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Dark Waters: An Ecological Reading of Gabriel Okara's "The Collected Poems"

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Abstract: Gabriel Okara's work is embedded with cultural and ecological identity. It manifests the lived experiences of the Ijaw community as well as the intricate flora and fauna of The Niger Delta. This paper examines the recurring image of water in The Collected Poems as a significant metaphorical and ecological symbol. Okara's poetry mediates his identity, communal belonging, spirituality but also the environmental loss that comes with the rich land. Through an ecocritical reading of selected poems, this study will explore how river, creeks, rain becomes indicator of ecological disruption.

The paper argues that Okara transforms water into a medium for expressing the gradual destruction of the natural environment caused by colonial modernity, industrial exploitation, and oil-related environmental damage. The pollution and disruption of water spaces reflect not only ecological crisis but also the displacement and suffering of the Ijaw people whose social and cultural lives are inseparable from the Delta. In conclusion this paper positions Okara as an important ecological voice in African poetry whose treatment of water transcends symbolism and becomes a critique of environmental injustice in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Gabriel Okara, Water Imagery, Niger Delta, Ijaw Community, Ecological Crisis, African Poetry

INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Okara is one of the most renowned Nigerian poet, novelist and playwright making him a major figure in the African literature. He was born and raised at Bumoundi, Bayelsa State that is situated in the heart of Nigeria's The Niger Delta. Okara is often considered as one of the first modernist poets of Anglophone Africa, deriving inspiration both from African oral tradition and Western literary style. In most of his works, Okara brings forward the African understanding, religion, folklore, imagery and he has been called "the Nigerian Negritudist". According to Brenda Marie Osbey, editor of his Collected Poems, "It is with publication of Gabriel Okara's first poem that Nigerian literature in English and modern African poetry in this language can be said truly to have begun."

Water is the fundamental essence of human life. Science proves that about 71% of Earth is covered with water in form of ocean, vapour, glaciers, soil moisture etc. It means that we are in contact with water all the time. Water constitutes up to 60% of human adult body which helps in maintaining cell structure, regulating stable body temperature, digestion, respiration, lubrication of joints and much more. Without water one will die from dehydration, surviving for only a few days. It is fundamental for all living organisms, ecosystem and human civilization. The dependency of water creates a need for continuous and adequate flow for existence.

Apart from the properties of hydration, water is also necessary for domestic use like cooking, sanitation and agriculture. Throughout history human societies have depended on water for agriculture, transportation and trade. Humans created a safe living environment for themselves by irrigating crops and sustaining livestock. This enabled cultivation of crops and maintained food supply. Water is the

fundamental element that helps in the process of photosynthesis producing oxygen and glucose which sustains life.

Water is used as a versatile and powerful symbol in literature across culture, genres and historical background. Water is an influential tool that is used by different authors to convey wide range of meanings and their emotions. In accordance to the context water can signify transformation, purity, renewal and destruction. Different forms like rain, ocean, flood and rivers serve as a dynamic force that reflects on natural process, human experience and cultural background.

The Niger Delta is the delta of river Niger. It is a resource rich region that has the highest quality of oil deposits on the planet hence it contributes the most to Nigeria's economy. It is known for its vast network of creeks and mangroves that has experienced severe ecological degradation due to oil exploration, industrial pollution, and environmental neglect. The contamination of water bodies has affected not only the ecosystem but also the livelihood and cultural life of indigenous communities. Their existence is closely connected with water. The tribes depend on water not only for the bare necessity of survival but they also are spiritually connected to it. In Okara's poetry water appears in various forms and each has a meaning attached to it that is unique. Although beneath its lyrical beauty lies an awareness of ecological disruption and cultural loss. Water gradually becomes a witness to environmental decay and the fragmentation of indigenous life caused by colonial modernity and extractive industrial practices.

Okara transforms water imagery into a powerful expression of ecological crisis and cultural suffering in The Niger Delta. The recurring presence of water shows how his poetry reveals the environmental degradation of the Ijaw homeland while preserving the identity of a community deeply connected to its aquatic landscape. This paper will explore how Okara uses water to reveal the ecological destruction and suffering in The Niger Delta

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gabriel Okara is one of Nigeria's most significant poets, he occupies a unique space in African literature as a transitional voice between the precolonial and postcolonial eras. Writing across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, his work is rooted in traditional African thought while simultaneously responding to the realities of colonial disruption and modernity. His poetry engages deeply with themes such as cultural displacement, spiritual duality, and linguistic hybridity. A considerable scholarly attention has been given to Okara's use of language and oral tradition whereas many other aspects remain underexplored.

Scholars like Isaac I. Elimimian have noted how Okara incorporates Ijaw idioms and expressions into English, thereby forming a unique poetic diction that reflects both indigenous cultural memory and the colonial linguistic inheritance. In his essay "Language and Meaning in Gabriel Okara's Poetry," Elimimian discusses how Okara's use of "The Voice" is more than personal expression it becomes a channel for a collective postcolonial consciousness, shaped by historical rupture and cultural negotiation. This tension is also apparent in Okara's poetic imagery, where natural symbols particularly water often become metaphors for identity.

Michael J. C. Echeruo, in "Gabriel Okara: A Poet and His Seasons," presents an overview of the poet's creative evolution. Echeruo maps Okara's shifting concerns across various political and personal landscapes, tracing his artistic trajectory in response to changing historical moments. Complementing this is Obi Maduakor's "Gabriel Okara: Poet of the Mystic Inside," which focuses on the metaphysical dimensions of Okara's writing. Maduakor introduces Okara as a poet drawn to the mystic and spiritual interior of human experience, where natural elements like water are not simply descriptive but serve as vessels for deeper philosophical inquiry.

Nancy C. Goodley, in her analysis "Two Levels of Meaning in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*," explores Okara's symbolic layering of narrative and language. Although primarily dealing with his novel, her insights are relevant to his poetry. Goodley argues that Okara deliberately intertwines literal and figurative meanings to reflect the postcolonial identity crisis—an inner conflict stemming from the clash of traditional African values with the imposed logic of Western systems. The subtle interplay of external and internal meaning also appears in his poems, particularly when he uses water imagery to portray psychological states such as longing, loss, or rebirth.

A more contemporary contribution comes from Innocent C. K. Enyinnaya's article "Gabriel Okara as a War Poet," which shifts the lens to Okara's engagement with the Nigerian Civil War. This paper reveals how Okara channels the trauma, disillusionment, and emotional cost of war through poetic form. Enyinnaya shows that beyond explicit descriptions, elemental symbols—like fire and water—carry

emotional weight, representing spiritual devastation and moral ambiguity. In this context water serves not only as a natural force but also as a metaphor for human suffering and resilience.

Although many critics have discussed Okara's cultural nationalism and linguistic experimentation, limited attention has been given to the ecological significance. This research proposes that Okara's poetic use of water serves not only as a metaphor for life, purification, and continuity but also as an emblem of chaos, displacement, and environmental degradation. By decoding these water motifs, this research aims to explore how Okara bridges the personal, cultural, and ecological dimensions in his poetry.

The study acknowledges certain limitations. No work is ever complete, leaving gaps that future researchers can explore and address. The present research is no exception, the scope of the analysis is limited to the selected poems from *The Collected Poems* by Gabriel Okara and broader conclusions about Ijaw culture and ecological issues are used from this specific literary work. This research will contribute to understand Okara better as a poet and emphasise on a dimension that remains unexplored. By addressing the gaps in current literary and ecological studies, this work aspires to not only decode the poetic depths of Okara's *The Collected Poems* but also provide insights into the broader cultural and environmental narratives of the Niger Delta.

This paper adopts an ecocritical and postcolonial framework guided by the environmental activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa. The concept of "slow violence" proposed by Rob Nixon and Ulrich Beck's theory of the "risk society" will support the research further. Saro-Wiwa's writings on the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta expose the destructive consequences of oil extraction, environmental pollution, and the marginalization of indigenous communities. His environmental and political concerns provide an important context for understanding the ecological anxieties embedded in Gabriel Okara's poetry.

Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence describes forms of violence that happen gradually rather invisibly over long periods of time. Nixon in his work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* explains "Violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space". He further enables this study to interpret ecological destruction as a gradual and often invisible to the government, media or people. It is mostly intensely experienced by marginalised communities thus having an unequal impact. The polluted waters, damaged landscapes, and disrupted livelihoods represented in Okara's poetry reveal the long-term environmental suffering experienced by the Ijaw people.

Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society from his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* helps explain how modernization and industrial practices generate environmental risks that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. They get more and more difficult to contain, control or predict. In the context of the Niger Delta, oil exploitation transforms water from a symbol of life and cultural continuity into a site of ecological danger and uncertainty. By employing these theoretical perspectives, this paper argues that Okara's poetry functions not only as a lyrical beauty but also as a critique of environmental degradation and ecological injustice.

DISCUSSION

The Delta is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, and a consideration of other components of the land community has much to contribute to our understanding of environmental degradation as slow violence

-Cajetan Iheka

The Niger Delta is an intricate geographical region that is on the Southern part of Nigeria. The Niger River which is Africa's third longest river flows through this delta. The delta resides a distribution of a vast network of creeks, canals, rivers etc. The water of the Niger river along with its tributaries drain into the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. The Niger Delta is Africa's largest delta that is ecologically a vital wetland ecosystem. The delta inhabits a huge aquatic life, mangrove forest and different organisms that are important for maintaining the biodiversity. Local communities especially the indigenous ethnic group called Ijaws primarily inhabit this region. The lives of these people directly depend on this wetland.

In an article titled "Niger Delta mangrove ecosystem: Biodiversity, past and present pollution, threat and mitigation" by SA Aransiola, the author quotes, "The Niger Delta mangrove ecosystem, located in Southern Nigeria, is a vital wetland area encompassing diverse ecological zones such as coastal inland zone, middle mangrove swamp forests, freshwater swamps, and landward mangrove zone" highlighting the importance of mangroves and the resources it provides to the ecosystem. The Niger Delta can be

understood through its four ecological zones. The first is its coastal barrier islands, these barriers are created by the constant deposition of sediments by the river and its tributaries over the period of time. The sediments are further distributed and redistributed by the coastal waves and currents making these barriers sandy in nature. These over the period of time turn into small islands that are divided by channels which help oceanic water seep into the mangrove swamp. It lies parallel to the mainland coast and is the first form of protection to the mangrove ecosystem. The second zone is the Mangrove swamps which covers most of the area. The Niger Delta has one of the largest mangrove forests in the world. Mangrove forests thrive on brackish water and soil that has low oxygen levels making the Niger Delta perfect location for different species of mangroves to sustain. The third zone is freshwater swamps that are usually found in inlands from coastal areas. This region is colonized by plants like bamboo, palms, ferns and water lilies. Rainfall and seasonal flooding are important for this region as it crucial for freshwater storage and regulated flooding. The fourth zone is lowland rainforest, this region is a drier land beyond the swamps. Historically this region once had belts of lush tropical forests but today are degraded by human activity.

Ecologically The Niger Delta holds a lot of significance in maintaining the biodiversity. The Niger Delta is globally known for its balanced Flora and Fauna. Its ecological diversity is maintained through the interplay of freshwater and saline water that is inhabited by multiple living species and organisms. These four zones collectively act as natural shield against coastal erosion and balance the ecosystem. The barrier islands and mangrove trees absorb tidal waves with high frenzy from natural calamities like tsunami and storms. The mangrove trees survive on soil that has low oxygen levels whereas the soil stores carbon that helps in climate regulation and protects from soil erosion. The wetlands naturally purify the water from the pollutants. Freshwater swamps are home to species of palm trees like raffia that helps in wine production whereas the rainforest region grows timber like mahogany. These products are exported worldwide and economically support the local settlers. Wetlands help in regulating nutrient cycles and purifying water.

The Niger Delta ecology particularly its waterways is central to the Ijaw community's identity and spirituality. Ijaws being riverine people have deep connection with water hence their beliefs and traditions have water deeply rooted in their lives. They also depend on water for economic purpose and survival in general. Water shapes them individually and communally. Having inhabited the Niger Delta for such a long period of time the Ijaws possess ecological knowledge of surviving in such a complex land. They have mastered commuting through water and finding medicinal aquatic plants. The knowledge has been passed down from their ancestors and has created a legacy. According to the Ijaws belief water is life giving but currently it is under threat by the external forces causing pollution and degradation. Their relation with waters shows sustenance which in modern world is disrupted by multiple causes. The ecological treasure of The Niger Delta is under threat.

As stated by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries oil was discovered in Oloibiri, a town in Nigeria's Bayelsa State in 1956. The Niger Delta has faced severe ecological degradation, primarily due to oil exploration and production by multinational companies like Shell and Chevron. This discovery marked the first commercially viable oil finding in Nigeria. Activities like this have altered the ecological balance of the Niger Delta threatening the traditional lifestyle of the Ijaw people. Oil exploration in current scenario puts The Niger Delta at the verge of extinction thereby destroying the Ijaw people's home. Oil pollution through pipeline vandalism and failure in operation has caused oil spill that have contaminated rivers, creeks and other form of filtered water. In 2011 a report by UNEP on Ogoniland, Nigeria documented severe oil pollution that was particularly impacting the drinking water, land and ecosystem. The pollution has penetrated deep into the soil hence contaminating land and water. The benzene levels in the drinking water were 900 times higher than the WHO standards and there were certain areas that had oil contamination that was 5 meter deep into the ground. The report highlighted how spillage over the years have caused contamination of these resources. It makes drinking water unsafe for humans and animals. Aquatic animals also die due to contamination of water. Soil produces crops that have toxic oil penetrated in them. The report laid stress on the need of support of government locals and companies to eradicate this threat that poses danger to so many lives and environment. Consumption of contaminated water can lead to serious health problems.

A practice called gas flaring which is the process of burning off excess natural gas that is released during the time of oil extraction. Instead of capturing the gas companies ignite them at the site of production and release it into the atmosphere. Capturing the gas would cost the companies so they found this cheaper alternative and consciously choose to risk lives. Gas flaring leads to respiratory illness, contribution to acid rain and climatic changes like global warming. Acid rain contaminates water bodies and soil that

kills animals and vegetation. Apart from respiratory illnesses the people living in The Niger Delta also deal with skin diseases, eye problems and even cancer. Living in that environment is gradually deteriorating human body.

On discovering that Nigeria is a land rich with crude oil, major companies set out on a mission to locate their oil infrastructure in different areas. Installation of pipelines and making accessible roads for the export of oil many mangrove trees were cut down and swamps were drained. Deforestation in The Niger Delta became a huge environmental disaster. The roots and shoot of the plants in this region are covered with the toxic spilled oil that suffocates them and stops their existence. Whereas disrupting the balance of nature causes an increase in risk of flood. This degrades the quality of soil that makes the farmers leave the land and find new place for agriculture. Surviving on a hazardous land becomes punishing for humans and animals who once inhabited the area. Ijaw people faced loss of livelihood and identity as they culturally and economically depend so much on the geographical aspect of The Niger Delta. Pollution and habitat destruction is bringing certain animal species to the brink of extinction. Loss of mangrove forests and swamps has reduced breeding grounds for fishes.

Oil pollution caters to climate change that has led to coastal erosion, flooding and higher storm surges. The region also faces a problem with water hyacinth which is a harmless looking aquatic plant on the freshwater bodies and wetlands of The Niger Delta. As the hyacinths flourish in areas that use extensive agricultural fertilizers, it is an invasive species that has taken over the water of the Niger Delta. It disturbs the livelihood of the Ijaw community making their navigation and life problematic. Not having proper sewage measures add to the water pollution of The Niger Delta. Activities such as illegal dumping or unchecked dumping has deteriorated the natural resources and environment.

Niger Delta is often discussed as oil resource rather than a lived experience. It is thought of as a land that has economic advantage not to its people but the ones in power. It is a sacrifice zone created by the global capitalism. Big multinational oil extraction companies prioritise profit over local survival. The biggest form of resistance was shown by Ijaw activists and groups like Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) demanding environmental justice and resource control. Ken Saro-Wiwa was the leader of this movement who throughout his life advocated for ecological and social justice of The Niger Delta specially Ogoniland that faced severe environmental degradation through oil extraction. His life and works showcase the natives struggle and the impact oil spills have left on them. "The notion that the oil-bearing areas provide the revenue and yet be denied a proper share of that revenue is unjust. The silence is deafening. The affected people must not be frightened by the enormity of the task, by the immorality of the present". Through *Moth and a Day*, Saro Wiwa has tried to depict the reality of these big companies who just exist for personal benefits. The Niger Delta throughout time have received environmental damage but haven't gained enough economic benefit. A land so lush and rich that it provides for other still remains to be in a compromising state. He exposes the motive of these companies as they prioritise profits over human rights.

Gabriel Okara died in 2019 being a part of the Ijaw ethnicity and having witnessed the chaos of oil pollution in The Niger Delta, the cause is reflected in his works. His work addresses the struggle and resilience shown by the people of the Ijaw community. His ecological vision portrays the Delta as a sacred yet endangered ecosystem. Okara's poetry has ecological themes deep rooted in his Ijaw heritage and The Niger Delta's natural and cultural landscapes.

The first trend is environmental degradation that is hinted at with the help of water imagery. Environmental degradation is the devaluation of environment and its resources like water, air and soil. This can be due to many causes like pollution, habitat destruction usually resulting from human activities. The deterioration of The Niger Delta is an outcome of the extraction and oil exploration that contaminated the water. It destroyed the fishing and agricultural economies of the region and marginalised the communities who called the Niger Delta their home. Okara links the ecological damage to the Ijaw community's personal loss and sufferings. He acknowledges how water is sacred to the ethnicity highlighting Ijaw's heritage and mourns for their loss. They dealt with maximum exploitation and received no economic help in return. The poem "Leave us Alone" is an outcry against the oppression of multinational oil and gas companies that have brought the community to a standstill. "Victory illusory as rainbow bridge. / It's beyond your reach as water was to Tantalus" (55) through this Okara explains water as a visionary illusion. He gives a mythological reference of Tantalus who can see water but never drink it which is very similar to the condition of the people of The Niger Delta. Communities like Ijaws who have lived near water for most of their lives cannot access it, something that they have in abundance yet inaccessible.

“The Glowering Rat” poem employs a visual of water through puddles and water drops depicting the ecological crisis caused by the disruption of the Niger Delta and the impact it has on the people. Okara questions industrial negligence and human greed with the line, “And these puddles, these festering wounds in streets and in my emptiness” (4). The puddles are described as festering wounds which symbolise the polluted stagnant waterbodies in The Niger Delta. It is unlike the past of The Niger Delta where the water was clear and pure. Festering wounds suggests environmental degradation as a physical and emotional injury, reflecting the Delta’s scarred ecosystems where oil slicks have coated water surfaces. The drops of water signify fleeting time and creates a vision for scarcity of water. Once the land had ample of water whereas presently its purity is reduced to drops. The glowering rat in the poem is like the opportunist industrial force that has manifested pollution through its influence.

“River Nun – 2” poem compares the river to a nun. The river is pure and pristine aligning with the beliefs of African culture. Disciplined and powerful “But tempted out of its course It splits in its languid flow Isolating land and thoughts into islands of ripening corn” (6) which depicts that momentarily the river is seduced away from its purpose. It was tempted away from its path therefore splitting possibly due to ecological disturbances or modern influence. Oil pollution and human interference have caused waterbodies to change its course literally. Okara tries to unify and revive the hope among the people who live in The Niger Delta by giving the poem an optimistic end. The river towards the end of the poem finds its path as it restores the ecological and cultural heritage.

The second trend is the impact of the ecological crisis have on The Niger Delta dwellers. It has been more than a decade since the first case of oil spill came out, the people have been suffering living in such environment since. It was familiar to mankind that stopping and cleaning the oil spill is part of a long term plan but for a while there was no progress witnessed. In a poem titled “Morbidity” from his collection the quote “I am engulfed by the miasma / Of human whims, the Creek Road swamps / Which defy the cleansing rains!” (12) highlights the suffocating environment that establishes both physical and spiritual decay. Miasma is a stagnant or foul atmosphere usually the swampy area representing the toxic release of gases during the process of gas flaring. In this context water is not life giving like the beliefs of Ijaw but toxic. It shows the transformation of a sacred ecological space into an uninhabitable environment which is a consequence of human advancement and greed. The poem shows misery it has caused to the locals. Creek road swamps that once were considered an important sustaining factor symbolising fertility are now filled with waste. Okara notes that rain which is traditionally considered for having cleansing and renewal properties is even ineffective to stop the degradation. The poem deflated the cultural ecology as it questions water which is so sacred now remains and a hazard our lives.

In the poem “Come, Come and Listen” Okara discloses fire as a force that destroys everything. “trembling, rooted to the ground in pouring rain — / waiting, waiting with hands raised skywards” (19) explains how the destruction has impacted the lives of Ijaw people. The mother in the poem is waiting for the rain to renew the environment and let her have the land back. Rain here becomes a symbol of unfulfilled promise, falling on a land that can no longer fully receive its blessing. Okara directly does not use water imagery instead writes, “song gurgling through molten lead poured down my throat” (12) which is a liquid imagery that resonates with the pollution of the Niger Delta. Instead of water he used molten lead to showcase the impurity and unsafe land. The onomatopoeia of gurgling suggests clogged flow of the rivers and other water bodies because of the industrial waste and oil reminiscents. In the imagery the molten lead is forced down the throat which is exactly how The Niger Delta was used for convenience without asking for consent. This poem connects environmental degradation to human suffering and the consequences one is facing as its result.

“The Dreamer” poem uses profound water imagery, specifically “waterless taps” and “empty pots,” to depict the scarcity and contamination of water. It illustrated the ecological crisis and the effects it has on the people of Ijaw ethnicity. The poem explores a state where dream of progress has converted into nightmares. There is an absence of clean water and multiple side effects can be seen in the economic, social and communal lives of people. Taps were made for human accessibility, it should provide and deliver potable water instead of being dry. This symbolises the contamination of groundwater and oil remnants on water surface. The “waterless taps” evoke the Ijaw’s loss of access to clean water for drinking, cooking, and hygiene, leading to health crises like waterborne diseases and economic hardship. The term “nightmares” underscores the horror of this scarcity, critiquing the negligence of oil companies and complicit leaders who fail to mitigate pollution. In the poem “Taps Are Dry” a similar idea is given where Okara writes “taps and faucets” no longer “hiss with water.” Both examples direct towards the scarcity of water and the problem it creates. The poem also has an imagery of empty pots which once stored fishes and water. The pots are a means of reflecting the ecological crisis, a place that had resources

in abundance now remains helpless. The people are facing annihilation of economic and cultural practices and food and water scarcity. Their dreams are shattered and lives have transformed into literal nightmares. The waterless taps and empty pots are central to these nightmares as Ijaws who once were part of a lush and serene Niger Delta can now only have resilience and hope that things will go back to as they were.

These trends illustrate Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence, a form of violence that unfolds gradually and often invisibly across time and space. These poems collectively portray a world in which systems of political and economic power impose long-term harm upon local populations while simultaneously isolating their suffering from global visibility and concern. Oil spills are gradually damaging the ecosystems, water is getting poisoned, agricultural land is losing fertility, and communities experience chronic illness and displacement. The quote from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* "It is a pervasive condition of empires that they affect great swathes of the planet without the empire's populace being aware of that impact" hints at how environmental crises such as climate change, deforestation, and industrial contamination are frequently generated by global systems of consumption and extraction yet the populations most responsible for these processes are often insulated from their immediate effects. Meanwhile vulnerable communities continue to endure the devastating consequences in silence.

The third trend is tension between tradition and modernity. This tension is prominent in Okara's poetry in context of the ecological crisis in The Niger Delta. Okara critiques the traditional values and the modern realities that erode them. Tradition in this context is the ecological balance, communal harmony and spiritual connection with land as the belief system of the Ijaw community. Modernity here is Western disruption, industrialisation and urbanisation. The poem "Cross on the Moon" with subtle water imagery reflects on the ecological crisis of The Niger Delta. Okara contrasts abundance with desolation with "the trees droop with leaves heavy with cooling dew" and "to those in their last sleep and whose hopes have dried in parched throats and whimpering children on backs of fearless mothers".

Initially he creates an imagery for natural abundance as the dew is clinging on the leaves. This means that there is harmony in nature and land is fertile whereas the parched throats signify the opposite. This contrast can be looked over as the distinction between tradition and modernity. Okara juxtaposes how things were traditionally and he explores the implications of modernity.

In "Piano and Drums" poem the speaker is "lost in the morning mist / of an age at a riverside keep / wandering in the mystic rhythm / of jungle drums and the concerto." The setting is of riverside as if the people have gathered for festivities. There is sound of drums that are native to African culture. It seems as if the people are praying the water deities and dancing on the beat of drums. Okara adds an element of modernity to this context which is the concerto. This could possibly mean the western influence or foreshadowing the ecological crisis that is to happen.

In the context of environmental degradation and industrial exploitation, Ulrich Beck's theory of the "Risk Society" becomes particularly relevant as it highlights how modernization generates irreversible ecological dangers. Initially the societies were only concerned with growth and distributing the available resources but science and advancement has led human race towards man made risks. Factories and industrialisation might produce economic growth but they also contribute to pollution. This creates a threat for the whole planet. A situation like this can not be kept in isolation.

The fourth trend is nostalgia that the people of Ijaw ethnicity have faced for pure water. They have an emotional and cultural connection with water which affects them the most due to the ecological disruption. Water in current context has become a happy memory or even a dream that they wish to relive. People of The Niger Delta grew up listening to the stories of their ancestors spending their lives in contact with water but they are denied of the same life. The poem "Flying over the Sahara" pictures a lifeless land that is arid and sandy. The landscape is no fertile like The Niger Delta, there is no life in that environment. "skeletons of water that were winding between gorges like groping mind in eternal search for fulfilment" states that water is not merely absent but is like a memory. The land has dried and it must have not been like that always. The water flows through landscapes for an inherent search and its absence denotes disconnection with nature. Water "is sucked away by craving sands" which means activities like over extraction, erosion and human thirst has devoured water.

"Give us Good Leaders" quotes "Sit round their soup In golden pots and With an arrogant sweep Of their hands Spill ours in our Earthen pots!" (3) uses soup as a symbol for Ijaws resources. The earthen pots that belong to the common mass is compared with the golden pots of the elite. Earthen pots represent the Ijaw community whose life depends on the water of The Niger Delta whereas golden pots if the oil

wealth possessed by multinational companies. The spilled soup creates a parallel to the oil spills that has made a basic human necessity nostalgic or dreamlike.

CONCLUSION

Okara's use of water is a quiet but strong form of protest. He uses water to highlight how the Ijaw people have been treated unfairly in Nigeria's political and economic system. Oil drilling in the Niger Delta has caused serious harm to the environment and to the people who live there. Okara doesn't attack these issues directly, but uses poetic images and metaphors to express pain, loss, and hope. While the oil industry treats rivers as transport routes and dumping grounds, Okara presents them as living, sacred spaces.

From an environmental point of view, Okara's poetry is ahead of its time. He writes about the damage caused by oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation long before these became global concerns. His poems show how this destruction affects not just nature but also the people and their way of life. He writes with deep feeling about the loss of natural beauty and the breakdown of a worldview that sees humans and nature as deeply connected.

By looking at Okara's poems from cultural, political, and ecological angles, this dissertation shows how deeply his writing criticizes modern systems that harm local communities and the environment. He is part of a broader African tradition of writers who care about the land and the people who live on it. His poems suggest that literature can be a tool for healing and imagining better futures. Through poetry he speaks for the people and the planet.

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