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Petro-Violence and the Rhetoric of Dispossession: A Critical Discourse and Postcolonial Ecocriticism Reading of "Ebi Bless Asain's *In the Creeks of Fire*"

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Abstract
Niger Delta fiction has generated a substantial body of scholarship on the thematic dimensions of oil-driven marginalisation, yet the linguistic mechanisms through which that marginalisation is textually constructed remain comparatively underexamined, while their ecological register has received even less scholarly attention. This article combined critical discourse and ecocriticism in the reading of Ebi Bless Asain's *In the Creeks of Fire* (2010), a novel set within the militant insurgency of the Nigerian oil fields. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse and social practice and Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, the study first traces how narrative structure, point of view, dialogue and lexico-semantic patterning encode ideology and power relations among the region's inhabitants, the Nigerian state and the international oil corporations. It then extends this analysis through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and the wider field of postcolonial ecocriticism, reading the novel's synonym chains, collocations and figurative language as a register that renders visible an environmental degradation otherwise dispersed across time and difficult to witness. The analysis finds that Asain's lexical oppositions, among them unpolluted set against polluted and paradise set against hell, do not merely dramatise social injustice but constitute what this article terms a petro-lexicon, a vocabulary through which the ecological and the political become inseparable. The article concludes that *In the Creeks of Fire* exemplifies an emergent strand of African petro-fiction in which militant discourse functions simultaneously as ideological testimony and environmental witness, and that reading such texts through discourse analysis alone risks treating the land as a backdrop rather than as a damaged environment whose condition demands critical attention.

Keywords: Niger Delta Fiction, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Petro-Fiction

Introduction

The Niger Delta occupies a paradoxical place in Nigeria's national imagination. Its subsoil sustains the greater part of the country's foreign exchange earnings, while its surface bears the visible cost of that extraction: polluted creeks, gas flares that burn day and night, and communities whose fishing and farming livelihoods have been steadily eroded since commercial oil production began in the 1950s (Nseabasi, 2010; Etekpe, 2007). Out of this condition has emerged a substantial corpus of what may be called Niger Delta fiction, novels that dramatise the region's environmental and political grievances through the lives of militants, hostages, oil workers and the communities caught between them. Ebi Bless Asain's *In the Creeks of Fire* (2010) belongs to this corpus. Set largely within the militant camps and creeks of the region, the novel follows a foreign oil worker taken hostage by an armed group, and through his gradual exposure to their grievances, stages the encounter between corporate oil interests and a dispossessed population.

Existing critical discourse scholarship on the novel has applied Fairclough's discourse and social practice model and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to uncover how the text encodes ideology and power, and has demonstrated convincingly, that Asain's language is not a neutral vehicle for plot but an active site where the marginalisation of the Niger Delta is constructed, contested, and in places resisted. What that discourse reading leaves comparatively unexamined is the ecological register of the same language. The vocabulary Asain uses when describing the region, pollution set against purity, disease set against health, paradise set against hell, is drawn as much from environmental description than from political grievance. A synonym pair such as polluted and infected does not only characterise a wronged people; it characterises a wronged ecosystem, and the two characterisations are, in the novel, inseparable.

This article therefore asks what is added to a critical discourse reading of Asain's text when it is placed alongside ecocriticism, and in particular alongside Rob Nixon's (2011) account of slow violence, a violence that accumulates gradually and often escapes the immediacy required of a recognisable spectacle. Where Fairclough and Van Dijk equip a reader to trace how power is legitimated or contested through discourse, Nixon and the postcolonial ecocritics who follow him equip a reader to notice when environmental harm has been rendered discursively invisible, and to ask what kind of language a novelist must invent in order to make it visible again. The Niger Delta, as Nixon (2011) and Okuyade (2013) both observe in different registers, is a site where oil wealth and ecological ruin are so entangled that the region's literature struggles to separate an environmental justice narrative from a political one. *In the Creeks of Fire* does not attempt that separation. Its militants speak the language of liberation and the language of a poisoned land in the same breath, and it is this fusion, rather than either register alone, that the present article sets out to describe.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Niger Delta literature has, for the most part, organised itself around theme and history rather than around the mechanics of language. Studies of oil, militancy and marginalisation in the region's fiction typically trace how novelists represent the Ogoni struggle, the Kaiama Declaration or the activities of armed groups operating in the creeks, treating the literary text primarily as documentary evidence of a political crisis (Ogbogbo, 2006). Orabueze (2015) moves closer to language itself in her reading of Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow, where the female body is analysed as a metaphor for ecological degradation, linking petro-culture directly to eco-feminist concerns and demonstrating that Niger Delta fiction can sustain a properly ecocritical vocabulary rather than a purely thematic one. Timibofa and Otuare (2024) extend a comparable eco-feminist reading to Tanure Ojaide's poetry, confirming that the region's literary output, across genre, returns repeatedly to the entanglement of gendered and environmental harm.

Critical discourse analysis, meanwhile, has developed a substantial methodological apparatus without being applied extensively to African petro-fiction specifically. Fairclough's (1989, 2003) work on language and power, and his three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice and social practice, have been used widely across media and political discourse, while Van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach has become

a standard tool for tracing how ideology is encoded in the mental models a text offer a reader to construct. Wodak's (1996) discourse historical approach adds a further historically anchored variant, though it has been applied to the Niger Delta corpus less often than Fairclough's and Van Dijk's frameworks. Thesis level applications of these two frameworks to Niger Delta militant fiction confirm their usefulness for isolating narrative structure, point of view, dialogue and lexico-semantic patterning as sites of ideological work, and the present article inherits that finding rather than disputing it.

Ecocriticism offers a differently oriented body of scholarship, one that asks not only how a text encodes power but how it represents the nonhuman environment and the harms visited upon it. Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, a violence that accrues gradually and often remains invisible to conventional narrative and media forms because it lacks a single spectacular event, has become a central reference point for reading environmental degradation in postcolonial contexts, and the Niger Delta, with its decade's long history of oil spillage and gas flaring, is among the clearest illustrations of the phenomenon he describes. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) situate this concern within a broader postcolonial ecocriticism that reads environmental exploitation and colonial or neocolonial exploitation as historically and discursively linked rather than as separate crises, while Iheka (2018) argues specifically for African fiction's capacity to represent ecological violence as inseparable from questions of political agency and resistance. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) extends this argument through the concept of environmental justice, tracing how African novelists represent the uneven distribution of ecological harm across communities differentiated by wealth, ethnicity and proximity to extraction. Ghosh's (1992) influential essay on petrofiction, though focused on the Arabian Gulf, remains relevant to any reading of Niger Delta militant novels, since it identifies a recurring difficulty within oil narratives generally: the tendency of the genre to foreground the human drama of extraction while struggling to grant the oil economy itself, and the land it transforms, the narrative weight that ecocriticism argues they deserve.

What is missing from both bodies of scholarship, taken separately, is a reading that treats discourse analysis and ecocriticism as complementary rather than as alternative methods. A purely discourse analytic reading of *In the Creeks of Fire* can show how Asain constructs ideological opposition between militants and the state; it cannot, on its own terms, explain why that opposition is so consistently phrased through the vocabulary of pollution, disease and paradise lost. A purely ecocritical reading could identify that vocabulary but would lack the systematic attention to sentence structure, point of view and dialogue that critical discourse analysis provides. The present article works in the space between the two, using discourse features already recognisable in the novel as the entry point for an ecocritical supplement.

Theoretical Frameworks

This article combines two established models of critical discourse analysis with an ecocritical supplement drawn primarily from Nixon's account of slow violence. Norman Fairclough's discourse and social practice model treats language as constitutive rather than merely reflective of social reality. Discourse does not simply describe power relations, it enacts and reproduces them, which is why Fairclough (1989, 2003) insists on analysing text as one dimension within a larger process, that also includes discursive practice, the production, distribution and consumption of the text, and social practice, the wider institutional and cultural structures within which that production occurs. Applied to *In the Creeks of Fire*, this model directs attention to how the novel's narrative choices-from third person exposition to embedded dialogue, position militants, oil workers, politicians and communities within a structured field of legitimacy and blame.

Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach supplies the second pillar of the discourse analytic framework. Van Dijk (2008) argues that ideology operates through mental models, the cognitive representations a discourse invites its audience to construct of social groups, and that these models are frequently organised around a polarity between an in group, coded positively, and an out group, coded negatively. This ideological square, in which "us" is associated with virtue and suffering while "them" is associated with culpability and excess, is directly observable in Asain's repeated use of pronouns such as we and them to

separate the region's inhabitants from politicians and foreign oil cartels. Van Dijk's approach is therefore especially well suited to the novel's rhetoric of collective address, its speeches, chants and internal monologues that construct solidarity among the marginalised while assigning blame to an identifiable elite.

Where these two models converge on the social and cognitive life of language, ecocriticism directs attention to what that language represents about the nonhuman environment and about harm that unfolds too slowly, or too far from metropolitan media attention, to register as an event. Nixon (2011) coins slow violence precisely to name this representational problem: environmental degradation of the kind produced by decades of oil spillage does not announce itself with the immediacy of an explosion, even though its cumulative toll on land, water and human health may exceed that of any single catastrophe. Nixon's framework asks what narrative and rhetorical strategies a writer must adopt in order to make such gradual harm visible within forms the novel included, that are structurally biased toward spectacle and event. Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) postcolonial ecocriticism supplies a companion insight; environmental and social exploitation in formerly colonised regions cannot be analytically separated because the same extractive logic that dispossesses land also dispossesses people, and a text that represents one is almost always, whether deliberately or not, representing the other.

A further concept relevant to the present reading is what Ghosh (1992) identifies as the narrative difficulty of oil itself, its tendency to resist the kind of individualised, psychologically interior storytelling that the novel as a form has historically favoured. Oil, Ghosh suggests, is better narrated through its social and infrastructural effects, pipelines, camps and spills, than through any single character's encounter with the substance directly, which is one reason petro-fiction so often proceeds through collective address, acronym, heavy institutional vocabulary and a documentary register rather than through sustained individual interiority. This observation bears directly on Asain's novel, whose militant characters speak collectively as often as individually and whose prose is dense with institutional acronyms, from FEND to NNPC to NDDC, that anchor the fiction within an identifiable extractive bureaucracy. A brief note on Wodak's (1996) discourse-historical approach clarifies why this article foregrounds Fairclough and Van Dijk rather than treating all three established critical discourse frameworks equally. Wodak's insistence on situating discourse within its specific historical and socio-political trajectory has an ecocritical counterpart in DeLoughrey and Handley's (2011) postcolonial ecologies, which argues that environmental change in formerly colonised regions cannot be read outside the historical process of colonial and neocolonial resource extraction that produced it. Both approaches share a historicising impulse that the present article's shorter format cannot pursue in full alongside its primary focus on textual and cognitive analysis, and both are acknowledged here as a direction the combined method developed in this article could be extended toward, rather than as frameworks applied systematically to the data below.

Taken together, these frameworks are not treated in this article as competing paradigms to be adjudicated between but as sequential lenses. Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach establish how the novel constructs ideological opposition through narrative structure, dialogue and pronoun choice. Nixon's slow violence and the postcolonial ecocriticism it has generated then ask what environmental content that opposition is carrying, and whether the novel's lexical patterning, its synonyms, antonyms, similes and collocations, can be read as an attempt to render slow, dispersed ecological harm legible within a narrative form built for spectacle. The analysis that follows moves through narrative structure, point of view, dialogue and lexico-semantic representation, reading each in turn for its discourse analytic function and its ecocritical implication.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based design appropriate to combine critical discourse and ecocritical analysis. The single primary text is Ebi Bless Asain's *In the Creeks of Fire* (2010), a 420-page novel narrating the militant insurgency of the Nigerian oil fields through the experience of a hostage taken from a Western oil company and the community of militants who hold him. Extracts were purposively selected

from across the novel rather than drawn from a single chapter, on the grounds that ideological and ecological patterning of the kind this article investigates is cumulative and recurs at multiple points in the narrative rather than being confined to any single episode. The novel's production context is relevant to Fairclough's (2003) discursive practice dimension, which asks not only what a text says but also under what conditions it was produced. Asain served in the Nigerian Air Force for over twenty years before writing In the Creeks of Fire, a biography that helps explain the novel's comfort with institutional and militarised vocabulary, acronyms, chains of command, negotiation protocols, and its readiness to narrate confrontation through structured dialogue rather than through introspective interiority alone. This biography, however, does not settle any interpretive question on its own, but it supports the reading, developed in the analysis below, that the novel's petro-lexicon draws as readily on bureaucratic and institutional registers as it does on the pastoral vocabulary more commonly associated with environmental writing.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. The first stage applied Fairclough's (1989, 2003) three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach to four discourse features already significant in the novel: narrative structure, point of view, dialogue and lexico-semantic patterning, including the synonym and antonym pairs, similes, collocations and acronyms through which the text constructs ideological meaning. The second stage returned to the same extracts through an ecocritical lens informed principally by Nixon's (2011) slow violence and, secondarily, by Huggan and Tiffin (2010), Iheka (2018), Caminero-Santangelo (2014) and Ghosh (1992), asking in each case what environmental content the discourse feature in question was carrying and whether that content would remain visible to a reading confined to the social and ideological register alone. Quotations from the primary text are reproduced only where brief and where paraphrase would lose the specific lexical choice under discussion; longer passages are summarised and cited by page number to the 2010 edition. The analysis does not claim exhaustiveness, given the length of the novel, but aims for representativeness across the discourse features the source material identifies as recurrent.

Data Presentation and Analysis

1. Narrative Structure and the Two Worlds Motif

Early in the novel, the hostages are shown a series of photographs contrasting the manicured BP Shell camp at Umukrushi with the surrounding villages: streetlights and paved sidewalks on one side, unpaved roads and polluted rivers on the other (Ebi, 2010, pp. 7-9). Read through Fairclough's (2003) textual dimension; the passage works by spatial juxtaposition, arranging two settings within a single narrated sequence so that inequality is perceived rather than argued. Read through Van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach; the sequence installs a mental model in which the oil economy's beneficiaries and its victims occupy the same land but incompatible worlds, a model the novel will reactivate at several later points, including the explicit description of “two worlds of the Niger Delta: unequal and separate” (Ebi, 2010, p. 166).

What a discourse analytic reading alone underestimates is the ecological content of that same contrast. The camp's flowers and clean water are not incidental set dressing; they mark an artificially sustained ecological privilege set against the degraded hydrology of the surrounding villages, whose rivers appear in the same sequence as polluted. Nixon's (2011) slow violence names exactly this asymmetry: environmental harm in extractive economies is rarely distributed evenly, and the novel's two worlds motif is, among other things, a spatial map of who is exposed to that harm and who is insulated from it. The scene functions simultaneously as Fairclough would predict, constructing ideological opposition, and as Nixon would predict, making visible an unevenness of ecological exposure that would otherwise remain dispersed across the region rather than concentrated in a single legible image.

2. Point of View and Collective Address

The novel's point of view shifts between external narration and first-person testimony delivered within speeches, a pattern most evident in Mr Brown's address to the young militants gathered in the mangrove forest. His appeal to “dear comrades” and his description of a life that “condemns you to a life of

hopelessness" (Ebi, 2010, p. 9) construct, in Van Dijk's (2008) terms, a collective in group identity organised around shared suffering. The pronoun pattern, we, us and comrades set against the unnamed forces that inflict the condition described, exemplifies the ideological square directly: positive representation accrues to the speaker's group while negative representation is displaced onto an external, largely unnamed elite.

The same speech, however, is saturated with environmental reference that a discourse analytic paraphrase risks flattening into generalised suffering. The despair Brown describes is anchored to a specific geography, the same creeks and mangrove forest in which the speech itself is delivered, and the hopelessness he names is bound to conditions, ruined fishing grounds, polluted water and denied access to the clean water enjoyed elsewhere in the region that are environmental before they are political. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) argues that African environmental justice fiction typically routes its political claims through precisely this kind of spatial specificity, refusing to let injustice remain abstract by tying it to a named river, creek or field. Brown's speech performs that manoeuvre: the collective identity Van Dijk's model isolates is not simply a political solidarity but an ecological one, forged among people who share exposure to the same degraded environment.

3. Dialogue as Ideological Contest

Dialogue in the novel frequently stages direct confrontation between militant characters and representatives of state or corporate power, as when a hostage negotiator's question is met with a militant's retort: "How can you call me a terrorist? How can you call me a criminal?" (Ebi, 2010, p. 159). Fairclough's discursive practice dimension is useful here because it directs attention not only to what is said but also to the institutional conditions under which the exchange occurs, a negotiation whose very format, hostage for demand, already encodes an unequal distribution of power that the dialogue's content then contests. The repeated rhetorical questions perform resistance at the level of naming: the militant refuses the labels 'criminal' and 'terrorist' and offers 'freedom fighter' and 'patriot' in their place, a lexical substitution that is, in Van Dijk's socio-cognitive terms, an attempt to overwrite the mental model an external audience has been given of the speaker's group.

An ecocritical reading adds a further dimension to this contest over naming. The labels the militant rejects, 'criminal' and 'terrorist,' are labels assigned by institutions, the state and the oil corporations, whose own relationship to the land is extractive rather than custodial, while the labels he claims, 'freedom fighter' and 'patriot', implicitly assert a prior and legitimate relationship to territory that extraction has disrupted. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) describe this kind of naming contest as characteristic of postcolonial ecocriticism more broadly, in which the right to define a group's relationship to land becomes inseparable from the right to define that group's political legitimacy. The dialogue's ideological stakes, in other words, are also ecological stakes: to be named a criminal is to be denied not only political legitimacy but also any legitimate claim over a land that the novel repeatedly figures as already the militants' own, degraded but not relinquished.

4. Lexico-Semantic Patterning: A Petro-Lexicon of Synonym and Antonym

The most sustained evidence for reading Asain's discourse ecologically lies in the novel's lexico-semantic patterning, particularly its recurring synonym and antonym pairs. The prologue's description of a land "massively polluted, infected with diseases, and strewn with untold poverty, hardship" (Ebi, 2010, prologue) yokes an ecological register, polluted and infected, directly to a socio-economic one, poverty and hardship, within a single sentence, so that the two forms of harm are grammatically as well as thematically inseparable. The same technique recurs in the novel's description of the pre-oil region as "unpolluted, rich, and seductively beautiful… the unheralded paradise of Africa" (Ebi, 2010, p. x), a formulation in which ecological purity, richness and beauty, and paradisal status are treated as synonymous, so that the region's later fall from that condition reads simultaneously as environmental degradation and as a fall from grace.

Fairclough's (2003) attention to lexical cohesion accounts for the mechanics of this patterning: synonym chains build textual coherence by repeatedly returning to a small set of semantically related terms,

reinforcing the reader's sense that pollution, poverty and injustice are facets of a single condition rather than separate problems. Nixon's (2011) slow violence supplies the reason this cohesion matters beyond the sentence level. Environmental degradation of the kind depicted in the novel- gas flaring, oil spillage, and contaminated waterways- develops cumulatively over decades and cannot be adequately represented through isolated dramatic images. By binding pollution lexically to poverty, disease and injustice at every opportunity, Asain's prose manufactures a form of narrative insistence that substitutes for the missing spectacular event: the reader cannot encounter the word polluted in the text without also encountering its socio-economic synonyms, so that the slow violence of ecological ruin is kept continuously present rather than allowed to recede into background description.

Antonym pairs perform a related function. The description of the region's people as caught between rich and beautiful on one side and poor and ugly on the other (Ebi, 2010, p. 166), and the ironic phrase describing a government that "champions compassionate conservatism" (Ebi, 2010, p. 196) while tolerating the conditions the novel documents, both depend on a semantic opposition between an idealised, unspoiled state and its degraded present. Garrard (2004) identifies this structure, an implicit or explicit contrast between a prior pastoral condition and a fallen present, as one of ecocriticism's most persistent narrative templates, and its presence in a novel more commonly read for its political content confirms that the ecological and the political registers in Asain's prose are not two separate strands but a single lexical system.

5. Figurative Language, Collocation and the Bureaucracy of Extraction

Asain's similes extend this pattern into the register of embodiment. Militants are compared to a "caged lion" (Ebi, 2010, p. 63) and to the "indomitable lions call of the wild" (Ebi, 2010, p. 19), while the region's impoverished men are described as walking "like corpses from malnutrition" (Ebi, 2010, p. 116). Read discourse analytically, these similes perform evaluative work of the kind Fairclough's textual dimension anticipates, aligning the reader's sympathy with the militants through heroic animal imagery while using the corpse simile to dramatise the human cost of deprivation. Read ecocritically, the pairing of wild animal imagery with images of famine draws the human body itself into the same register as the degraded land, collapsing any clean boundary between social and environmental harm: the caged lion is not only a political prisoner but a creature whose natural habitat, figured throughout the novel as the creeks and mangrove forest, has itself been rendered a site of confinement and threat.

Collocation supplies further evidence of a settled petro-lexicon at work across the novel. Terms such as environmental degradation, oil spills, gas flare, pipeline vandalisation and oil cartels recur throughout the text with sufficient frequency to constitute what Crystal (1989) calls habitual co-occurrence, the tendency of certain lexical items to appear together so consistently that their combination becomes a recognisable unit of meaning in its own right. LeMenager (2014) argues that this kind of specialised, industry derived vocabulary is a defining feature of petro-fiction generally, evidence that the oil economy has penetrated a region's language as thoroughly as it has penetrated its economy and landscape. The same is true of the novel's acronyms, FEND, NNPC, NDDC, MOU, and IOCs, each of which names an institution or agreement through which extraction is administered. Ghosh (1992) suggests that this institutional, acronym heavy register is characteristic of oil narratives because the substance itself resists individualised storytelling and is more legible through its bureaucratic and infrastructural traces than through direct description, and Asain's prose bears this out: the reader encounters oil in the novel almost entirely through the institutions, agreements and abbreviations that regulate its extraction, rather than through sustained description of the substance itself.

6. Irony as Rhetorical Strategy

Asain also deploys irony as a discourse resource distinct from though related to, his lexico-semantic patterning. The description of "foreign oil cartels" that "did not care for their survival" (Ebi, 2010, p. 3) and the later observation that an oil executive, Erikkson, is disappointed when militants continue disrupting production despite his company's reward efforts under a signed memorandum of understanding (Ebi, 2010, p. 227) both depend on a gap between a stated or implied corporate self-image, care, good faith negotiation, and the narrated reality the novel supplies against it. Fairclough's (1989) account of discourse as a site of

ideological contest identifies irony of this kind as a means by which a text can destabilise an official version of events without needing to state the counter-claim directly, since the reader is left to supply the contradiction, the narration has already staged.

The ecological stakes of this irony become clearer once the phrase “compassionate conservatism” (Ebi, 2010, p. 196) is read alongside Nixon's (2011) observation that slow violence is frequently obscured precisely by the language of care, responsibility and progress that extractive institutions use to describe their own conduct. A memorandum of understanding, in Nixon's terms, is exactly the kind of bureaucratic instrument through which environmental harm is administratively managed rather than halted, allowing an oil company to appear responsive while gas flaring and spillage continue largely unabated. Asain's irony, in other words, is not only a rhetorical device for undermining corporate credibility in the abstract; it is aimed specifically at the discourse of managed, documented, seemingly accountable extraction that Nixon identifies as one of slow violence's characteristic disguises.

Discussion of Findings

Three findings emerge from the combined analysis. First, the discourse features that critical discourse analysis identifies in *In the Creeks of Fire* - narrative juxtaposition, collective point of view, adversarial dialogue and lexico-semantic patterning - consistently carry ecological content that a purely political reading either overlooks or treats as incidental colour. The two worlds motif is a spatial argument about environmental exposure as much as it is a political argument about inequality. The novel's synonym chains bind pollution to poverty so tightly that the two cannot be prised apart without distorting what the sentence is doing. This finding supports the article's central claim that Asain's language constitutes a petro-lexicon, a vocabulary in which environmental and political meaning are structurally fused rather than merely juxtaposed.

Second, Nixon's (2011) slow violence proves especially productive as a supplement to Fairclough and Van Dijk because it explains why the novel relies so heavily on lexical repetition and cumulative synonym chains rather than on a single dramatic environmental event. Oil spillage and gas flaring in the Niger Delta have occurred incrementally across seven decades, a temporal structure poorly suited to a conventional narrative climax. Asain's prose compensates for this mismatch not by inventing a spectacular ecological catastrophe but by saturating the text with recurring vocabulary, polluted, infected, and degraded, so that cumulative harm registers cumulatively in the reader's experience of the language itself. This is a discovery that discourse analysis alone, attentive to ideology and ignorant of narrative temporality's relation to environmental harm, would not have generated, and it is a discovery that ecocriticism alone, without Fairclough's attention to lexical cohesion as a textual mechanism, could not have specified with the same precision.

Third, the analysis complicates any assumption that Niger Delta militant fiction subordinates environmental concern to political grievance. Caminero-Santangelo's (2014) argument that African environmental justice fiction routes ecological claims through specific, named geographies rather than abstract nature is borne out by Asain's insistence on locating suffering in the same creeks, rivers and mangrove forests that the militants are fighting to protect. The novel's militants are not simply ‘freedom fighters’ who happen to live in a degraded environment; their claim to legitimacy rests, in the text's own logic, on a prior and continuing relationship with a land that extraction has poisoned but not erased. This suggests that the genre Asain's novel belongs to, sometimes read primarily as insurgency fiction, deserves recognition as environmental justice fiction in its own right, on the same terms Orabueze (2015) applies to Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*.

A further finding concerns method rather than content. Applying Fairclough and Van Dijk first, and only then returning to the same extracts through Nixon and postcolonial ecocriticism, proved more productive than attempting both readings simultaneously, because the sequence allowed the ecocritical stage to build on discourse features already isolated with precision rather than requiring a separate identification

procedure. The BP Shell camp sequence, for instance, was first located and described as an instance of narrative juxtaposition before its ecological content was drawn out; had the ecocritical reading been attempted independently, it is plausible that the same passage would have been noticed for its imagery of wealth and poverty without the finer discourse analytic vocabulary, setting, character, plot, and theme, that made its spatial logic legible in the first place. This sequencing is offered here as a transferable procedure for future combined readings of petro-fiction, rather than as a claim specific to this novel alone.

A limitation of the present analysis follows directly from its single text focus. Because the study deliberately concentrates on Asain's novel to the exclusion of comparable texts in the same corpus, it cannot establish whether the petro-lexicon identified here is a feature of the Niger Delta militant novel as a subgenre or a stylistic signature specific to this author. The synonym and antonym patterning documented in the data section is distinctive enough, however, to suggest that a comparative extension of this same combined method to other texts in the corpus would be a natural next step, not because further research always needs to be gestured toward but because the specific lexical mechanism identified here, the fusion of ecological and political synonyms within single sentences, is precisely the kind of feature that a comparative reading could confirm or disconfirm.

Conclusion

Reading *In the Creeks of Fire* through Fairclough and Van Dijk alone would confirm what the novel's plot already announces: that militancy in the Niger Delta is represented as a legitimate response to political and economic marginalisation, and that the text's discourse structures work systematically to secure the reader's sympathy for that position. The ecocritical supplement offered here does not overturn that finding so much as it relocates its foundation. The novel's political claims are legitimated, at the level of language, by an ecological grammar that precedes and outlasts any single act of militancy: the synonym chains binding pollution to poverty, the antonym structures setting a remembered paradise against a poisoned present, and the collocations that embed oil, gas and pipeline vocabulary into the texture of ordinary sentences all suggest that Asain's ideological argument is inseparable from an argument about the land itself. This has a consequence for how Niger Delta fiction, and African petro-fiction more broadly, might be classified. If slow violence names environmental harm that struggles to find narrative form because it lacks a single legible event, then the militant novel's recourse to repeated lexical patterning, rather than to a climactic ecological disaster, can be read as a formal solution to that representational problem, a way of making cumulative harm audible across a text's whole length rather than confined to one scene.

On this account, *In the Creeks of Fire* does not simply borrow the vocabulary of environmental crisis to intensify a political narrative; it uses political narrative, hostage taking, negotiation, and militant speech as the vehicle through which an otherwise diffuse ecological catastrophe can be given the coherence and duration of a story. The novel's insurgents are, in this sense, doing double narrative work, carrying the plot's political conflict while also carrying, in the very words assigned to them, the slow violence that a purely event-driven narrative could not otherwise accommodate. Readings that treat Niger Delta militant fiction as a subgenre of environmental justice writing, rather than as political fiction with an environmental backdrop, would need to take this fusion, and not merely its themes, as their starting point.

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