

Resisting Pacification: Locating Tension in G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's Poetry

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Niyi Akingbe and Paul Ayodele Onanuga,
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Abstract: This paper analyses the tension between subjugation and resistance as represented in G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's six poetry collections, through the lens of discourse stylistics and eco-linguistic theories. Ogbowei is a prolific Nigerian poet whose work delineates anger and resistance while documenting the Niger Deltan experience. His poetry illustrates themes of emasculation in the aftermath of continued pillage and drums up support for the region's nationalism, expressing the Niger Deltans' frustrated yearnings for self-determination. Venturing beyond the usual boundaries of ecocriticism, Ogbowei's poetry not only engages with the Niger Delta's enduring poverty, ecological degradation and despair but also deploys resistance against the region's continued subjugation, portraying Niger Deltans' determination and struggle to live a fulfilled life in an ecologically-degraded environment. Taking eco-critical concerns as a point of departure, this paper interrogates the poetics of resistance in Ogbowei's six collections: *the heedless ballot box* (2006), *the town crier's song* (2009), *the song of a dying river* (2009), *marsh boy and other poems* (2013), *let the honey run* (2013) and *matilda* (2018). Ogbowei expresses feelings of anger and anxiety through linguistic deviations, collocational clashes, allusions, repetitions and pointed use of lexis, in service of an artistic commitment to resistance and protest. Ogbowei's poetry collections thus provide a literary site where protest, resistance and revolt intersect, relaying the peculiarities of the Niger Delta. Through an analysis of selected poems in his oeuvre, we argue that Ogbowei's work calls for eco-revival and the restoration of dignity to humanity in this troubled region.

Niyi AKINGBE and Paul Ayodele ONANUGA

Resisting Pacification: Locating Tension in G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's Poetry

Introduction

G'Ebinyo Ogbowei is one of the most prodigious poets to emerge from Nigeria's Niger Delta region. To date, he has published six poetry collections: *the heedless ballot box* (2006), *the town crier's song* (2009), *song of a dying river* (2009), *let the honey run* (2013), *marsh boy & other poems* (2013) and *matilda* (2018). While this paper places overarching emphasis on the anger derived from the marginality and economic disempowerment of the Niger Delta in these collections, we also interrogate controversial intersections between nationalism, militancy and self-determination. Ogbowei's six poetry collections are marked by a poetics of belligerence and bellicosity, producing a palpable sense of tension that defies restraints. In response to marginality, his poetry is committed to the fight for the liberation of this region from the postcolonial Nigerian nation-state's stranglehold. Discernible in Ogbowei's oeuvre is a reflection of the contradictions and struggles within the Niger Delta's communities. Beyond an overt portrayal of Niger Delta nationalism, these collections' terrific inscription of environmental despoliation produces depictions of anguish, contextualizing remarkable experiences of regional persecution. This anguish is expressed through a vocabulary of resentment in Ogbowei's poetry that establishes him as a *bonafide* Niger Delta nationalist, imbued with a passionate devotion to the pursuit of the region's secession from an inequitable Nigeria nation-state. As one navigates anger in these poetry collections, one encounters striking images of death and violence, which heighten political tension. The palpable tension created by Ogbowei's vocabulary of resentment arouses our understanding of the state of siege presently ravaging the Niger Delta. By raising profound questions about this region's political subjugation in his poetry, Ogbowei has rejected the path of seemingly conciliatory eco-critical awareness associated with most Niger Delta poetry, and instead embraces tropes of resistance which wrest the narratives of the region's travails from a reactionary platform. By so doing, he has subversively endorsed the emergence of youth militancy as a backlash to continued dehumanization, stridently calling for the region's self-determination.

Drawing Attention to the Misery of Ecological Degradation in the Niger Delta

It is no exaggeration to say that the Niger Delta's enduring political and ecological crisis has in recent years benefited from a poetry of anger and disillusionment that derives from a generational reaction to economic strangulation, political marginalization, social emasculation and ecological despoliation of the various communities in the region, due to the poorly regulated activities of multinational oil firms, who have been conducting their operations since the 1960s. Farm lands, fishing ponds and rivers bear the inscription of environmental pollution orchestrated by the activities of Shell and other oil multinationals. Severe environmental degradation threatens to ruin the continued subsistence of Niger Delta communities. In view of the continual despoliation of the Niger Delta's flora and fauna, the region remains a significant subject in contemporary Nigerian literature.

Curiously, if the determination to amplify narratives of misery besetting the Niger Delta is of utmost concern to the writers from the region, then how does one come to terms with the revelation that John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Gabriel Imomotimi Okara, foremost Nigerian poets of Niger Delta descent, have only reacted passively to the degradation of the region in their poetry? Perhaps their hesitant reaction is borne out of their respective attitudes toward the euphoria of a promising, newly independent Nigerian nation, bristling with the boisterous optimism of the 1960s, to the detriment of launching campaigns for the restoration of the Delta's ecosystem. The work of these two poets professes disparate leanings as they are effusive in their praise of the rustic charms of the Niger Delta's unmistakable ambience, exemplified in Clark-Bekederemo's *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) and *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1978). Of course, at this stage, degradation as an ineluctable sign of the region's decline as we now know it had not yet become a national crisis. Nevertheless, given the fact that postcolonial Nigeria is a contentious nation with enormous regional differences, Clark-Bekederemo and Okara might have deliberately shied away from capturing in their poetry the enduring misery and festering poverty that the region has contended with since oil exploration began in 1967.

Within his own limitations, Tanure Ojaide, a Niger Delta poet, moves beyond a reactionary sensibility in his poetry collections, *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *the endless song* (1989) and *The Tales of the Harmattan* (2007), to draw attention to the debilitating ecological degradation of the region. Over the last ten years, the passivity of the poetry written by the older generation of Niger Delta poets and the seemingly reactionary poetics identified in the eco-critical poetry emerging from the region have been succeeded by a new poetic consciousness which emanates from a combative reaction to the relentless,

successive military subjugation and economic emasculation of the Delta. Years of neglect and the reckless appropriation of the Niger Delta's wealth by the Nigerian government, alongside the insensitivity of oil multinationals, have fueled a wave of radical ecological poetics by Niger Delta poets like Ibiwari Ikiriko, Ebi Yeibo, Joe Ushie and Ogaga Ifowodo. The work of these poets draws on the consummate eco-critical poetry of Tanure Ojaide, illustrating the Niger Delta's despoliation and, also borrowing significantly from Ogbowei's militant poetics that pointedly referenced political tyranny and subjugation. Furthermore, these poets harness stratagems of anger and defiance to address the gamut of grievances concerning the ecological degradations plaguing the Niger Delta's communities. These include the theft of the region's wealth by the Nigerian government, the destruction of the ecosystem by the operating oil multinationals, the pauperization of the population due to the polluted water and farmlands and the deficits of social amenities in the region. Reflecting on the magnitude of the Delta's degradation, Niyi Akingbe argues that 'in the context of the degradation of the Niger Delta, the language of neglect continues to revolve around the images of oil exploitation and, by extension, economic dispossession' (2014, 17). The Niger Delta's sustained exploitation has been relentlessly referenced in the eco-critical but combative poetics of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005), Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue* (2007) and Joe Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* (2004).

Like any group constantly threatened with possible annihilation, the Niger Delta's communities constantly resisted exploitation and domination during colonialism and this trend continued in postcolonial Nigeria. Reflective of the postcolonial leadership challenges which have lingered in Nigeria as in other African nations (Onanuga 2018), Isaac Adaka Boro's *The Twelve-Day Revolution* (1982, 52) depicts the Niger Delta of the 1960s, providing a striking portrayal of the region's struggle for self-preservation. However, during the 1990s, due to the militarization of the zone and the tragic hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a prominent minority rights activist, by the military government of Sani Abacha, the region's crisis escalated and received international media coverage. Over the years, the government's neglect of the Delta's communities in terms of non-provision of basic amenities as well as widespread destruction of the farmlands and fishing waters have significantly fueled agitations that have developed into armed resistance led by young militants, which the government and oil multinationals have not succeeded in curbing. In the domain of the arts, literature undertakes the task of documenting prevalent social realities within the environment in which it is produced. This paper is focused on a linguistic analysis of tension in Ogbowei's six poetry collections, which delineate the enduring poverty, deprivations and ecological degradation that Niger Delta's communities continually contend with, and the militancy and armed struggle which this oppression has engendered.

More recently, as the world continues to witness accretions of repression, injustice and blatant subjugation of oppressed minorities, technological advancements and the widespread use of social media have provided viable pathways to the creation and sustenance of protest movements for social change. Through hash tags and online trends like #Arab Spring, #Bring Back Our Girls and #Black Lives Matter, attention is drawn to prevailing social crises while tangible moves are made to correct identified wrongs. However, while online or social media-based activism have been adjudged as influential, the diverse levels and forms of political protests have only continued to expand (Norris 20). Social scientists and sociologists have been concerned with the social demographics of protests, the attitudes and motivations behind them and the dynamics of their mobilization. For most literary writers, however, resistance and protests are hinged on the weight of conscience, where the pen is supposedly mightier than the sword. Consequently, cultural imperialism, political subjugation, and economic and social oppression are themes regularly explored in African literary writings.

The role of a literary writer extends beyond reducing thoughts to writing. Writers act as the conscience of society, as they draw attention to existing social ills. This preoccupation is targeted toward eventually occasioning social change. Within the African continent, politically conscious writers have undertaken this onerous task, oftentimes to their personal detriment. Some popular names that come to mind in this regard are Wole Soyinka, Jack Mapanje, Kole Omotoso, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. With specific attention to poetry, Gabriel Okara argues that the 'poet must exist to exercise the powers of the word to realize his visions and an existing society on which he focuses his visions' (2004,78). Similarly, Achebe (1985) asserts that literary writings are often concerned with contemporary issues. While physical protest actions may involve violence and the breakdown of law and order, writers expressing resistance may act as arbiters of justice through non-violent means. Tanure Ojaide in *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa* (1995,42) declares that:

Literature has to draw attention to [the] increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights... It is understandable why the African (Nigerian) artist is utilitarian.

In this conception of the writer's role, the writer employs his or her artistic talents and consciousness to create awareness either to avert conflict or reconcile people enmeshed in conflicts (Aito6), extending Aito's typification of poets as 'town criers' 'who harness the relationship between art, ideology and social consciousness to articulate the prevalent conflicts in post-contact Nigeria' (8). This paper explores the role of the writer witnessing such conflicts, through an exploration of the linguistic representation of activism and resistance in selected eco-critical poetry by G'Ebinyo Ogbowei.

Ecocriticism, Ecological Oppression and the Propagation of Poetic Expressivity

Eco-criticism substantiates meaningful intersections between literature and the environment. Ezenwa Ohaeto (1994) argues that eco-criticism explores the interactions between literature and nature. Since literature exists as a mirror of the human society and serves as a form of documentation of prevailing happenings, eco-critical literary writings have grown to draw attention to the aftermath of human activities on the environment. Buell, Heise and Thornber argue that eco-criticism is crucial in view of the necessity 'that environmental phenomena must be comprehended, and that today's burgeoning array of environmental concerns must be addressed qualitatively as well as quantitatively'(418). The expression of eco-criticism through literary writings spans the three main genres of literature, although the present enquiry focuses on poetry. As a tool for creative expression, poetry has been harnessed for the documentation of historical realities and for stimulating socio-cultural consciousness. In addition, it is deployed for mediation or reconciliation during dissonance. In eco-critical literatures, poetry is employed to engage readers' sympathies towards the experiences of persons inhabiting environmentally degraded locations and to unravel the capitalist webs that result in such experiences. The inference made by such eco-critical work is that ecological oppression becomes more pronounced where business concerns accrue greater significance than the lives of human occupants of exploited terrains. Commenting on ecological oppression, Bunker states that:

When natural resources are extracted from one regional ecosystem to be transformed and consumed in another, the source-exporting region loses value that occurs in its physical environment. These losses eventually decelerate the extractive region's economy while the resource-consuming communities gain values and their economies accelerate. (25)

In his poetry, Ogbowei places emphasis on the operations of successive, oppressive Nigerian governments which have led to the maximum destruction of livelihoods of the Niger Deltans through indiscriminate oil explorations. These activities have affected the daily lives of individuals and communities in the region, leading most often to loss of livelihood, villages left in ruins and rising health problems amongst residents. Naturally, victims of such exploitations do not take such oppression lying down. In the Niger Delta, there are frequent protests, media advocacy efforts and militant, armed engagements of government forces which have culminated in frequent instances of kidnapping for ransom. These agitations have, however, spurred and engendered an outburst of creative writings borne out of these choleric energies. The resultant literary compositions not only document the peculiar experiences of victimhood, but also explore the activities of perpetrators through first-hand accounts. Such literary expressions frame resistance and protest using particular linguistic devices and tropes.

The Niger Delta as a Tale of Hardship

The Niger Delta region traditionally extends from the tributaries of the River Niger to its depository in the Atlantic Ocean, a littoral landscape that has often been neglected in terms of infrastructural development by successive Nigerian governments. It is the homeland of relatively small, migratory ethnic groupings like the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ilaje, Ogoni and Isoko, who have competed with one another from the pre-colonial period for dominance in trade and have often asserted supremacy through warfare'(Akingbe and Akwen,2016,2-3). Recently however, the geographic appellation has assumed a political connotation to encompass all the surrounding areas where there are confirmed petroleum products extractable in commercial quantities. The area spans Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ondo, Abia and Imo States. These states are members of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), an agency of the Nigerian government established to manage the affairs and peculiar developmental challenges of the region.

Despite the involvement of the NDDC in recent years, no serious infrastructural interventions have been achieved, and the region presents a stark contrast between wealth and poverty. An oil-rich region, a significant contributor of about 90%, to the Nigerian GDP, the Niger Delta is paradoxically enmeshed in environmental degradation as well as systemic neglect and marginalization. While the dominant

occupation of the region's peoples used to be fishing and farming, oil spillages and hazardous gas flares have concertedly ruined the lush vegetation it once showcased. Hence, socially and politically conscious Niger Delta writers have consistently drawn inspiration from the plight of the region and have raised national and global awareness about its degradation through their writing. These writers include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide, Kaine Agary, Ahmed Yerima, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Joe Ushie, Ebi Yeibo, Tess Onwueme, Barine Ngaage, Ogaga Ifowodo, Tonyo Biriabebe, Nnimmo Bassey, Ben Tomoloju as well as G'Ebinyo Ogbowei, whose creative intervention constitutes the data for the present study. The Niger Delta region has experienced a checkered history, with antithetical frustrations from its two existing divides: the government and the multinational oil companies who reap the benefits of oil exploration, exploitation and marketing; and the residents who suffer the effects of environmental degradation in their homelands caused by oil spillages and incessant gas-flaring and worsened by the lack of commensurate government presence in terms of social services. Paradoxically, 'the Delta region is the richest and most naturally endowed, but seems abysmally, a lesser developed part of the Nigeria nation-state. Nevertheless, some of the northern states are far worse on many basic indicators of development. That was the case before the Boko Haram insurgence, and it is most definitely the case after it' (Akingbe 2019, 13).

Despite prolonged clamour for resource control, a number of the oil blocks are still owned by private individuals from outside the region, while major exploration is carried out by oil multinationals in cahoots with the indigenous organizations owned by non-Delta Nigerians. Nwagbara refers to this as 'a serious form of polarisation, which finds timbre in the periphery and centre paradigm or town/country thesis, where the core depends on the periphery for the supply of its economic means and materials' (77). Dafinone explains that:

The Niger Delta people vehemently oppose being colonized by few Nigerians who have captured the instrument of power for their interests. As long as the government continues to alienate the people from their land and usurp their right without due process, the government cannot be seen to be democratic as it does not take into consideration the principles of corporate governances, which involves freedom of choice, rule of law, transparency, accountability, probity, equity and justice. Our stand on this issue is not in the context of breaking from the Nigerian federation or excluding other non-oil producing areas from benefiting from the proceeds from oil export and production. (4)

Contemporary Nigerian literature has highlighted the conflagrating tensions in the Niger Delta. Similarly, third-generation Niger Delta poetry revolves around the experiences and challenges of Delta communities and inhabitants, which have been poignantly and forcefully articulated in the poetry of Ogbowei. These poetry collections encapsulate the issues that surround the erosion of their homelands, their identity, language, environment and culture. The poetics of anger embedded therein are wielded as cudgels to sensitize the broader public and to batter the government for its inadequacies. Enajite Ojaruega suggests that:

The debacle caused by oil exploration and exploitation activities in Nigeria's Niger Delta region has attracted much attention within and outside the annals of literature to such an extent that; even now it is possible to refer to the fast-growing corpus of literary writings on these issues as "Niger Delta Literature". Many writers have written and published works in all genres of literature describing in literary terms the on-going despoliation and degradation of the physical environment of this region. The extraction of crude oil from the land and water spaces as well as gas flaring activities have led to the pollution of the region's land, water, and air. (495)

Consequently, creative writing from the region, especially poetry, beyond documenting the peculiar experiences of its inhabitants, has been confrontational and oppositional in orientation. Poetry emerging from this region has also been perceived as a product of "conflict, political schisms and experiences that enables self-expression, self-fulfillment and maximum self-realisation" (Aito 11). In all, Niger Delta's poetry revolves around agonizing experiences and conflicts as they affect individuals, communities, the region and Nigeria as a nation.

Methodological details

G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's six poetry collections were selected for analysis in this paper because of Ogbowei's ostensible reclamation campaign for the Niger Delta. Ogbowei's poetry offers a veritable linguistic-literary site where the Niger Delta's nationalism dovetails with a regional determination for resource control. This concern is imbued with a linguistic exploration of protest and resistance that reinforce a polemic of 'we' versus 'they' in the selected poems from the six collections. The poetry collections bear

the imprint of Ogbowei's deep fidelity to the course of Niger Delta nationalism. Inspired by the fireworks of revolt, the fiery poetics embedded in his work advanced political activism supporting a total emancipation of the region and its possible secession from the Nigerian nation-state. Excerpts from these poems are employed as supplements in subsequent discussions of how protest and resistance are enacted and re-negotiated.

The analysis is guided by tenets from discourse stylistics and ecolinguistics. On the one hand, discourse stylistics merges theoretical concerns from both Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and linguistics stylistics. In their exploration of CDA, Fairclough and Wodak perceive discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice' that subtly undergirds social relations and power dynamics (258). Stylistics on the other hand, attempts to identify and analyze characteristic uses and functions of language and rhetoric in spoken or textual discourse. To achieve this, it synergizes formal linguistic analytical tools with methods from literary criticism. Discourse stylistics is an interdisciplinary perspective towards the study of both spoken and textual materials. Simpson and Hall define discourse stylistics as being concerned with the study of literary texts with attention paid to instances of naturally occurring language use in a social context (136). Like CDA, discourse stylistics reveals as much about contexts as it does about texts. In line with its discourse analysis roots, discourse stylistics considers literature as an instance of language in use – 'social interaction'. Some of the formal features which discourse stylistics considers are parallelism, alliteration, assonance, meter, rhyme, cultural inter textualities, and appropriations. It also submits that discursive practices have major ideological effects beyond the direct meanings or implications of the linguistic units. This resonates with Wodak's assertion that discourse analysis-based theoretical orientations are 'not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach' (259). Thus, discourse stylistics contextualizes the use of language and attributes situational functions (social, cultural, situative and cognitive) to language use.

Ecolinguistics, on the other hand, grew out of the application of critical discourse analysis to texts about the environment and environmentalism, in order to assess the effectiveness of these texts in achieving environmental aims (Harré et al. 1999). Consequently, it tends to explore, apart from the social context within which discourse analysis studies language, the ecological context within which language is embedded. Halliday (1990, 18) proposes that ecolinguistics should consider the ecological context and consequences of language. Beyond a perception of language as cognitive structure which influences individuals and societies, ecolinguistics attempts to encourage the protection of ecosystems. These theories' predilection for the exploration of the nexus of language and social phenomena therefore suits the enquiry which this paper addresses.

Exploring Resistance in Ogbowei's Selected Poems

In subsequent sub-sections, the linguistic framing of the themes of activism and resistance in the selected poems are discussed. The implications of these findings are further elaborated.

Stylistic Deviations in the Selected Poems

The tone of resistance and protest is set from the cover page of *marsh boy* through the preliminary pages where writing conventions are serially flouted. The most obvious stylistic deviations, which also run across all the poems, are when normally capitalised words (proper nouns, the first letter of sentences and titles), are reproduced in lower-case. The conventions of initial capitalisations, capitalisation of proper nouns and full stops are ignored. Some instances of these grammatical and graphological deviations include:

i sing of creeks...
i sing of ponds...
i sing of rivers...
i sing of swamps...
i cast aside paddle and net...
i am the marsh boy... (Ogbowei, *marsh boy*, 21)

In the above, 'I' the first-person personal pronoun, is written in lower-case letters. While it visibly breaks the convention of writing, its miniaturization stylistically validates the second-class citizenship of the Niger Delta's residents within the postcolonial Nigeria nation-state. The deviation portrays the sub-humanity of the victims who are consigned to a life of penury despite the relative wealth on which their homelands are situated. This excerpt from *marsh boy* further constitutes an instance of structural

repetition. The structure repeated in the first five lines is the subject+ predicator +complement, where the complements are all realised through prepositional completives (prepositions +noun forms). This structural parallelism ambitiously conveys the extent of the poet's ecological concerns. Ogbowei is revealed as an active participant in the discursive practice embodied by the lived experiences in the Niger Delta with the repetition of 'i sing' which is in the simple present form, indicating currency and habitualness. In addition, the variation of locales and the diversity of the wasteland for which he laments are attestable in the range of lexis – creeks, ponds, rivers and swamps, paddle, net and marsh.

The collections are also full of other forms of stylistic peculiarities, as established by the following excerpts:

many mays have passed (58)
folake, folarin (34); mammanvatsa, bukharin (35)
ratkomladic, sarkin bello (62) (*marsh boy*)

In these lines, subversion is evidently the stylistic leitmotif. For example, 'mays' is not capitalized, despite referring to the month of May, and being a proper noun. In addition, it is rendered in plural form. Through the alliterative rendition of 'many mays', the poet reinforces the passing of time and of course the unchanged situation of the Niger Delta. In the other realizations, personal names are presented in deviant forms since they are proper nouns, which under normal circumstances should be written in initial capitals. The traditional form in which the first name is split from last names through the use of space is also jettisoned. Similarly, in *song of a dying river* the misery of the Delta is further pursued in a poem titled 'vultures':

a dead gull
a dead turtle
fish washed up shore
a motorboat strike
a maimed manatee
a raucous vulture restaurant (*song of a dying river*, 41)

A further realization of deviation within punctuation is the obvious and intentional elision of intra-sentential markers like comma, full-stop, colon and semicolon. The only constantly and properly applied punctuation is the apostrophe when it is used to indicate possession or ownership. While these punctuation conventions are used to assist readers in understanding a text, the poet's willful deviation complicates reading and comprehension. This resistance subtly reiterates the difficulty of daily existence in the Niger Delta. By making the reader tread stealthily the confusing paths of interpreting the writings, the poet conscripts the reader into becoming a participant in the excruciating navigation of the landscape of hardship, to witness the unremitting toil up a steep hill of misery which inhabitants of the region have regularly experienced. An instance is provided from '*marsh boy*':

the horse will throw off the rider
mudbugs would be honoured held high
mud hens would roost in palaces
we'd be decked in royal robes
but you dress us in shrouds
we desire liberty equality not bread
but death is a liberator
the grave a leveller
you feed us the poisoned fruits of freedom (*marsh boy*, 22)

Correspondingly, this route of resistance is further pursued to focus on the Delta's hardship in 'curving winds of hate'. In this poem, we identify several instances of missing punctuation through which the poet activates shared feelings between the readers and the Niger Delta's residents:

the city by the sea is burning
a triangulating greed
patriotic awesomely tribal
carries off the prize
puts to death the battered bride (*song of a dying river*, 27)

The poet's intentional flouting of the conventions of written English language in his poetry portrays the collections as anti-normative or counter discursive. These accrued experiences of oppression and

the ruining of homelands, particularly in a nation where Niger Deltans feel alienated, are clearly not normal. Consequently, the poet uses *abnormal* language that invokes revolt, to portray the sustained social disequilibrium suffered by the Niger Delta's residents. Sadly enough, people on whose lands 'black gold' is extracted are enmeshed in desperate poverty. The linguistic resistance and protest embedded in the poem suggest that the poet is angered and is prepared to champion a new reality that aggressively calls for a 'pluck out the green white green the plunderer's flag of pride' (*song of a dying river*, 62). His protest dovetails into virulent revolt that goes beyond the distaste for prevalent poverty, environmental exploitation and control over resources to also embrace a yearning for self-rule and the preservation of group identity. Akingbe has argued that 'protest involves an overt response to articulations of power and authority and, assumes the existence of social, political and economic relationships in which individuals or groups disagree with one another, and go on to express such disagreement in a variety of ways' (2011, 5). The aspiration to 'pluck out' the 'green white green', a description of the Nigerian flag, from the Niger Delta's communities, signifies a morbid disenchantment with the Nigeria nation-state. It equally implies that the relation between Nigeria and the Niger Delta has become tenuous, as spatial divides and the assertion of binary opposition between 'we' and 'they' persists. The rancorous campaign for the severance of the Niger Delta from Nigeria illustrates that little or no benefits have been derived from being a part of the Nigeria nation-state since the attainment of independence in 1960.

Akingbe and Onanuga (2018, 18) contend that poetry is a form of song and its mellifluousness lies in the engagement of sounds for lyrical creativity. Lyricism as an intricate link between poetry and song affirms this bond. Notably, Ogbowei in *marsh boy* appropriates lyricism as a resistance trope through his use of assonance and alliteration. Some realizations of these poetic devices include:

...**p**rison of **p**overty
...**r**ight to **r**ise
...**s**ighing **s**wamps
...**c**reeks with **c**rushed dreams
...**h**umble **h**ungry **h**unter (*marsh boy*, 1)

...**c**arpet...**c**auterize **c**lean the **c**ancer
...**b**omb the **b**ellicose **b**ogs
...**s**tone and **t**hrone
...**p**leading **r**e**p**rieve (*marsh boy*, 2)

Assonance and alliteration also reinforce the resistance narrative within the theme of 'depression':

...**s**uffering and **s**orrow
As mile **s**tretches the creases
And **l**aughter
lightening out of the dark **r**eaches
of a **w**racked soul (*the heedless ballot box*, 30)
rally **r**ascals and **r**enegades
summon **s**ycophants and **s**quanderers (*song of a dying river*, 61)

Beyond enhancing the lyrical nature of poetic renditions, sounds play symbolic roles when they are used in creative writing. Some sounds, for instance, are exploited to convey meanings like force and softness. Plosives, which are produced with the explosion of air through the oral cavity, are indicative of force. Therefore, the conscious repetition of such sounds – in these cases, the repetition of /p/ and /k/ in **p**rison of **p**overty; **c**arpet **b**omb...**c**auterize **c**lean the **c**ancer – are indicative of force, affirmation and conviction.

Parallelism is another linguistic tool in which similar linguistic structures are repeated. Ogbowei harnesses parallelism to protest about the repeated plunder and 'rape' of the Delta raped' by successive Nigerian governments. Parallelism reinvigorates the repetition of similar linguistic structures to illustrate stylistic and ideological implications: they are emphatic and assertive since they reiterate viewpoints and perspectives. Instances of these realizations are rife in 'a riddle':

long stabs search for liver
long knives bloody a river
black clouds rain clouds
a quiz thunder louds (*the town crier's song*, 36)

Parallelism is further realized in some other poems, for example:

i sing of creeks...
i sing of ponds...
i sing of rivers...
i sing of swamps... (*marsh boy*,21)

this ideology of terror...
this love of the betrayer
this loyalty to the slayer
that bullies us
into taking the name of our abuser...
into learning the lingo of the looter
this perpetual paranoia (*marsh boy*,27)

These realizations imbue musicality in the analyzed poems while also emphatically drawing attention, through the repetition of structures, to the thematic of chaos which they strikingly espouse. In addition, 'the felon is on the run' (49) is suffused with and totally reliant on the use of parallelism to realize its thematic focus. Instances include:

the conflict is on the run
the jailer too is on the run...
the felon is on the run
the enforcer too is on the run...
the shoplifter is on the run
the shopkeeper too is on the run...
hawker and retailer are on the run
wholesaler and bulk buyer too are on the run.. (*marsh boy*, 49)

The poem, 'the doorway to hell', in *song of a dying river* also includes a striking parallelism from one end of Yenagoa's coastline of the Ijaw to the Oghoye's Creeks in Ilaje country:

i see them all
saracens and crusaders
visigoths and vandals
makers of history...(*song of a dying river*, 95)

Unsurprisingly too, paradigmatic relations in terms of the substitution of lexical items within the same parts of speech are employed to sustain and reiterate the spheres of discourse. Therefore, we have situations where any of the nouns – *conflict*, *jailer*, *felon* and *enforcer* – are interchangeable with related options. Through this poetic device, Ogbowei explicitly portrays a circuitous exploitation of the Niger Delta by a coalition of successive Nigerian governments, multinational agencies and internal saboteurs.

Further identifiable features include rhetorical questions which are heavily laden with expressions that heighten concerns about the Niger Delta's plight. An instance is below:

is it fear
or a pontifical perfidy
that shuts your ears
to the apostrophizing pain
of the wounded and dying? ('Is it fear', *matilda*, 30)

Where the poet challenges the continual subjugation of these underprivileged people, he also employs the word 'apostrophizing' uniquely to attest to the gross indifference in response to the pain and suffering experienced in the region. Since apostrophes are used to show possession or ownership, the marked presence of 'pain of the wounded and dying' is asserted. Unfortunately, however, their plight is ignored. The poet queries the inaction of the powerful elite, who could have salvaged the situation, by demanding to know whether their silence is due to 'fear or a pontifical perfidy' – fear of being undermined or displaced from being in control of the prevailing exploitation.

Also notable in Ogbowei's poems is an over-reliance on nominal groups combined with adjectives. Undoubtedly, Ogbowei's penchant for combining nouns and adjectives is not far-fetched. These word classes help to achieve vivid representation of the thoughts of the poet and images of happenings in the Niger Delta:

"a dream delayed"
seeing these smoking shores

the sacked villages their smouldering huts
the gullied faces of stripped peasants
their drooping shoulders their despair-dimmed eyes (*matilda*, 60)

The description of 'smoking shores, sacked villages, smouldering huts, gullied faces, stripped peasants, drooping shoulders, despair-dimmed eyes' are all reflections of the Niger Delta's bizarre experiences. The carnage in the Delta is unforgiving and has ruined the inhabitants. The reference to fire – through 'smoking' and 'smouldering' – indicates the deplorable state which oil exploration has created in the region. The inhabitants are also not spared the menace of gas flaring as they have 'gullied faces, drooping shoulders, despair-dimmed eyes' and have become 'stripped peasants'.

Graphology, as a stylistic feature, is concerned with studying how what is said is represented graphically, and this has been utilized by Ogbowei as an expression of resistance. Through graphology, a language scholar may gain insights into covert meanings as well as the personality or psychological state of the writer. Graphological deviation however occurs when established norms of writing (graphemes) are intentionally flouted to create additional meanings in a text. Several instances are identifiable in the *marsh boy*, as in the line 'What are cruisers and **suvs** to the swamp dweller' (28). The word 'suvs' is printed in a bold font to reinforce the contrast in fortunes within the context of the minimal possessions owned by the struggling Niger Delta residents in contrast to the ostentatious exhibitions of ill-gotten wealth by the fraudulent government officials. It could also be interpreted as the poet's way of emphasizing subversion by drawing attention to the alphabetism which otherwise should be capitalized and have full stops in-between each letter.

Within the poem 'larcenous party', there are also instances of graphological deviations. The word 'hole' is written in a symbolic manner: the written fonts thin out, one word per line, as if a hole is being dug. The adjective 'black' is also graphologically realized with bold fonts:

black
h
o
l
e (*marsh boy*, 59)

Similarly, graphology is harnessed in 'the heron hunt':

pitiless ghosts out of the past
pursue the heron
down
looping creeks
to her hair-raising loft
lost in this wilderness of want (*the heedless ballot box*, 72)

Beyond the written letters, the imagery reinforces the context in which the poet documents the Niger Delta's turbulent experiences. The color black suggests the bleakness and blatant irredeemable nature of the Delta's masses who have been thrown into 'contemplative poverty' by licentious and profligate Nigerian rulers. The graphological recreation in 'the heron hunt' represents a jagged pursuit along looping creeks. These realizations further assert the militant eco-critical concerns of the poet since they provide insight into the degradation of the Niger Delta. The semblance of a spiraling effect is also enacted through subversive graphology, such as:

s
p
i
r
a
l

(*marsh boy*, 60)

In the poem 'shifting fault lines' (*marsh boy*, 62), the word 'war' is handwritten and not typewritten. This provides graphological prominence as it stands out from the other words around it. There are two possible reasons for this choice on the part of the poet. Firstly, the handwritten word resonates with the action of 'carving' as in 'the bludgeoned body of baby charles/dumped on the doorsteps of our distraught home/the word war with a fork/carved on his bloated belly'. The second interpretation lies in the fact that human actions – self-inflicted, handwritten – are usually the causes of crises, conflicts and eventually war.

The poet also employs italicization as a graphological tool. This is exemplified in 'Christmas':

*Mummy mummy
you'll buy us new shoes of fine leather
a pair for me
a pair for heather (let the honey run, 3)*

Italicization is similarly employed in 'stormin'

*how bad for Baghdad
how sad for saddam (the town crier's song, 87)*

In 'the fumbling king' (51), italicization is used in the penultimate stanza to delineate the demise of the arrogant ruler. While his death is occasioned by betrayal through 'oily words of sharks with shiny teeth/sharper than brutus' 'dagger', the use of italics foregrounds the remark that the stab '*cut through his cunning heart/feels the feral pain of pleading death*'. The refrain in 'a deranged gun' (38) is also repetitively rendered in italics:

*ransom riches have reached rumuekpe
banditry brings beautiful girls and luxury cars (marshboy,38)*

These graphological interventions actualize and make graphic the poet's words while also establishing a homological effect, which Short (2000) refers to as a graphology-symbolic effect. This occurs where a word or a piece of text actually looks like the concept that it represents.

Allusions and the Historicization of Resistance

An 'allusion' refers to a passing reference or indirect mention. It may also be defined as an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly. Such instances are rife in Ogbowei's poetry. Locations, persons and events within and outside Nigeria are constantly referred to. These function as indexes of fields of experience. Whether direct or inferred, allusions assist in broadening the readers' understanding. Not only are the references reflective of shared experiences, but they are also evocative of the inhuman disparities in the performance of power. The allusions in his collections are varied and span across diverse spheres of human activities. However, the most realized domain of allusion is socio-politics. Instances of such socio-political references in Ogbowei's poetry abound, as in the poem 'for kenule saro-wiwa':

*sunglasses award the degree of the white feather
deliver it with nine decapitated red cocks
bleeding thrashing scratching from the rolls'
not the name saro-wiwa
not the name mosop
but khana gokana tai eleme
and nine necklaced cocks
are nine burning hellhounds hanging (let the honey run, 47)*

Some other realizations from *marsh boy* are:

son my and **Srebrenica** (21) (refers to an ethnic cleansing massacre, a localized genocide. Srebrenica is a town in the east of Bosnia, which was the site of an ethnic cleansing massacre in July 1995.)
mean months of '66 (21) (refers to the events that surrounded Isaac Boro's previously referenced 'The Twelve-Day Revolution' and the first Nigerian military coup)
romanovs who see in our desolation their prosperity
somozas who see in our destruction their security (23)
tuolsleng (28) (a notorious prison in Cambodia)
choeungek (28) (a traumatic reference to a killing field in Cambodia)
dawsuu (35) (a Burmese non-violent politician)
insein prison (35) (a Burmese top security prison)
bush, blair, barak (37) (names of former leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom)

Also notable is the following from the poem 'stalking death':

*a river of corpses
running through the bosphorus*

seeks a northerly course (*matilda*, 66)

These references are infused with images of destruction and histories of hegemonic imbalances. As tropes of protest-resistance-revolt iconography, they testify to the cyclical nature of history and reference the contemporary challenges of the Niger Delta's people in the context of previous occurrences elsewhere. In addition to the systemic exploitation of natural resources in the region, activist groups like the militant Avengers suffer repression for their protests against exploitative practices. Ogbowei therefore situates the Niger Delta's resistance within the global theatres of violence where the voices of dissent and resistance are met with decisive state repression. By navigating the Niger Delta's political turbulence, Ogbowei appropriates striking contiguous memories of terror and oppression, from Spain, Portugal, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, Cambodia, the Philippines and Ukraine to Senegal, China, Kenya, Turkey and Russia. Most of these countries have witnessed dictatorial regimes and have adjudicated on cases of human rights abuses. Consequently, the names of perpetrators of crimes against humanity as well as their victims are recounted. The names of these dictators are derisively mentioned: Somoza, Mugabe, Mubarak and Museveni represent the oppressors; while correspondingly, Ken Saro-Wiwa and MammanVats represent the victims. The poet therefore contextualizes the present Niger Delta's turmoil within both historical and contemporary realities.

In addition to the allusions to socio-political history, there are references to icons of popular culture:

this game of thrones (*marsh boy*, 27)
shifting patterns on corleone's chessboard (*marsh boy*, 27)
dancing dacoits to the dragon throne (*song of a dying river*, 34)

Popular culture refers to the mundane prevailing culture within a society and encompasses nuances of art, cooking, clothing, entertainment, films, mass media, music and sports. The 'game of thrones' refers to a recent fantasy television series which enjoyed wide viewership globally. However, the poet uses this allusion to represent the power play that occurs when politicians strategically scheme to gain authority. This allusion is sustained through another popular culture reference to the novel and film *The Godfather* (1972), in which Corleone is a mafia don. The reference to 'chessboard' affirms the place of stratagems in political battlegrounds. However, the situation does not favor the masses, who are continually trampled upon in 'the cut-throat politics' and end up suffering the collateral effects of insidious power plays. In fact, the poet affirms that the politician 'bullies us into taking the name of our abuser that bullies us into learning the lingo of the looter' (*marsh boy*, 27). This excerpt asserts the nationhood foisted on the reluctant Niger Deltans by the vicious elite of postcolonial Nigeria.

In addition to the hedging of invectives against exploitation, Ogbowei's writing also includes a volley of rancorous poetics against the marginality of the region. Again, accusatory allusions are made to protest the oppression of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. Language plays a crucial role in the negotiation of the region's reclamation as well as in the historicization of its struggle, because language is never neutral. Instead it is made malleable to perform multifarious roles and functions. In Ogbowei's poetry, the English language is the dominant language. However, this is interspersed with creolized Nigerian Pidgin and the Ijaw language which is spoken in the core Ijaw states of Bayelsa, Rivers states and in a section of the Delta state. Creolized Nigerian pidgin is strikingly appropriated in 'na here de deal dey don':

Oga, notindeyshele
Notindey happen
na here de deal dey don
na here de don dey deal (*song of a dying river*, 58)

(Boss, nothing is happening
It is here that the deal gets done
And it is here that they have been doing the deal)

Significantly and even more poignantly, the enactment of language politics comes to the fore through the interspersing of Ijaw language in Ogbowei's poetry, as is evident in 'welcome to our smouldering swamps':

Asawana
Wana (an Ijaw battle cry) (*marsh boy*, 29)

This war cry is emblematic of the call to arms in the spirit of protest-resistance-revolt stratagem against entrenched, systemic subjugation to which the Niger Delta's people have been callously consigned. By using the Ijaw language, the poet courts a group patronage and seeks to establish linguistic-cultural affinities. He also establishes the 'we versus them' dichotomy, an alternation that suffuses the text.

In the poem 'avoid them' (43), Ogbowei uses Nigerian Pidgin, a contact language which is fast becoming creolized in the Niger Delta region. The identified excerpts include derivatives of proverbs from the Niger Delta Creole:

not every han carry cutlass kin kill
yet you get for watch cutlass and han (*marsh boy*, 43)
(although it isn't every hand that wields a cutlass that can kill
Still you've got to watch both cutlass and hand)

orange yellow fine for eye
how you know 'e sweet (*marsh boy*, 43)
(how can you tell the sweetness of and orange
From its seemingly attractive colour)

learn for be sentinel na you hos
cos plenty tem nadere de rascals kin gada (*marsh boy*, 43)
(learn to be a sentinel/watchman in/over your own house
because many a time the rascals gather there)

There is also a rendition of a French proverb:

La meilleure facon d atteindre votre
ton but cest par la force le fusil
(the best way to achieve your goal is by the gun, *marsh boy* 104)

A notable feature is that most of these linguistic choices are embedded within a context of war and violence, regardless of the mode of language in which they are rendered. Ogbowei's overarching preoccupation with a committed pursuit of the Niger Delta's liberation through protest and resistance aptly signals a change in the tactics of the Niger Delta's people to bring attention to their plight. Little wonder then that militancy and other forms of violence against the Nigerian government and multinationals have become thriving engagements in the area. Youth militancy as a backlash against the perceived marginalization of the region seems to have been retooled to respond to decades of unanswered agitations for resource control and the long-running mindless state subjugation of the Delta's communities. It is also noteworthy that the non-English sentential expressions are often in the form of proverbs. Proverb is an integral aspect of oral literature that provides a window into the ethos and norms within a specific culture. Nigerian Pidgin/Creole is regarded as a neutral language which cuts across cultural and social divides among varied Nigerian ethnic groups. Consequently, its use is intended to subversively serve as a vehicle of propaganda that communicates the Niger Delta's dilemma beyond the region. This is consciously amplified with the intention of ensuring public sensitization to the agitating issues.

Weaponizing Lexis and Vocabulary Range

Ogbowei's inscription of protest-resistance-revolt collocations throughout his poetry collections has set him apart as the most vocal writer from the region, since he calls for the unconditional liberation of the Niger Delta through armed struggle. Cohesion is a textual resource employed to link different sentences within any text. As such, through the establishment of cohesive relationships, the linguistic choices in different parts of a text correspond with one another to form a network of sequential relation. According to Leech and Short (1981, 244), cross-referencing and linkage are the two major kinds of cohesion. Cross-referencing is concerned with how language is used to indicate referentiality within different parts of a text, that is, how connectivity is established in the text. This is realized through definite reference (personal pronouns, deictics, and definite articles), substitution, ellipses, and repetition. Linkage, on the other hand, involves the use of overt connectors such as coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and linking adverbials.

Pronouns are used to replace nouns and are imbued with ideological framing characteristics, since they can signify inclusiveness or the adverse. This implies that pronouns can be harnessed by politically-conscious writers in service of group affinity and otherness where affiliations and dissociations are established. Factions and group identities are thus forged by the poet. In *marsh boy*, Ogbowei employs

the pronouns 'I, we, our, us' as counter-forces to 'they, them, their' where his inclusion in the plight faced by the Niger Deltans is established. The oppressors are the Nigerian government, the complicit Niger Deltans and the oil multinationals, who profit from the oil business but fail to ensure abandonment liability which requires that they restore their areas of operation back to how nature intended. Apart from being very harsh in the criticism of the activities of the 'pillagers', exploiters and oppressors, the poet's tone is also scathing in denouncing the complicity of opportunistic Niger Deltans who betray the struggle in recompense for the government's patronage.

With regards to employing a vocabulary of resistance, the phases of transition witnessed among residents of the Niger Delta are identifiable thus:

watch the plundered province provoked to revolt
cut herself loose from this house of hate
this house full of strife...(song of a dying river, 69)

Again, memory is subverted to recall the despoliation of the Niger Delta in 'the floor plan of a dream':

the silhouette of a simulated passion
is thrown upon the screen where fond memories
dance to a thousand instruments
playing half-forgotten tunes (let the honey run, 25)

This dialectics of transition is further pursued through the figure of the marsh boy:

i am a **marsh boy** quick and handy with a gun
i am the **marsh tiger** stalking beneficent tyrants (marsh boy, 23)

The transmutation of the marsh boy and his consequent heroism as a freedom fighter and revolutionary is depicted against the backdrop of troubled experiences in the exploited and degraded region. The marsh boy is in real pursuit of equity that could guarantee him a chance of living a fulfilled life. The quest for 'liberty equality' however does not appear on a platter of gold, especially as there have been 'compatriots made to pay for crimes for which others are decorated'. The metamorphosis of the 'marsh boy' to a 'marsh tiger' follows his transition from a 'humble hungry hunter pushed out of the dining hall by buccaneering brothers'. This quickens his response as the conscience of the society. He thus becomes the 'spear driven into the soul of the stalker... the bomb exploding the peace of the pillage...quick and handy with a gun':

I am the **evil child** who cries too much/you say
I am the **evil spirit** driving the delta round in loops/you say (marsh boy, 22)

The transfiguration of the Niger Delta's protester or rebel figure is also attested to from the above excerpt where he metamorphoses from being a child to being a spirit. Explicating why individuals often embrace rebellion, Ted Gurr in his seminal book *Why Men Rebel* (1970) asserts that 'if a regime responds to the threat or use of force with greater force, the effect is likely to be an intensification of resistance: dissidents will resort to greater force' (232). Obviously, the expectation of the government is that the status-quo of exploitation be maintained, at which point the protester is still accorded the designation of a child. However, once the protests become disruptive, inhibiting the status-quo, the protesters become 'evil spirits' which must be exorcised. These labels are thus reflective of the social distance and power disparity between the aggressors and the victims.

Lexical items are also employed to establish contrasts between the experiences of the victims and the aggressors. A notable example comes from 'welcome to our smouldering swamps':

What are schools and clinics to the vanishing ones
What are water pumps and power mowers
What are cruisers and **suvs** to the swamp dweller
This toothache running needles
Through the roof of your head
This bomb ticking in your grasping mind
This running sore draining your sick soul (marsh Boy, 28)

These lines document the lackluster state of affairs where even good things are meaningless for the inhabitants of the Niger Delta's region. Schools and clinics, which ordinarily should have been commonplace social amenities, are described as unavailable, yet the marsh boy has limitless access to

arms. Through this poignant narrative, the implications of social imbalance are made clear. The contrast is further sustained in the following lines:

romanovs who see in our **desolation** their **prosperity**
somozas who see in our **destruction** their **security** (*marsh boy* 23)

The 'desolation' and 'destruction' which the Niger Delta's inhabitants and their homelands undergo are juxtaposed with the 'prosperity' and 'security' which the looters and exploiters enjoy. The anger which the poet feels can therefore be better understood since the wealth in which the exploiters gloat has not been used to service the needs and yearnings of the Niger Delta's region.

The poet further deepens the narrative of the prevalent situation in the region through his effusive use of adjectives. He identifies the Niger Delta as 'contentious constituent' (42), 'traumatized territories' (25), 'eventful graveyards' (24), 'smouldering swamps', 'swamps of death' (28) and, with a tone of anguish and finality, declares that the region is a reflection of 'a failed federation':

odi's the sector
that killed our faith
in a failed federation
where contentious constituents
disdainful of minorities
mired in the maligned marshland
hurry south spreading
the language of hell (*the heedless ballot box*, 42)

Here Ogbowei references a significant event in Nigerian history, when a civilian president oversaw the destruction of a Niger Delta village, Odi, by the military, because its inhabitants had attacked and killed some soldiers during a protest to draw attention to the ecological degradation of the community.

Ogbowei's predilection for jeremiads persists in *matilda* where judgment day is announced to evildoers through the imagery of rainfall, while the suffering band of Niger Deltans might eventually enjoy a respite:

"by the brass river bury me"
thunder drums heralding the retreating rains
heaven's fury searing the weeping sky
lancing the heaving sea
all wails shall drown
drown all self-flattering tears (*matilda*, 38)

Expressions like 'thunder drums, heaven's fury, wails shall drown...all self-flattering tears', offer an intertextual appeal to biblical Armageddon. Not only are the people angry and in need of intercession, but the speaker imagines Heaven's fury unleashed on the evildoers tormenting the region. The poet further tolls the death knell when he submits that:

the delta is a death parlour
a place of grief
where we're gathered to hear
the ghouls decide how you deserve to die (*marsh boy*, 24)

It is clear that Ogbowei has foreclosed the possibility of a change in the Niger Delta's fortunes through peaceful dialogue. He draws on historiography to emphasize the cyclical nature of history, interweaving past global events into his narrative of the contemporary situation of the Niger Delta. As earlier identified, the use of socio-political and historical allusions in the poems foreground the present challenges of the Niger Delta within the context of certain historical realities. An awareness of political history is also evident in his reference to events like the invasion and destruction of Odi village during the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Consequently, hinging on these histories, the poet presents his conviction that a respite for the Niger Delta agitation can only be realized through violence, coordinated through an armed struggle.

The Intertwining of Language and Ecology: Ecolinguistic Implications of Findings

Selected poems from Ogbowei's *marsh boy* have been subjected to linguistic enquiry, which has shown that they offer a vivid catalogue of the lurid realities of life in the Niger Delta. The linguistic tools employed are further reliant on specific ideological constructs. The first and obvious ideology is that of

'Otherness' wherein the author situates the sufferings and poverty of his people against the backdrop of the exploiters' excesses and self-interest. This viewpoint is asserted across the *marsh boy* collection. A significant pointer is from 'this perpetual paranoia' (27):

this ideology of terror...
this love of the betrayer
this loyalty to the slayer
that bullies us
into taking the name of our abuser...
into learning the lingo of the looter (*marsh boy*, 27)

Also notable is the poem 'how many mays more':

communities can't coalesce into a nation
tribes can't be welded into a state (*marsh boy*, 58)

These excerpts espouse resistance through the use of pronouns and nominal items that illustrate stark and abhorrent contrasts. Expressions such as 'betrayer', 'slayer', 'abuser', 'looters' are obvious oppositional significations. They also testify to the nationhood foisted on the Niger Deltans who would rather elect to have their own sovereign state than continue as a collateral appendage of Nigeria. 'Our' and 'us', however, identify the Niger Deltans as an oppressed minority. In addition, and as identified earlier, lexis has been manipulated as a linguistic implement to exemplify the performance of 'Otherness'. The excerpt from 'how many more days' also queries the rationale behind the Nigerian citizenship which Niger Delta peoples have been forced to acquire. The Nigerian nation-state is often viewed as a colonial relic since ethnic majorities enjoy a privileged position over minorities. This situation has frequently pitted the Niger Delta minority groups against the ethnic majorities of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo who have successively produced the political elites that have governed postcolonial Nigeria since independence. The sole exception to this arrangement was President Goodluck Jonathan, who is thus far the only past Nigerian president of Niger Delta extraction and whose emergence was a result of a fortuitous combination of concessions and resistance (Akingbe 2020, 128).

In Ogbowei's poetry, oppression is also depicted as an ideology and wielded as a tool of subjugation. The oppression as used by the aggressor (the government and its capitalist counterparts, the oil multinationals) is framed in several forms, from its use as a repressive implement to being employed as a device through which the opposition is forced to join the exploiters' camp. The poet reiterates that, in the midst of protest movements in the region, charlatans often come forward to reap the fruits of group struggles. Consequently, the cycle of lack, deprivation and resistance is poignantly contextualized:

frustration ploughs my back
cuts gullies down each side of my face
the harmattan of poverty has cracked my soul...(*let the honey run*,67)

starving criminals scavenging for supplies
dance around the dead and dying
rush into promising stores and warehouses
haul home stereo systems sacks of sugar and flour (*marsh boy*, 24)

...you dress us in shrouds
we desire liberty equality not bread
but death is a liberator
the grave a leveller
you feed us the poisoned fruits of freedom (*marsh boy*,22)
the creeks burning at shoulders
beat a hasty retreat
the rivers on fire foam at mouth...(*the town crier's song*, 77)

now guns are smoking
now resilient rockets and mortars
and dedicated ieds
blast rip apart
dreams beginning to bloom... (*song of a dying river*, 63)

These lines significantly invoke resistance against the emasculation and dehumanization to which the inhabitants of the region are continually subjected. Significantly, these poems ostensibly capture the level of subjugation of the Niger Delta, alongside a depiction of the corresponding courageous defiance mustered by the rampaging militant youths to counter the excesses of brutality dispensed by the government troops deployed to the region. Thus, the poetics of resistance embedded in Ogbowei's poetry register a ringing proclamation that the Niger Delta's reclamation attempt has moved from conciliatory passivity to a new phase of armed struggle. It also highlights the tension between activists' determined struggle for the recuperation of the Delta from the predatory Nigerian government, and a rejection of debilitating complacency. Indeed, for the contemporary Niger Deltans, death appears a better alternative than passive resignation – 'a liberator', from 'scheming cowards and cunning criminals', and from 'the poisoned fruits of freedom' shamelessly canvassed as socio-economic palliatives.

More critically, Ogbowei's lamentations and fervor for resistance should not be perceived wholly as a retrogressive demonization of the Nigerian government and the activities of oil extraction in the region. Rather, he presents a call to action, based on an awareness of the devastating effects of ecological degradation in the region, and he expresses a deep yearning for the restoration of a habitable Niger Delta. Like Stibbe, Ogbowei is also 'contributing to the search for new stories to live by' (2015) on the ecological front. The poet is convinced that these dehumanizing atrocities should be interrogated and challenged through militant poetics embedded in resistance dialectics. It is against this backdrop that Ogbowei's appropriation of the resistance trope draws attention to the ecocidal and homicidal activities of successive Nigerian rulers. They are described as being preoccupied with the continual theft of the region's wealth, without making corresponding improvements to the economic well-being of the people and environment. The selected poems from Ogbowei's six poetry collections identify the complicity of the Nigerian government in entrenching inequality and exploitation – an act of economic emasculation which has led to the degradation of the Niger Delta and which has triggered armed insurrection. Furthermore, the tension embedded in the poetry collections derives from Ogbowei's detailing of the regrettable influence of internal conspirators from the Delta's communities who collaborate with the Nigerian government and the oil multinationals to compromise the collective interest of the region.

Ogbowei's concomitant employment of unconventional linguistic forms in his poetry for a depiction of the harrowing conditions of Niger Delta's nationalities and people are forms of alterity which resonates with what Udentia (1994, 28) refers to as 'alternative pedagogy'. His thematic thrusts fulfil the principal social function of literature, which Maduka describes as being 'to criticise these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society' (11). Nevertheless, Ogbowei's poetics also betray a penchant for defiance and self-assertion. This resistant tone aligns his poetry with postcolonial African writings, commented upon earlier, which offer platforms for 'social protest and a medium of political re-assertion' (Obiechina 8). These writings also reveal the contexts of their origins as a 'product of conflict, political schisms and experiences' (Mowah 99). Ogbowei's poetry, despite reveling in predilections for flowery language, tuneful flows and mellifluous cadences as creative endeavors, compellingly dwell on the jarring socio-political and economic experiences in the Niger Delta's society. This dwelling finds provenance in the deathly lexis, violent oppositional frames, frightful allusions, and militant linguistic weapons which suffuse the collections. Unsurprisingly, Ogbowei's poetry signals a shift in literary commitment to the inauguration of a new Niger Delta where equity, fairness and justice will prevail, which he has negotiated through his appropriation of the poetics of nationalism, protest and resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Ogbowei's poetry is relentlessly belligerent in tone, combative stylistically and deeply critical in its documentation of decades of the Niger Delta's despoliation. The poems studied, derived from his six poetry collections, detail endemic poverty, unremitting misery and worsening ecological degradations as collateral damages of this despoliation. In Ogbowei's poetry, images of protest and revolt are deployed against the subjugation of the Delta communities. His historical references to Nigerian political actors by name provide an effective delineation of the shifting oppressors of the Niger Delta from the colonial to the postcolonial era. In his poetry, resistance as an overriding leitmotif undergirds a fierce polemic directed against the region's exploiters, since the theme of subjugation runs through *heedless ballot box*, *the town crier's song*, *song of a dying river*, *let the honey run*, *marshboy* and *matilda*. We have further argued, using the dialectics of protest-resistance-revolt, that Ogbowei redefines the Niger Delta's struggle against pernicious marginalization and deprivation within the context of a recognizable radical eco-critical poetics. We have identified how Ogbowei has deftly employed poetics and linguistic devices to produce soaring pyrotechnics of anger, resentment and audacity. The poet's strategic deviations from writing conventions align him with the thematic focus on

protest and resistance identifiable in the work of third generation Niger Delta poets. In his poetry, Ogbowei harnesses the tropes of protest and resistance to dramatically convey the peculiarities of the contemporary socio-political situation in the Niger Delta.

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