



Rupture and Resistance in the Poetry of Ogaga Ifowodo: A Postcolonial-Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract. The rupture and the revolutionary movement to resist the exploitation of resources in the Niger Delta based on the obnoxious land tenure system government policies which have led to the degradation of the environment has been explored by writers from the region. The impact of the pollution of the environment on the people includes decrease in economic production as the environment is no longer sustainable. The issue of the loss of land through acquisition by government laws as oil exploration and exploitation sites has also made many communities homeless. The result of this dislocation is protest and resistance of the inhabitants of the region against the oil companies and their government backers. This paper argues that it is the conflict over the control of land between the indigenous people and the government that forms the basis for the ecological degradation of the Niger Delta through irresponsible exploitation of resources. The study uses the postcolonial-ecocritical theory to assert that the conflict over the ownership and control of the land is the major cause of the degradation in the region. The paper draws illustrations from Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* to prove that through the motifs of paradise, care, seizure, abandonment, exploitation and resistance, the government and the oil companies have turned the once pristine environment of the Niger Delta into an environmental dystopia. The result is resistance by the indigenous people as the land has stopped providing sustenance for them. The use of analepsis, repetition and contrast enable the poet to present a picture of the past, present and the future of the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Paradise, Environmental Degradation, Land Seizure, Resistance, Remediation

1. Introduction

Ecocritical African literature has been engaged with the study of the impact of the exploitation of natural resources on the environment. More so, there has been

the engagement of modern African literature on several issues including that of environmental degradation as an offshoot of the colonial experience. As part of the commitment of contemporary writers in Africa, they have engaged in the description of how man has destroyed the environment due to the high level of mineral exploration and exploitation. The first step to this exploitation of the natural resources is the seizure of the land where such minerals are domiciled. Thus, the history of man has been dominated by the subjugation of the colonized people and their land by the colonizer. Fanon (1962, as cited in DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011) surmised that “for the colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (p.3). In this vein, land becomes the most priced commodity the colonizer has sought in the process of dominating other nations.

The loss of the land resulted in what Babette (2008) refers to as “land conflict” which he defines as “the different interests over the property rights to land, the right to use the land, to manage the land, to generate income from the land, to transfer it and the right to compensation from the land” (p.9). Land is at the root of the conflict between the colonizers and the colonized in whatever place colonization has occurred. Once the land of the colonized has been taken away from them, the result is the massive exploitation of the land and its resources by the colonizers. As the colonizers exploit the land on a massive scale without regards to the indigenous knowledge of how to care for the environment, the result is pollution and degradation of the environment. This forms the argument of this paper. The paper argues that the rupture between man and the environment can be traced to the seizure of the land by government and the multinational oil companies through the land tenure laws which have resulted in the revolt and resistance by both man and the environment.

The people of the Niger Delta have lived in their land for thousands of years. The land has always been theirs. Therefore, the relationship between the traditional owners of the land and the environment has to be ruptured for the new owners of the land to legitimise their right over the land. This often culminates in unwholesome and unsustainable use of the land which eventually results in the degradation of the environment. The disconnection in the relationship between the traditional owners of the land and the seized land leads to resistance by those whose land is stolen. The resistance is also environmental in nature as the land also tries to resist the degrading practices of the exploiters. It is this state of rupture and resistance that this paper investigates. This paper argues that the struggle over the ownership of land in the Niger Delta area is the cause of the revolt by both the indigenes of the area and the environment. The paper uses illustrations from Ogaga Ifowodo's poetry to portray the relationship between land, the environment and the unending struggle between the people of the Niger Delta and the exploiters of the environment. The selected collection is *The Oil Lamp* (2005). In drawing illustration from the selected collection, the paper harps on the poems that reflect the postcolonial ecocritical theory in the argument that there is a relationship between the loss of land and the twin issues of human resistance and ecological resistance in the poetry of Ogaga Ifowodo.

The postcolonial ecocritical theory accounts for the nature of political and social control of colonized territories, and the cultural and material tensions that are associated with the colonized people's resistance to the colonizer's occupation, exploitation of natural resources, and the bureaucratic strategies the occupiers develop and exercise to earn themselves legitimacy, to continue the perpetuation of such control. The land is also the root of the environment of a place. This means that place becomes the point of convergence between postcolonial and ecocritical studies. Therefore, Jonah (2020) asserts that "both fields are concerned with the idea of the representation of place, postcolonialism focuses on the historicity of place and ecocriticism hinges on the aesthetics of place" (pp.38,39). The discourse of place and land becomes the focal point as it is the inhabited land that houses both the people and the environment. Therefore, when the land is cared for, the environment will be habitable but when the land is devastated, the environment will become degraded. This is the importance of the merger of the postcolonial and the ecocritical theories in this paper.

2. Analysis and Discussion

The poetry of Ogaga Ifowodo reflects this interrelationship between the control of land and the health of the environment. Ifowodo is one of the contemporary Nigerian poets who is committed to both the political and environmental concerns of the nation, Nigeria. Akingbe (2012) argues that an African work of art that fails to address issues of socio-political or historical significance is considered to be outside the scope of African aesthetics (p. 2). Thus, the work of Ifowodo follows the same trend in the explication of the challenges militating against the development of the emergent nations of Africa. In the poetry of Ifowodo, there is what Nixon (2005) describes as the parameters of both "cosmopolitanism and bioregionalism" (p. 248). Nixon explains bioregionalism as "one's local part of the earth whose boundaries are determined by the location's natural characteristics rather than by arbitrary administrative boundaries" (p. 256). As such, Nixon can surmise that "in an era of giga mergers and nano second transnationalisms, we cannot persist with the kind of isolationist thinking that has in different ways, impeded both postcolonial and ecocritical responses to globalization" (p. 248). The implication of Nixon's argument in the investigation of Ifowodo's poetry is that in tackling the political, social and environmental challenges of the Niger Delta, the poet has used the explication of the local issues to reflect on the situation of the nation, Africa and the world at large. One of the thematic preoccupations of Ifowodo that has found expression in a globalised world is the concept of paradise.

In the poetry of Ifowodo, there is a noticeable description of the paradisiac nature of the land of the Niger Delta before the displacement due to loss of land caused first by colonialism and then by the neocolonial forces of emergent African States. As used in this paper, neocolonial forces mean the relationship by the government of the independent African states and their former colonizers represented mostly by western multinational corporations. Neocolonialism is usually engineered by a collusion necessitated by the incompetence or economic reliance of these nations on their colonial exes. Usually, these collusions have economic and political undertakings fueling them, such that short-term gains and grants go one way, and access to natural resources as loan collaterals go the other way. On one side of this presentation is the idealic description of the environment. Ifowodo describes the pristine and virgin environment that is the foundation of nations and the universe. In *The Oil Lamp*, Ifowodo idealizes the environment of the Delta from a firsthand experience of the pristine

environment when he was growing up as a child. In the poem "A Waterscape", the poet proffers a glimpse of the pristine and paradise nature of the environment that:

Hung above water, hands in the hair,
whited tongues and breathing fibrous air:
roots, white mangrove roots.

Blacker than pear, deeper than soot
massive ink-well, silent and mite:
water, black water.

Floating hats of lily, yellow plume,
plankton and shrimp, egg-and-fish in bloom:
Lakes, ancestral lakes.

Rich mud of eels, water-holes of crab,
sink-place for fisher dig-and-grab:
bog, mudskippers' bog

And in the mangrove waters, when tides
free the creeks of weeds, fishermen glide
home to the first meal (*The Oil Lamp*, p.xi)

In this introductory poem, the clean, rich and pristine environment of the Delta is presented. Through the use of the technique of analepsis, Ifowodo takes the reader to the idealic past in the Niger Delta. Though the environment described by the poet is not obtainable again in the present circumstances, the idealization of the environment in the poem reminds the reader of the past in the Delta region. The poet substantiates the paradise beginning in several ways. One way he idealizes the Delta is through the description of the agricultural bountifulness of the environment. The poet says:

...What did they know of oil
other than the fruit – red extract of palm trees?
The bounty of the sea, of the creeks and rivers,

The barn –busting yield of arable land
rich in organic silt and loam
had not caused a quest for riches
hidden deep in the heart of the earth.
When they dug wells, it was for water;
They didn't have to dig too deep for the table,
They didn't have to drill to the heart
or mine every vein for fossil ooze,
until the colonial find in '58. (p. 42)

Apart from idealizing the environment as producing clean water from "wells" without any purifying materials, an environment that yields "fruits" and bounty of the sea, the poet also articulates the relationship between the land, environment and the people in the past. In the poem "Ogoni", Ifowodo

foregrounds the shift in the ownership of the land as the beginning of the rupture and the eventual resistance by both the people and the environment of the Niger Delta.

Ifowodo uses the technique of contrast to show that in the beginning, the land of the Niger Delta belongs to the people dwelling in the area. The poet contrasts the views of Major Kitemo representing the neocolonial forces and an old man. According to the Major, "the land is Nigeria's" (p. 38). He backs his arguments with "decrees duly made in the books" (p. 37). In contrast, the old man argues with an interrogative that "can you tell, my son, how old Nigeria is?" The Major replies that Nigeria "born in 1914, she's seventy-nine this year". At this point, the old man again queries the Major:

That's Lord Lugard's colony, the cartographer's
trade map for British expropriation. But I

will take your word for it, So tell me, my son,
How long do you think we have been on this land,
how long the oil, the trees, the creeks and the rivers?"
(p. 39)

In this excerpt, the use of the conversation technique enables the poet to establish the original owners of the land. In the quest to create farmlands for their sustenance, the people of the region have felled the trees which constitute the original and virgin forest of the area where they have planted cash crops and food crops. The question is who is responsible for the clearing of the forest that has paved the way for the farmlands in the region? It is the indigenous people of the Delta. In this vein, it can be established that from the beginning, the people of the Niger Delta have been the owners of the land and they have been able to manage the environmental harmony between themselves and the land. These lines buttress the argument that the land of the Niger Delta has been managed sustainably by the people of the area. The people of the Delta were satisfied with the resources the land offers them. In turn, the people "didn't have to dig too deep for the table" nor did they have to "drill to the heart/or mine every vein for fossil ooze" (p. 42). The significance of the care for the land by the people is that the relationship between man and the environment becomes mutual. While the care for the environment leads to increase in the production of food for man, the waste produced by man serves as manure that nourishes land for a sustainable environment. According to Ifowodo, this was "until the colonial find in '58" (p. 42).

The quest for oil and the subsequent exploitation of the land by the colonial government in the late 1950s ruptured the harmony between the people of the Niger

Delta and the environment (Chukwueloka & Adoromike, 2020, p.11). The colonial power's "theft by law" of the land of the colonized is well known in history. In describing the land tenure in pre-colonial Benin, Bradbury (1957) explains that:

No rights in fallow land are recognized. Once a man has cleared land, planted it over two or three years and then let it go fallow, it reverts to the community though it is not likely to be recleared till some years later. In fact, some individuals return to the same piece of land after a period of years but they do not thereby establish any additional claim to it (pp. 44,45).

This land tenure system which may also be applicable to other areas of the Niger Delta ensures that land is cared for. This is because, for the African, land is more than just a place to grow food and harvest crops. In the words of Osagie (2013), "land was regarded as sacred gift from Almighty God to the people for their sustenance... land does not belong to the living alone, but also to the dead (ancestors) and those unborn" (p. 138). This practice of communal ownership of land for both farming and religious purposes continued for some parts of the Niger Delta during the colonial rule. But a noticeable shift from communal ownership of land to that of government ownership began with the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri, in the present Bayelsa state in 1958 (Montesano, 2021, 93). The paradox of the situation is reflected in the poem Ogoni XXIX that,

... what a half-breed the people were
To claim and fight for what they did not own,
To deny the owners what was theirs

By decrees duly made and in the books; (p. 37)

This excerpt buttresses the shift from the communal ownership to that of the government. Once the government appropriates the land, all the resources on and in the land also belongs to the government. Once again, this argument is substantiated by the conversation between Major Kitemo and the Old Man. Major Kitemo asked;
"Do you really believe you own the oil?"

"Yes", they said, as I knew they would.
"And how did you come to own it?"
"By its being on our land," they said.

"The land is Nigeria," I corrected them...
"And how did Nigeria come to own the oil?"
Oh, I should have paused to give thought,

should never have presumed a hoary-headed man,

But I answered too quickly, "By its being on her land."
(p. 38)

In the poetry of Ifowodo, the motif of land seizure is developed. In order for both the colonial and neocolonial governments to lay claim to the oil resources of the Niger Delta, they have to strategize to change the land tenure system through decrees and laws. Major Kitemo, in the poem Ogoni XXXII makes this idea clearer when he says that,
"By decrees and edicts

duly made, the land is not yours
nor all that lies in it. The powers
That rule the country-your colony-

that make you citizens
of a nation, known to law
and safe from plunder,

decree the land and its wealth not yours". (p. 40)

Once the land tenure system changes from communal ownership to government ownership, the rupture in the harmony between the people and the environment is complete. The motif of abandonment is developed at this stage by the poet. The lamentation by the former teacher that "but for the theft by law, we would in time have seismographed and drilled, or hired Shell" is like a medicine after death. The government has seized the land and the connection between the people and the land is broken (Ogbinaka, M., Akpome, A. & C. Addison, 2024, 167). A direct consequence of the seizure of the land is the exploitation of the natural resources of the land without any mutual respect for the environment unlike what has been the norm in the pre-colonial era.

The abandonment of the status-quo by the new system leads to neglect of the environment. In turn, the neglect of the environment begins to bend towards apocalypse which Thompson (1997) describes as a word taken from "the Greek *Apo-calyptein* meaning 'to unveil'. Apocalyptic literature takes the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed; the underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil ..." (pp. 13,14). The history that just ended as rendered in the reviewed poems is the control of the land by the indigenous groups in the Niger Delta. The major aim of the seizure of the land by the neocolonial forces is to gain unfettered access to the rich resources of the land (Dick 2010; Darah, 2011). At the same time, since the new forces who seized the land have no ancestral connection to the land, they have no obligation to care for the land, its environment

and inhabitants. Just a few decades into the seizure of the land of the Niger Delta, the environment becomes degraded and devastated. Ifowodo portrays the apocalyptic situation of the area in the poem "Ogoni XLII" that;

Can anyone think of the Niger Delta
and not feel an ache in his heart?
So inhospitable, it is like all terrains

in the world where oil might be found: under
seas, desert dunes, snow-capped wilds, malarial
swamps. As if He who desolated

those places thought it too cruel to plant
humans in some of them without recompense ...

But a good man's conscience
will sting him like bees to see how abject

they are that live amidst such wealth in our
land; to hear them bewail the dissipation
of their share of earth's bounty, the devastation

that pours oil on rivers to float fish
lure the flamingo to a lethal meal
and quill the secretary bird's death on sludge;

that irrigates lowland crops to rot their roots,
and wells resentment like ocean tides above their
heads. (p. 52)

The effect of the shift from pristine environment to the "oil" environment is described by Temi Ologunorisa (2009) that:

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has suffered all forms of pollution and degradation arising from oil and natural gas exploitation. These include decrease in agricultural yield, depression in flowering and fruiting in okra and palm trees, deformities in children, liver damage and skin problems, increasing concentration of air borne pollutants, acidification of soils and rainwater, corrosion of metal roofs and significant increases in concentration of sulphates, nitrates and dissolved solids, with associated socio-economic problems. (p.1)

The devastation of the land which was the pride of the people of the area wrings feelings of nostalgia from the generations spanning the time when the people were in control of their land and the present time of neocolonial control. An example of a member of this generation is Madam Edoja. Madam Edoja is "ninety years of age". She was happily married till her fiftieth birthday when she loses her husband to an accident. The husband "fell off a rig and drowned at sea"; this is one of the new and emerging cause of death in the

Niger Delta after the seizure of the land and the subsequent exploitation of the land for crude oil by multinationals (p. 17). Through the use of a dirge, Ifowodo is able to show that the people of the area did not consent to the seizure of their land. According to Madam Edoja in the poem "Jese XV",
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 ...

The fields are tarred where cassava once grew,
you know the fields are tarred and harder
than a shell, too hard for our hoes.

Oil is my curse, oil is my doom.
Where are my children? Where is my husband?
Ashes and bones. (p. 17)

In this dirge by Madam Edoja, the transition from the bountifulness of the past is contrasted with the bareness of the present. The lamentation of Madam Edoja goes further to establish the idea of lack since the loss of the land to the neocolonial occupation forces. The theme of lack is developed further when the persona laments the lack of social amenities like electricity and pipe borne water. This is the preoccupation of the poet in "Poem XLIX" where the poet says that:

And this from a man with a grudge in Warri:
The whole town in darkness
Because Never Expect Power Always
is working hard for its name.

First, there was light every other day,
then every two days; then four, then, ...
Forty five days! Can't sleep at night-
Without the fan to stun mosquitoes. (p.62)

Though the Delta is an oil bearing region, the lack of petrol or fuel for domestic consumption is also a continuous occurrence which has led to tragic consequences. The poet in "Poem I" says:
It was the fourteenth month of the fuel crunch
and stoves cooked cobwebs in cold corners.
Dreading the spirits that live in trees,

they would not break green twigs to make a meal
till the fuel crunch compelled choice between
tree and human, today and tomorrow (p. 3)

In another level, the theme of lack or scarcity of the basic necessities of life is developed in terms of the human biological and psychological makeup. The scarcity of basic needs becomes injurious to the physical development of the people. The idea of hunger is also related in "Poem XVIII" where the persona relates the story of those driven from their home by the forces of evil that:

Crickets, outshouted, scurried
in dazed circles around children too stunned
to stretch out a hand, until hunger matched fear

and the men, far from yam or fish, turned insect
hunters, wild root diggers. Banished
from fire by fire, they ate their food fresh (p.23).

Hunger or the inability to get food to eat is the worst form of deprivation a man can encounter. The degradation of both the physical environment and the human psyche ignited the unrest paving the way for the next level of activity in the Niger Delta which is the struggle to recover the land from the neocolonialist.

A direct consequence of the rupture in the ownership of the land of the Niger Delta, the degradation of the environment and the lack of social amenities is the confrontation between the people of the area and the neocolonial forces. In the bid to recover their land or worse still get recompense from the wealth that is flowing from their land, the people confronted the government. In *The Oil Lamp*, the government and the oil multinational companies are represented by Major Kitemo. So, the people of the Niger Delta on the one side and the neocolonial forces on the other become locked up in a struggle to determine who controls the land and its wealth. This struggle yields the motif of resistance in the poetry of Ifowodo. The theme of resistance is developed along a tripod approach of environmental and ecological resistance, the human resistance to the neocolonial forces and the counter-resistance of the neocolonial forces.

On the first level, there is the environmental and ecological resistance. The 1979 constitutional amendment to the land use tenure system moved the ownership of land including those in the Niger Delta in the hands of the federal government. The implication is that the compensation for any land allocated to an oil company will be based on "on the value of the crops on the land at the time of its acquisition, not on the value of the land itself" (p.55). Once the mutual relationship between the indigenous people of the Niger Delta is shattered by the seizure of the land by the occupational forces, the care that the

environment enjoys in the way of both physical and spiritual care is ruptured. Hitherto, the people of the Niger Delta before the seizure of their land have engaged in the remediation of the environment in their own way. This is what the poet describes in the poem "Ogoni L" that:

... we

are silted gutters, swamp and swampdwellers.
The Niger flows down to us its floodwaters,
swells our rivers with the dread tributues

of seasonal carnage washed in from the fields.
And we stay afloat by treading tears, reclaiming
footholds with the humus of hate and envy (p. 63)

The people of the Niger Delta are engaged in the reclamation of the environment through the "treading tears" of both physical and spiritual care because "at one with nature's lore, they left no graves" (p. 66). This care has been replaced with the machines of destruction; the canoe is replaced with the trawlers and tanker which "sail away/with Bonny Light crude" (p. 55). The gods and the spirits of the mangrove have been replaced with the "Iron Dragon/the gas-flaring stack whose awful mouth spits fire/without cease ... (p. 55). Therefore, with the introduction of the unknown into the area, the environment revolted. The environment which has been known to yield good harvest seizes from doing so. Instead, the environment begins to yield twigs and thistles. In the poem, "Memory was His Saviour and His Death", the poet portrays the contrast between the past and the present this way:

... He remembered the swamps and the rivers,
the fish shivering in a choked net,
the colony of creeks and mudskippers

founded by the retreating tides. And farms
swollen with roots and bulbs. He remembered
a bounty whose splendour wrote psalms
chanted by the peasant to winds and birds ...

He had known the floods, the tides and the waves
that soften the land and brought the fish home;
at one with nature's lore, they left no graves. (p. 66)

This is the glorious past when the environment yields plentiful harvest. But presently, the environment is resisting man because,

when the housewife stood aghast by her plot
of cassava and herbs swallowed by slick

when trees, fish and animals in mourning

surrendered to acid rain and gas poison

when the canoe paddling children to school
capsized far from the bridge or motorway. (p. 67)

The resistance by the environment is disastrous to man. For instance, instead of rain water, there is soot water in some communities in Rivers State. With no hope of surviving from the environment which has hitherto been his means of survival, the people of the Niger Delta began their own resistance to the occupational forces. This resistance manifests in several ways.

One of the manifestations of the human resistance is peaceful agitation for a share in the oil proceeds or stoppage of the oil drilling in their land. The persona in the poem "Ogoni XXXV" reechoing the words of Major Kitemo, points to the agitated spirit of the people of the Niger Delta when he says that "No child, man or woman could be swayed; /they had the script in their heads, /answer for every question (p. 43). Another level of the human resistance is the resort to violence. When the peaceful agitation does not yield the desired result, the people resorted to violence. At this time, the narrative is taken over by the propagandists of the neocolonial forces, the foremost of whom in the poetry collection under study is Major Kitemo. The killing of the "four men, calling/them traitors" is one of the first acts of violence (p. 47). At the same, in other parts of the Niger Delta, physical violence by the people of the area is springing up daily. At Odi, "a case of homicide: five cops and four/soldiers sent to break a youth revolt/lay dead in the dark labyrinth of the delta" (p. 21).

In order to stop the continuous agitation and pave the way for the eventual use of force, the occupational forces launched a counter-resistance. In "Ogoni", the counter resistance force is led by Major Kitemo. Due to his insistence on wiping out the indigenous population to gain unfettered access to the drilling of oil in the Ogoniland, Major Kitemo said the killing of the four traitors in Ogoni gave him the pretence to launch the "aggressive act of folly, so I said: "Kill-/Them-All ..." (p.47). Due to his obsession with genocide of the local people, the people named him Major Kill-Them-All. This pun on Major Kitemo (Major Kill-Them-All) reflects the severity of the counter-resistance. The resistance by the environment, the indigenous people and the counter-resistance by the neocolonial forces culminated in a state of war. The poet describes this situation in "The Pipes War XLIV" that:

Such folly
as Major Kitemo's pretext in Ogoni,

as flattened a town for a felony,

as burned one thousand officially dead,
as turned a scrapping for used pipes
-so rusted Shell could dig them up!-

into a war for territory
between Oleh and Olomoro ...

leapt into hordes of hands, and there was a pretext
to shoot and burn, and drive more into the bush. (p. 54)

The images of the towns of Ogoni, Oleh and Olomoro are a symbolic reference to the devastation that has happened to places where there has been resistance to the degradation of the environment by the multi-national corporations exploring oil in the area. The image of Major Kitemo is symbolic of the state forces that provide protection for the oil companies. At times, the oil companies use subtle means of divide and rule to create a clash between oil bearing communities who are in a constant mutual suspicious of each other. This is the case of Oleh and Olomoro who fought a fratricidal war because of the suspicion that the other has ambushed the compensation accruing from the oil companies. At other times, the resistance is quelled by the state. This is the case of Odi where the state forces have to level the community in order to avenge the killing of soldiers and police by resistance forces. In this scenario, the crisis between the hegemonic forces and the resistance fighters transform into war.

The illustration of the trope of war is the destruction of Odi. Odi is an Ijaw community in the present Bayelsa state. The resistance to the unbridled exploitation of oil and the despoliation of the environment in the process took a new turn when the resistance forces are accused of killing twelve members of the government in 1998. In order to dislodge the militants, as the government calls the resistance forces, the government forces launched an attack on the town in 1999. The attack on Odi led to the destruction of the town and the killing of more than nine hundred persons. This is what is captured by Ifowodo in "Poem XVII" that:

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 try stripping the mud-
walled classroom blocks of their thatch roofs
In the thick of the season's night – and – day (p. 22)

The destruction of Odi catapulted the Niger Delta region into a state of war. The resistance forces used the events at Odi as a launchpad for revenge attacks on the hegemonic forces in the region. The poet uses the events at Odi to symbolise the conflagration that enveloped the Niger Delta region. In this vein, the poet further describes the state of warfare in the Niger Delta that:

... over

its ribs than a drum of war . . .
but the murderers, crouched in ambush
behind off- hinge doors, armed and ready
for battle, had fled. It was time

for the house- to – house search
to fish them out. In the light noon
hazed by the just and smoke

of their bombs, in the silence
heavier than a ghost-town’s,
they kicked in doors, but remembering
. . .

*This is the army! You cannot win!
Come out with your hands above your heads!
(The Oil Lamp,p.26)*

The extent of destruction at Odi, and indeed, the Niger Delta, is a further proof that the clash between the resistance and the government forces is a debilitating one for the Niger Delta. Describing the destruction further in poem “XXII” the poet portrays the gory nature of warfare and the destruction that follows that:

And they shot grenades into houses
suspiciously unmarked, dropped
on bellies, machine guns on the ready,
to await the squealing caved –in faces of fear
and surrender. Still, they heard only
their thumping boots, the tumbling-in

of roofs and walls crumbling
before the charge at the blasted door (*The Oil Lamp*,
p.27)

In the midst of the crisis that the seizure of the land of the Niger Delta has brought to both the environment and the people of the area, the poet also projects a hope for the redress of the breach between man and the environment. But this is hinged on the return of the land to the people that owns it. It is only then that they can resuscitate and rejuvenate the environment through a physical and spiritual remediation based on a mutual relationship between the land and those dwelling on it because “Luckily for him, he was in the right place.../his act will glitter like rubies of blood and

blaze/his name” (p. 68). Surely, the Niger Delta people will regain their land and resources after so many struggles.

3. Conclusion

This paper argues that it is the conflict over the control of land that forms the basis for the ecological degradation of the Niger Delta. With adequate illustration from Ogaga Ifowodo’s two collection of poetry, this paper has proved that the people of the Niger Delta have cared for the environment of the region when the communal land tenure system was operated by them. But the multinational oil companies and the hegemonic forces use the decrees and laws of government to appropriate the mineral resources of the region for themselves. The massive exploitation of the resources leads to a polluted land and in turn to a degraded environment. The environment becomes unsustainable and the livelihood of the people threatened. This disenchantment leads to confrontation between the people and the hegemonic forces. The peaceful resistance soon gives way to a violent confrontation. The result is the destruction of the communities in the Niger Delta. The people of the region did not lie down and wait for fate. Instead, they engaged the multinationals and government forces in armed struggle.

The rupture between man and the environment is one of the impacts of this conflict. The appropriation of the resources of the land of the people of the Niger Delta and their eventual reaction is paralleled with the reaction of the environment to the loss of care it is getting from the indigenous people of the area. This convergence between the postcolonial and ecocritical theories forms the basis of this paper which argues that the transition from the pristine environment where the indigenous people of the Niger Delta own and care for the land to the desolated and dystopic environment of the present is all due to change of the ownership of land. This struggle for the control of the resources in the land of the Niger Delta people has generated the movement from the paradise nature of the environment to a polluted land, abandonment of the principles for the sustainability of the land, degradation of the environment and the eventual resistance by both the environment and the people of the Niger Delta.

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