Nigeria's export earnings. Unfortunately, however, this has not impacted positively on the lives of the people of the region. Obi (2002) believes that despite the overwhelming contribution of the oil minority areas of the Niger Delta to Federal Revenues, they have been excluded from direct access to oil revenues, except through federal and ethnic majority benevolence. This is further buttressed by Taiwo, thus;

Since 1975, the devastation of the Niger Delta has become unbearable, with 2.5m barrels of crude oil spilt or leaked into the delicate riverine environment resulting in the wholesale desecration of the fish stocks that most villagers depend on (p.172).

It is important to mention here that the unbridled assaults and injustice on the Niger-Delta environment have thrown the region's cultural practices and socio-economic and political wellbeing into a state of frightening disquiet. As a result, varying degrees of human outrage and protests, ranging from violent and non-violent, have occurred. Buttressing this, Taiwo avers that “the environmental devastation associated with the (petroleum) industry and the lack of (equitable) distribution of oil wealth has been one of the aggravating factors of numerous environmental movements and inter-ethnic conflicts in the region” (p.173).

Poets from the Niger-Delta region have also joined the bandwagon of protest and environmental advocacy, by using their art to address the devastation of and injustice on the environment (Uzoechi Nwagbara, 2010: p.2). This is evident in the poetry of Nnimmo Bassey and selected poems of 'Ruvia Idase, Chukwuma Anyanwu, Martins Tugbokorwei, and Greene Okome, for this study. These poets have added their voices to a host of other Niger-Delta poets in solidarity for a safe and serene environment. The poems selected for examination exposé the struggles of the Niger-Delta people and solidarity for justice and fair treatment of the Niger-Delta.

### **Environmental Commitment in Niger-Delta Poetry**

The commitment to environmental issues by Niger-Delta poets has evolved as a result of a host of socio-economic, political and historical experiences. Anthony Vital (2008) acknowledges this when he asserts that African eco-criticism, which also entails environmental commitment, will need to work from an understanding of the complexity of African pasts, taking into account the variety in African responses to currents of modernity that reached Africa from Europe initially, but that now influence Africa from multi-centres, European, American, and now Asian, in the present form of the globalizing economy (p.87-88). He adds that it will require being rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment if it is to pose African questions and find African answers. In line with the foregoing opinion, it is imperative to mention that a variety of Nigerian scholars have attempted to locate factors that have necessitated discourses on environmental commitment within the ambits of Nigerian literature. (Darah, 2009, Okuyade, 2013, Abba & Onyemachi, 2020)

It is important to assert that eco-literature in Nigeria may have started with the first crop of Nigerian writers (poets) like Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, John Pepper Clark and others, even though they may not have addressed environmental issues as radically as one now experiences in more recent times. Ushie (2005: p.13) is of the view too that the writings of earlier Nigerian writers including Soyinka, Okara, Clark and others, were in praise of nature essentially, but they rarely considered the consequences of man's injustice meted on the environment. A classic work worthy of mention that clearly illustrates their environmental commitment is Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1979) wherein some of the poems are geared toward a concern for nature. This phase of environmental writings was meant to celebrate nature and as such, may be considered the starting point of eco-literature in Nigeria.

However, it may be argued that much of what constitutes the concerns for and commitment to nature, as well as the protest outlook of Nigerian poetry, was born out of the Niger-Delta oil exploration experience. Corroborating this view, Okunoye (2008) opines that the driving force for the new culture of protest defines the reaction of much of recent poetry from the (Niger-Delta) region (p.418). It is a reaction against the mindless exploitation of the environment as a result of the discovery of oil in what Ojaide (1995: p.16) describes as "the senseless destruction of our original neighbours: the trees and animals". It is based on this idea that a new wave of environmental literature came to be. Thus, the eco-poetry of this wave is anchored on the poets' attempt to save the earth. This has been noted by Ojomo (2011: p.102) thus:

... the environmental crisis is one of the most pressing and timely concerns of our planet at the turn of the 21st century. As a global phenomenon, no society is immune totally to the threats and dangers, that the environmental crisis poses to our humanity... But concerning the African experience, a vast area of land rich in natural resources of all categories, flora and fauna of immense diversities, the dimension of the global environmental crisis in the continent has a particular character.

It is geared towards exposing crimes of eco-injustice and environmental degradation in all its forms and outlooks.

With the discovery and exploration of oil in Nigeria, the nation abandoned agriculture which was her previous means of livelihood. Consequently, the concentration on oil over agriculture has exposed the people of the Niger Delta to impoverishment, pollution, loss of livelihoods through

poisoned land and fishing waters, high rates of respiratory diseases, illness, disenfranchisement and despair. **Ken Saro-Wiwa, in *Forest of Flowers* (1986), captures this reality, when he says:**

*He cursed the earth for spouting oil, black gold, they called it. And he cursed the gods for not drying the oil wells. What did it matter that millions of barrels of oil were mined and exported daily, so long as this poor woman wept those tears of despair? (Night Ride, p. 115)*

It is indeed sad to note that, oil exploration and exploitation have wiped out the means of people's survival. As a result of reckless and unbridled exploration of oil, the earth, where the people plant without applying fertilizers, has lost its nutrient, and the water that is populated with myriads of fishes have been exterminated by constant gas flaring and oil spillages. This is aptly captured by Ojaide (2006: p.82) when he accentuates thus:

The air used to be cool because of constant rain and luxuriant forest, but oil sleeks, blowouts, and gas flares had destroyed that life. Even the rain that fell was so soot-black that no more did anybody drink rainwater, which of all waters, used to be described as God-given water. The people had lost their green refuge as well. Their forest used to have deep green and high foliage, the pride of the tropics, but that had changed since fires often followed oil and gas accidents.

As noted by Amnesty International (2009), the people living in the Niger Delta have to drink, cook with, and wash in polluted water; they eat fish contaminated with oil and other toxins. The health of the environment and the lives of the people are intertwined with the health of the water system. The food, water and cultural identity of many local people are closely related to the Niger-Delta ecosystem, as most families in the region rely on fishing as well as offshore farming for both income and food.

The foregoing therefore suggests that environmental commitment in Niger-Delta poetry is situated in the struggle for the liberation of the Niger-Delta environment from all forms of eco-injustice and environmental degradation.

Prominent among writers who have decried the evil inherent in the Niger Delta are Ojaide, Osundare, Ofeimun, Ikiriko, Basse, Clark, and Saro-Wiwa amongst others. These environmental writers have called for the prioritisation of environmental discourse for better leadership and socio-economic relations, as well as environmental sustainability. This has become a fertile ground for poets to express themselves on the various factors hampering ample

usage of Nigeria's natural resources. In affirming the commitment of Nigerian writers in the crusade against environmental exploitation of the Delta, G.G. Darah in his essay, "Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literature" harps on the urgency of Tanure Ojaide's art of resistance:

The poetry of Tanure Ojaide and by extension Nigerian eco- poetry ... fits into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters based on sheer output, Ojaide is the most prolific in the Niger Delta region. From his titles, one can discern an abiding concern with the fate of the Niger delta people ....many of the poems in these collections are verbal missiles directed at political despots whose role has brought misery and distress to the region (2009).

Among a host of favoured advocacy tools, as vehicles for change and intervention against man's uncontrolled poaching of the ecosystem, Niger-Delta poets have adopted various forms of resistance in their creative endeavour. In their works, these poets make efforts towards the liberation of the Niger-Delta environment from the claws and shackles of imperialism and thus have adopted the politics of resistance geared towards the advancement of humanity. Niger-Delta poetry fits into the tradition of advocacy in resistance and outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters. As an advocacy tool, resistance has been employed in the Niger Delta largely because of the urgent demand to liberate and salvage our endangered environment. Liberation, in this case, becomes a product of resistance. According to Gustavo Gutierrez (1988), it expresses the aspirations of the oppressed people and social classes emphasising the conflict aspects of the economic, social and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes.

With the nature of the relationship between literature and the natural environment, Ojaide considers the eco-critical art of poetry as a kind of public duty, which he owes the Nigerian people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. Thus, environmental justice becomes a major concern of poetry emanating from the Niger Delta and it is fundamentally about equity and fairness toward disadvantaged individuals, groups, communities, societies, institutions, regions and nations. It advocates for an appropriate distribution or sharing of the spoils and benefits of the environment. The costs of environmental pollution and degradation that are suffered by the Niger-Delta environment, as well as the benefits that should flow to it, are heavily disproportional in a way that the principles of fairness and equity that underlie or underpin environmental justice are impaired with one hazardous consequence to include environmental crisis.

From the foregoing, it can be inferred that eco-criticism as a literary approach in Nigeria, concerns itself with radical agitation and mobilisation of all social forces in the protection and preservation of the natural environment. It seeks to create awareness of contradictions within the society, particularly concerning the desecration of the ecosystem by agents of the state, individuals and organisations. The poets examined in this study have used their poetic imaginations and literary works to expose and decry the unprecedented despoliation and degradation of the ecosystem of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

### **Indices of Ecological Injustice and Solidarity in the Selected Poems**

As a poet, Nnimmo Bassey has sojourned to the hinterlands of the Niger Delta, preaching and speaking on ecological reforms, peace and sustainable development. He thus deploys poetry as a potent weapon aimed at "those who would eat our today and render tomorrow's people destitute" (Ike Okonta, blurb).

Nigeria holds the largest mangrove forest area in Africa, most of which is found in the Niger Delta, where 11, 700square kilometres of swamp forests host several unique plant and animal species. However, that invaluable wealth is being jeopardised by the oil business, which is controlled by transnational entities: Shell, Agip, Mobil, Texaco and Chevron. They have contributed not only to the destruction of the forests but to the exploitation of the inhabitants as well as human rights violations of local communities, spreading conflicts and death.

Odioma community (Brass L.G.A.) of Rivers State suffered from such an encounter with the discovery of oil at Owukubu (a swampland linking Odioma and Obioku communities) in 1998. Ownership of the area had been the motive of a local dispute between the two communities and had not been resolved until Shell started drilling operations in the area in 2005. Consequently, an attempt by the community youths to stop Shell's operation until they (the community) are properly consulted and accorded recognition, as the land owners, saw the intervention of military personnel. In no time, the communal crisis snowballed into unspeakable fatalities, "when the soldiers arrived at the community... with their gunboats" spraying their bullets sporadically and leaving some inhabitants lifeless.

In the first poem, 'We Thought It Was Oil... But It Was Blood' which is also the title of the collection, the poet, in lines 1-4, alludes to freedom from colonialism and all forms of oppression predominant in the former colony, only to find out that there exists a new form of colonialism (environmental neocolonialism). The poem mainly explores the harrowing

experience of the Niger Delta residents in the hands of transnational oil companies like ‘Shell’ with the backing of the military (behind military shields –line 45). In a bid to protect their environment against injustice, as well as fight for their human rights, there is a vicious attack on people. This is adumbrated in the poem thus “Three young folks fell to our right/Countless more fell to our left” (line 5-6), resulting from the “red-hot guns” (line 10) of these military men. The sight of the "bright red pools" is seen to have confused some of the youths, who were privileged onlookers, as a result of the poet's continuous repetition of, "We thought it was oil/But it was blood". The zeal and commitment to salvage the environment sees the poet say:

They may kill all  
But the blood will speak  
They may gain all  
But the soil will RISE  
We may die/And yet stay alive... (line15)

As a result, we cannot just “wail and mope” but, arise in unity and bandage the earth with our fists because the oil only flows when the earth bleeds (line 16).

In ‘We Have One Earth’, the poet solicits that “men must give nature a break” (line 53) to allow the birds of the air a pristine environment. The major cause of this is that “primates have shot down the sky” (line 37).

In ‘Polluted Throats’, the poet describes the effect of environmental harm on the habitat:

Zambrano drinks polluted streams  
Sees his rice field die (lines 14-15).

Despite the dilapidated nature of the environment, the poet urges all and sundry not to be hopeless, as there is something we can all do and that we must do. This is because, it would mean a continuance of environmental exploitation, degradation and injustice if we fold our hands and do nothing (lines 18-22).

Also, in ‘Laguna Guatavita’, the poet captures a landscape that has been abused by “crazed gold diggers” (line 5) and “awed fingers” (line 9). We see images like “lips swollen/Scarred/Bruised by insatiate claws/cut by the impatient axes/...scrap golden dregs”.

Furthermore, in 'Facial Marks', the poet exposes the alienation of the inhabitants of Mindo, Ecuador, from their land, caused by the environmental scars left by transnational eco-devourers. He compares facial marks to environmental scars. Towards the end of the poem, he calls back all those, who have been alienated and relocated to "drive off evil serpents" (line 23)

from the land as “environmental scars are death masks” (line 17), which spell doom. Unless they join hands (collective fists), the vicious cycle of the degradation of the environment will continue unabated.

However, in some of the poems, man misuses nature through science and technology. The streams are no longer safe as a result of ‘arsenic urine’ from the ‘bladder of profit factories’, in the words of Niyi Osundare. Also, toxic and acidic substances evaporate into the sky and the resultant effect is a rain of acids. Almost across the length and breadth of the Niger Delta, the impact of oil and gas on the artificial environment, such as that constructed by man, is quite evident in the discolouration of corrugated iron sheets by constant gas flaring, which also causes a deluge of acid rain. At the slightest gale or tempest, buildings begin to collapse.

Looking at 'Gas Flares', it is noted that the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has marked a turn in the contribution of Nigeria and Africa to the global ecological situation. Bassej laments the misuse of the earth by man. The earth’s misuse is everywhere around the globe, but the third world economic situation has worsened the Nigerian scenario. ‘Gas Flares’ expresses how the seismic companies have polluted the whole environment:

The earth gassed  
 Dynamites rocked the storehouse  
 Of life  
 The earth gassed  
 A fart delayed  
 Belching dragons attack  
 Leaping tongues lick  
 Roofs, farms  
 Now the sky is ablaze  
 Where will the people go? (p. 48)

The first stanza above describes how the earth has been ruffled by man in his quest for hidden treasures of the earth (Dynamites rocked the storehouse). The ancient arrangement of the storehouse of life has been shifted; yet, man stops not at that, but continues to destroy the ecosystem by unending gas flaring. It captures the effect of gas flaring on both the natural and the built habitats (roofs and farms). Virtually all spheres of nature have been polluted in this poem, the “sky is ablaze... sea is ablaze... earth is ablaze” and this harms the poor residents of the environment who become hopeless with nowhere to run to for succour.



With the continuous gas flaring and depletion of the ozone layer, nothing less is expected from the earth but a strong climatic change that leaves humanity under threat and the whole of creation at the mercy of the earth. In recent times, man has witnessed ‘rampaging waves’, the melting of polar ice and more water mass being released into the ocean. In ‘Shuffle’, Bassey says:

Rampaging waves  
Lap up water locked lands  
And watery shores  
Polar ice melt down polar waves  
Knocking in Atlantis  
And those outside  
Noah’s ark... and  
Each day  
I learn  
The meaning of  
Climate Change. (p. 45)

In ‘In the Backyard’, Bassey further laments the destruction of nature’s visible expression of her liberty in the procreation of her kind. The forest, compost and ponds, which constitute the natural environment, are being replaced with the man-made/artificial environment, as man attempts to create something more beautiful than nature by destroying nature itself. He avers:

In the backyard  
A forest  
A compost  
A pond...  
In the backyard  
I sense the fish  
Imagine the feast  
Held captives  
In the compost heap  
And wriggle away  
In its pond...  
In the backyard  
A peep indoors  
An aquarium  
With paper fishes  
A paper sea. (p. 46)

Bassey is more forceful in the use of his expression because of his impatience with the prevailing condition of his country (Nigeria). Hence, his poetry is patterned after his radical and militant drive for the protection of the environment.

'Ruvia Idase in his poem "The Cry of the Militant", sectioned in six, begins by presenting a chaotic and ruined environment with apt metaphors such as 'wretched thatches', 'barren waters', 'friendless habitation' and 'living graves', seemingly orchestrated by oil exploration in the Niger-Delta. The Niger Delta is also likened to a woman and mother that has been constantly raped and rendered incapacitated. The poet avers,

Bleeding decades of unseasoned rape  
 Injuries so deep  
 Death perches near.  
 See, there she lies prostrate, our mother  
 Battered by this cruel oil rape!  
 Can she walk again  
 This raped goddess?  
 Can she walk again? (lines 12-19)

This deplorable state portrayed by the poet has "distorted all beautiful things" (line 31). The poet agrees that the Niger Delta is blessed with rich resources but unfortunately he cannot lay his hands on its gains. He laments,

In these ripples of ransom  
 I cannot see the road  
 To gather the ripe fruits of my clan  
 Ripe are the fruits of my clan  
 But how can I gather them  
 In these ripples dishonouring my innocence  
 And my noble dream? (lines 45-51)

Having lamented the harm occasioned by the wanton exploration of oil and without recourse to the safety and sanity of the environment, he appeals to all eco-predators to pity mother earth. In section VI, the poet avows,

Pity us  
 Please pity us  
 You who prod us with fire rods  
 And our screams call violence

For emphasis on his solidarity for a sane and safe environment, the poet repeats the above call and ends the poem on a note of advocacy.

Greene Okome, in his poem "Naija Deatha", presents to us the ideal condition of the environment before the oil crisis took centre stage and caused so much ruin. He does this in the first 21 lines of the poem with words like 'verdant forest', 'waters... provid(ing) protein feed', 'ancestors rejoiced', 'happiness and contentment confronted the people constantly', etc. Having praised the serenity of the environment, the poet does not fail to mention that things have

changed for the worse and he narrates the conditions that orchestrated the degradation of the environment stemming from the unbridled exploration of oil as seen in lines 22-33. He avers,

In fifty years  
 From the bowels of the earth  
 Pipes have reared their heads  
 Criss-crossing the entire water-region  
 Vomiting black slimy substance  
 Distributing misery and stifling growth.  
 This land is covered in darkness  
 Living things grope for survival  
 The rivers reject their inhabitants in annoyance  
 But upland the Black Gold  
 Produce chubby-cheek vultures  
 Barking at protests of infidels.

In the same vein, Anyanwu presents us with an imaginary dialogue, as the title does imply – "Dialogue", between the Federal government and MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta) on the crises of the Niger-Delta. Here, the Federal government is willing to negotiate and grant the people of the Niger-Delta amnesty, "Come let's reason together". However, it is not the type they demand. Hence, the poet through MEND queries the Federal government thus:

What amnesty?...  
 With your soldiers,  
 Killing innocent citizens.  
 Your army, maiming, raping, murdering,  
 Sacking whole villages?  
 Amnesty of money? No, Sir!  
 Give us amnesty of peace,  
 Amnesty of industries,  
 Of roads, of bridges on our waterways.  
 Give us amnesty of no more  
 Gas flares!  
 No more poisoned waters!  
 Yes! And amnesty of  
 The right to ask for our rights! (Ukala, 2009: p.136)

This injustice meted out on the Niger-Delta region and its people means nothing to the Federal government which is not interested in addressing the challenges presented in the poem. Thus the Federal government decides to suspend the dialogue because it is not in her favour:

This dialogue, replies  
 The Federal government,  
 Is suspended.  
 We will consult on

Your brand of amnesty,  
Amnesty, indeed! (Ukala, 2009: p.136)

In the poem, “Give a Human World”, Tugbokorwei solicits a restoration of a sane environment. This is seen in his continuous repetition of “Give me” at the beginning of each of all six stanzas. He cries,

Give me a clear blue sky...  
Give me fresh unpolluted air...  
Give me supple green plains...  
Give me crystal clear rivers...  
Give me a habitable world...  
Give me a human world... (p. 141)

This repetition reminds one of Anyanwu’s plea in “Dialogue” when he says ‘Give us amnesty’.

### **Conclusion**

As has been established earlier in the essay, the culture of commitment, solidarity, agitation and protest has taken over Niger-Delta Literature in particular, and African literature in general. For some scholars, such as Anthony Vital, history is implicated in the proper understanding and relevance of African literature. This implication also motivates regional varieties of writing as the different historical experiences are peculiar to certain regions. The Niger-Delta region is a classic example of one which has had a plethora of historical experiences in form of colonialism, human rights infringements, marginalization, oppression and environmental despoliation. These harsh historical experiences have all influenced writers of the Niger Delta who seize every opportunity to use their art in putting an end to these vices in the region. The poems engaged in the study, robustly expose the ruined state of the Niger-Delta environment and reawaken the consciousness of man on the need to protect, preserve and redeem the once serene environment. The poets, no doubt, have successfully engaged their art in solidarity for a more conscious effort by all and sundry to treat the environment fairly and restore its original ideal state.

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