

Shadows Cast on Fallow Ground: Ken Saro-Wiwa's Terra Poetica and the Lexicon of Liberation

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Abstract

This paper examines the environmental vision embedded in the writings and activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa and argues that his works articulate a poetics of the land that foregrounds ecological justice, ethical reorientation, and democratic responsibility. Drawing on insights from ecocriticism and environmental humanities, the study analyzes Saro-Wiwa's memoirs *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* and *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* to explore the intersections of environmental degradation, political marginalization, and environmental racism in the Niger Delta. The paper contends that Saro-Wiwa's narratives function not merely as autobiographical records but as ethical interventions that challenge exploitative relations between humans, the state, multinational corporations, and the natural environment. Through his literary and political engagement, Saro-Wiwa articulates an ecological consciousness that calls for sustainable development, environmental responsibility, and justice for marginalized communities. The study concludes that his writings remain a significant contribution to African ecocritical discourse and offer an enduring framework for understanding the relationship between literature, activism, and environmental ethics in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ken Saro-Wiwa, environmental justice, Niger Delta, environmental racism, ecological ethics

Introduction

Environmental degradation has become one of the most pressing global concerns of the twenty-first century. Industrial expansion, resource extraction, and rapid economic

development have intensified ecological crises across the world. With the advent of civilization/industrialization, the mutual existence between man and the natural environment has been altered as nature is only expected to serve man without any recourse to the environmental threats posed by modern civilization (Krutch, 1954, Marx, 1964, Schaefer, 1975, Elder, 1985, Love, 1996, and White, 1996). As a result of civilization, there are different activities which have brought about a lot of crises in the society. The desire to annex the natural resources of a region, or expand the territories or frontiers of a group of people has led to the colonization of different places/regions by the western world.

As identified by Adhuze (2012), industrialization is boosted through the exploitation of labour and natural resources while civilization thrives on the despoliation of the natural environment causing various environmental hazards like oil spills, deforestation, pollutions, and conflicts over land use,

water rights, toxic waste contamination, and others that lead to crises in the society. Conflicts over land and its resources are common themes in African literature as the resources from the minority— not in terms of numbers, but status—areas are used to build the imperialist urban centres while the rural areas and towns are left in a degraded state. This pattern of conflicts are depicted in ecological literary discourse to uncover the relationship between these levels of human conflicts and the physical environment.

Therefore, literary ecology sets out to study how literature both reflects and influences the human interactions with the natural world. The

negative effects of man's activities on the environment have prompted a "widespread disciplinary revaluation" that has led to a concerted effort at reassessment of cultural values and "the extension of human morality to the non-human world" (Love, 1996: p.229). In the African context, environmental concerns have been closely linked to questions of political power, resource control, and social justice. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents one of the most striking examples of this intersection. Despite being the center of Nigeria's petroleum industry, the region has experienced severe environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration and exploitation. Oil spills, gas flaring, and the destruction of traditional livelihoods have profoundly affected the social and ecological fabric of the region. These developments have also stimulated scholarly and creative engagement with environmental questions in the humanities. Within literary studies, ecocriticism has emerged as an important theoretical framework for examining the relationship between literature and the natural environment. The field explores how literary texts represent ecological realities, critique environmental exploitation, and imagine ethical relationships between humans and the non-human world.

Among the most prominent voices that drew international attention to these ecological injustices was Ken Saro-Wiwa. A writer, activist, and environmental campaigner, Saro-Wiwa used both literature and political activism to expose the environmental devastation in Ogoniland and the broader Niger Delta. His writings articulate a deep concern for the land and its people, presenting environmental degradation not only as an ecological issue but also as a moral and political crisis.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Discourse

Literature serves as a profound examination of the human role within the environment, capturing the tensions between social classes and the natural world. Traditionally, literary studies focused on human crises such as race, class, and gender. However, the emergence of Ecocriticism—a term coined by William Rueckert in his seminal essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978)—shifted the focus towards the relationship between man and the natural

environment. In the contemporary era, the mutual existence between man and nature has been altered by industrialization. Nature is often viewed through an anthropocentric lens, expected to serve human needs without regard for environmental threats.

Ecocriticism, sometimes described as literary ecology, investigates the ways literature engages with environmental issues and ecological consciousness. The discipline emerged prominently in the late twentieth century and has since expanded into a broad interdisciplinary field connecting literature, philosophy, history, and environmental studies. Ecocritical scholars argue that literature plays an important role in shaping cultural attitudes toward the natural world and can influence environmental awareness and activism.

To tackle the challenges of environmental degradation, it is important that man should seek to re-evaluate the connection between him and natural phenomena so as to effect a change in his way of engaging with the natural environment. The danger posed by environmental degradation, as a result of human activity, calls for a conscientious effort to stem the tide of imminent destruction of the only planet that sustains life. As DesJardins (1993) observes, "environmental problems raise fundamental questions of ethics and philosophy" (p.54). This opinion is equally shared by Evernden (1996) when he argues that "environmentalism involves the perception of values, and values are the coin of the arts" (p.103). He further asserts that environmentalism as a discourse is better engaged through aesthetics if it is not to be regarded as "merely regional planning". These pronouncements highlight the need for a re-evaluation of values to chart a sustainable path, especially for the younger generation and posterity.

O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004) in *Learning towards an ecological consciousness* argue that scientific technological activities have alienated man from his connection with the physical world which has always bear the brunt of his scientific adventures. This is largely because man has always had an illusion of being outside the world which he is acting upon and this has fostered an "instrumental consciousness"—a mechanistic, materialistic, and obsessed worldview of dominating and exploiting the natural environment.

The human interaction with the natural environment is basically informed by his understanding and representation of the world around him. Potter (2005) posits that “how we represent the world informs how we live in it—either responsive or not to our ecological place” (p.1). As such, ecological literary works are intended to:

mirror/reflect back our own attitude towards the natural world so as to appeal to our affective recognition which in turn raises the ecological consciousness of the society who is able to see itself in the mirror (p.2).

This observation underscores the need for an appropriate view of the interrelationship between human and nonhuman nature to arrive at a suitable environmental ethics for “restitution and recovery”.

The despoliation of the natural environment is intrinsically linked to the history of colonialism and capitalism. In Africa, the subjugation of indigenous resources has led to a "colonial urban space" where expatriates live in manicured environments while natives are relegated to degraded shanties. This pattern of "domestic colonialism" persists even in the post-independence era, as local elites continue to exploit natural resources for selfish gains. In African literary studies, ecocriticism often intersects with postcolonial concerns. Environmental degradation in many parts of Africa is frequently tied to histories of colonial exploitation and contemporary neo-colonial economic structures.

In Nigeria, this is most visible in the Niger Delta, where oil exploitation has caused oil spills and gas flaring, deforestation and loss of biodiversity, and the destruction of local livelihoods (fishing and farming). Consequently, African ecocritical scholarship tends to emphasize issues such as environmental justice, resource politics, and the marginalization of local communities. Within this framework, the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa provide a compelling example of how literature can serve as a vehicle for ecological resistance and ethical reflection

Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Poetics of Environmental Resistance

In Nigeria, the problem of environmental degradation became a cause for concern sometimes in 1988 when Seun Ogunseitan wrote a report on the dumping of toxic waste in Koko, Delta State. Before then however,

there has been a steady devastation of the natural environment in the Niger Delta area of the country as a result of the activities of the oil explorers. To curb the recklessness of the foreign oil company in the region, Ken Saro-Wiwa, a renowned literary artist and an environmental activist, under the aegis of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) took on some forms of peaceful protests to draw the attention of the international community to the plight of the Ogoni people and other ethnic groups of the Niger Delta. His outcry for the unjust treatment of his people and the natural environment eventually culminated into his assassination and nine other Ogoni elders on 10 November, 1995 by the Abacha military regime.

From then on, the restiveness in the area has not seized as necessary actions have not been taken to alleviate the suffering of the Niger Deltans. From the official records of the Department of Petroleum Resources, an estimate of 1.89 million barrels of crude oil were spilled in 4,835 separate incidents between 1976 and 1996, with a noted rise in its devastating effects in the 1990s. Amnesty International reported more than 2,500 oil spills from 2008 and 2012 in the Niger Delta, while another occurrence of over 600 oil spills took place between January and September of 2013 in the same region. While major spills with huge devastations occurred in the late 90s, there still remains persistent spills which are often under-reported. This is apart from the devastating effect of gas flaring on human and nonhuman nature in the area which has deprived so many people of their sources of livelihood thereby subjecting them to abject poverty, diseases and premature deaths.

Ken Saro-Wiwa occupies a unique position in Nigerian and African literary history. While he is widely recognized for his political activism and leadership in the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), he was also a prolific writer whose works span fiction, memoir, journalism, and television drama. Across these different genres, Saro-Wiwa consistently foregrounds the relationship between the land, its resources, and the well-being of the people who depend on it.

In *On a Darkling Plain*, Saro-Wiwa recounts his experiences during the Nigerian Civil War. Although the memoir primarily focuses on the

political and military tensions of the period, it also reveals his early sensitivity to questions of justice, governance, and the fate of marginalized communities. The narrative demonstrates how political conflicts often intersect with struggles over territory, resources, and identity.

Similarly, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* documents Saro-Wiwa's imprisonment by the Nigerian military government. The text provides a powerful testimony of political repression while also reinforcing his commitment to environmental justice. Through reflective passages and personal observations, Saro-Wiwa presents the struggle for ecological preservation as inseparable from the broader quest for democracy and human rights.

Literature as Ethical Intervention against Environmental Racism in the Niger Delta

A central theme in Saro-Wiwa's environmental activism is the concept of environmental racism. This term refers to the disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to environmental hazards and ecological destruction. In the Niger Delta, oil exploration by multinational corporations, often in collaboration with the Nigerian state, has resulted in severe environmental damage that primarily affects minority ethnic groups such as the Ogoni.

Saro-Wiwa's writings vividly portray the consequences of this environmental injustice. Polluted rivers, destroyed farmlands, and toxic air from gas flaring have undermined traditional livelihoods such as farming and fishing. For the people of Ogoniland, the land is not merely a physical resource but a cultural and spiritual foundation of community life. The destruction of the environment therefore represents both an ecological and cultural loss. One of the most significant aspects of Saro-Wiwa's work is its insistence on ethical responsibility. His narratives challenge readers to reconsider the moral implications of environmental exploitation and to recognize the interconnectedness of human and ecological well-being. Through vivid descriptions and personal reflections, he exposes the human cost of environmental neglect and calls for a renewed sense of accountability among political leaders, corporations, and citizens.

By transforming personal experience into literary testimony, Saro-Wiwa demonstrates the power of literature as a form of social intervention. His writings do not simply document environmental problems; they actively seek to inspire moral reflection and collective action. In this sense, his work embodies what may be described as a poetics of environmental responsibility.

Niger Delta—Bound to Oil Woes

The Niger Delta has always been connected with the history of oil prospecting in Nigeria. Starting with the trade and politics in palm oil and kernels from 1830–1885, and the discovery of crude oil in large quantity in 1937, the Niger Delta has always borne the financial burden of Nigeria during and after the colonial era. Tamuno (2011) gives a vivid description of this burden:

The fiscal arrangements made to accomplish and consolidate the 1914 phase of Amalgamation were such that put considerable financial burdens on the Southern partner. The Southern burden was made possible by Palm produce.

In 1937, a new financial future for Nigeria began to present itself through the discovery of Crude Oil. The first export... through the known Crude Oil reserves [was from] Oloibiri. With more... exploration... Oloibiri became Nigeria's first casualty of the Oil and Gas Industry. Oloibiri was used, misused, abused and later abandoned by the relevant authorities in the Oil industry. When Oloibiri ceased to please its exploiters, new oil fields were found in Ogoni territory. These too went the way of Oloibiri, as one oil-well after another got exhausted (pp. 4–5).

This grim condition of the Ogoni people became a cause for which Ken Saro-Wiwa chose to lay down his life. Beginning with *On a darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*, Saro-Wiwa who belonged to the Ogoni, a minority group in Nigeria, x-rayed the war from the point-of-view of members of the minority ethnic groups in the eastern part of the country who were the unwilling bedfellows of the Igbo led by Ojukwu, the Biafran warlord. The major cause for the war, according to Saro-Wiwa was based on the rulers' greed—on both sides of the divide—to control the oil proceeds from the Niger Delta. This he reiterated in his address at the launch of some special publications to mark his

fiftieth birthday on 10 October, 1991 that the “greed for the oil of the delta” is largely responsible for the injustices being perpetrated against the minority ethnic groups in the country (*A Month and a Day*, p.86).

However, in spite of this clear picture of the situation of things, the Ogoni chose to pitch their tent with the federal authority believing that they have a better chance for self-autonomy, especially with the creation of Rivers State at the onset of the civil war. This singular act by the Gowon-led government brought some respite to the clamouring for more states in the federation to accommodate the minority groups and bring governance closer to the grassroots. This turned out to be just another “carrot” to pacify the minority groups in the Eastern Region so as to win their sympathy for the Federal Government’s bid to keep the nation “united”.

Saro-Wiwa’s poetics of the land as a language of protest and call for change is inscribed in the two texts which form the focus of this study. While his Nigerian civil war account, *On a Darkling Plain* clearly shows his protest against “domestic/indigenous colonialism” of the minority groups by the Nigerian elite and/or the three notable—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—majority groups in the country, the prison note memoir—*A Month and a Day*—chronicles his travails, and by extension, the Ogoni, in the hands of the repressive military government of the post-civil war years.

Taking stock of the pains of oil exploitation in the Niger delta area, he noted that nothing good would ever come to his people—the Ogoni, unless someone took up the task of organizing the members of his community to demand for what rightfully belonged to them. The precarious situation of the Ogoni is described thus:

The Ogoni are so far down in the well that only shouting loudly can they be heard by those on the surface of the soil...

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a waste land: lands, streams, and creeks are totally and continually polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapours, methane, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and soot emitted by gas which has been flared twenty-four hours a day for thirty-three years in very close proximity to human habitation... All one sees and feels around is death. Environmental degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous

Ogoni people (*A Month and a Day*, pp. 76, 95–96).

The stark reality of the Ogoni becoming an endangered species as a result of the environmental despoliation of their land prompted Saro-Wiwa’s decision to devote his life to challenge the oppressive forces who are bent on wiping his people out of the face of the earth by robbing them of their natural resources and devastating the land. To achieve his aim of “put[ting] the Ogoni on a pedestal and secur[ing] for them [what] they were entitled to” and have been denied, he chose to channel all that was required—“energy, patience and money” into the task of organizing his people to demand for their rights through “writing fiction about the Ogoni and Nigeria” and a non-violent environmental activism by establishing the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

In his speech at the launch of *On a Darkling Plain*, on 22 March, 1990 he noted that one of his objectives for writing the book was “to help chart a new path in the political thinking and social behaviour of Nigerians” and to highlight “the ethnic question and oil”. Re-echoing Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s take on the ethnic issue, he notes that:

Under a true federal constitution, each group, however small, is entitled to the same treatment as any other group, however large. Opportunity must be afforded to each to evolve its own peculiar political institution. The present structure reinforces indigenous colonialism—a crude, harsh, unscientific and illogical system (p. 63).

According to him “oil was very much at the centre of the war... and twenty years after the war, oil extraction in the Niger Delta area continues to take a devastating toll on the people of the region as the:

Nigerian elites have turned the delta and its environs into an ecological disaster and dehumanized its inhabitants. The notion that the oil-bearing areas can provide the revenue of the country and yet be denied a proper share of that revenue because it is perceived that the inhabitants of the area are few in number is unjust, immoral, unnatural and ungodly (pp. 63–64).

He goes ahead to query the justification for the unfair treatment of the minority groups in the country, especially the oil-bearing communities, calls on the affected peoples to “gird their loins and demand without

equivocation their rightful patrimony". He then calls on the Nigerian elite "to play fair by all Nigerian communities... so that we can ... hand over a meaningful legacy and a beautiful country to the future" (p. 64).

Addressing the Ogoni Question

Besides Saro-Wiwa's foray into party politics, business, and literary ventures, to address the peculiar situation of the oil-bearing areas, particularly the Ogoni, he had to mobilize his people to form different socio-political associations and organizations and raise awareness about the need for the people to "organize themselves better and to take responsibility for their political existence" (p. 65). Some of such associations include the Ogoni Central Union, Kagote, a club for the Ogoni elite, the Ogoni Klub, for young Ogoni professionals, before the establishment of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) which came much later in 1991.

The Ogoni Bill of Rights which articulated the people's pains and demands on the Federal Government was launched under the auspices of the Ogoni Central Union on 26 August, 1990. The major grouse of the Ogoni listed in the Bill of Rights include articles 9–10, and 16–19, stated thus:

9. That in over 30 years of oil mining, the Ogoni nationality have provided the Nigerian nation with a total revenue estimated at over forty billion naira, thirty billion dollars.

10. That in return for the above contribution, the Ogoni people have received NOTHING.

16. That neglectful environmental pollution laws and sub-standard inspection techniques of the Federal authorities have led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment, turning our homeland into an ecological disaster.

17. That the Ogoni people lack education, health and other social facilities.

18. That it is intolerable that one of the richest areas of Nigeria should wallow in abject poverty and destitution.

19. That successive Federal administrations have trampled on every minority rights enshrined in the Nigerian constitution to the

detriment of the Ogoni and have, by administrative structuring and other noxious acts transferred the Ogoni wealth exclusively to other parts of the republic (pp. 68–69).

The Ogoni people's demand on the Federal government, stated under article 20 of the Bill of Rights, include the following:

That the Ogoni people be granted Political Autonomy to participate in the affairs of the republic as a distinct and separate unit by whatever name called, provided that this autonomy guarantees the following:

- (a) political control of Ogoni affair by Ogoni people;
- (b) the right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development;
- (c) adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions;
- (d) the use and development of Ogoni languages in Ogoni territory;
- (e) the full development of Ogoni culture;
- (f) the right to religious freedom;
- (g) the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation.

The above demands were made in full cognizance of the fact that they do not jeopardize the interest of other ethnic groups in Nigeria and that the demands are meant to foster equity, fairness and justice among the nationalities under the Federal republic.

The attainment of these demands was vigorously pursued by Saro-Wiwa and his people with the hope of bringing succor to the devastated land and people of the Ogoni communities. Saro-Wiwa employed every avenue to give voice to the Ogoni plight both in and outside the shores of Nigeria. When the Federal Government turned a deaf ear to the Ogoni Bill of Rights, a 'Demand Notice' was issued to the three major oil companies—Shell, Chevron and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)—operating in Ogoni, "to pay damages of US four billion dollars for destroying the environment, six billion dollars in unpaid rents and royalties" or quit the land.

Conclusion

Saro-Wiwa's poetics of the land have been used to enunciate the travails of the minority groups in Nigeria, with a special focus on the oil-bearing communities of the Niger delta. His stance in *On a darkling plain* reveals his

disappointment with the major ethnic groups and the Nigerian elites who have only sought to enrich themselves at the expense of the masses and mindless exploitation of the natural resources. His detention memoir, *A month and a day* chronicles his efforts at confronting the repressive hegemony which is aimed at pauperizing the rightful owners of the oil wealth in Nigeria.

The writings and activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa remain a crucial reference point in discussions of environmental justice in Africa. Through his memoirs and political engagement, he articulated a powerful critique of the destructive relationship between resource exploitation and marginalized communities in the Niger Delta. His work demonstrates how literature can serve as a platform for ecological awareness, ethical reflection, and political resistance.

More broadly, Saro-Wiwa's legacy highlights the importance of integrating environmental concerns into literary and cultural studies. As global ecological crises continue to intensify, the insights provided by African ecocritical writers offer valuable perspectives on sustainability, justice, and the future of human-environment relations.

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