

# Greed and Selfishness as Nucleus of Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta: A Study of Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

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## **Abstract**

All the genres of literature, from poetry to drama, and the novel, generally reflect the happenings in a society and this is why literature is seen as a mirror of the society as well as regarded as is being alive. This paper entitled "Greed and Selfishness as the Nucleus of Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta : a Study of Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* examined greed and selfishness as the major cause of environmental degradation and poverty in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Using eco-criticism as frame work, the researchers realized that both the *fauna and flora* of the Niger-Delta were greatly affected by the selfish activities of both the multinational oil companies and the Federal government of Nigeria. In fact, the research revealed that while the gasses the oil exploration in the region emit into the air affected the ozone layers in the sky, the oil spillages destroyed the farm lands as well as the aquatic lives in the water in the region. The result is the impoverishment of the masses in the region. This also accounted for the reasons why most writers in the region lament over the suffering of their people, hence the literature of the area is considered as lachrymal.

**Keywords:** Greed; Selfishness; Environmental degradation; Niger-Delta etc.

## Introduction

Literature is an artistic portrait of life in poetic, prosaic, and dramatic forms. It depicts life in the human society in a creative way. That is the reason why some literary critics regard it as performing a sociological function. Ngugi wa Thiongo is one of the literary critics who contends that literature is now giving impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political

and economic forces in a particular society. This means that literature is a product of the society and based on this premise should depict life in the human society. These critics lay more emphasis on the social situations without considering the fact that the social environment will not exist if there are no physical environment. In other words, the physical environment is as important as the social environment and should equally be the focus of literary works. Ifejirika Echezona, in *Introduction to Literary Theory, Criticism and Practice*, contends that:

If man's physical environment consummated in the ecosystem is so important to man, there should be a way to reflect that in men's critical works, his profound recognition and appreciation of the immense significance of his environment to him. This could be done through literary works that discuss the value of the ecosystem outside of biological sciences. Literary artists should therefore employ their works in the genre of prose, poetry and drama to raise alarm over man's unwholesome activities on the environment or the ecosystem (52-53).

The focus of this paper is on the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as reflected in the poetry of Ogaga Ifowodo in particular. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2011), quoting Senayon note:

It is universally acknowledged that the Niger Delta region accounts for over ninety-five percent of the Nigerian Economy. It is equally an open secret that the Niger Delta region is the least developed area of Nigeria as the oil wealth from the area is carted away by the ruling cabal [s]...to develop their own region (51)

This, as a matter of fact, accounts for the 'lachrymal' (Nwahunanya, 37) nature of the literature of the Niger Delta. The literary writers from the Niger Delta write with pain, sorrow (a kind of consistent weeping within, as a result of marginalization and neglect) etc.. According to Nwahunanya(2011),

Niger Delta has provided a veritable practising arena for these revolutionary inclined writers. They have recommended the dialectics of force as the supreme panacea to the problem of the Niger Deltans, for whom other strategies, including protracted lamentation, have failed (55).

It is in the light of this understanding of the situation of the Niger Delta that the discussions in this paper will be best understood.

The frame work on which the discussions here will be anchored is eco-criticism. Eco-criticism is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where literary scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Some eco-critics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all eco-critics agree on the purpose, methodology, or scope of eco-criticism. Eco-criticism "attempts to delineate the relationship between literature and the natural environment" (Cuddon 214).. Eco-critics and theorists ask a lot of questions like: How is nature represented in this planet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this work consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the

way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should the environment become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship with the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping through the pores of contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. government reports, and what rhetoric enforces this view? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics? In all these seeming insights into the nature of man and his existence, literature plays a landmark role.

#### Greed and Selfishness as Nucleus of Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta: a Study of Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has, paradoxically, brought fortune and misfortune to its people. Communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have been on the frontline of the negative impact of oil exploration activities. The non-abatement of the degradation of the land, air and water resources of this region has collectively become a vibrant metaphor for Nigerian poets to criticize and proffer solutions to. This provides the justification for the use of Eco-criticism as a tool of analysis in this paper. This paper discusses greed and selfishness as the nucleus of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and in doing so, attention is paid to Ogaga Ifowodo's collection of poetry - *The Oil Lamp*. In the collection, attention will be paid to the following individual poems: 'A Waterscape', 'Jesse', 'Odi', and 'Pipes of War'.

In *The Oil Lamp*, Ifowodo borrows from the Nigerian history and literarily retells the stories of what occurred in Jese, Odi and Ogoni lands of the Niger-Delta. These three towns witnessed some of the worst devastating effects of oil exploration in recent times. Jese is the scene of an inferno resulting from scooping oil from burst oil-pipes. Odi was reportedly decimated by soldiers sent to the community to restore peace so that oil exploration activities could continue unhindered. Ogoni, as the home town of Ken Saro-Wiwa, is perceived and treated by the government then in power as culpable because of the activities of Saro-Wiwa and the some other Ogonis.. Apart from the first three sections which take their titles from these three towns, the other three sections in the collection contain poems that stress these themes. They are 'The Pipes War', 'Cesspit of the Niger Area' and 'The Agonist' which is dedicated to the late Saro Wiwa and the other eight men killed along with him.

Ifowodo's style in the collection is narrative. However, his use of personification, similes, alliteration, onomatopoeia, pun, irony, satire, word formations especially from the dialect of the people of the region and from other registers, give the collection its poetic quality. Added to this is the poet's use of stanzas made up of triplets and run-on lines. Ifowodo's imaginative treatment of these events shows that these occurrences negatively affect the people and the environment and consequently have implications on climate

change. The most significant effect of the occurrences in these three towns which Ifowodo foregrounds in the collection is fire. In the collection, the fires result directly and indirectly from the oil exploration activities in the region. One of the consequences of fires is re-composition of the matter burnt into gas resulting to the emission of gases into the atmosphere. This is one of the major causes of the green house effect which depletes the ozone layer, resulting in global warming - a major cause of climate change.

Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* is divided into two parts: *A Waterscape* and *the Agonist*. The work explores the theme of greed and selfishness as the nucleus of environmental degradation. *A Waterscape* paints a beautiful picture of the Niger Delta before the influx of Oil Companies which led to exploitation and degradation of the environment by the multinationals. An atmosphere of peace and serenity pervaded the entire landscape. This is the exact picture of the Niger Delta at the very beginning.

The next stanza heralds the advent of the oil firms that led to unabated pollution of the Niger Delta, even to this moment.. The persona therefore laments as he coins these poetic lines: "blacker than pear, deeper than soot,/ massive ink-well, silent and mute:/ water, black water". The picture here is antithetical to the picture in the first stanza. The liveliness gives way to gloom. The water is not only silent, but black as a result of pollution. The persona who seems to be from the Niger Delta recounts, in the third stanza, the nature of the Niger Delta Rivers before the pollution.

Floating hats of lilies, yellow plume,  
Plankton and shrimp, egg-and -fish in bloom:  
Lakes, ancestral lakes.  
Rich mud of eels, water-holes of crab  
Sink-place for fisher of dig-and-grab:  
Bog, mudskippers' bog (*xi*).

The water teems with diverse flora and fauna; however, there is a shift in time in the last stanza as the persona becomes melancholic because 'in the mangrove waters, where tides / free the creeks of weeds, fishermen glide/ home to the first meal'. This last line paints a deplorable picture of life in the Niger Delta. The inhabitants, who are mostly fishermen, labour to even have a square meal from the water which is supposed to teem with lots of aquatic fauna and flora. The monotonous effects of words such as '*glide*', '*home*', '*first*' and '*meal*' accentuate the melancholy that pervades the locality as a result of environmental pollution and degradation brought about by greed and selfishness of the oil firms.

In 'Jese', the persona discusses the theme of greed as evident in the lives of the political leaders. These leaders amass so much wealth, so much, more than what they actually need to live in comfort and affluence at the detriment of the masses. The quest for accumulation of wealth has blindfolded these leaders and they cannot live up to the promises they made to the people. The poet uses the minister as a microscopic representation of the kind of leaders we have amongst us. The persona decries government failed

promises of easing the sufferings of the people by providing them with electricity. This is portrayed in the following lines: “promises made by a hard-hated/ minister at the tape-cutting for the first/ well withered with the drilling tree.” The *well* being referred to is an oil well of the oil firms. There is constant electricity at the oil facility. The “lighted stockades” which was not far away kept the villagers hope of having electricity, one day, alive.

The persona looks at the effects of the greed and selfishness of the oil firms to the masses. They fuel up poverty which causes more degradation of their environment. The people of Jese, initially, are conscious of the need to protect the environment. This consciousness is so deep in their psyche that even after fourteen months of severe fuel crunch, they preferred to:

...cook cobwebs in cold corners/ dreading the spirits

Dreading the spirits that live in the trees...

they would not break green twigs to make a meal

till the fuel crunch compelled choice between

tree and human, today and tomorrow (3)

Poverty, suffering and the need to survive pushed the inhabitants of Jesse into destruction of their environment. They fell trees in order to get firewood to cook their food and by so doing, “the forest quavered as trunk after trunk snapped/ and a nameless rage waged green-fingered/ branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe.”(3 )

The persona’s anger is not directed to the inhabitants of the Niger Delta for the destruction of the environment. His anger, undoubtedly, is directed to those whose unwholesome activities fuelled up the embers of poverty and hunger that forces the traumatized people to destroy the environment.

The desperation of the inhabitants of Jesse for survival makes them cook with wet logs which make cooking cumbersome and further pollutes the already polluted environment with smoke. They are unable to light their lanterns as a result of the fuel crunch; they rather “turned to candles till their need made wax gold / forcing them to roost earlier than hens.” (pg. 3)

However, after forty years of being powered by a plant, “till the tree drilled its last barrel/ the electric Cyclops blinked/ moved to another well in another place” the heap of crusted metal at the abandoned site became a reminder of the failed promises. The oil drilling firms as well as the government who are also stakeholders in the oil firm are only interested in making money from oil and do not bother to replace old oil pipes which become “corroded and cracked by the heat of their burden.” This results in an oil spillage which is discovered by “four boys chasing rodents for the day’s meal while their mates in cities where the pipes end/ learnt their letters in songs and rhymes.” (5)

The persona also projects the greed on the side of the masses who in turns repeatedly continued to fetch petrol from the broken or vandalized pipeline. Greed would not let the villagers in Jesse see the danger in what they are doing and the calamity

waiting to befall them as they scramble for this product - the spilled oil. As a result of greed, the villagers would not report to the authorities about the broken pipe-linen as they hoped to illicitly collect the spilling oil so as to eke out a living. They started a business of selling the oil.and so kept coming, over and over again, for several months - / and they fought for allow room / to fill their bowls and kegs/ with the spilled oil of their land / (6)

It has become palpable that the political leaders in this part of the world are the opposite of selflessness. As soon as they are able to manipulate the people and maneuver their ways into power, they immediately forget the plight of the masses. Even those who accidentally assumed positions of authority, quickly forget where they had come from. Many of these political leaders just ensure that they are safe and comfortable as soon as this is achieved, they turn deaf ears to the cries of the masses. What matter most to them are the things they stand to gain, and this is what the poet-persona decries. He asks rhetorically: / “Will the government aid the victims of Jese? / The head – of – state, visiting the village / And paired to his soul lowered to his head.”

(15)

The selfishness of the political leaders has reached the apex where, the security of the position, the name and fame, have become more important to the people. They only play politics with the feelings of the masses. The Governor shifts the blames for the ills in the society to the people who would now take responsibility for all that has happened while they save their office and names - / For the avoidance of doubt government / Wishes to make clear that the police / Arrived too late to stop the fire. (16). Rather than console the people of Jese, and rebuke the police who had fired a shot in the mist of petrol, the governor covers the police, covered the government and put the blames on the masses. The persona shows the extent of poverty the inhabitants of Jesse are subjected to. The place has been neglected and the people impoverished. The discovery of the leaking pipes brings happiness and hope to the people of the town. They scrambled for petrol and kerosene from the leaking oil pipes in order to alleviate their sufferings. The inhabitants of Jesse are no longer interested in the havoc the spillage causes on the environment. They are rather interested in scooping the spilling oil, “and soon, stoves and lamps burned again/ a roadside oil trade boomed, brought life/ back to the stilled village sparked the trek/ to a visible oil market.”{.7)

The government warned the people to stop scooping oil from the broken pipes but the poverty and neglect the people have been subjected to as a result of the greed and selfishness of the oil firms make them turn deaf ears to the warning, The government then sends policemen “to disperse the frenzied crowd/blazing the fiery trail of law and order./ ” The people have become so much impoverished that they do not care about the environmental hazards that may result from their actions. Accidentally, fire is ignited and the cost would be disastrous not only to the inhabitants of Jesse but also to the environment as well. The poet persona paints a gory image of the disaster in poem ix:

.... They wakened

From their nightmares to the greetings of fire  
Shrieked across dismal doorway by a child  
demented by the deafening whoosh!  
Blinded by the dazzle of her mother's hair glowing  
" led by the venomous scent of charring bones... (pg. 11)

The land which has been polluted by oil spillage is further destroyed by the inferno and 'Fields of crops snatched from water by the hands of simple farmers screamed/...the rivers now on fire rushed/ to the sea for a dip floating/ along the land's burning question /' ( 13). The rich and diverse flora and fauna are destroyed. The persona laments over the total destruction in the opening lines of poem xii: 'the trees burned, the rivers burned...'

Madam Elijo, a ninety year old widow captures the feeling of the people of the Niger Delta about oil in her lamentation in poem xv:

Oh mate, do you have a cup of garri  
To lend me for the children's sake?  
Not even a cup, not even a handful!  
The fields are tarred where cassava once grew  
...oil is my curse, oil is my doom. ( 17)

Oil which is supposed to be a blessing to the people ends up bringing pains to the people through the destruction of their environment.

In the poem 'Jesse' (3-17), the people are forced to begin to cut down trees with which to cook out of desperation from hunger. The hunger is caused by the impossibility of the community getting kerosene for their cooking stoves. This is as a result of fuel scarcity which has been on for nearly a year and half. By the fourteenth month of the fuel scarcity, Ifowodo reminds that the people's culture forbids deforestation as they believe that fresh trees are inhabited by spirits: "dreading the spirits that live in trees" but the people are compelled to make a difficult choice between "tree and human, today and tomorrow" (3). Ifowodo employs the use of personification to describe the resultant depletion of the forest: "The forest quivered as trunk after trunk snapped / and a nameless rage wagged green-fingered / branches in the air as they fell to the hungry axe" (3). This makes the deforestation seem even more horrible. Research has shown that apart from burning of fossil fuel, deforestation is the next leading factor of increased carbon dioxide concentrations in the air. Carbon dioxide is the second most important gas contributor, after water vapour, to the greenhouse effect in the earth's atmosphere. A greenhouse gas absorbs and re-emits radiation.

The poet says the trees are fresh when he calls the branches "green-fingered" and personifies them as "logs still so alive they hissed" (3). The hissing refers to the sound that is made when logs do not catch fire easily due to their freshness. This personification recalls the "nameless rage" shown by the trees when they are being cut down by the people. The logs naturally emit gases that pose

immediate danger to the people and the “wet smoke so bitter”, forces tears out of the eyes of the women cooking and the food is given a bad smell. Apart from the health implications, the gas emitted into the air also affects climate change as the smoke that results from the logs is likely to change the natural composition of gases in the earth’s atmosphere.

The fuel scarcity experienced by a people ravaged by poverty is worsened by the insensitivity of the multi-national oil companies operating within their domain. The poor maintenance of oil pipes in ‘Jesse’ (.3-17) which transport the refined oil leads to spillage. Ifowodo onomatopoeically describes these pipes as “corroded and cracked / by the heat of their burden-” Incidents of oil spillage in Nigeria have become common occurrences and this pollutes the land and the waters.

Petrol when exposed to air quickly turns to gas and is highly combustible. The people’s rush to scoop this fuel leads to physical combustion which claims many lives while destroying farm lands and polluting the environment. Ifowodo aptly captures the extent of this pollution of the air when he metaphorically refers to it as a “mist” (6). This has negative implications for the ozone layer. Liquid fuel such as gasoline and fuel oil account for 36% carbon dioxide when combusted.

The air which is already saturated with fuel fumes bursts into flames either through negligence on the part of the people or through an attempt by soldiers drafted to Jesse to arrest the situation. Thus, the composition of the air is further changed as more gases are emitted into the atmosphere. The poet describes the intensity of the flames produced from burning bodies when he narrates how a mother “in a bed gummed to her back” recalls seeing “her daughter lighting up the sky / before a cloud swallowed her” (9) while a child is demented and blinded by “her mother’s hair glowing / for a maddening moment like filaments of gold” (11).

Ifowodo paints the picture of the disruption and destruction of the natural gases of the atmosphere by using sarcasm in the imagery of the offer of the burnt sacrifice of its own worshippers to a god (11). The ‘god’ in this case would be the government and the oil companies who are implicated as the sources of the fire.

He then moves on to a set of related imageries. The poet refers to the smell of the air as “the venomous scent of charring bone” (11) thus comparing the smell of burnt human bones to the horror, fear and distaste that is felt at the thought of a snake’s bite. Continuing with the imagery of snakes, the poet also likens the movement of the fire which burns everything in its path to that of a cobra: “the fire uncoiled like an infinite cobra / stretched to the farthest edges/ of a land marked by oil for double torment” (13). These images of snakes call to mind the Islamic and Christian conceptions of Satan, the devil and the avowed enemy of Man. He vividly shows how the fire consumes everything in its path by personifying the crops, creeks and ponds and the rivers respectively as they attempt to escape the rampaging fire ( 10- 14). However, all efforts to douse the fire are fruitless ( 11-14). The reader is thus left to imagine the various gases released from the burnt matter and the change in the composition of the gases of the atmosphere.



In part II entitled 'Odi', the persona recounts the destruction of Odi, a town in the Niger Delta region, by the Federal troops. The youths of Odi are aggrieved because of the degradation of their environment by the multinational oil companies and the poverty their selfishness unleashed on the land. They become aggressive and take up arms against the people they think are working against them. '...five cops and four / soldiers are sent to break a youth revolt / ... in the dark labyrinth of the Delta.' ( 21)

The Delta region is regarded as a dark place. It is dark in the sense that it is not developed and it is yet to see the light of modern civilization. Delta is in the dark because of the selfishness and greed of government officials and their cronies, the multinational oil firms.

The president orders a troop to invade the town in search of the missing policemen and soldiers. The soldiers wage war on Odi. The poet persona paints a gory picture of the invasion of Odi by soldiers in poem XVII:

The first grenade lobbed by a hand  
Too eager for live cremations, landed  
On the roof of the village school  
The fire and the alarm started there  
With the wiping out of the house of learning  
They had come to perfect what rain and wind  
Began weeks before by stripping the mud-  
Walled classroom blocks of their thatch roofs.( 22 )

The soldiers do not just destroy buildings; they destroyed the natural environment by felling harmless trees. A harmless dog is equally killed and its blood used as a graffiti. The president justifies the destruction of Odi in line 3 of the second stanza of the poem XXVI. He declares: 'we will protect our oil wealth at all cost'. 'The president's declaration emphasizes the theme of greed and selfishness as a nucleus for environmental degradation. Odi is destroyed because of the desire of the government to continue oil drilling in the land in spite of its negative consequences on the ecosystem. The imagery of fire is introduced in the first line of the section entitled 'Odi' (2), when the poet describes the way the soldiers sent to the town to maintain peace following the killing of five policemen and four soldiers as: "A battalion of justice scorched its path / to Odi". This presents an unfavourable climate which has been already, especially as it indicates that the soldiers have come 'to solve by war / a case of homicide'. The imagery of an unfavorable climate is sustained by the unfavorable weather: "They had come to perfect what rain and wind began weeks ago before..." Prior to this, the governor had subjected the people to some harshness in his bid to discover the killers of the policemen and the soldiers. (21). It is to such a weary people, battered by nature and man, that the battalion is sent. They arrive at a time when man is naturally at his weakest and that is night time. In this section of the collection, the fire that occurs and that has the potential of causing climate change is

caused not by nature but by the agents of government on the orders of the President whom the poet calls “false-star general”, a satiric formation of ‘five-star general’.

The people are awakened by the grenades thrown by the soldiers. They flee into the bush. The bush becomes a source of refuge, temporarily from the soldiers but not from hunger. This makes the people turn to insects and wild roots which are eaten raw: ‘Banished from fire by fire, they ate their food fresh’ (23). But even the bushes are not safe for long, as grenades are thrown into them and the people are forced to go deeper into the bushes.(25). These grenades naturally burn everything in their path. This burning is aided by the oil saturated air, the oil spilled in the water and oil-rich land. Ifowodo says ‘the air after a night and a day of bombing by the soldiers is hazy with smoke and dust’ (26). It is so hazy that during the house to house search for the murderers, the soldiers cannot see that what they take for a fellow soldier’s uniform and kit are actually old and dusty and belong to Sergeant Tobi, an old man crippled in the Biafra war. This leads to another round of bombing with the soldiers acting as they would in war time ( 29).

The destruction is total especially as the poet says that the act, as written on the walls and doors, was aimed at ensuring that: “THIS IS THE END OF ODI.../ NEXT TIME YOU SEE SOJA YOU GO RUN!” (30).The soldiers, content with their act, boastfully tell a fisherman returning from the sea: “You have no home anymore. Go back to sea!” Newspaper headlines corroborate this thus “Odi flattened, pays the heaviest price yet” (‘30-31). Even three years later, the people are still at risk as an aimless grenade buried under weeds close to a house, went off and killed a woman and her son. The bombing affects the atmosphere to the extent that the air itself is no longer familiar to the people: “...The air, still thick / with a smell not of sea or shore or human place, / made him shiver like a fish flung on beach... (31).

The third part of the poem entitled ‘*Ogoni*’ captures the brutal killings of Ogoni activists who were fighting for resource control as well as the protection of the land from the unwholesome activities of the oil firms. In poem XXIX, Major Kitemo, military personnel, defends his atrocities in Ogoni. He insists that ‘extreme measures were called for / to teach the needed lesson, stem the tide / of defiance which, for three years / had shut down shell’s oil wells / and slimmed the nation’s purse.’ (37) The government is not interested in the preservation of the ecological system of the Niger Delta region which comprises diverse flora and fauna but rather interested in making money from crude oil drilled by the Shell oil firm. The battle for resource control as well as the ownership of the Niger Delta fuels up a rift between the Federal government and Shell, on the one side and the people of Ogoni on the other side. This is why Major Kitemo asks the people of Ogoni an important question: ‘Do you really believe you own the oil?’/ ‘Yes,’ they said... ‘And how did you come to own it?’/ ‘By it being on our land,’ they said./ ‘The land is Nigeria’s...’(38)

This battle for resource control pitches the people of Ogoni against Shell and the Federal Government. The people of Ogoni kill some of their kinsmen, whom they believe are sabotaging their effort, ‘calling them traitors, and vultures gorging on kinsmen’s corpses...’The government, in order to protect their source of income, decides to attack the people of Ogoni, ‘shooting and bombing

to keep them in the bush.’ Major Kitemo and his soldiers ran ‘out of ammo by the tenth day, / but Shell shipped in caseloads of what ... (they) lacked.’ The people of Ogoni are punished because of their desire to protect their land from oil pollution. In the section entitled ‘Ogoni’ (33-48), the poet says that soldiers also threw grenades in Ogoni. But Ifowodo, this time explicitly discusses the direct effect of that incident on the psychology of the people rather than on the environment. The people had earlier been presented as intelligent enough to defeat, in a debate, the soldier sent to them to appeal to them to renounce all claims of ownership of the Niger Delta land. The intra-communal clash which leads to the death of the four Ogonis, gives the government the opportunity to use force on the people. After fifteen continuous days and nights of bombing, the people are cowed and in contrast to the intelligence and courage shown during the debate, they beg: Let us live. Please! Please! (48). As for the environment, the poet leaves the reader to infer from what happen in ‘Jesse’ and ‘Odi’. Poverty, environmental degradation, deformation of people and land become inevitable because of self interest both on the part of the Ogonis and on the part of the Nigerian government and these are aftermaths of greed and individualism.

‘Pipes of War’, the fourth part, captures the never ending onslaught of the military in the Niger Delta.’ In poem XLI, the poet persona laments on the hanging of the Ogoni nine ‘for murders pre-planned...’ He wonders in poem XLII why the Niger Delta is not as hospitable as other places where oil is drilled. The only gain of the people is the environmental pollution- ‘the devastation that pours oil on the river to float fish / lure the flamingo to a lethal meal / and quill the secretary’s bird’s death on sludge;/ that irrigates lowland crops to rot their roots / and wells resentment like ocean tides above their heads.’(52). Ifowodo presents the people living in abject poverty yet living on the land which sustains the country. “They scarp for a living / where the land’s promise was boundless ease”(55). Consequently, the poet employs bitter satire and borrowing from the geographical location of the Niger-Delta, puns on the name ‘Nigeria’ to refer to the region as the “cesspit of the Niger Area” (*Cesspit of the Niger Area*),(Note that since :”Odi”, “Jesi” *Cesspit of the Niger Area*’ etc are sections in the Collection, the titles need not be written before the page) 57-63). Because the Niger-Delta region is situated in a difficult terrain, Ifowodo believes that the oil is God’s compensation for the inhospitable land: “. . . as if He who desolated / those places thought it too cruel to plant / humans in some of them without recompense” (52).

The government which is supposed to soothe the people for living in such a terrain and reward them for the oil extracted from their land, starves them of such social facilities as electricity (3,4, 46, 55), water (54), hospitals (48, 60-61), schools (22), and roads and bridges ( 67). This is in addition to the neglect of the area by the oil companies. The poet uses juxtaposition to contrast the images of hunger, poverty and powerlessness of the power with the images of splendor which surround the staff of the oil companies (62). He portrays the people as defenseless as they are bombarded by a government which unleashes terror on the people of the region in their bid to “protect our oil wealth at any cost” (31). The people are revealed as peaceful because of their skill at debate. (3). The use of the first person (plural) pronoun is ironical as the real owners of the land are denied its benefit. The poet presents the cruelty of

an army who are meant to protect the citizens but who sees them as enemies. The people's challenges with the government and the oil companies are worsened with the machinery of propaganda at the disposal of the government. This affords the government the opportunity of selling its own side of the conflict to the world (16, 31). The poet now becomes the people's advocate.

The selected poems reveal that the environmental degradation and impoverishment that have become the lots of rural communities in Nigeria have inhibited Nigeria's natural environment from enhancing the socio-economic development meaningful for survival. Against this backdrop, this paper appraises the manner in which the selected poets signify the degradation of nature, the abuse of oil extraction and the growing clamour for resource control which have given rise to pockets of agitations in Nigeria today. They capture the extent to which multinational corporations in partnership with the political elites have left ecological imprints which jeopardize the Nigerian environment. The textual analyses of environmental aesthetics in Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, for example, delineate Nigeria's environmental issues and the general human condition. By applying eco-critical approach, the analysis shows the impact humans have had on the Nigerian environment through modern technological innovations and global economic expansion. Greed and selfishness in Ogaga's *The Oil Lamp* examines the dialectics between forms of domination in the Nigerian social space and how this translates into the domination of the environment. Conscious of the apprehensions that perspectives on Ecocriticism circumscribe, a comparative evaluation of the poet Ogaga Ifowodo suggests convergences in his response to issues of development, environmentalism, resistance, critique of globalization, militancy and displacement. This poet lampoons the misdeeds of the ruling elites and their cohorts culpable for ecocides in the Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general. The paper demonstrates that Nigerian literature acts as discourses about the ecology and the fate of man in a modern integrated world to which natural resources are central to existence. Along these lines, the selected work is axiomatic of resistance against the Nigeria's political rulers and their supporters who cause pain and anguish to the already impoverished majority and their homeland.

## Conclusion

Ogaga Ifowodo uses his poems to paint a vivid picture of how the greed and selfishness of the Shell Oil Company as well as the Federal Government bring about the destruction of the natural environment which bring untold hardship and suffering to the Niger-Deltans and this results in conflicts and further destruction of the already degraded environment. As an artistic reflection of life, these poems have adequately conveyed and exposed the devaluation of our environment and consequent disaster on man. Unfortunately, the attention of man has been drawn to social and political issues, even as our environment and resources stand as a major bone of contention. The work considered greed and selfishness, as the nucleus of environmental degradation in Ogaga Ifowodo's *Oil lamp*. It expressed the level of greed and selfishness that has made the natives of the region to suffer immensely. The poet critically evaluates the disaster suffered in this area in his collection. He exposes the desperation of the people to survive in a

dilapidated and apparently barren environment and the deceit of our leaders who pretend to be ignorant of the suffering state of the people. This perennial unhealthy, dilapidated condition of the Niger Deltans, highly influenced their literary works hence it is described as “weeping”.

With these, the selected poems establish that ecological problems are hinged on the structures of domination in the human society and are also geared towards exploiting the common people and the natural world under the influence of profit-driven oil prospectors. Therefore, vital issues about developments, the loss of landscapes, the destruction of plants, organisms and animals brought about by capitalist industrialization and globalization are fundamental attacks on the Nigerian environment. It is the summation of this study, that environmental liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the conditions under which human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to the environment. Ifowodo tugs on the emotions when he asks: “Can anyone think of the Niger Delta/ and not feel an ache in his heart? / so inhospitable, it is like all terrains/ in the world where oil might be found: under seas, desert dunes, snow-capped wilds, malarial swamps” (.51). He thus universalizes the experience for a world-wide identification of the plight of the people of the Niger-Delta of Nigeria.

These images thus portray an imbalance in the treatment of the environment through oil exploration and exploitation activities in that region. The activities of the government and the oil companies are depicted as having negative impacts on both the lives of the people who own the land and also on the environment. Sometimes the activities of the people themselves impact negatively on the environment but Ifowodo makes this look like the people are being forced to do these out of the sheer need for survival which overrides all other concerns for the environment. On the other hand, the government and the oil companies are depicted as willfully ill-treating the people and the environment by not providing the basic necessities of life and other comforts in compensation for the oil in their land; through oil spillage; and through gas flaring.

Thus, in highlighting the problems of the region, Ifowodo seems to be calling on those concerned namely the government and the multinational oil companies to have a re-think and change their policies in the region. For the poets, the activities of the government and the multinational oil companies in the Niger-Delta have already impacted on the climate. In the section dedicated to Saro-Wiwa titled ‘The Agonist ( 65-69), the poet juxtaposes life before and after oil exploration and exploitation in the region. Some of the changes that have occurred following the discovery of oil are acid rain and gas poison.

His criticism of the government and the oil companies in the collection therefore seems to set an agenda for the two bodies to re-consider their activities in the Niger-Delta, the immediate goal of which will restore balance to the ecosystem and to the composition of the gases in the atmosphere. This will in turn serve the ultimate goal of saving the earth for the sustenance of humanity. Today Niger Delta has suffered greatly having been raped of her serenity and inflicted with great pains owing to the level

of exploration and exploitation of the environment for economic gains. The proceeds from these exploration and exploitation have great value to the state while the state has abandoned this place without conscious efforts to revitalize the land in order to preserve other natural resources. This, connotatively, is orchestrated by greed and individualistic tendencies of both the multinationals and the Federal Government.

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