

## Resource Exploitation as a Metaphor for Environmental Ruination in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*.

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### Abstract

*The anthropocentric consciousness of human beings has induced the belief that humans are the most significant and only important entity in the ecosphere. This accounts for his preponderance towards reducing every other entity, such as the natural resources, animals, environment, and aquatic life, to a second inconsequential 'other' and therefore an object for exploitation. Resource exploitation, here, refers to the prospecting and exploration of natural resources for the use of human beings. With particular reference to crude oil and its associated by-products, this study reveals that resource exploitation translates into environmental despoliation and degradation. The study adopts ecocriticism as a theoretical lens through which Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* are read as texts that explore environmental ruination in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. It concludes that there is an ongoing wanton degradation of the Niger Delta environment without a simultaneous provision of an alternative means of survival for the inhabitants. Since prevention is better than cure, this paper recommends that the multinational oil companies should be compelled by the federal government of Nigeria to comply with existing environmental legislation and international operational standards so as to reduce, if not stop, the level of environmental degradation.*

**Key words:** *Ecocriticism, Resources exploitation, environmental degradation, Niger Delta, ecology.*

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### Introduction

The exploitation of natural resources in Nigeria has been going on since time immemorial. The transition from palm oil exploitation to crude oil exploration and exploitation by transnational oil firms in the 1950s marks a watershed in the history of Nigeria, reputedly the most populous Black nation on earth. The country did not only transit from an agro-based economy to a crude oil-based economy; it also transited from peaceful eco-friendliness to ecological destruction. It became a country in which the greed of a select few ensured the continuous wanton exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta region, an action that has given rise to numerous human and ecological

problems. These problems that result from oil exploration activities are suffered by the poor masses while minor elites enjoy the obscene wealth that accrues from oil. According to Onyechigoziri Chikere and Okachukwu Onuah Wosu:

In representing the relationship between literature and the environment, many eco-sensitive scholars have defined environmental abuse as a consequence of human activities. These human activities, which have facilitated technological advancement, have accounted for direct and indirect forms of ecocide, ozone layer depletion, destruction of the flora and fauna and other forms of environmental red-flags. (3)

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is situated in the South-South geopolitical zone, comprising six states. The politics of crude oil exploration has expanded the scope of the Niger Delta to include three other adjoining oil-producing states. The Niger Delta region now consists of nine states, namely Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Imo, and Rivers. The region is home to an estimated 31 million people scattered in 185 local government areas. It is reputedly the largest mangrove forest in Africa and the third largest in the world (Powell et al., 1985; Anifowose, 2008; Chinweze and Abiola-Oloke, 2009; Kadafa, 2012; and Ite et al., 2013). The ecosystem of the Niger Delta mangrove comprises different species of flora and fauna. It is divided into four ecological zones; mangrove swamp zone, fresh water zone, low land rainforest zone and coastal inland zone. Ite, et al. (78) are of the opinion that “the Niger Delta region is the richest part of Nigeria, considering its rich and inexhaustible deposit of hydrocarbons and its richly diverse natural ecosystem, which supports numerous species of both terrestrial and aquatic fauna and flora.”

The history of crude oil exploration and exploitation could be said to have started in 1908 when the Nigerian Bitumen Corporation, a German company, started prospecting for oil in the Aroromin Area, presently in Ondo State, following visible signs of the presence of crude oil in the area. However, the outbreak of the First World War in the same year brought the expedition activities to an abrupt end. It was around 1937 and 1938 that crude oil exploration activities resumed when the Anglo-Dutch Shell D’Arcy was given the sole concessionary rights over the whole area later referred to as Nigeria. The outbreak of the Second World War again affected the operational activities of Shell D’Arcy. The company later resumed oil exploration after the end of WW II in 1945.

After many years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, Shell D’Arcy later discovered crude oil in commercial quantity in 1956 at Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa state. The commercial production of crude oil started in 1958 as Shell began producing 5,100 barrels per day, and by 1960, it had reached a peak production of 2.44 million barrels per day. The success recorded by Royal Dutch Shell attracted other foreign multinational oil corporations such as Mobil, Chevron, AGIP, Elf, Tenneco, Texaco, etc. These non-British companies were granted licenses to explore and prospect for crude oil, thus breaking the sole concession rights of Shell D’Arcy. Despite this, Shell still

produces over 50% of Nigeria's crude oil from about 100 oil fields. The company also has an oil reserve of 11 billion barrels per day (Kadafa, 38). Kadafa reveals that "in 2006, there were 11 local and foreign oil corporations operating 159 oil fields and 1,481 oil wells in the Niger Delta region" (51).

Anifowose and Onuoha reveal that "the Niger Delta region has about 606 oil fields (355 situated onshore and 251 situated offshore), 5,284 drilled oil wells, and a 7,000 km oil and gas pipeline, crisscrossing the length and breadth of the region" (35). The production of crude oil in commercial quantity transformed the Nigerian economy from an agro-based one to a crude oil-based one. Crude oil has, therefore, become the mainstay of the Nigerian economy; hence, Akpotor (41) submits that "petroleum and derivatives dominate the Nigerian economy, making up about 98 percent of exports, over 80 percent of the government's annual revenue, and 70 percent of budgetary expenditure." It is believed that the Nigerian government gets about US\$ 20 million per day from crude oil (Oluduro and Oluduro, 48).

The enormous deposit of hydrocarbons in the Niger Delta region and its exploitation have enriched the Nigerian nation, making it the largest producer of crude oil in Africa and the sixth most important exporter of crude oil in the world, with the bulk of its exports going to the United States of America (Akpotor, 49). Paradoxically, the oil wealth being derived from the belly of the Niger Delta is not palpably felt in the region. Instead, the people of the region seem to be starving in the midst of plenty. Chijioke, Ebong, and Ufomba aver that:

Throughout the more than 50 years of crude oil exploration and production in Niger Delta region, oil drilling and refining has caused unquantifiable and inhuman devastation to the people of the region as the people are no longer engaged in their fishing, farming and hunting activities which was (Sic) the mainstay of their economy (55-56).

Over this same period, the Niger Delta environment has also been subjected to diverse forms of severe degradation and ruination to the point that the once very important, rich, and productive wetland and one of the best marine ecosystems in the world has been described as one of the five most severely petroleum-damaged ecosystems and oil-polluted environments in the world (Oluduro and Durojaye, 772). Concerning Oloibiri, the place crude oil was first discovered in large quantity, Ibaba reveals:

Olibiri (Sic) is a shadow of its former self. Farming which used to be the mainstay of the community's economy has been paralyzed as farmlands has been destroyed, fishing activities grounded and aquatic life virtually castrated by many years of oil prospecting and exploration. (12)

Presently, the Niger Delta region is obviously bedeviled by diverse ecological problems ranging from environmental degradation, water pollution, loss of soil fertility, destruction of the

ecosystem, global warming, and the absence of socio-economic and infrastructural development. The prospecting and exploration of crude oil resources in the Niger Delta region by multinational oil corporations in connivance with the federal government of Nigeria have resulted in the ruination of the Niger Delta environment, thus making it unfit for habitation by all the inhabitants of the ecosphere.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The damages done to the environment as a result of human activities have continued to constitute topical issues of public discourse among concerned persons. The callous destruction of nature due to industrialization and urbanization and the threats it poses constitute one of the major concerns of ecocriticism. In the words of Abrams and Harpham ecocriticism “designates the critical writings which explore the relationship between literature and the biological and physical environment conducted with awareness of the devastation being wrought on the environment by human activities”. (87)

William Rueckert is credited with coining the word ‘ecocriticism’ in his 1978 essay “literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (Glotfelty, xx). By ecocriticism, Rueckert means “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” with the intention “to develop an ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing of about literature” (107). Rueckert referred to the first law of ecology-that everything is connected to everything else to explain the interconnection between literature and ecology both being bound in a complex global system.

Cheryll Glotfelty explains that ecocriticism approaches the study of literature following an earth-centered perspective. This entails a deconstruction of the notion of ‘the world’ freeing it from the restricted sense of the sociosphere which literary theory generally, imbues it with and expanding its meaning to include the entire ecosphere. Ecological criticism may go by different, if not disparate shades or even encompass a broad scope of inquisition yet the view that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix) is one fundamental thesis of ecocriticism. Ecocritics, therefore, thematizes the interrelationship or interconnectedness of nature and culture (especially literature and language). As a theoretical framework, ecocriticism “negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotfelty, xix). This article, following an ecocritical perspective examines Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* and Nwoye’s *Oil Cemetery* as texts that negotiate the interconnections between the human and the non-human aspects of the ecosphere and seeks to expose how crude oil exploitation activities by man affect the ecosphere.

### **Literature Review**

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is supposedly one of the most studied mangroves in the world. This is unarguably due to the residue of hydrocarbons found in its land and also due to the effects of crude oil exploration activities. The region has been made the subject of innumerable studies that adopted diverse perspectives in reporting the Niger Delta condition. Most of these studies

(which want of space cannot allow us to review in this article) explore the environmental and human problems created by the crude oil exploration activities of multinational oil corporations. According to OkachukwuOnuahWosu and Idio, M. S.,

Oil exploration has led to oil spills in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and this has resulted in pollution of the environment and the ecosystem at large. The pollution of the environment has caused many scholars and writers to churn out a harvest of literary works as a reaction against the injustice done to nature. (211-212)

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, which was published in 2006, received wide critical acclaim. Many literary critics have appraised Agary's debut novel from diverse critical perspectives. Koussouhon and Dossoumoun in their study approached Agary's novel using the lexico-grammar theory. They are of the opinion that Agary encodes experiential and textual meaning through the medium of language. Their adoption of systemic functional linguistics in analyzing *Yellow-Yellow* reveals that the writer carefully organizes her language in order to effectively create meaning. Their concentration in examining textual and experiential metafunctions helps them place Agary's debut novel "in a good position to reconstruct the past and the present in proper perspectives in order to project the future of their nation" (2435).

Kaze reads *Yellow-Yellow* from an ecocritical point of view. He reveals that the inhabitants of the Niger Delta environment experience poverty and precocity as a result of their despoiled and polluted environment brought about by 'the profit-driven activities of oil companies.' Kaze thus points to the fact that Agary's novel portrays the interconnections between man and nature. In his words, the novel "complicates the oil encounter in a way that links the people to their land and its exploitations inseparably" (14).

Simon submits that Agary's novel emerging from the fraught Niger Delta background exposes the pitiable predicament of women being the victims of the ecological problems prevalent in the region. According to Simon, Agary's women are especially affected by the grave ecological, socioeconomic, and health implications of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Thus the novel aptly "expounds the complex situation women are trapped in" (164) in the Niger Delta region as a result of crude oil exploitation.

Oseghale Francis engages in an ecocritical analysis of *Yellow-Yellow* and reveals that the exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta affects plants, animals, aquatic, and human lives in the region. According to him, "the narrative vividly portrays the negative consequences of crude oil exploration, which include untold hardship, exploitation of the people and the environment, pollution of farmland, destruction of plants and aquatic lives..." (329)

Ashaolu Olubunmi and Ede Egburg have a tacit agreement on the ecofeminist inclination of Agary in *Yellow-Yellow*. Both critics in their separate studies appraise the novel in the light of its

representation of a very symbolic connection between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women. Ashaolu posits that the novel “is a very compelling portrait of the interconnections and subjugation of African women and the environment in a manner that none (woman and environment) can be studied in isolation” (41). Ede, on his part, avers that Agary portrays the female body as a metaphor for the environment “because just as the environment is explored, exploited, polluted, and abandoned ..., women equally suffer the similar fate ...” (17).

These studies reflect the diverse perspectives through which *Yellow-Yellow* has been appraised. While Simon, Kaze, and Oseghale focus on the effect of oil exploitation on human inhabitants of the environment, Koussouhon and Dossoumoun attempt a language-based analysis in exposing how Agary encodes meaning. Ashaolu and Ede, following an ecofeminist perspective, reveal the connection between the way women and the environment are treated in *Yellow-Yellow*. None of them places the environment as the vulnerable victim of crude oil exploitation. This paper therefore argues that the exploration and exploitation of crude oil represent the exploration, exploitation, pollution, and abandonment of the environment.

May Ifeoma Nwoye’s *Oil Cemetery* does not enjoy the same wide critical reception accorded to Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*. Critical studies of it are therefore still minimal, especially when compared to Agary’s debut novel. In a review of *Oil Cemetery* entitled “*Oil Cemetery* wins ANA-Chevron Prize,” Yinka Olatunbosun opines that the narrative exposes how the human inhabitants of the Niger Delta contend with the environmental degradation that results from the exploitation of crude oil in their communities. Olatunbosun rightly points out the fact that the narrative plot revolves around the female protagonist Ruth, who “leads a subtle revolution that would later shock her entire community” (Nd) and brings the change they so much desired.

Fajenyo Ezekiel attempts a book-length criticism of Nwoye’s literary corpus. Writing about *Oil Cemetery*, he explains that Nwoye treats another topical contemporary issue of the Niger Delta—the exploitation of crude oil by multinational oil companies who end up leading the people in hunger and poverty even as their environment is completely devastated.

Okediran Wale, in his review, states that the novel is a glowing addition to the growing literary corpus on “the political and environmental tragedy of oil exploration in Nigeria as well as in the sphere of conflict resolution” (4). According to Okediran, Nwoye succeeds in using her creative writing skills to portray the obviously intractable problems arising from oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. She succeeds through her novel in proffering “dialogue between oil companies and their host communities” as a means of “finding solutions to the challenges of oil exploration.” (6).

In his own review, Eazy, Ubaji Isiaka submits that Nwoye’s novel portrays the dubious and exploitative acts of oil companies operating in the Niger Delta and the “role of women towards liberating the region from the shackles of poverty and environmental degradation” (2). Eazy holds Nwoye to task for her failure to apportion blames to the government for its connivance with oil



companies in engendering the human and ecological problems in Niger Delta. Eazy further accuses the author of idealism because of her failure to “mention the prominent issue of youth restiveness and militancy” (9) which brought about the Amnesty programme. The fact that many nonviolent portents which were carried out could not bring peace in the Niger Delta seems to lend credence to Eazy’s accusation. Yet, it needs stating that Nwoye opts for nonviolent nude protest as a viable alternative to violent protest and militancy because it also has the potential of yielding the expected outcome, if properly executed.

Yakubu Mahammed appraises Nwoye’s *Oil Cemetery* as a communication event. He adopts Wolfgang Iser’s Reception Theory to argue that the novel is a text that functions as a means of communication between the author and her readers. In his words, the novel is a “channel of communication” through which the author’s “message—“improvement of the condition of the people of the Niger Delta and preservation of their environment through activism”—is passed to the receiver (46).

This present paper uses insights from ecocriticism in the critical analysis of *Oil Cemetery* so as to reveal how the author portrays crude oil exploration and exploitation as a metaphor for environmental spoliation of the Niger Delta.

### **Resource Exploitation as a Metaphor for Environmental Despoliation in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow***

The anthropocentric consciousness of human beings has induced the belief that humans are the most significant and important entity of the universe. This accounts for his preponderance towards exploring every other entity in the universe for his use and therefore places natural resources, animals, the environment, etc., at his mercy. Resource exploitation in this context refers to the prospecting and exploration of natural resources for man’s use. With particular reference to crude oil and its associated byproducts, we are interested in revealing that resource exploitation translates into environmental despoliation and degradation. This is so because natural resources are only found within the environment, and their extraction is an act of plundering, even reducing the worth of the environment they are found in.

Literary works, being cultural products, are inseparable from the social milieu that gave birth to them. This implies that works of literature embody the response of authors to different social realities. Kaine Agary’s debut novel, *Yellow-Yellow*, for instance, represents an exposition of the negative impact of resources (in this case, crude oil) exploration in the Niger Delta environment and its non-human and human population. Agary, through the eyes of the young autobiographical narrator, Zilayefa, exposes the human and environmental crises bedevilling Nigeria’s Niger Delta Region due to the activities of multinational oil corporations prospecting and exploring oil in the region.

As the narrator opens in chapter one, the homodiegetic narrator, Zilayefa, whose story the novel embodies, provides a graphic description of environmental degradation due to resource exploration. She reveals, “During my second to last year in secondary school, one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village broke and spilt oil over several hectares of land, my mother’s farm included (*Yellow-Yellow*, 3). Zilayefa further reveals:

It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like. I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. Then there was the smell. I can’t describe it but it was strong-so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach.... There was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it-viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep (*Yellow-Yellow*, 4)

Observably, this scene exposes the menace of oil spillage and its attendant effects on the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta environment. It records how crude oil spillage drowns farmland and animals and also affects the health of the human population. To cap it all, villagers were the losers because their attempt at getting compensation for their farms overrun by oil spillage failed because “...the oil company that owned the pipes...said they suspected sabotage by the youths and were not going to pay compensation for all the destruction that the burst pipes had caused “(*Yellow-Yellow*, 4). This means that the farmers, such as Zilayefa’s mother, lost their main sources of survival as a result of oil spillage.

The effects of crude oil spillage are indeed enormous, ranging from the destruction of farmlands, pollution of the environment, and the economic and health hazards human beings suffer. The excerpts above lend credence to Adati Ayuba Kadafa’s incisive revelation that “when oil spills occur, the oil spreads over a wide area, affecting terrestrial and marine resources” and, in most severe cases, leading to the “...complete relocation of some communities...” Pollution of fresh water, loss of forest and agricultural land, destruction of fishing grounds, and reduction of fish population... ” (26). Just as Zilayefa informs the readers, “...so it was that, in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance.... She and others in the village lost the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares...” (*Yellow—Yellow*, 4), the oil spillage in her village causes the ruination of plants and extermination of animal and aquatic life, thus bringing hardship, suffering, hunger, unemployment, and poverty.

It is worth mentioning that by placing this vivid scene of environmental degradation due to oil exploitation at the fore of the narrative, Agary highlights crude oil exploitation as the cause of the multifaceted crisis that plagues the Niger Delta region. These crises constitute the chapters that follow. As a people whose major sources of sustenance are farming and fishing, two vocations that greatly rely on natural resources found in the environment, the despoliation of that environment means that their sources of survival have been taken away from them. This explains the helplessness, lack, and poverty that set in among the people.



Ideally, the oil spillage that drowns Binaebi's farm is responsible for the turning point in the life of Zilayefa and her family. As a single parent, Binaebi—Zilayefa's mother—relies on the proceeds from her farm for their daily survival and education of her only child. However, Zilayefa, the narrator, explains:

The day my mother's farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for we started to wither, . . . the black oil that spilled that day swallowed my mother's crops and unraveled the threads that held together her fantasies for me. She was able to find new farmland in another village, but it was not the same (*Yellow – Yellow*, 10).

This abortion of Binaebi's dream of a better life for her daughter is not peculiar to her alone but also applies to every other person whose main source and hope of sustenance was destroyed by the oil spillage. It rendered them hopeless and helpless because their transitional economic support system of farming and fishing could not support and sustain them any longer: "Farming and fishing, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother, no longer provided gain" (*Yellow—Yellow*, 39).

Essentially, oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has degraded the water bodies because, as the oil spillage overruns farmlands, it cannot be supposed that the streams, shallow wells, and ponds—sources of domestic and drinking water for the host communities—are not affected. Unarguably, oil spillage overruns farmlands; unarguably, oil spillage is one of the major sources of water pollution in the Niger Delta. Zilayefa captures the menace of water pollution by oil spillage thus:

The water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines that moves the wealth from beneath my land and into the pockets of the select few who ruled Nigeria was the same water I drank (*Yellow – Yellow*, 39)

Zilayefa's revelation in this excerpt exposes the despoliation of the environment, the pollution of their source of drinking water, and, most importantly, their deplorable condition in which lack of pipe-borne water forces the people to drink the water polluted by oil spillage. This injection of polluted water, of course, poses serious health implications because it could lead to the outbreak of diseases such as cholera, typhoid, dysentery, and other waterborne diseases.

Conversely, Agary also began her searchlight on the pre-oil days when the land yielded in multiple folds and the water bodies were full of fish, when farming and fishing sustained the people; the good old days, before crude oil exploitation, before oil spillage destroyed everything.

Zilayefa narrates:

My mother told me of the days of her youth when every husband was expected to give his new wife a dugout canoe . . . the wife would use this canoe to fish, earn a living and helped to feed the family . . . those were the days when . . . the rivers were teeming with fish. Their farms held plantain trees so fertile that there was more plantain than anyone knew what to do with . . . Those were the days (*Yellow – Yellow* 39 – 40).

This excerpt reveals an obviously sharp contrast between the days before and after oil was discovered in large and commercial quantity. Indeed, the days before oil happened were characterized by bountiful harvest of both fish and sea products whereas the days following oil exploitation are synonymous with environmental degradation and despoliation. It is therefore, obvious that the oil exploitation activities of multinational oil corporation degrade and despoil the Niger Delta environment, chocking the very life out of it.

Regrettably, the biodiversity of the Niger Delta ecosystem has been destroyed, the flora and fauna depleted, and the entire environment despoiled as a result of crude oil exploitation. Just as Catherine Acholonu posits, the Niger Delta environment is:

Suffocating from humility's waste, from all the fumes and chemicals humility has been pumping into her blood (the rivers and oceans), and her body (the soil). In this and other ways, we have been killing off not only our mother earth but also other occupants of the planet – our brethren who comprise the vegetation, the mineral and the animal kingdom. (*Motherism*, 118)

It is even more regrettable that the Niger Delta region embodies sites of abject poverty, suffering, and deprivation while the oil wealth from the region enriches others, leaving the people with an unconducive environment that has been despoiled and degraded as a result of oil exploitation. It is therefore on this note that crude oil resource exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria becomes a metaphor for the environmental despoliation and degradation of the region.

### **Resource Exploitation as Metaphor for Environmental Ruination in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery***

Natural resources exploitation in Nigeria has been going on since time immemorial. The transition from palm oil exploitation to crude oil exploration and exploitation by transactional oil firms in the 1950s marks a watershed in the history of the most popular blank nation on earth. The country did not only transit from an agro-based economy to a crude oil-based economy; it also transited from peaceful eco-friendliness to ecological destruction. It became a country in which the greed of a select few ensures the continuous wanton exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta region, an action that translates to numerous human and ecological problems. These problems that result

from oil exploitation activities are suffered by the poor masses while the minor elites enjoy the obscene wealth accruing from oil.

Crude oil exploration and exploitation with the attendant consequences such as oil spillage, destruction of the rich ecosystem of the Niger Delta region, impoverishment of the people and other forms of environmental degradation have made the region to become very topical in national and international discourses. As is typical with all situations of conflict and violence, a large body of literature has been created out of the Niger Delta imbroglio. Nigerian writers such as Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark – Bekederemo, TanureOjaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tess onwueme, Ahmed Parker Yerima, IbiwariIkiriko, Kaine Agary, etc., have contributed in creating an enduring conversation, through their creative writings, of the intricate vagaries of life that now prevails in the Niger Delta region as a result of oil exploitation and its attendant socioeconomic, human and ecological problems. Ken Saro-Wiwa's contribution possibly stands out because his vocal indictment of the Nigerian state in the ruination of the Niger Delta made him the first environmental martyr in Nigeria. Unarguably, the Niger Delta and by extension, Nigeria:

. . . . gained attention in the international media since the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. He was the man who drew the world's attention to the environmental pollutions and the impoverishment resulting from the activities of oil companies in the region. His killing by the military regime at the time further ignited interest in the kind of "slow violence" that the people and the land of the region have been subjected to (Kaze, 14)

May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* is an interestingly riveting addition to the discourse on the Niger Delta. The narrative unequivocally portrays the inequality and injustice prevalent in the region: the stupendous oil wealth of the few elites in contrast with the abject poverty and deprivation of the majority within the same social milieu characterized by oil exploitation and environmental degradation. It, most interestingly, places women at the warfront of an activism that engendered change.

As the story begins, the omniscient narrator portrays a rustic Ubolu community where the people and nature enjoy a cordial relationship; it is a community whose people enjoy an uncontaminated environment and a tradition that has not been defiled by the marauding beast of modernization. According to the narrator:

. . . . the people of Ubolu hold fast to their old ways of life: farming, fishing, mining and their traditional culture. Oblivious to what lies beneath their land, the people are happy with their life, living it as they choose to . . . even as much of Nigeria has become modernized; Ubolu remains backward, virtually untouched by any form of civilization (*Oil Cemetery*, 1-2)

This unequivocally portrays a community that relies on their environment—land, river, etc.—for their sustenance; a people whose major occupations are farming and fishing. The narrator attests that the “villagers say that anything put in the ground usually comes out tenfold during the harvest” (*Oil Cemetery* 2) while the rivers are full of different species of fish.

Sadly, for these people, the rich crude oil resources beneath their land were discovered, and Zebulum Oil International, headed by Jefferson Watts, “acquired a license to drill for oil” (*Oil Cemetery* 25). Things never remained the same afterwards. Rita, the heroine of the narrative, emphatically submits:

From the slave trade era to the crude oil era, the history of our natural resources has remained in the hands of a league of merchants whose key agenda lay in the amount of natural resources they could acquire from our country. In their scheming exploits, they have raided our culture and our communities . . . the crazy exploitation of oil has disrupted the normal life of our people with nothing to show for it . . . We have moved from oil boom to oil doom. (*Oil Cemetery*, 62-63).

Of course, crude oil resource exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta generally and in Ubolu community particularly translates into environmental ruination. The negative effects of such as Zebulum Oil International leave the environment despoiled and degraded, thereby totally disrupting the normal life of Ubolu people who rely on their environment for sustenance. The problems resulting from oil exploration and exploitation, which affect the host communities such as Ubolu, manifest in diverse forms. Oil spillage remains the major means of environmental ruination in the Niger Delta. Nwoye’s narrator reveals that

There was a massive leakage in one of the oil pipelines at the Ubolu community farmland. Eighteen people had been found dead from the effect of fumes they inhaled in the course of fishing and farming or carrying out their ordinary lives. The community was in chaos (*Oil Cemetery* 89 – 90)

The effect of this oil spillage is enormous. It rendered the farmland as infertile as it kills aquatic life. The human problem that arises is that the farmers and the fishermen are forcefully disengaged from their occupation without being provided with another alternative. This explains why the “youthful population, which in better times would be engaged in fishing and farming, now hung about the community without direction or purpose” (*Oil Cemetery*, 89). Instructively, Rita, while addressing the oil workers union, outlines the grave consequences of oil spillage thus:

The oil spillage causes frequent farmland depletion and forest fires as well as serious air pollution. It also poisons the earth, kills crops, and plunges many farmers into deeper poverty. More serious is the contamination of

rivers, which not only deprives fishermen of their living but causes a shortage of drinking water (*Oil Cemetery*, 63).

Unarguably, crude oil exploitation by multinational oil companies is responsible for the huge environmental ruination that has characterized the Niger Delta region. In their effort to tap oil from the ground, these oil merchants drill wells and lay pipes with which they suck the resources from the wells to the refinery. Sometimes, an explosion occurs in the process, leading to fire disaster and death. This exactly happens in the Ubolu community and is reported in the daily newspaper, Renaissance:

Tragedy occurred yesterday as an explosion damaged an oil pipeline in a remote part of the Delta. Over thirty people lost their lives. Fire-fighters and policemen could not easily get access to the Ubolu site where the tragedy occurred . . . the explosion ripped open part of the main pipeline running from the oil fields at Isioye and Ubolu to the oil refinery. (*Oil Cemetery*, 79).

Though it is only the human loss that is reported in this sad incident of pipeline explosion, the material loss not reported is enormous. When an explosion of this kind happens, it affects the environment by dispensing an ocean of crude oil, which, with swift movement just like a flood, swallows up whatever comes its way—farmland, animals, streams—thus ruining and degrading the environment and its inhabitants.

Unfortunately for the people of Ubolu, in this case and the entire host communities of multinational oil conglomerates, living in an environment so degraded and ruined by crude oil becomes a very disturbing nightmare. This is so because oil exploitation activities negatively affect the sources of sustenance of the people. At the beginning of the story, the readers see an Ubolu community, prior to the discovery of oil in its land, peaceful, brimming with life, and its people productively engaged in sustainable occupations such as farming and fishing. But immediately oil exploration and exploitation began in the community; everything changed for the worse. Nwoye's narrator provides these vivid but detailed pictures:

For some time now, the inhabitants had been complaining that the harvest had diminished beyond comprehension. The fishermen complained about dead fish in the river. Crops for which the community was renowned were no longer growing . . . the thatched – roof village, the golden savannah, the once – green forest that had characterized Ubolu for generations threatened to become mere memories in the wake of the oil exploration (*Oil Cemetery*, 85).

Oil pipelines must be added as part of the environmental ruination of the Niger Delta. Since pipes are the only route through which crude oil is transported from an oil well to the refinery, this means that oil pipes are laid wherever oil is drilled many kilometers away from where it is refined. So in

Ubolu community, as is the case with every other host community in the Niger Delta, pipelines crisscross the length and width of the community, passing through farms, streams, and even homesteads, thus claiming a valuable portion of the environment. By implication, no other activity, whether farming, fishing, or any other, can take place where an oil pipeline is laid. This means that the pipes have polluted the place, making it unfit for any useful activity, even as they metaphorically suck the life-blood of the people. Indeed, crude oil exploration and exploitation in the Ubolu community, particularly, and in the entire Niger Delta, generally, is a metaphor for environmental ruination. Activities of multinational oil conglomerates adversely affect the flora and fauna of their host communities, more so because they

. . . do their business with arrogance and impunity. They occupy people's land and offer the local's only cheap menial jobs, yet they have no regards for the environment where these businesses are done, let alone the people's health (*Oil Cemetery*, 131).

May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*, therefore, present a lurid picture of the obviously intractable consequences of crude oil exploration in the Niger Delta using Ubolu as a fictitious example. The narrative bluntly indicts multinational oil conglomerates, their local allies, and the Nigerian federal government for the serial ruination of the Niger Delta environment through crude oil exploitation activities.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the vulnerability of the environment, particularly as a victim of crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The manner in which crude oil is exploited by multinational oil conglomerates operating in the Niger Delta is responsible for the enormous damage done to the environment, which has in turn made it inhabitable. This paper concludes that crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has led to the exploitation, pollution, and abandonment of the Niger Delta environment and this has given rise to what Harold Fromm called 'the problem of the environment.' And this problem needs urgent attention, especially because it should be among the important human concerns.



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