

## **Neo-liberalism and Eco-Imperialism in Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp***

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, African poetry has steadily grown responsive to some of the ecological challenges the continent is grappling with. The Nigerian poetic tradition known as Niger Delta poetry is perhaps the largest body of eco-poetry on the continent. As the emergence and surge in the volume of this poetry is inextricably linked to the growing despoliation of the ecosystem of the oil-rich Niger Delta, critical attention to the eco-conscious nature of the poetry has not been lacking. However, the representation of the political-economy of the activities of the oil companies in the poetry in relation to the state of the environment has been underexplored. This paper, therefore, examines the roles of multinational oil corporations, in cahoots with Nigerian political elites, in the devastation and neglect of the environment from which they draw huge profits. This is with a view to advancing scholarship on the poetry. Using Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*, this critical engagement shows that oil corporations deploy violent but subtle imperialistic tactics and neoliberal strategies to wreak devastation on the Niger Delta environment.

### **Keywords:**

Neoliberalism, Imperialism, Niger Delta poetry, Ogaga Ifowodo, eco-poetry

### **Introduction**

About two decades ago, Slaymaker (2007) criticises literature from sub-Saharan Africa for its lack of ecological consciousness. He contends that both eco-literature and eco-criticism in

the sub-region have not kept pace with environmental literature of the metropolitan centres. He buttresses his arguments with references to the writings from African writers and critics such as Niyi Osundare, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Ali Mazrui Bessie Head, Ken Saro-Wiwa, among others and posits that their writing is not eco-conscious enough or do not preserve link with the metropolitan centre’s conception of eco-literature.

Interestingly, Slaymaker’s position has attracted deserved critical responses, whether deliberately or coincidentally. For instance, Caminero-Santangelo (2007) argues that the assumptions that Slaymaker based his view on are essentially Anglo-American. He insists that such assumptions are inadequate to engage the African imagination of nature and environment in critical discourse. It is apparently on the same account that Nixon (2007:716), in “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”, argues that “it is no longer viable to view environmental... as a Western luxury” and concludes that the claim that African Literature lacks environmental consciousness is jaundiced. Views such as these have also come from African critics. A very early one in this regard is Nfah-Abbenyi’s (2007) “Ecological Postcolonialism in African Women’s Literature”, where she shows how African women writers are environmentally conscious.

Many more scholars of African literature have produced works that further subvert such a sweeping claim by Slaymaker. Okuyade (2013) edited a collection of essays on African eco-critical literature, while Iheka (2017) has produced a book length study on ecological violence and resistance in African literature. Numerous articles on African eco-literature abound and few examples, especially on Niger Delta poetry, include Nwagbara (2020), Adebisi-Adelabu (2020), Adebisi-Adelabu and Oyetunji (2021) and Abba and Onyemachi (2020).

### **The Niger Delta Region and Its Ecological Crisis**

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is home to more than 20 million people and more than forty ethnic groups (Ayuba, 2012). According to Orhero (2020: 5), the region was “originally made up of six states namely, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers before three more states: Abia, Imo and Ondo were added to sum the nine oil-producing states”. Evidently in the foregoing, the Niger Delta is made up of the oil producing states in Nigeria. These States massively contribute to the GDP of the country, every year. Relatively, Darah (2010:102) argues that the Niger Delta refers to the areas rich in crude oil, but in a state of devastation because of capitalist-oriented ecological issues.

The discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in 1956, according to Ayinuola (2013), makes the area suffer and face huge problems in terms of social infrastructural development and environmental decadence. It has a complicated social situation characterised by oil pollution, environmental degradation, and destruction of aquatic

lives (Ayuba, 2012). The environmental issues in the Niger Delta have subjected the people to abject poverty and untold hardship with other negative activities that are harmful to the existence and survival. Ayuba (2012:12) explains that “oil exploration and exploitation has been on-going for several decades in the Niger Delta, and has had disastrous impacts on the environment in the region and has adversely affected people inhabiting that region”. The core subject in Ayuba’s study underscores the fact that the people of the Niger Delta are buffeted by both ecological and economic problems, which finds support in Oviasuyi’s observation that

[t]he inhabitants of the region have been subjected to untold hardship through oil pollution, environmental degradation, destruction of aquatic lives, and other negative activities that are inimical to the existence and survival of the people of the region as a result of oil exploration and exploitation. (2010:2)

Eliagwu (2014), citing Ukpong (2005), observes that the rate of poverty, and the slow-pace of socioeconomic development in the Delta relegates most people to the background, as they live lower rank of life. The extracted crude oil enriches the nation's account and places it among the sixth largest oil producing nation's worldwide, yet the average the Niger Delta citizens live below US\$2 a day (Eliagwu, 2014).

In decades, the people of the Niger Delta, has made serious effort to ensure the Nigerian government and the world understand their predicament and come to their aid, but in most cases their efforts have yielded no result. As such, the people resort to violence and militancy to draw the attention of the world to their plight. Given these realities, the Niger Delta of the Nigerian ecological space has and continues to witness issues such as violence, killing, oil pipeline vandalism as well as kidnapping (Eliagwu, 2014), which is their own way of resisting oppression. This reaction of the indigenes of the region to the capitalist and imperialist tendencies of oil explorers has turned the oil producing community to a violent landscape (Ojaide, 2006), as the people transfer their anger to those associated with the poor state of the society, particularly government officials and foreign investors.

In the literary context, the ecological crises of the Niger Delta region have been captured in the works of many Nigerian writers such as Tanure Ojaide, Tony Afejuku, Odia Ofeimun, Gabriel Okara, Ogaga Ifowodo, Nnimmo Bassey, EbiYeibo, Ahmed Yerima, IsiabaIrobi, Helon Habila, Kaine Agari, Stephen Kekeghe, Peter Omoko, Niyi Osundare, Sam Ukala, J.P. Clark, among others (Adebiyi-Adelabu and Aguele, 2018). It is on this literary terrain that many African writers have mostly exercised and imagined nature, and produced

works that have come to be known as the Niger Delta Literature, which predominantly highlights and decries oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. A vital and instructive point that justifies the foregoing listing is that literary writers engage environmental concerns because they see literature as a site for productive humanistic dialogue with the non-human. In the context of the African literary canon, the need to evaluate the roles of man in the “green space” (society) has been evident in the qualitative insertions of African writers, particularly poets, into environmental discourse in world literature (Dasylyva and Jegede, 2005).

### **Politics of Eco-Imperialism in the Niger Delta Poetry**

Ecological imperialism, as a theoretical concept, was first conceived by Alfred Crosby in his 1986 book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe*. The book foregrounds colonization as a tendency for cultural, political and ecological dominance. Ecological imperialism, according to Glotfelty and Harold (1996), points towards a system of politico-cultural cum economic exploration and exploitation which places the environment at the receiving end of man’s activities. In other words, it is a capitalist "robbery scheme" which encourages the widening of economic gap between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Ecological imperialism as a concept examines ecological imperialism as “a policy of extending a country’s power or influence through colonization, use of military force or other means” (Eguvwebere 2018:42). In this light, ecological imperialism is conceived as a legacy of capitalism, which seeks to forcefully explore the natural environment against the cosmic structure of the host community.

Crucial to ecological imperialism and neoliberal inclinations are political domination and socioeconomic exploitation. Looking at early Africa-focused environmental literary criticism enables us to recognize the extent of the damage wrought on the environment by human activities. This perspective, which emerged in the 1970s, investigates the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment. The attainment of independence of many African countries came with its attendant socioeconomic maladies characteristic of failed countries and many other former colonies and occasioned by the backward environmental policies, capitalist explorations and corruptive tendencies of African leaders. Graziella Acquaviva and Cecilia Mignanti (2019:77) observe that Nigeria’s political independence was besmirched by “serious crisis at the societal and economic levels following the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri in 1956, leading the country to a situation of great environmental and ecological threats and unsolved issues of resources control, in particular in the Niger Delta region”. At first, it appeared as an era of boom but later transmogrified to doom as can be seen in the society. In response to this, African poets began interrogating the environment in forms of protest and resistance to

ecological disorderliness, in “eco-literature” (Adefemi, 2019).

From the creative works of pioneer poets such as Gabriel Okara, David Rubadiri and J. P. Clark to those of emergent voices such as Niyi Osundare, Nnimmo Bassey, Tony Afejuku, Tanure Ojaide, EbiYeibo, Ogaga Ifowodo and others, African poets have been concerned with the conceptualization of ecological issues. What is palpable in the works of these poets is the conscious engagement with nature. In their creative enterprise, African poets have used both metaphoric and metonymic language to capture ecological issues. The Nigerian poets, for instance, foreground, articulate, and project the risks, both human and non-human beings, faced in the society, especially, in the wake of oil production in the Niger Delta region since the 1950s (Acquaviva & Mignanti, 2019).

The Niger Delta poetry can be canonized together with ecological poetry. Poets, who write mainly eco-poetry, are from a wide variety of backgrounds. These poets all have something in common in that they decry the constant destruction of our national and environmental habitats. The Niger Delta poets take with utmost seriousness the destruction of their flora and fauna due to the exploration and exploitation of crude oil. Nigeria made a great deal of fortune from the oil boom of the 1980s. This fortune was made at the cost of the Niger Deltans whose land and water have been desecrated, fishes poisoned, animals killed and human inhabitants sent packing. This in effect makes the eco-poets decry the destruction of the ecosystem by human activities and modernization. The Niger Delta and eco-poets write using satire, symbolism and realism. Some of the poets in these traditions include Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, Niyi Osundare, Onookome Okome, Joe Ushie, Bassey Nnimmo, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Chin Ce among others.

In the Nigerian environment, particularly in the Niger Delta where the multinationals’ presence has robbed the natives of “the legacies of grandmothers” (Okoro 2007: 1), their natural world, clean environment, flora and fauna have been devastated, which sign-posts a “... huge paradox that dogs the history of the region, that is, the paradox of sitting on oil and yet remaining impoverished” (Olaoluwa 2009:176). This is the spectre of capitalism which follows the shadow of imperial domination and the co modification of human relations. In most of the poems in the Niger Delta region there is a reference to good, pristine nature that has come under heavy attack in recent times. Nigerian writers have used literature to interrogate events in the Nigerian environment which pose a threat to our environment, Nature and society at large. An essential facet of this interrogation is eco-poetry. Contemporary Nigerian writings such as *Delta Blues & Home Songs* by Ojaide (1986), *Dark through the Delta* by Umez (2004), *Polluted Landscape* by Nwagbara (2002), and *Intercepted: Poems* by Bassey (1998) sensitize Nigerians to the moral, ethical and environmental implications of nature despoliation in this region and also Nigeria as a whole.

Egya (2013:66) notes that "the poet projects dialectic voices of both the oppressed

voice (man and earth) and the oppressor...". Besides, Inyabri (2014) is of the opinion that insensitivity as projected by the exploiters towards environmental concerns has resulted in African writers and critics' eco-paranoia. In view of this, Aghoghovwia (2014) adds that some of the principles that underwrite eco-poetry in the Niger Delta derive from politics of resistance against neo-liberalism that the Nigerian state and its elites, in collusion with imperial multinational oil companies, is committed to perpetuating to the detriment of its people and the ecosystem in which they struggle daily.

### **Eco-Imperial Intentions and Neoliberal Actions under the Rays of Oil Lamp**

The collection is mainly divided into two parts: A Waterscape and The Agonist. The subjects treated in this selection of poems serve as testimonies to the fact that the Nigerian government, as well as individuals and private firms involved in oil exploration and production are just as corrupt as pre-colonial imperialists. Foregrounded as ecological imperialism in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* is the deterioration of the ecosystem as a blowback effect of oil exploration by multinational corporations. The first poem in the collection titled 'A Waterscape' gives details of what the Niger Delta region was before the discovery of crude oil, while also examining the resultant influx of oil companies which led to exploitation and degradation of the environment by greedy individuals both in the government and in the private sector.

In Part One (1) of the collection, the title "Jese" is a symbolic reference to a town called Jesse to retell what actually happened in the named town in Niger Delta. Here, the poet begins to show the gradual effects of the abuse of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta for the purpose of oil exploration. The poems are presented in a narrative form where poems I and II are introductory and reflect gradual normalization of distortion. It is not until part III that we begin to see the damage caused to the ecosystem:

This was how the damage was done with old pipes  
corroded and cracker by the heat of their burden-  
petrol and paraffin piped away from rotting  
dugouts and thatched  
to float ships and fly planes,  
to feed factories and the chain  
to heat stoves and save the tree  
to light house and street (5)

The third part of the poem reveals how the ecosystem became gradually destroyed as a result of oil spills from pipes and drills. Hence, the poet makes reference to tripartite damage affecting Niger Delta; the damage done to the land which is the source of feeding, the

damage done to the air wherein ‘paraffin piped away’, and the damage done to the people who lived in the poisoned environment. In depicting the ecological damage bedeviling the Niger Delta region, the poet affirms that unregulated exploration and exploitation significantly contributes to the decadence of the Niger Delta environment. He expresses that not only is the process destructive, but also the end result is disastrous because the extracted oil is used to power vehicles and planes that gunk carbon monoxide into the air, further destroying the environment. With this, the poet begins to mourn the fact that nothing is the same again in the Niger Delta since the discovery of oil. In poem IV under “Jese”:

The broken pipes, like the mouth of a river,  
carved two brooks of kerosene and petrol,  
And like that Gaulish crowd, crazed by cracked  
casks of wine on a cobbled street,  
a siphoning circus danced to the wild  
music of deprivation in the low growth, (6)

The poet employs virtual imagery to depict an artificial change in the topography of the land as a resultant effect of oil spills as opposed to the natural tides that we are introduced to at the beginning of the collection of poems. To achieve this, he employs simile to make a comparison of what was and what now is: “brooks carved by kerosene and petrol, rather than clean rivers, there are polluted ones by the oil spills”. Another type of destruction to the ecosystem is one that results into fire outbreaks as a result of the oil spills.

The fire uncoiled like an infinite  
cobra, stretched to the farthest edges  
of a land marked by oil for double torment.  
And the fields of crops, snatched from water by the hands  
of simple farmers, screamed:  
It's midseason! We are not ripe!  
Do not reap us! Do not cook us! (13)

The lines above depict loss of crops and seasonal harvest by fire resulting from oil spills. Land which was green before is now scorched by the wide spread fire which does not only affect the crops and land but also water. However, the oil spill in water disallows easy quelling of the raging fire:

The creeks and ponds, soon to boil dry, joined the  
fields, thinking the case of water even clearer and  
cried:  
Take your cooking oil away

We are no pots or cauldrons!  
Can't you see here's no kitchen  
And you burn your meal to ashes?  
The rivers, now on fire, rushed  
to the sea for a dip, floating  
along the land's burning question,  
  
unanswerable as every spot soaked the flow and wind  
and water showed the fire where to go (13)

The above excerpt portrays the continuous adverse effects of unregulated oil exploitation which in turn affects every aspect of nature, from the land to the seas as opposed to the form of 'A Waterscape' which presents to us the serenity and beauty of nature. The last two lines clearly depict the destruction of the ecosystem in this environment as nothing is spared by the fire. The last line makes this clear: 'every spot soaked the flow and wind and water showed the fire where'. This in itself attests to the ecological destruction not only limited to land and water but wind as well, thereby making the destruction all round.

The rhetorical question here is one that will always be asked: 'and you burn your meal to ashes?' While this can be taken literally, it can also be said that man's destruction of the ecosystem for the temporary gratification of money, non-renewable resources owing to ignorance or indifference. This is a question that succinctly conveys the message which echoes a question about when mankind will come to realise the ecological destruction bedevilling his environment and actively mitigate or put a stop to it. In the twelfth poem of the section, the poet continues to communicate his message of the sufferings of the eco system:

The land burned, the trees burned, the rivers  
burned,  
the smoke unrolled endless bolts of cloth  
to wrap naked grief and shield the world  
  
from the horrors of the flames. It was harmattan,  
best for bonfires and spreading with the wind  
scorched-earth policies framed in secret rooms (14)

While there are indeed accomplishments in renewable energy, oil exploration is still very much prominent and the destruction to our ecosystem is ever growing. In the last line of the above excerpt, Ifowodo expresses concern that this environmental decadence is further



aggrandized by neoliberal policies. These policies function as economic weapons wielded by the government and multinational corporations, aimed at colonizing and controlling public resources for their individual enrichment.

In light of this, Ifowodo calls out to the concerned parties: the government and the multinational oil companies to have a re-think and change their policies in the region, maintaining that the activities of the government and the oil companies in the Niger-Delta have negatively impacted the climate and the environment. In the section dedicated to Ken Saro-Wiwa titled “The Agonist” (65-69), the poet employs the use of contrast to juxtapose 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.

The mood of the poems reeks of insecurity birthed by exploitation of both resources and people. There is some anxiety the indigenes experience, which is borne out of uncertainty over whether there would be another oil spill that may ruin their farmland, a fire outbreak along pipelines, or uninsured accident at the oil rigs. One would think that of all places that evil can be perpetrated, a school for children would be the last. However, it is the first place of attack and this completely makes the people lose faith in their security. The poet-persona provides evocative images in this respect, viz.:

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.  
In the thick of the season's night-and-day (22)

The above excerpt highlights a sense of insecurity by the people as trigger-happy soldiers parade the villages and unrepentantly blow up a school. This degenerates into a series of events which stanzas two and three explain as stripping the village bare. An already impoverished settlement typified by the mud walls brings to the fore the suffering these people were already experiencing, exposing their financial insecurity. The insecurity is further aggrandized as they would now become anxious for their safety and that of their family. This stanza begins with the fact that it was dawn; hence, people who are supposed to

be safely tucked in bed with their loved ones are instead fleeing for the safety of their lives with barely anything to wear:

its green scarves for peace. They huddled under trees  
and counted a bomb when the ground shook, till  
it rumbled as if the god of thunder (23)

Everyone is affected by the state of unrest, from the old to the young and not even nature can shield them from the disaster happening around them, they are sent out of their houses with only the clothes on their backs:

had changed his throne. Fear stilled the ungovernable mouths of babies  
strapped to backs with  
bedspreads grabbed by instinct at the moment of fight (23)

Insecurity grows from not having a place to stay to not having food to eat and what the next day held in store for them, if they would survive or end another day as victims or casualties of people's greed. They are basically left to the elements of nature at this point:

It was dark when they fled their beds,  
dark again when they knelt in silence,  
prayed the invaders to accept victory and go home,

but heard the ground tremble, the sky rumble,  
and the trees wave again in vain. (23)

They are displaced and disoriented as they can no longer live in their homes, farm on their lands or have proper access to their 'ancestral waters' but now need to rely on insects and experiment with wild vegetation for sustenance. In poem XV of part II "Odi", the poetic persona is an old woman who sings of the evils her eyes have seen:

Oil is my curse; oil is our doom.  
Where is my husband, where my only love?  
At the bottom of the sea, the bottom of the sea

Oil is my curse; oil is our doom.  
Where is the fish for palm-oil soup?  
Dead in the creeks, dead in the lakes (17)

Oil is my curse; oil is my doom.

Where are my children? Where is my husband?  
Ashes and bones. Ashes and bones (17)

The repetition of the curse of oil further foregrounds where the problem is from, the insecurity of lives, family, source of income, feeding and existence has been stripped bare as a result of the greed people have for oil.

A consistent undertone in the works of postcolonial Nigerian writers reflects the ineptitude of their national leaders (Adebiyi, 2015). In *The Oil Lamp*, neo-liberalism is characterized by the siphoning of resources which ought to be for the masses by government officials, and its resultant effects is revealed in the lives of the citizens as evident in their suffering and impoverishment. Pure greed, indifference and irresponsibility are what aptly describe the political elites' disposition towards the suffering of the people of the Niger Delta. As much as it can be said that oil companies are responsible for a lot of evil perpetrated against the people, there is also the question of unfavourable neo-liberal policies and disposition of the government towards the plight of these people. Neo-liberalist tendencies are well foregrounded in the conversations that ensue in some selected poems. In poem XVII, Ifowodo captures the intent in driving the people out of their land by any means necessary because in the bosom of the land is a rich deposit of hydrocarbon.

In poem II, Ifowodo lays out the tactics employed by the government, variously represented as 'the head of state,' 'the president' or 'governor', and multinational corporations to make the people trust them and relinquish their land for exploitation.

It is necessary to quote at lengths here for better illustration:

Electric light. Electric for short  
or eletiriki, when conducted  
through the cables of their simple speech  
Promises made by a hard-hatted  
minister at the tape-cutting for the first  
well withered with the drilling tree

When the tree gowed in the dazzle  
of lighted stockades – halogen-eyed Cyclops

guarding the well – they could touch the day

shaped by a minister's words when their oil lamps  
should sputter and die at the flick of a switch  
The dream of eletiriki burned bright (4).

These lines reflect government's fictitious promise to provide electricity to the people. However, the fact that it was conducted via common speech with no action following signifies that it was a fake promise. The promises are short lived and revealed to underscore that it was not true electricity that was given to them *ab initio*, but a death threat presented in a wrapping sheet of technological benefits. In retrospect, the so-called electricity provided for the people was actually meant to aid visibility at oil drill sites. This further highlight how the people were manipulated and made to resort to the use of oil lamps, which could die out at any time. In a similar dimension, imperialistic multinational corporations exploit the people while promising and giving them the barest minimum. As soon as the little they give yields nothing in return again, they move 'to another well in another place/ to guard a fresh promise of light' (4). In other words, when their oil well(s) dries up, they then go ahead to another village to make the same empty promises.

A common attribute of both the government and the oil companies is that they are out to seek their own profit. There are different sectors at both national and international levels which make use of both unfinished and finished products of the oil drilled from the Niger Delta region. Hence, it can be said that these agencies or sectors are financially capable of ensuring that the life of the indigenes of the Niger Delta region are made better by providing basic socioeconomic infrastructure. Be that as it may, the people of the Niger Delta region remain plunged in abject poverty due to the greed and exploitative tendencies of these capitalists.

The Niger Delta is in the dark – both literally and metaphorically – because of the selfishness and greed of government officials and their cronies and collaborators in the oil companies. In Poem XVII, which focuses on the Odi disastrous spectacle, the president, in a clear symbol of neo-imperialism and neo-liberalism, orders a troop to invade the town in search of missing policemen and soldiers and brands the real owners of the land "thieves", exerting a misguided justice on them. Similarly, in the poems dedicated to Ogoni land, neo-liberalism is exemplified in the friction between the people and designated authority by the government. Taking advantage of a quarrel between the Ogoni people over the state's marginalization and despoliation of their ecology, the military superintendents of Ogoni exaggerated the crisis in order to justify a total besiegement and massacre of an already dispossessed people – an action which was rumoured to be motivated by a powerful

multinational oil company. The ensuing decimation appears predetermined to rid the land of people so as to have monopoly over it.

Obviously, Odi is destroyed because of the desire of the government to continue oil drilling in the land despite the adverse effect on the ecosystem. Through evocative diction, the reader is able to apprehend the depth of devastation caused by the state's military and its brutal assertion of authority over the people. 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'. This declaration by the president raises an ethical concern. Who are the 'we' here? They are most likely the political elites, not the citizens of the country in general. The president is more concerned with protecting the oil wealth, rather than the people and the source of the wealth itself. In fact, his personalizing of public resources emphasizes the tendency for greed, selfishness, capitalistic inclination and absolute indifference to the plight of the people, which are hallmarks of neo-liberalism at its finest.

The neo-liberal poverty discourse is basically premised on the tenet that neoliberal policies give rise to an increase in poverty ratio as a result of a simultaneous growth in unemployment ratio. In other words, the nexus of neo-liberalism and poverty discourse reflects the negative impacts of neo-liberal policies on the economically marginalized population. Quadri (2018) avers that the question as to whether poverty can be reduced under the ideology of neo-liberalism has continued to engage the interest of scholars, policy analysts and critics. Consequently, Collins *et al.* (2015) and Rotarou and Sakellariou (2017) explain that the establishment of neo-liberal policies has given rise to a plethora of socio-economic maladies, of which are poverty and unemployment. Policies such as free market competition, deregulation of market, and privatisation have been uncovered as detrimental to the society as private corporations prioritise profit maximisation over social and ecological welfare. Corroborating this is Ifowodo's depiction of the harsh reality of poverty in the Niger Delta.

Poverty and inadequate infrastructure are typical of the Niger Delta. Ifowodo explores this as a consequence of ecological disaster due to oil exploitation in the region. In the third poem under "Jese", the poet paints a picture of four boys going about trying to get their meal for the day while their counterparts elsewhere are learning the letters of the alphabet:

Four boys chasing rodents for the day  
while their mates in cities where they

learnt their letters in song and rhyme  
to find the fountain. The mist of gush

blinded them long before the blaze. They

summoned the village for the hot show  
the ritual bath before sacrifice. (5)

The poet makes use of contrast here to explain the situation of things in the Niger Delta as opposed to what obtains in other parts of the world. The disorderly use of enjambment wherein run-on lines which should be full sentences are broken into different stanzas reflects the disorder in the lives of the people. Children are not allowed to live a normal life; instead, forced to live in abject poverty to the extent that they have to fend for themselves. It is in their quest for survival that they find a leaking pipeline which brings momentary 'prosperity' to the people. In another inscription of poverty induced by ecological disaster, the poet notes:

...cooked cobwebs in cold corners  
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)

The above excerpts point to poverty and the need to survive as forces that drive the inhabitants of Jesse into destroying their environment which they originally held in high esteem and protected very well. However, as they are hard pressed from the fuel crunch, they fell trees in order to get firewood to cook their food and, by so doing, they contribute further to the destruction of their environment.

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.

They smelt edible death in food cooked  
with logs still so alive they hissed,  
then puffed out clouds of wet smoke so bitter (3)

With their sources of sustenance (both land and water) gone, they had to resort to experimenting with what was available to them in order to find out what they could eat. The idea of 'edible death' implies that there were some foods experimented with, but which did not turn out positive as they had hoped. The poet directs his anger towards those whose unwholesome activities fueled up the embers of suffering and hunger that force the traumatized people to destroy their environment so as to survive. The desperation of the inhabitants of Jesse for survival makes them cook with wet logs, which further pollutes the

already polluted environment with smoke. They are unable to light their lanterns as a result of the fuel crunch. Instead, they ‘turned to candles till their need made wax gold / forcing them to roost earlier than hens.’ Living in such an environment is most likely going to shorten their lifespan. Yet, the abject poverty in which people find themselves makes it impossible to think of relocating from the only home they have ever known. Consequently, it is a lose-lose situation for them. It is probably on account of this that Ifowodo makes a clarion call for radical resistance against all forms of ecological imperialism.

The nexus of resistance and neo-liberalism is a complex phenomenon which reflects the tensions and contradictions among the inhabitants of the Niger Delta communities, government and multinational corporations that has emerged as a result of the clash between neo-liberal policies and environmental development. To this end, the implementation of neo-liberal policies has often led to a concentration of wealth and socio-economic power in the hands of imperialist capitalist, while exacerbating social and economic marginalisation. It is important to state here that in the Niger Delta discourse land is conceived to be of utmost significance; whoever controls land wields socioeconomic power. In a subtly expository way, the poet engages both parties (the oppressor and the oppressed) in a conversation of rights over the land. Critically examining the attitude towards land in the Niger Delta, Adebisi-Adelabu and Oyetunji (2021:30) observes that it is ‘important to their collective survival as it serves as their source of food, economy, transportation as well as recreation’. They note further that much of the land has been ‘substantially lost to oil exploration in the region, leading to disenchantment, anger, frustration and deaths.’ Consequently, resistance against land dispossession due to oil prospecting and exploitation is on the rise. This is with a view to bringing to light their experiences, while demanding social and environmental justice cum development. This has resulted in the build-up of power struggle between those who benefit from such neoliberal policies, and those who find such policies detrimental to their ecological welfare.

Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* is not only deeply saturated with the negative experiences of the Niger Delta populace due to oil exploration, but also attempts to instigate resistance through his use of radical language and vivid imagery. The collection exposes government and their multinational corporation allies as culpable for ecocides in the Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria in general. It signifies the pre-eminence of the concern for profit over the consideration of the life and basic needs of the people in whose area the oil is being exploited. The resistance that Ifowodo talks about in *The Oil Lamp* as reminiscence are inscribed in the poems: “Odi”, “Ogoni”, “The Pipes War”, and “Cesspit of the Niger Delta”. In these poems, the reader is exposed to the contradictions created by neoliberal capitalist

structures fueled by collective capital and rental claims. Such conflicts as reflected in “Odi”, “Ogoni” and “The Pipes War” must be understood in relation to the collective interest role played by not only neoliberal capitalists around the world, but also by nation states, imperial powers and imperial multinational oil companies around the world. This resonates in Bond’s (2006:34) assertion that oil alone does not cause conflicts; rather it is “the process of oil transformation and mediation through market, social and power relations in various forms as energy, profit and power that causes conflicts”. Thus, the contradiction in the neoliberal capitalist structure of the oil sector exists predominantly in the forms of power/class struggles - conflicts over ownership, between the oil producing communities and the state. For instance, in the poem, “Ogoni,” Ifowodo talks about how the people resisted military operations in Ogoni land under the leadership of Major Kitemo, one which involved many casualties while the government showed no mercy.

According to the poet, the soldier sent by the government kept on “[s]hooting and bombing to keep them in the bush.../ after fifteen nights and days in the bush”. This number of days is probably an understatement of the number of days the military operation led by Major Kill-them-All spent in suppressing the Ogoni people who were fighting for their fundamental human rights. Even when Major Kill-them-All ran out of ammunition, the multinational company gave them more ammunition to continue their military operation, thereby promoting the murder of the natives. What this means is that the multinational companies collaborate to suppress the people from fighting for their fundamental human rights.

One thing to note is that the main catalyser of the protest staged by the Ogoni people was the fact that the multinational companies failed to contain the oil spilled in their rivers and farmlands. In other words, the oil companies pollute the environment and make it unsafe and uninhabitable for the natives, while also destroying their sources of livelihood. As a matter of fact, the oil companies even sponsor military operations to repress the people’s will and efforts at safeguarding the environment that the oil companies are destroying, thereby reaffirming the claim that neo-liberal petro-capitalist system does not care about the welfare of people. It is on this note that the poet in the poem “Ogoni” speaks of “Money-on-the-barrel to the oil cartel/ for containment strategies/ when the natives get restive (53).

## **Conclusion**

Ifowodo’s engagement with the ecological realities of the Niger Delta in *The Oil Lamp* appropriates agonizing metaphors and lucid imagery to establish the neo-liberalism, imperialist tendencies as drivers of the desecration of the environment, and the senseless brutalization of the Niger Delta people. His criticism of the government and the oil



companies in the collection seems to set agenda for a reconsideration of the activities in the Niger-Delta, the immediate goal of which is to restore balance and reparation to the ecosystem. This will in turn serve the ultimate goal of saving the earth for the sustenance of humanity, presenting a panacea to the Niger Delta debacle, with his poems as a reflection and refraction of what is being done and what ought to be done. Consequently, the poet is established in this article as a voice against neo-liberalism and.....what?

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