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ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION OF THE NIGER DELTA IN LITERARY TEXTS: AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta is one of the richest oil regions in the world, but also one of the most damaged by pollution and exploitation. The present research studies how Nigerian literature presents the problem of environmental degradation in the Delta. It refers to Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, and the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa. In the framework of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, the research shows how writers connect the destruction of the land with the suffering of people, especially women. Karen Warren's idea of the "logic of domination," Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism, and Rob Nixon's "slow violence" give the theoretical base for this reading. In *Oil on Water*, the silencing of women like Boma and Isabel is linked to the silencing of polluted rivers and destroyed forests. Ojaide's poems express grief over the loss of nature and culture, while Saro-Wiwa's work adds the voice of protest and activism. The study argues that literature not only describes ecological damage but also acts as a form of resistance, calling for justice, care, and renewal. It concludes that saving the Niger Delta environment cannot be separated from protecting human life and dignity.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Environmental Degradation, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Literature And Resistance

Introduction

The Niger Delta, located in southern Nigeria, is widely known for its vast oil wealth but also for the severe damage caused by decades of extraction. While oil has brought profit to multinational companies and the Nigerian state, the local environment and communities have faced pollution, displacement, and loss of livelihood. Rivers once rich in fish are now replete with oil spills. Farmlands are infertile, and gas flaring has polluted the air. These realities make the Niger Delta one of the most studied regions in discussions of environmental degradation and social injustice (Karmakar, 2025; Bose, 2024).

This research examines these texts through the lens of ecocriticism and ecofeminism. Ecocriticism helps us see how the environment in literature is not a backdrop but a living presence that suffers exploitation alongside human communities. Ecofeminism, especially, Karen Warren's idea of the "logic of domination" and Vandana Shiva's critique of



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capitalist exploitation, shows how women and nature are controlled by the same systems of power. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" also gives a useful perspective, as the damage in the Delta is gradual, hidden, and long-lasting rather than sudden (Rowland, 2019; Sankaran, 2021).

Literary works from the Niger Delta, therefore, serve as both testimony and resistance. They document how environmental degradation is not only about nature but also about human survival, dignity, and identity. By showing the struggles of women, children, and displaced communities, these texts highlight the human face of ecological destruction. Recent scholarship emphasizes that such literature provides a cultural memory of suffering while also imagining alternative futures based on justice and sustainability (Okolo, 2023; Ajibade, 2021). In this sense, literature becomes more than art. It is a tool of advocacy that insists on accountability and calls for harmony between humans and the natural world.

Literature Review

Studies on environmental degradation in the Niger Delta show how literature has become a tool of both documentation and resistance. A growing body of scholarship highlights how Nigerian writers capture the ecological crisis caused by oil exploitation. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has received significant attention for its portrayal of polluted creeks, ruined villages, and silenced voices. Karmakar (2025) reads the novel as a call for "decolonial repair," showing how the Niger Delta's ecological damage reflects wider structures of petro-capitalism and injustice. Akpama (2025), using an ecolinguistic approach, emphasizes how language in the novel frames the environment as both violated and resistant, underscoring how narrative choices reveal ideological tensions.

Ken Saro-Wiwa represents the most politically charged example of Niger Delta literary engagement. Pegg (2015) emphasizes how Saro-Wiwa's death made him a global symbol of resistance, while his writings remain central to understanding the moral stakes of environmental justice. Wiwa (2021), reflecting on his father's execution, frames it as both a personal tragedy and a national turning point, showing how literature and activism became inseparable in his legacy. Together, these studies highlight that Saro-Wiwa's literary contributions cannot be separated from his activist role, making him an enduring voice in debates on environmental degradation.

Postcolonial Perspectives on Environmental Exploitation

Scholars increasingly read Niger Delta literature through postcolonial lens, highlighting how oil exploitation continues the legacy of colonial extraction. Obi (2020) argues that multinational oil corporations function as "neo-colonial agents," taking resources while leaving destruction behind. Similarly, Watts (2021) emphasizes that the political structures supporting oil extraction mirror colonial governance, where local voices are marginalized and decisions are imposed from above. Literature such as *Oil on Water* reflects this reality by presenting the environment as a contested space shaped by both local suffering and global exploitation. This perspective shows how ecological degradation in the Delta cannot be separated from the historical and political patterns of domination.

Memory, Identity, and Environmental Trauma

Another critical dimension of Niger Delta writing is its treatment of memory and trauma. Scholars note that literature preserves the collective memory of ecological destruction, ensuring that stories of loss are not erased. Adeoti (2022) explains that narratives of polluted rivers and destroyed farmlands serve as "cultural archives" that protect community identity against forgetting. In the same line, Bassey (2019) argues that remembering ecological trauma is essential for demanding justice, as memory connects



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past exploitation to present struggles. By linking environmental degradation with identity and history, Niger Delta texts highlight how the fight for ecological justice is also a fight for cultural survival.

Studies on Oil on Water

Scholars have increasingly turned to Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as a central text for understanding the Niger Delta's ecological crisis. Karmakar (2025) interprets the novel as a narrative of "decolonial repair," arguing that its depiction of ruined villages and polluted rivers highlights how petro-capitalism destroys both people and ecosystems. Akpama (2025) adds that the novel's language frames the Delta as both violated and resistant, showing how ecological destruction is tied to struggles for identity. Bose (2024) contrasts the global "Capitalocene" with indigenous eco-justice, observing that the silenced voices of characters such as Isabel and Boma symbolize a cultural collapse tied directly to environmental ruin. For Ogungbemi (2023), the novel functions as ecological advocacy, presenting journalism and storytelling as acts of resistance.

Studies on Ken Saro-Wiwa

Ken Saro-Wiwa represents the most overtly political dimension of Niger Delta literature. Pegg (2015) marks his execution as a turning point, turning him into a symbol of resistance against ecological and cultural oppression. His novel *Sozaboy* illustrates how marginal voices are silenced in corrupt political systems, mirroring the silencing of the environment. Wiwa (2021), reflecting on his father's death, frames it as both a family tragedy and a national betrayal, showing how literature and activism were inseparable in his life. These readings underline that Saro-Wiwa's legacy is not only literary but also moral, linking ecological justice with human rights.

Theoretical Contributions

Critical approaches to ecofeminism and ecocriticism provide a strong foundation for analyzing Niger Delta texts. Wiyatmi and Suryaman (2019) propose ecofeminist literary criticism as a tool for fostering both ecological awareness and gender justice. Oppermann (2013) identifies feminist ecocriticism as a "new settlement" that bridges environmental and gender concerns. Vakoch and Mickey (2018) and Vakoch (2022) provide comprehensive frameworks that connect ecofeminist thought to literature, emphasizing how women and nature are both subordinated under exploitative systems. These theories, alongside Vandana Shiva's call for ecological balance and Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence," offer interpretive tools for understanding how the exploitation of the Niger Delta environment parallels gendered and cultural oppression.

Theoretical Framework

The study proceeds in the framework of ecofeminism. Ideas of more than one ecofeminist writers have been considered.

Ecofeminism and the Logic of Domination

Karen Warren's ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are linked through what she calls the "logic of domination" (Oppermann, 2013). This logic justifies control by labeling women and the environment as passive, voiceless, and available for use. In *Oil on Water*, Isabel's kidnapping and commodification mirror this process, as her body is traded much like oil resources. Boma's silence after trauma also reflects this domination: her lost voice symbolizes both gendered oppression and ecological collapse. Scholars such as Akpama (2025) and Bose (2024) reinforce this view,



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showing how Habila's narrative constructs the environment and women as equally silenced under petro-capitalism. Warren's framework thus makes visible how patriarchal and capitalist systems shape both literary characterizations and ecological realities.

Vandana Shiva and Ecofeminist Resistance

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism emphasizes the resilience of women in resisting ecological exploitation. She argues that women's traditional roles as caretakers of land and community give them a unique voice in struggles for ecological balance (Wiyatmi & Suryaman, 2019). Ojaide's poetry echoes this perspective, as his verses often portray women as keepers of memory and culture in times of ecological decline. Akani (2021) notes that in *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, women are shown mourning, resisting, and transmitting cultural identity despite the loss of land and rivers. Similarly, in *Oil on Water*, Boma's silencing can be read not only as trauma but also as a challenge to recover voice, aligning with Shiva's call for alternative ethics of care and reciprocity.

Analysis and Discussion

The present research examines the representation of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta in the contemporary literature. Along with that it explores its impact on women. The data has been taken from literary texts of some prominent writers.

Women, Silence, and Environmental Ruin in *Oil on Water*

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* directly links ecological collapse with the silencing of women. Isabel, the kidnapped wife of a European oil executive, becomes a symbol of how women's bodies are commodified and traded in the same way as oil resources. Her captivity mirrors the Niger Delta's hostage condition under corporate and political powers (Bose, 2024). Similarly, Boma, once a singer, loses her voice after trauma, reflecting how cultural life collapses when the environment is destroyed. As Akpama (2025) notes, the novel's language frames women and the environment as equally voiceless, both stripped of agency under petro-capitalism. Karmakar (2025) further argues that the ruined creeks and silenced characters demand "decolonial repair," showing how ecological injustice is also a cultural and gendered tragedy. These portrayals echo Warren's ecofeminist view of the "logic of domination," where women and nature are subordinated through the same structures of power.

Ken Saro-Wiwa: Literature as Activism

Ken Saro-Wiwa's contribution represents the merging of literature and activism. His novel *Sozaboy* exposes how corruption and exploitation silence ordinary people, a theme that parallels the silencing of the Niger Delta environment. Pegg (2015) observes that Saro-Wiwa's death made him a symbol of ecological justice, while Wiwa (2021) frames his execution as both a personal and national loss. His activism and writing together reflect Nixon's idea of "slow violence," as he consistently highlighted the long-term and invisible damage caused by oil exploration. Saro-Wiwa's legacy shows how literature can function as direct resistance, demanding justice for both the land and the people.

Intersections of Ecology, Gender, and Culture

Across Habila, Ojaide, and Saro-Wiwa, a common pattern emerges: environmental degradation is never just about nature but also about silenced women, displaced communities, and destroyed traditions. Boma's lost voice, Ojaide's mourning figures, and Saro-Wiwa's silenced activists all embody the interconnectedness of ecological and social suffering. As Chukwulobe (2023) shows, displacement in *Oil on Water* reflects hierarchies



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of exploitation, while Ogungbemi (2023) argues that storytelling itself becomes ecological advocacy. Together, these texts affirm that literature not only documents the crisis but also resists it, offering what Warren calls an “ethics of care” as an alternative to domination.

Strategy of Analysis

In this study, the analysis has been carried out by combining close analysis of selected literary texts with ecofeminist and ecocritical theories. Characters, images, and plot details from Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Tanure Ojaide’s poetry, and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writings were examined not in isolation but within their social and ecological contexts. This method allowed the voices of Isabel and Boma, the imagery of Ojaide’s polluted rivers, and the silenced characters in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* to be read as symbolic of broader structures of oppression. The theoretical lens of Karen Warren’s “logic of domination,” Vandana Shiva’s ecofeminism, and Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” was applied to show how gender, ecology, and culture intersect in the Niger Delta. In this way, the analysis does not simply retell the texts but interprets them as literary critiques of environmental degradation and social injustice.

Resistance and Resilience

Although the literature of the Niger Delta often focuses on destruction and loss, it also highlights forms of resistance and resilience. In *Oil on Water*, Rufus and Zaq’s act of telling stories itself becomes a kind of resistance, ensuring that the violence of oil exploitation is not erased but remembered. Ogungbemi (2023) reads the novel as a form of ecological advocacy, showing how literature can stand against silence. Even Boma’s broken voice, while symbolizing trauma, also points to the possibility of recovery, echoing Shiva’s idea that resilience can grow out of suffering.

Ken Saro-Wiwa represents resistance in its most radical form. His activism, combined with his literary work such as *Sozaboy*, demonstrates that art can inspire direct political action. Even after his execution, his legacy continues as a symbol of courage. Pegg (2015) calls his death a global marker of environmental justice, while Wiwa (2021) emphasizes how his story keeps inspiring new generations to fight for dignity and ecological balance.

Towards Ecofeminist Futures

The final insight from these literary works lies in their vision of alternative futures grounded in ecofeminist ethics. Warren’s “logic of domination” shows how women and nature are simultaneously silenced, but the texts also point toward ethical alternatives. Vandana Shiva’s emphasis on care and reciprocity resonates strongly in Ojaide’s poetic voices of mourning women, who stand as keepers of tradition and survival.

Conclusion

The study of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta through literature shows that ecological collapse cannot be separated from social, cultural, and gendered oppression. Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Tanure Ojaide’s poetry, and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writings all connect the ruined environment with silenced voices and displaced communities. Characters such as Isabel and Boma reflect how women are made voiceless in the same way as polluted rivers, while Ojaide’s poems preserve memory and Saro-Wiwa’s activism transforms literature into direct resistance.

Taking support of Karen Warren’s “logic of domination,” Vandana Shiva’s ecofeminism, and Rob Nixon’s “slow violence,” the analysis shows that the Niger Delta crisis is not only ecological but also cultural and political. Their views confirm how women, communities, and the land are all treated as “usable others” under systems of patriarchy and petro-



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capitalism. At the same time, they also highlight possibilities for resilience through memory, care, and protest.

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