

## Environmental Devastation in the Niger Delta: A Reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*

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### Abstract

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The 'Niger Delta region' has become notable in Nigerian literature as a result of issues arising from resource extraction, conflict and environmental degradation. When one imagines the extent of damages in this region, one is therefore not taken aback by the number of literary works beaming their searchlights towards such a direction. Writers like Tanure Ojaide, J.P Clark, Habila Helon, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Sophia Obi, Obari Gomba, Nnimmo Bassey, G'Ebinyo Ogbowei etc. are notable voices in this regard. The Niger Delta region has in recent times suffered from the ugly hands of oil spillages resulting to discharge of poisonous and hazardous substances into water sources, forests, soil, and human settlements. Sadly, the crude oil that ought to have been a source of 'tears of joy' has become a plague in the region; an oily tears of the Delta. The paper therefore attempts a connection between literature (in this case poetry) and the environment through Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*. The collection delves into the issues of oil spillage and its resultant effects on the landscape and therefore advocates a new way of looking at Niger Delta literature from the standpoint of human damages done on environment and not the other way round. The poet is fearless in his poetic inputs and adopts a stance worthy of commendation. This paper adopts an ecocritical approach since ecology as a study transcends all boundaries and enjoys a handful of representations in literature.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Niger Delta, Devastation, Ecopoetry, Environment, oil*

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### Introduction

As Ikiriko observes, "the oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta" (7). This region has become notable not just in Nigerian literature but across the world as a result of issues arising from resource extraction, conflict and environmental degradation. While many committed writers have looked into the Niger Delta issue from a socio-political angle and how it

affects humans, one may highlight that the commitment most times has been limited to the human socio-political reality and not that of the environment/ecology. This is what we are set out to dissect and include in this paper through an ecocritical approach to Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*. It is necessary to observe that not just humans but non-humans also 'feel pains.'

Green studies otherwise known as environmental criticism or ecocriticism has in recent times been adopted to approach literature and the environmental devastation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This approach as M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham posit, "designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (96).

### **Niger Delta Region: An Insight**

Take a look, dear reader, at the map of Nigeria and behold how the giant country sits, suppressing the Delta which serves it the functions of support and sustenance. As it is on the geographical expression, so it is in the political, social and economic expressions. As I write this, there is no...drinkable water to the population, but siphoning oil and gas to enrich other lands and lives. Upcountry, well away from the smoke and stench of the oil wells, oil concessionaires of all sorts wake up millionaires on a daily basis. Down the Delta, in the fountain of oil and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood (Ikiriko 6).

Dear reader, the mental picture of the Niger Delta region as painted by Ikiriko is something to reflect on. The mismanagement of the resources over the decades in the region has caused huge damages to the region whose people are frustrated to suffer the worst impact of the oil exploitation with little potential benefits. Historically and cartographically, the region is made up of present-day Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers State. However, in 2000 Obasanjo's government included Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River State, Edo, Imo and Ondo States.

It is estimated that over 30 million people live in this region which is also regarded as one of the World's ten most important wetland and coastal marine ecosystems. The region is rich with a diverse mosaic of ecological zones, five of which are the Mangrove Forest and Coastal Vegetation Zone, the Fresh Water Swamp Forest Zone, the Lowland Rain Forest Zone, the Derived Savannah Zone and the Montane Zone. The Niger Delta is also the location of enormous oil deposits, which have been extracted for decades by the government of Nigeria and Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs) (Ajodo-Adebanjoko 2)

Aside the Middle East, which has a long historiography of interminable crises, the region is one of the most studied Regions across the world. This is due to the repertoire of literary works covering the various epochs of the Region. Most of the literary works are written objectively to genuinely address the myriad challenges of the people. A part of the literature also tilts to satisfy some sectional interests especially that of the oil majors.

It is not surprising that efforts put together as palliatives often pale into insignificance. Could this be the reason for the increase in the misery index, the resurgence of militancy, compounded by frustration, alienation, marginalization, and poverty in the Region? Some critics believe that the situation has been taken advantage of, by a band of self-serving benefit captors, economic opportunists, political adventurers and conflict entrepreneurs, all feasting on the honey pot of crude oil (“The Niger Delta”).

This paper is basically the textual analysis of Ibiwari Ikiriko’s *Oily tears of the Delta* with close attention to ecocriticism as the theoretical framework. The tenets of ecocriticism are looked into in the poetry collection sampled.

### **Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism**

Nature writing itself refers to a set of writing, both fictional and non-fictional, that focuses primarily on nature. Eventually, ecocriticism was streamlined to be a critical perspective that is concerned with how nature (both humans and nonhumans) is represented in texts. It became an umbrella term for such phrases as ‘ecological criticism’, ‘environmental criticism’, ‘environmentalism’, and so on. Our focus here is however on ecocriticism as a literary theory. Commenting on the etymology, Abrams and Harpham assert that;

Ecocriticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining “criticism” with a shortened form of “ecology” –the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. “Ecocriticism” (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities (96).

As Thomas K. Dean opines it as a “response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental degradation” (“What is Ecocriticism?”). Cheryll Glotfelty has also famously defined ecocriticism as ‘the study of the

relationship between literature and the physical environment' ("Introduction: Literarily Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis").

All these definitions share one salient point in common: ecocriticism is concerned with how nature is represented in texts and the relationship between humans and nonhumans in an environment as represented in a literary text. The impetus of ecocriticism was buoyed, as we saw in Dean's definition, by the phenomenon of 'environmental degradation'. Ecocritics reasoned that environmental degradation is a corollary of man's relationship with nature. So, their textual concern is how this relationship is represented. As Hans Bertens remarks, "Ecocriticism's examination of representations of nature does of course not limit itself to the way animals are represented. It examines representations of landscapes and of nature in its original state..." (Berterns 200). Landscape itself by definition includes the nonhuman elements of place—the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air, as well as human perspectives and modifications

Though the theory revolves around the relationship between man and his environment, it is necessary to note that it is not a study or critique of nature but the realization of the significance in maintaining a balance between the actions of man and its impact on the environment as it applies to a given literary text. This therefore sheds light to the humanistic comprehension of our relationship with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction as seen in the Niger Delta Region. Unarguably, the environmental hazards that plague the Niger Delta region are consequences of man's disconnection from the natural world brought about not only by the increasing technology but also by an anthropocentric mindset where man seems to be at liberty to manipulate the environment whichever way he pleases with taking into consideration its resultant effects.

### **The Devastation of the Landscape in Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta***

The concept of Landscape as Scheeze posits include 'the non-human elements of place—the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air, as well as human perceptions and modifications.' ("Some Principles of Ecocriticism"). Therefore, to talk about the landscape in the context of Ikiriko poems is to talk about those rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air *et cetera* that are found in the Niger Delta region as represented in the poems.

The first that leads us into this analysis is Ikiriko's "Ikikali." The poem sets the pace for this paper portraying the fact that not just humans but non-humans also 'feel' the pains of environmental destruction. In this poem, the speaker is non-human; it is Ikikali a 'rocket-seed/of the *Angala*, sign-post tree'(1-2). This kind of near-animistic technique where a non-human, the seed of a tree, is the speaker in a poem is not very common, but not unacceptable either. This is particularly interesting because, for the first time, a non-human is allowed to speak for itself in the poetry of Niger Delta. Through this singular speech of Ikikali, we become aware of what non-humans feel about their state of existence and coexistence with man in the environment. The voice in the poem is not just that of Ikikali; it is a representation of the landscape and its constituents, particularly non-humans. Therefore, in relation to Obari Gomba's argument that the persona 'states the circumstances of its birth and the challenges of its environment' (138), the voice articulates the circumstances of all non-humans, their birth and challenges in the Niger Delta environment.

Ikikali laments that having obeyed its mother's command and got dispersed to the right place, at the right time – 'At lowest ebb of tide', it is ready and willing to continue the tradition of propagation: 'I am set to span out / willing to fruit-yield' (11-12). However, it is faced with obstacles to that *natural* readiness and willingness to 'fruit-yield'. Those impediments are flares and sludge. The flare here refers to gas flares obviously resulting from oil exploration. From this poem, one gets a glimpse of the phenomenon responsible for the impediments which the landscape suffers—oil exploration, which generates gas flares and 'sludge'.

The poem "Oily Rivers" further buttresses the issues raised by 'Ikikali' that oil extraction and its accompanying activities are largely responsible for the truncation of the natural cycle of the landscape's flora. As MacKay notes, the speaker in "Oily Rivers" which we consider to be the same non-human voice in "Ikikali" is a typical 'expansive' persona (qtd. in Akwanya 35). As it declares in "Oily Rivers,"

I come from  
the bottom of  
the Amalgam (1-3)

...

I am of  
the Oil Rivers,  
where rivers are  
oily  
and can  
neither,

quench my thirst  
nor  
anoint my head(11-18).

These lines clearly state that oil exploration is responsible for the setback, for it is the exploration that renders the river oily, so that it ‘can neither quench’ the persona’s thirst ‘nor anoint’ its ‘head’. It is that same oil exploration that produces the flare and sludge which plague the persona in “Ikikali”. This oiliness of the river and its inability to quench thirst is a recurrent theme in Niger Delta literature. A typical example is where in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, the narrator says that “in a village centre we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well’s blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face... 8). The difference in Ikiriko’s poem is that it is not just the human thirst that is an issue; it is specifically that of non-humans, for not only humans have thirst to be quenched. In fact it does appear that the oiliness of the river affects non-humans more than it affects humans as it obstructs their growth and development.

Similarly, the voice in Ikiriko’s “Okara’s Nun” seems that of the same non-human persona. The poem significantly echoes Gabriel Okara’s “The Call of the River Nun”—with the latter serving as a pretext for the former. The relationship between the two poems is not in doubt at all as can be easily made out from their titles, “The Call of the River Nun” and “Okara’s Nun” respectively. That relationship is however a relationship of variation in that while Okara’s poem celebrates the environment/landscape typified by the ‘River Nun’, Ikiriko’s text is elegiac, lamenting its disappearance/loss. The ‘variational’ relationship is best buttressed by quoting a few lines from each of the poems. Stanza two of Okara’s poem reads:

I want to view your face  
again and feel your cold  
embrace; or at your brim  
to set myself and  
inhale your breath; or  
Like the trees, to watch  
my mirrored self unfold  
and span my days with  
song from the lips of dawn (“The Call of the River Nun” 5-13)

Whereas Ikiriko’s reads:

Okara’s

Silver-surfaced  
Nun  
Is no more

Now  
Crude-surfaced  
It lumbers  
Along lifeless,  
Like dead wood... (1-9)

The question is, ‘Why has the nun, which Okara celebrates, disappeared in Ikiriko’s poem?’ The answer of course exists in Ikiriko’s poem. It is the crude oil that has turned the ‘silver-surface’ of the nun to a ‘crude-surface’ thereby rendering it ‘lifeless’ and incapable of exhibiting its natural translucence and steady flow; it only lumbers. The lifelessness of the River Nun which is caused by the crude oil is not just limited to the river, the river unwittingly but clumsily transfers the deadness ‘to the sea / rendering brackish / zones barren / like poisoned ditch-water.’ It also affects the kingfisher which depends on the nun for livelihood. The crude equally affects the soil and trees surrounding the river banks, as can be garnered from stanza three, “Lifeless like / the dead woods / that border /its crude soiled banks” (10-13).

In ‘Delta Tears’, the poet further paints a vivid picture of a near-total loss of aquatic creatures in the environment. Thus,

The mudflats [are] destitute of mudskeepers....  
The sandflats [are] bereft of children....  
The mangrove floors [are] fleeced of *akanga*,  
Tide-keeper crab of the scape...  
The creeks [are] arid of tilapia tail clatter  
Festal sign of fish-fairs for the Kingfisher (37- 47)

The persona of the poem is ‘the wooden drum’ – another inanimate object. The account of the environment it gives is an eye-witness account; hence, it says that “I utter not what I hear with ears / But what I see with eyes’ (51-52). Aside from the loss of mudskeepers, *akanga*, tilapia, etc. which adversely affects both the children and the Kingfisher, there is yet another loss: that of the periwinkle clusters, the dangling oyster canes and the sand flies.

All these aquatic creatures, “Then the clans and clans and clans / Of life: shelled, scaly, feathered, furred and leafed” (65-66) that enliven and animate the sea and constitute its beauty and naturalness have been wiped away, their onetime presence is now replaced with “Nothing, except fag-end flora and fauna, / Pale plains of sand and mud, burrowed and gaunt / Things toss[ing] up

and down up and down / like dogs do with filthy rags” (67-70). All these are because of the oil business as we read that “The coated seascape smells / Oil and tar and gas” (71-72) causing “fishes [to] grope and gasp / For way and life, belly-up” (75-76).

There is a technique of recalling through meditation the prior-state of the environment which is found in another of Ikiriko’s poem, “The Palm and the Crude.” The persona of the poem lets us know that, “In the beginning/ Was the Palm/And the Palm/Was of us [them] (1-4).

These first four lines takes us to the beginning where what they had was palm oil which they owned and utilized modestly and it oiled their palm, balmed their joints, sweetened their insides and anointed their heads (17-20). Then came the crude oil which does the exact opposite of what the palm oil has done:

Then came the Crude  
And the Crude  
Wasted our waters  
Soiled our soils  
And lacerated our lot (29-33)

Apparently, one can see the contrast between palm oil which anoints the persona’s head in “The Palm and the Crude” and the crude oil which does not anoint the persona’s head in the poem, “Oily River.” In fact, from that point, we may well extend the personas of “Ikikali” and “Oily River” further to “The Palm and the Crude,” except that in the latter poem, the persona takes a plural personality as evident in the pronouns, ‘us’ and ‘we’ and ‘them’. The use of these plural pronouns, however, confirms the expansiveness of the persona: it could be a communal and consensus voice of lamentation and discontent.

All the poems we have so far considered are unanimous in locating the responsibility for environmental destruction, susceptibility and insecurity on the activities of oil and gas extraction. Whether it is done to satisfy man’s industrial and mercantile hunger as in oil exploitation and killing of antelopes, deer, gazelles, porcupines and elephants, or to satisfy man’s need for designer wears as in skinning of snakes, lizards and crocodiles or to serve man’s greed and irrationality as in felling of trees and burning of bushes, they all point to a singular fact: that man is responsible for and guilty of environmental degradation. But is it ‘everyman’ that is involved in that calculated and unrestrained destruction? It does not seem so, Ikiriko’s poetry there are certain individuals at the vanguard of this grotesque activities, notably oil companies (represented by Shell) and the government.



The question worth asking however is, ‘if the landscape is insecure, exploited, destroyed and ravished by man, what then is the fate of man, the ravisher within the ravished, destroyed, exploited and deteriorating environment?’ It is not likely to be different because as we have seen earlier in this paper, man actually depends on the environment for food, air, clothing, water, and virtually everything he needs. As such, if the landscape is in a state of pathos, man cannot by any means be spared. Ikiriko in his poetry is not unaware of this fact; hence, he wastes no time in calling attention to the suffering of human subjects in the Niger Delta enclave amidst the destruction of the landscape.

As the landscape is under siege (so to say) within the Niger Delta environment, the human subjects dwelling in that entity are emasculated and made to suffer and die. This situation is exactly what is at issue in Ikiriko’s “Ogoni Agony” and “Odi.” The two poems are poetical meditations and allusions to two significant incidents in the history of the Niger Delta people. The first reflects on the marginalization of Ogoni people (an oil-rich community in the Niger Delta). It is this marginalization that Ken Saro-Wiwa fought against under the auspice of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)—the same course that later claimed his life. The other poem, “Odi,” reflects on the inhuman massacre of Odi people of Bayelsa State by soldiers acting on government’s orders. These are some of the ways in which humans suffer together with the environment. Humans depend on the environment/landscape for virtually everything. Therefore, if the environment is endangered, humans are also endangered, which really calls for a change of attitude in the way humans exploit the natural environment since it is after all to their detriment.

### **The Defence of The Landscape in Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta***

Having critically analysed some of Ikiriko’s poems, it is vivid that he has through his poetic lens reveal different ways in which the natural environment is destroyed or exploited by man. In Bodunde’s assertion, “Ikiriko in his literary expressions do not just stop at exposing this ugly trend in its various shades, colours and consequences for both non-humans and humans, he equally mount a robust literary resistance and campaign against the “the systematic crushing of the environment” (qtd. in Orabueze 177).

In Ikiriko’s collection, we catch a glimpse of the defence of nature and the landscape first in the poem, “Delta Tears”. In this poem, the defence comes in the form of invocation. The persona starts by reminding ferocious earthly creatures like tiger, crocodile and boa-constrictor of how they used to ward off their attackers. These creatures have in the past fought against those who come

to annihilate them in several ways. The Tiger, which the person refers to as the ‘King of forests and mangroves’, usually warns poachers to beware. However, if a poacher becomes heedless, it would attack the poacher in anger; thus, “But if the poacher always stalks an aim / king returns to pounce with furry fury” (98-99). Also, the crocodile—referred to as ‘goddess of tidelands and whirlpools’ deceived ‘loads of profit-mongers’ who want to turn it into a mercantile object by slipping away at the turn of the tide, thereby “baffl[ing] and sham[ing] buyers and sellers” (95). Similarly, the constrictor warded off its predators “seeking precious stones” (96) by attacking and “Crushing flesh, bone and all” (99). These are various ways the Tiger, Crocodile and Constricting Boa have countered or frustrated different domineering endeavours of man. The named creatures do not just stand for themselves; in the poem, they are actually metaphors for the landscape—water land and air. Since they have such capacity to ‘defend’ themselves against their exploiters, the persona invokes them to fight against their modern day ravishers. He lets them know that time is long overdue for such reprisal action, thus:

Roaring Tiger, the encroaching poacher  
Stays to stalk a reckless aim

And it is time for  
The furry pounce

Dual-world Crocodile, it is past lowest tide  
And the shameless transaction over

It is time to be tide-borne  
And shame profit-mongers

Constricting Boa, predators  
Have burrowed past the numb segment

And it’s time to constrict, crush  
And grind insatiate bones and all (100-116)

Invoking these animals to act this way is based on the understanding that nature has all it takes to shield itself from human unchecked despoliation and dominion. The Niger Delta landscape, metaphorised as the Tiger, Crocodile and Boa-Constrictor, is implored by the persona to shun its silence and show its ravagers that it has a voice to speak. It does not matter how vicious that ‘speaking’ may turn out to be or sound because, if it fails to do so, the incorrigible and conscienceless man will continue to cast it as subaltern. This is in agreement with Rigby’s thesis

that nature is not actually silent as presumed: ‘Despite our best efforts at domination’. Rigby says “we are forcefully reminded by every earthquake, volcanic eruption, passing comet, and the sheer unpredictability of the weather’ that we are not the master after all” (14). Such forceful reminding is what the persona of Ikiriko’s “Delta Tears” prays nature to do in the form of the Tiger King’s pouncing, the Crocodile Goddess’s deception and the Constricting Boa’s crushing of flesh and bone.

In “Oily Tears” the poet continues the defence on a note of optimism. The five-lined poem reads:

Careened,  
These oil tears  
Dripping down the tears on your face  
Will one day be staunched,  
I swear!

Here, the poet’s prayer and hope is that the ‘oily tears’ which continually drips down Niger Delta’s face will one day be staunched and stopped. This is a way of defending the enclave from whatever is responsible for the oily tears. It implies that both “Delta Tears” and “Oily Tears” are in faith with the poet’s personal intention which he reveals in the preface to the collection that ‘a great majority of the poems in this collection ought to assist the staunching process if ever it will come’ (7). The two poems discussed above are arguably some of those poems that could assist in that ‘staunching process’.

Ikiriko is committed in his poetic expressions in defence of the environment. He has in his poetic capacity done this not because the environment or nature cannot speak for herself; she is quite capable of doing so and has actually done in some occasions. But her manner of speaking may be either not heard or misunderstood. Hence the need for human mediators, like Ikiriko.

### **Conclusion**

The paper’s concern has been to ecocritically attempt Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta* and his thematic preoccupation which apparently lies on the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta region. It is stating the obvious that this is the hallmark of Niger Delta literature (poetry in particular). Ikiriko’s commitment is not limited to the human socio-political reality. In fact, his concern is the environment. As Jean-Paul Sartre (whom we consider to be the father of literary commitment) observes, “Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged, willy-nilly” (65). In this paper therefore, we have shown how the state of the

landscape is revealed in Ikiriko's poetry and how the poet has written for the freedom and preservation of that landscape. By doing this, he has sought to 'preserve everything that is good for humanity' since we demonstrated in the analysis that the 'good of humanity' is inextricably tied to the good and health of the environment in which humanity dwells.

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