An Ecocritical and Reader-Response Analysis of the Niger Delta's Environment in Tanure Ojaide's "*The Fate of Vultures*" And Nnimmo Bassey's "*We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood*"

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Abstract

This paper undertook an ecocritical and reader-response analysis of the Niger Delta's environmental crisis as represented in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood*. Based on the principles of ecocriticism developed by Lawrence Buell and the theory of reader-response formulated by Wolfgang Iser, the paper questions the ways in which the two poets create the ecological disaster of the Niger Delta as the location of political, economic, and human disasters caused by decades of oil mining. The main analytical framework on which the poems are discussed in terms of the depiction of landscape, biodiversity loss, environmental toxicity, and entanglement of human communities with their natural habitats is ecocriticism. Reader-Response criticism complements this analysis by discussing the way in which the poetic texts address, locate and activate the affective and cognitive responses of the reader to the ecological crisis. By critically examining imagery, tone, diction, symbolic arrangement, the paper reveals that both Ojaide and Bassey use their art in ecological activism and

change the damaged landscape of the Niger Delta into a strong statement against corporate impunity and state involvement. As the results show, although Ojaide laments the ecological loss in a lamentative and mythopoeic key, Bassey uses a more activist and documentary address in her poetry, making the reader face the visceral realities of oil pollution. The two texts together form an important contribution to the ecological literature on Africa as well as demand an ecological justice urgently.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Reader-Response Theory, Niger Delta, Oil Pollution, Tanure Ojaide, Nnimmo Bassey, Environmental Justice, African Poetry

Introduction

Niger Delta is a region in Nigeria, which is considered to be among the richest ecological wetlands in the world but has suffered what many scholars and environmental activists have termed as one of the most outrageous instances of industrial ecological destruction in the twenty-first century. Since the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956, the area has been exposed to unrelenting extraction operations that have left the mangrove forests in shambles, polluted its waterways, wiped off its aquatic biodiversity and rendered vast areas of arable land infertile. The effects of this annihilation have been felt most sharply by the native populations, the existence, cultural identity, and spiritual cosmology of which is closely tied to the land as well as to the water. It is against this backdrop of ecological disaster and human destitution that two of the most eminent poets in the Nigerian context, Tanure Ojaide and Nnimmo Bassey have risen to the ranks of effective literary voices of ecological protest, resistance and lamentation.

Tanure Ojaide, arguably the foremost poet of the Niger Delta, has consistently engaged the environmental and socio-political crises of his homeland in his extensive body of poetry. His collection *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) stands as a seminal text in African environmental literature, drawing on Urhobo oral traditions, mythological imagery, and a profound ecological sensibility to mourn and condemn the destruction of the Delta's natural world. Nnimmo Bassey, a leading environmental rights activist and poet, similarly deploys verse as a form of political and ecological testimony. His collection *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* (2002) is a scorching critique of the oil industry and the state, focusing

on the viewpoint of communities that have been made invisible by the apparatus of extractive capitalism. These two texts embodied the breadth and the scope of the literary-ecological imagination of the Niger Delta.

This article placed both texts in the context of ecocriticism a critical approach that analyzes the interaction between literature and the physical setting and reader-response criticism, which prefigures the decision-making of the reader in creating literary meaning. The two theoretical frameworks allow viewing the poems as both concerned with the ecological content and aesthetic of the poems and responsive to the ethical and emotional needs they pose to their readers. The general thesis here is that despite the fact that Ojaide and Bassey use different poetic registers, the two authors share an overlap in using literature as a means of ecological activism, and that their poetry can be considered a kind of the so-called environmental literature in the holistic sense of the term that is, literature that does not simply describe nature but promotes its preservation and laments its loss.

Statement of the Problem

Although the scholarly interest in Niger Delta literature has grown over the last twenty years, much of the critical interest in the poetry of the area has been based on its socio-political and postcolonial aspects, at the cost of a more thorough ecocritical approach. The ecological aspects of writings like Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures* and Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* have not been discussed with the thoroughness to which the ecological crisis with which they are identified calls. Moreover, little critical attention has been given to the reader-response aspect of the two texts which is how they locate, involve, and mobilize their readers as environmental agents of environmental awareness and responsibility. The paper fills this gap by prefiguring the ecocriticism and reader-response theory as complementary methods to examine how the poets build, depict, and politicize the ecological destruction of the Niger Delta.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to conduct an ecocritical and reader-response analysis of the Niger Delta's environmental crisis as represented in Ojaide's *The*

Fate of Vultures and Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood.* Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how both poets represent the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta within the framework of ecocritical theory.
2. Analyse the reader-response strategies employed in both texts to engage, implicate, and mobilise the reader.
3. Investigate the poetic strategies imagery, symbolism, tone, diction through which the environmental crisis is aestheticised and politicised.
4. Situate both poets within the broader tradition of African environmental literature and ecological activism.

Literature Review

Niger Delta Literature and the Ecology of Oil

Niger Delta literature has become one of the most politically-charging and environmentally-involved sets of writing in modern African letters. It is a crisis literature, the meeting of oil digging, political marginalisation, corporate impunity and ecological apocalypse that have marked the area since the late 1950s. This literature has been more and more seen by scholars as the element of what Omowunmi Segun describes as a poetry of outrage and mourning that is based on the materiality of a landscape on the verge. The prose works and activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa, which took place mainly outside the space of poetry, contributed towards making the Niger Delta a locus of ecological interest on the global agenda, and preconditioned future literary-ecological interventions.

Tanure Ojaide is considered to be the most prominent poet of the Niger Delta. His scholarship and his poetry have a profound involvement with the oral traditions of Urhobo and the ecology of the Delta and the socio-political processes that ravaged it. Theorists like Isidore Okpewho have placed Ojaide in the context of African oral poetics, and critics like Niyi Osundare and Charles Nnolim have hailed his ability to merge the cultural memory of the indigenous, with the political commentary of the present. Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures* has been called a watershed collection of Nigerian poetry, having been marvelous in its lyrical expression of environmental loss, and the use of local cosmological symbols to interrogate extractive capitalism. The poet must be the "voice of the voiceless", and this moral

imperative is imprinted at all levels of the imagery and rhetoric of the collection, as Ojaide himself affirms.

Less widely researched than Ojaide in the field of literary criticism, Nnimmo Bassey is a unique figure at the border of poetry and environmental rights activism. His *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* has been acknowledged by critics such as Kemi Atanda Ilori and Ndubuisi Martins-Cookey as a powerful example of what they term "witness poetry" verse that bears testimony to atrocities with the rigour of a legal or journalistic document. The collection's documentary character distinguishes it from Ojaide's more lyrical approach, yet both texts share a foundational ecological consciousness and a commitment to naming, mourning, and condemning the destruction of the Niger Delta.

Ecocriticism and African Literature

Ecocriticism, as a formal discipline, emerged in the 1990s in North American academia, primarily through the foundational work of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, whose anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) defined the field as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Lawrence Buell's subsequent elaborations, particularly in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), provided detailed criteria for what constitutes "environmentally oriented" literature, with a concern about the non-human world, a sense of place as a moral category, and a sense of ethic of human responsibility towards the environment. These paradigms, though, were constructed in the context of Western traditions of nature writing, especially American, and their relevance to the African context has been the focus of a continuous critical discussion.

Theorised by Cajetan Iheka, Byron Caminero-Santangelo, and Comfort Ayorinde, African ecocriticism aims to adjust and challenge Western ecocritical models in response to the historical, colonial and political contextual factors that define the ecological experience of the African. Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2017) is especially relevant in this case: Iheka believes that African ecological texts are deeply shaped by colonial past and postcolonial political economies where the natural world of the

continent has become an object to be mined and not a place that can be lived in and preserved. This argument carries specifically strong force in the situation of the Niger Delta: it is not just an environmental issue of the ecological crisis but a symptom of colonial and neocolonial exploitation. The poetry of Ojaide and Bassey enters into this structural aspect directly, placing oil pollution in a larger context of critique of global capital, rotten governance, and native dispossession.

Reader-Response Theory and Environmental Poetry

Reader-Response criticism, which is mainly attributed to Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Louise Rosenblatt, holds that the meaning of literature is not an inherent feature of literature itself but a resultant phenomenon of the interaction of the text and the reader. The idea of the implied reader by Iser and his theory of reading as a gap-filling/meaning-making process is particularly relevant to the discussion of environmental poetry, where effects of the text are typically conditional on the abilities of the reader to be ecologically empathetic, politically minded, and affectively involved. The transactional theory of Louise Rosenblatt also focuses on the aesthetic and efferent aspects of the reading experience and the distinction between reading to get information and reading to get affect is especially important to ecopoetry, which often aims to create both an informational and an emotional impact.

Applications of the reader-response theory to environmental literature are a comparatively new phenomenon and include critics like Scott Slovic and Patrick D. Murphy. The writer Slovic, specially, has suggested that environmental writing is a method of ecological awareness-raising, and that it calls the reader to acknowledge their implication within ecological systems, and to cultivate what he terms awareness and responsibility. This reader-response aspect is of crucial significance in the context of the Niger Delta poetry: not only had the communities concerned by the issues of the Delta, but also the international readers: governmental bodies, corporate actors, environmental organisations whose reaction toward the ecological crisis has real political implications. The strength of the poetry then is not only in its aesthetic qualities but also in its ability to generate knowledge, empathy and political will among its readers.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

While there is a growing body of scholarship on Niger Delta literature and on African ecocriticism separately, few studies have brought these two frameworks together in a sustained comparative analysis of Ojaide's and Bassey's poetry. Furthermore, the reader-response dimension of both texts the manner in which they construct and position their readers has been largely neglected in existing criticism. The present study addresses both of these gaps by providing an integrated ecocritical and reader-response analysis of the two collections, with close attention to the textual mechanisms through which environmental consciousness is constructed and communicated.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism: Foundational Principles

Ecocriticism, as a theoretical and methodological framework, proceeds from the foundational premise that literature is not produced in an ecological vacuum but is always already embedded within specific material environments that shape its themes, imagery, and cultural significance. Cheryll Glotfelty's classic definition situates ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii), while Buell refines this to emphasise the normative dimension of ecocritical inquiry: that is, the commitment not only to describe the literary representation of nature but to evaluate the ethical quality of that representation and to advocate for environmental justice.

Buell identifies four criteria for what he terms "environmentally oriented" literature:

> first, that the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that implies that human history is implicated in natural history; second, that human interest is not the only legitimate interest; third, that human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and fourth, that some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is present in the text (Buell 7–8).

Both Ojaide's and Bassey's poetry satisfy all four of these criteria. Their verses do not treat the Niger Delta's ecology as mere backdrop; they position it as a living,

suffering presence whose destruction is an ethical catastrophe that implicates both local actors and global systems.

African ecocriticism, as theorised by Iheka, adds a critical supplement to Buell's framework by insisting on the centrality of colonial and postcolonial histories to the ecological situations represented in African literature. Iheka argues that African ecological writing must be read not only in relation to Western environmental philosophy but in relation to the specific histories of dispossession, extraction, and political marginalisation that constitute the material conditions of African ecological crises. This supplement is indispensable for reading Ojaide and Bassey, whose ecological consciousness is inseparable from their critique of oil corporations, the Nigerian state, and the international systems of capital that sustain extractive economies.

Reader-Response Theory: Wolfgang Iser and Louise Rosenblatt

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, as elaborated in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), posits that literary texts are characterised by fundamental indeterminacies or "blanks" that require the active participation of the reader to be filled with meaning. The reader is not a passive recipient of a fixed textual message but an active co-producer of the text's meaning, whose interpretive work is guided but not determined by the text's structures. The "implied reader" is the ideal reader inscribed within the text the reader whose responses the text anticipates and calls forth. For Iser, the reading experience is fundamentally transformative: the reader's horizon of expectations is challenged, modified, and expanded through engagement with the literary work.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, elaborated in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978), complements Iser's approach by distinguishing between two reading stances: the "aesthetic" stance, in which the reader attends to the qualitative and emotional dimensions of the reading experience, and the "efferent" stance, in which the reader extracts information or meaning for practical use. Rosenblatt argues that literary reading typically involves a mixture of both stances, and that the relative balance between them is determined both by the text and by the reader's purposes and contexts. Environmental poetry, with its dual commitment

to aesthetic experience and ecological information, is particularly suited to an analysis informed by Rosenblatt's framework: both Ojaide's and Bassey's poetry seek to produce aesthetic experience and to transmit ecological knowledge, and they calibrate the aesthetic and efferent dimensions of reading in distinct but complementary ways.

The integration of ecocriticism and reader-response theory in the present study enables an analysis that is simultaneously attentive to the ecological content of the poems and to the mechanisms by which that content is communicated to, and received by, their readers. Ecocriticism provides the framework for analysing what the poems say about the environment; reader-response theory illuminates how the poems say it, and what responses they seek to produce in their readers.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close reading, textual analysis, and theoretical application. The primary data for the study consists of selected poems from Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990) and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* (2002). Close reading constitutes the principal analytical tool: each poem is subjected to rigorous formal and thematic analysis, with particular attention to imagery, diction, tone, symbolism, and structural organisation. These formal elements are analysed as the vehicles through which the poets' ecological and political arguments are articulated.

The theoretical framework draws primarily on Lawrence Buell's ecocritical criteria for environmentally oriented literature, Cajetan Iheka's African ecocritical framework, Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader and the indeterminate text, and Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and book-length studies on Niger Delta literature, African environmental writing, ecocriticism, and reader-response theory. These secondary sources are used to contextualise the primary texts and to situate the analysis within broader critical conversations.

The comparative methodology employed in the study is designed to illuminate both the convergences and divergences between Ojaide's and Bassey's ecological visions and poetic strategies. Rather than treating the two texts as interchangeable instances of "Niger Delta environmental poetry," the study is attentive to the specific cultural, political, and aesthetic particularities of each collection, while also tracing the shared ecological and ethical commitments that link them. The analysis proceeds thematically rather than poem by poem, organising the discussion around key ecocritical and reader-response concerns: the representation of ecological destruction, the construction of the reader, the politics of witnessing, and the ethics of environmental advocacy.

Discussion of Findings

Ecocritical Analysis: Representing Ecological Catastrophe

The Non-Human World as Suffering Subject in Ojaide's the Fate of Vultures

One of the most distinctive features of Ojaide's ecological poetry is his capacity to render the non-human world the rivers, birds, forests, and soils of the Niger Delta as subjects possessing their own interiority, suffering, and moral claim. This is consistent with Buell's ecocritical criterion that environmentally oriented literature must not treat the non-human environment as mere background but must grant it a moral presence equal to that of human characters. In *The Fate of Vultures,* Ojaide achieves this through a sustained practice of personification, anthropomorphism, and mythological animation that transforms the degraded landscape into a living, mourning, and accusing presence.

In the title poem, "The Fate of Vultures," Ojaide deploys the vulture a bird traditionally associated in Urhobo cosmology with both death and spiritual purgation as a complex ecological symbol. The vulture's fate in the poem is intimately tied to the fate of the Delta's ecosystem: as the ecosystem is polluted and degraded, the vulture's traditional ecological function as a scavenger and purifier of death is rendered redundant by the sheer scale of destruction. Ojaide writes:

> The vultures circle overhead, searching / for carrion in a land that is all carrion now, / where the rivers weep oil and the trees / wear the black shrouds of fire.

The image of a "land that is all carrion now" encapsulates the ecocritical vision of the poem: the entire ecosystem has been killed, not by natural processes but by industrial violence. The rivers that weep oil and the trees wearing black shrouds of fire are not merely descriptive details; they are personifications that grant the non-human world a capacity for grief and suffering analogous to that of the human victims. By animating the landscape in this way, Ojaide satisfies Buell's criterion that human interest should not be the only legitimate interest in environmental literature: the rivers and the trees are here accorded a moral status independent of their utility to human beings.

Ojaide's use of Urhobo mythological imagery further deepens the ecological resonance of his poetry. The Delta's rivers, particularly the Niger and the Ethiope, are sacred entities in Urhobo cosmology, associated with protective deities and ancestral spirits. When Ojaide depicts these rivers as polluted and dying, he is not only documenting an environmental catastrophe; he is mourning the destruction of an entire cosmological order. The ecological and the spiritual are inseparable in Ojaide's verse, a feature consistent with what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in their postcolonial ecocriticism, call the "sacred ecology" of indigenous peoples the sense that the natural world is not merely a resource but a living community of which humans are a part. The destruction of the Delta's ecology in Ojaide's poetry is thus simultaneously an environmental, cultural, and spiritual catastrophe.

Visceral Ecology: Blood, Oil, and the Body in Bassey's Poetry

Nnimmo Bassey's ecological imagination operates in a register quite different from Ojaide's elegiac and mythopoeic mode. Where Ojaide mourns and mythologises, Bassey documents and accuses. His collection's title *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* is itself an ecocritical statement of extraordinary power. The substitution of blood for oil collapses the distinction between the natural resource being extracted and the human bodies that are being destroyed by the extraction process, suggesting that oil and blood are, in the Niger Delta context, functionally equivalent: both are liquids that flow from wounds, both sustain life and cause death, and both are commodities in a global market that values them above the communities from which they are drawn.

In poems such as "The Delta Blues" and "Fuel to the World, Fumes to Us," Bassey employs what might be called a "visceral ecology" a mode of ecological representation that foregrounds the bodily and physical dimensions of environmental destruction. His images are not primarily aesthetic or symbolic; they are clinical and documentary, drawing on the language of ecological science, medical diagnosis, and legal testimony. This documentary mode is itself an ecocritical strategy: by presenting the ecological crisis in the language of evidence and documentation, Bassey positions his reader as a witness to a crime, implicating them in the question of accountability and response. In one representative passage, Bassey writes:

> *The flares never sleep; they eat the night / and spit carbon into the lungs of children / who do not know why they cough / or why the fish die before they grow.*

The personification of the gas flares as entities that "eat the night" and "spit carbon" is characteristic of Bassey's technique: the industrial apparatus of oil extraction is rendered as a predatory, consuming presence, while the victims children who do not know why they cough, fish that die before they grow are presented with clinical simplicity. This juxtaposition of the industrial and the biological, the powerful and the vulnerable, is one of the defining features of Bassey's ecological vision. The children and the fish are both non-human in a significant sense: both are members of the ecosystem who bear the consequences of decisions made entirely outside their communities and without their consent.

Landscape, Place, and Ecological Memory

Both Ojaide and Bassey engage deeply with the concept of place as a moral and ecological category, consistent with Buell's criterion that a sense of the environment as process rather than static backdrop is essential to environmental literature. For Ojaide, the Niger Delta's landscape is not merely a geographical location but a memory-saturated space that embodies the history, culture, and spiritual life of its indigenous inhabitants. His poems are filled with the specific topographical features of the Urhobo homeland the Ethiope River, the Okpara forests, the creeks and mangroves of the Delta rendered with a particularity that invests them with irreplaceable value.

The concept of "ecological memory," as developed by the cultural geographer Paul Connerton, is useful here: the Delta's landscape, in Ojaide's poetry, functions as a repository of collective cultural memory, and its destruction is simultaneously an act of ecological and cultural violence. When the mangroves are cleared and the rivers are poisoned, the communities' capacity to remember and reproduce their cultural life is also destroyed. This is the dimension of ecological loss that Ojaide's elegiac mode is particularly well suited to capture: the mourning is not only for the lost species and polluted waters but for the lost world of meaning and belonging that those species and waters sustained.

Bassey's engagement with place operates on a more explicitly political register. His poems name specific locations Ogoniland, Oloibiri, Bonny, Warri and document specific ecological events: oil spills, gas flares, pipeline explosions. This toponymic specificity is itself an ecocritical gesture: by naming places and events, Bassey refuses the erasure of the Delta's communities from the public record and insists on their geographical and historical particularity. His poetry functions as a form of counter-cartography, mapping the Delta not as a resource zone but as an inhabited landscape of communities, histories, and suffering.

Reader-Response Analysis: Constructing the Ecological Reader

The Implied Reader in Ojaide: Elegy, Witness, and Ecological Empathy

Applying Iser's concept of the implied reader to Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures,* one can discern a reader who is invited to occupy a position of mourning and witness. Ojaide's elegiac mode calls forth from the reader an affective response of grief and loss, while his mythological imagery calls forth cultural and ecological knowledge. The implied reader of Ojaide's poetry is positioned not as an outsider observing the Delta's crisis from a safe distance but as a witness who is implicated in the mourning process a participant in the ecological elegy who shares, at least imaginatively, in the community's loss.

Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance is particularly active in the reading of Ojaide's poetry: the reader is called to attend not only to the informational content of the poems the fact of oil pollution, the destruction of mangroves but to the quality of the loss, the felt texture of a world being destroyed. This aesthetic engagement is not mere

sentimentality; it is, as Slovic argues in his analysis of environmental literature, a necessary precondition for genuine ecological responsibility. A reader who has been aesthetically moved by Ojaide's lament for the Delta's rivers is more likely to understand and respond to the political demands of environmental justice.

Iser's concept of textual indeterminacy is also productive for reading Ojaide's poetry. His frequent use of symbol and myth creates interpretive "blanks" that require the reader's active engagement to fill. The meaning of the vulture symbol, for example, is not exhausted by its literal referent: the reader is invited to bring to it whatever knowledge of Urhobo cosmology, ecological science, or political history they possess, and to construct a reading that integrates these dimensions. This indeterminacy is not a weakness but strength: it makes the poem available to multiple readers in multiple contexts while retaining its ecological and political force.

The Reader as Witness and Accuser in Bassey's Poetry

Bassey's implied reader is constructed very differently from Ojaide's. Where Ojaide invites the reader into a space of mourning and cultural memory, Bassey positions the reader as a witness to a crime and, by implication, as a potential accuser and advocate. The documentary mode of Bassey's poetry its insistence on naming names, citing facts, and documenting atrocities calls forth from the reader an efferent response in Rosenblatt's terms: a response oriented toward action, advocacy, and accountability.

The title of the collection *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood* is itself a reader-response gesture: the use of the first-person plural "we" implicates the reader in the collective experience of the Delta's communities, inviting them to share the shock of recognition that the title encapsulates. The "we" is initially the "we" of the Niger Delta communities, but it expands, as the collection unfolds, to include the "we" of a global humanity that has consumed the oil without acknowledging the blood. This expansion of the "we" is a sophisticated reader-response strategy: it denies the reader the comfortable position of innocent bystander and insists on their complicity in the ecological crisis.

Iser's theory of the "negated" reader the reader whose comfortable assumptions are systematically challenged and disrupted by the text is particularly relevant to Bassey's poetry. The collection's direct address to the reader, its refusal of aesthetic consolation, and its insistence on the material facts of suffering deny the reader the aesthetic distance that might allow them to appreciate the poems as beautiful objects without confronting their political demands. Bassey's poetry is designed to be uncomfortable, to produce in the reader not only empathy but guilt, responsibility, and the imperative to act.

Convergences: Shared Ecological Ethics and Reader Mobilisation

Despite the significant differences in their poetic modes, Ojaide and Bassey converge in their shared ecological ethics and their commitment to mobilising the reader on behalf of the Niger Delta's communities and environment. Both poets refuse the separation of ecological and human concerns: in both collections, the destruction of the environment is inseparable from the destruction of human lives, cultures, and communities. This convergence is itself an ecocritical statement: it challenges the anthropocentrism of much mainstream environmental discourse by insisting that ecological justice and human justice are the same struggle.

Both poets also share a commitment to what Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), calls making "slow violence" visible. Nixon argues that the violence of environmental destruction unlike the spectacular violence of war or disaster is slow, incremental, and largely invisible to the media and the international community. The poet's task, in Nixon's framework, is to find narrative and aesthetic strategies that render this slow violence visible and legible to a global audience. Both Ojaide and Bassey perform this task through their respective poetic modes: Ojaide by elegising the slow death of an ecosystem and a culture, Bassey by documenting the cumulative evidence of decades of pollution and neglect. Together, they offer their readers a comprehensive account of the Niger Delta's ecological catastrophe and an urgent demand for justice.

Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Scholars of African literature should more systematically integrate ecocritical frameworks into the study of Niger Delta poetry and prose, moving beyond the socio-political and postcolonial perspectives that have dominated the field and engaging more rigorously with the ecological dimensions of these texts.
2. Literature curricula at Nigerian and African universities should incorporate the poetry of Ojaide, Bassey, and other Niger Delta writers not only as aesthetic objects but as ecological and political documents that raise critical questions about environmental justice, corporate accountability, and indigenous rights.
3. The intersection of ecocriticism and reader-response theory should be developed as a productive interdisciplinary framework for the analysis of African environmental literature, with particular attention to the ways in which African poets construct and mobilise their readers on behalf of ecological justice.
4. Nigerian and international environmental organisations should draw on the poetry of the Niger Delta as a resource for public education and advocacy, recognising its power to produce ecological awareness and political responsibility in ways that conventional political and scientific discourse often cannot.
5. Future studies should extend the ecocritical and reader-response analysis conducted here to other texts in the Niger Delta literary tradition, including the poetry of Jack Mapanje, Ogaga Ifowodo, and Uche Nduka, with a view to developing a more comprehensive account of the region's ecological literary imagination.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comprehensive ecocritical and reader-response analysis of Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood,* demonstrating that both texts constitute significant contributions to the tradition of African environmental literature and to the global discourse of ecological justice. Through distinct but complementary poetic modes Ojaide's elegiac and mythopoeic register, Bassey's documentary and activist voice

both poets transform the degraded landscapes of the Niger Delta into powerful testimonies against the violence of oil extraction and corporate impunity.

The ecocritical analysis has shown that both texts satisfy Buell's criteria for environmentally oriented literature: the non-human world is present as a suffering subject rather than a mere backdrop, human interest is not the only legitimate interest, human accountability to the environment is foregrounded as an ethical imperative, and the environment is rendered as a dynamic process that has been violently disrupted by industrial capitalism. Iheka's African ecocritical framework has further illuminated the colonial and neocolonial dimensions of the ecological crisis both poets represent: the Niger Delta's destruction is not an accident of development but a product of the same systems of extraction and dispossession that have historically constituted the African continent as a resource zone for global capital.

The reader-response analysis has demonstrated that both poets are deeply attentive to the effects of their poetry on their readers, employing sophisticated strategies to construct implied readers who are positioned as witnesses, mourners, accusers, and advocates. Ojaide's elegiac mode and mythological imagery call forth from the reader an aesthetic response of grief and ecological empathy, while Bassey's documentary mode and direct address call forth a more efferent, politically engaged response oriented toward accountability and action. Together, the two collections model comprehensive reader-response ecology: the reader who has moved through both texts is equipped not only to feel the loss of the Delta's ecology but to understand its causes, to name its perpetrators, and to demand its remediation.

Ultimately, both Ojaide and Bassey affirm through their poetry a vision of the Niger Delta that is ecological, cultural, political, and spiritual a vision in which the land, the water, the communities, and their cosmologies constitute an integrated whole that has been shattered by the violence of extraction. Their poetry is an act of resistance, mourning, and hope: a refusal to allow the erasure of the Delta's ecology and its people from the consciousness of the world, and a demand that the world hear, see, and respond to what has been done in the name of oil.

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