
PETRO-VIOLENCE AND THE FEMALE BODY: GENDERED ECOLOGIES OF RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGER DELTA FICTION

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Abstract: *This study examines how three Niger Delta novels, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, and Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, represent the female body as a site where oil violence is enacted and endured. Using ecofeminism and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, the study argues that petro-violence in these texts operates through two linked registers: the literal contamination of women's farmland, water, and reproductive lives, and a figurative language that casts the land itself as a violated female body. The analysis identifies patterns of environmental dispossession, transactional intimacy, disfigurement, and captivity, alongside quieter modes of female resistance: flight, refusal, and guardianship. The study concludes that Niger Delta fiction by both women and men repeatedly genders ecological catastrophe, though with different political consequences depending on authorial standpoint. The study recommends gender-sensitive environmental policies and greater attention to literary insights in addressing ecological injustice and sustainable development in the Niger Delta.*

Keywords: *petro-violence, ecofeminism, Niger Delta fiction, gendered ecology, female body, slow violence, resistance*

Introduction

The Niger Delta occupies a peculiar place in the imagination of postcolonial African literature. It is at once one of the most oil-rich regions on the continent and one of the most environmentally devastated, a contradiction that has generated a substantial body of fiction, poetry, and drama concerned with what has variously been called the "resource curse," "petro-violence," or, in Rob Nixon's now well-known phrase, "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011). Within this body of work, a recurring pattern is

the alignment of the region's ecological suffering with the suffering of its women. Farmland ruined by spilled crude, rivers thickened with oil, and air blackened by gas flares appear again and again alongside women whose bodies are exploited, scarred, held hostage, or otherwise made to carry the costs of an extractive economy they did not create and from which they rarely benefit.

This paper examines that pattern across three novels set wholly or partly in the Niger Delta: Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), and Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010). The three texts differ considerably in narrative voice, gender of authorship, and formal approach. *Yellow-Yellow* is narrated in the first person by a young mixed-race woman, Zilayefa, whose life is shaped from childhood by an oil spill that destroys her mother's farm and later by a transactional relationship with an older, wealthy man. *Oil on Water* follows a male journalist, Rufus, on a search for a kidnapped British woman, Isabel Floode, through a landscape of abandoned villages, militant camps, and a mysterious river shrine tended by a woman named Gloria. *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* is narrated by three male friends, Tubo, Amaibi, and Doye, whose adult lives are shaped by militancy, oil bunkering, and the slow erosion of their childhood landscape. Read together, these novels allow a comparative reading of how petro-violence is gendered depending on whether the narrating consciousness is female or male, victim or observer, insider or outsider to the extractive economy.

The central argument of this paper is that petro-violence against the Niger Delta environment and petro-violence against women in the region are represented in these novels as structurally continuous rather than merely parallel. Oil does not simply devastate land that women happen to depend on; the language, imagery, and plot structures of all three novels repeatedly figure the land itself in bodily and often explicitly gendered terms, so that ecological damage becomes legible as a form of violation done to a body. At the same time, the actual women in these novels, Zilayefa and her mother, Isabel Floode, Gloria, and Boma, experience oil's consequences directly and specifically: through the loss of subsistence farmland, through transactional sex arranged around oil wealth, through kidnapping, through disfigurement in an oil-related fire, and through forms of quiet resistance that rarely take the shape of dramatic rebellion.

This paper is organised as follows. It first outlines the theoretical framework of ecofeminism and slow violence that underpins the analysis, followed by a conceptual framework clarifying key terms such as petro-violence, petroculture, and gendered ecology. It then reviews recent scholarship (2020 to 2025) on gender and the environment in Niger Delta writing, identifies a gap in that literature, and states the

significance of the present study. The methodology section explains the qualitative, text-based approach adopted. The analysis proceeds through eight thematic subsections addressing land, water, transactional intimacy, disfigurement, captivity, sacred guardianship, the sexualisation of land in militant discourse, and forms of resistance. The paper closes with a summary of findings, recommendations, and a conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

Several key concepts require clarification before proceeding to the analysis. Petro-violence, following the environmental humanities scholarship of the last decade, refers to the range of physical, structural, and slow forms of harm generated by the extraction, transport, and governance of petroleum resources. This includes direct violence, such as military repression of protest, kidnapping, and militant reprisal, as well as indirect or structural violence, such as the contamination of farmland and the erosion of local economies (Aghoghovwia, 2022). Aghoghovwia's (2022) study, *Violent Eco-tropes*, is particularly useful here, since it argues that violence in Niger Delta cultural production functions not only as a literal, material response to extraction but also as a set of recurring tropes, metonymic devices through which writers make the abstract violence of "oil ontology" legible to readers.

Petroculture, a term developed within energy humanities scholarship, describes the ways that oil as a commodity organises social relations, aesthetics, and modes of storytelling well beyond the oil field itself (Szeman & Wenzel, 2021). A petrocultural reading of Niger Delta fiction attends not only to plots explicitly about oil companies or spills, but to how oil's presence structures courtship, kinship, employment, and even language, as seen for instance in the frequent use of oil-derived metaphor by characters describing their own bodies or relationships.

Gendered ecology, as used in this paper, refers to the discursive and material process by which environmental degradation is represented in specifically gendered terms, and by which women's bodies become sites onto which ecological meaning is projected. This is distinct from simply noting that women are affected by environmental harm; it describes a representational pattern in which land is described using bodily, maternal, or sexual language, and women's bodies are in turn described using ecological language, such that the two become mutually metaphorical.

Finally, resistance in this study is understood broadly, following the wider literature on women's agency in conflict and extraction zones, to include not only organised protest but also every day and often unspectacular acts: withdrawal from communal obligations, flight from an abusive arrangement, silence as refusal,

guardianship of sacred or ecological space, and the quiet management of shame and survival. This broader definition matters because, as the analysis will show, the women in these three novels rarely engage in the kind of dramatic confrontation associated with Niger Delta militancy; their resistance takes different, sometimes less visible, forms.

This broadened understanding of resistance is not a lowering of the analytic bar but a deliberate methodological choice. Scholarship on Niger Delta militancy has tended, understandably given its subject matter, to define resistance primarily in terms of the organised, often armed, confrontation practised by groups such as the militants encountered in *Oil on Water* and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. If this paper adopted the same definition, the women in all three novels would appear almost entirely without agency, since none of them takes up arms or leads a protest movement within the timeframe the narratives cover. Adopting a broader definition, drawn from feminist scholarship on everyday resistance in conditions of structural constraint, allows the analysis to register the forms of agency these particular fictional women do exercise, without either overstating their power or dismissing what they do manage to control as insignificant simply because it does not resemble militant action.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in ecofeminism, a critical framework that identifies a structural connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Warren (1996) argues that ecofeminist philosophy rests on the claim that the twin oppressions of women and nature are conceptually and historically linked through a "logic of domination" in which characteristics associated with the feminine, embodiment, emotion, dependency, and the natural world, are devalued in relation to characteristics associated with the masculine, reason, autonomy, and culture. Mies and Shiva (2014) extend this argument specifically to the Global South, contending that colonial and postcolonial development regimes have treated both women's reproductive labour and the natural environment as free, exploitable resources whose value is realised only in service of capital accumulation elsewhere.

Applied to the Niger Delta, ecofeminism offers a lens through which the region's oil economy can be read as an extension of the same logic: land, water, and women's bodies are all rendered instrumental to an extraction process controlled by distant and largely male interests, whether multinational oil companies, the Nigerian state, or local patriarchal structures. This framework does not claim that women and the environment are identical, but that their subordination proceeds through

comparable mechanisms of appropriation, and that literary texts frequently register this connection through shared imagery and narrative structure.

The study also draws on Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, defined as violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Slow violence is useful here because oil pollution in the Niger Delta rarely announces itself through a single spectacular event; rather, it accumulates through repeated spills, continuous gas flaring, and the slow poisoning of farmland and waterways over decades. Nixon's framework helps explain why the harm experienced by women in these novels, infertility fears, chronic illness, the wearing a way of subsistence livelihoods, often unfolds without the narrative markers conventionally associated with violence, such as a single perpetrator or a discrete act. Instead, harm accumulates the way oil itself does: seeping, spreading, and settling into bodies and land alike.

Taken together, ecofeminism and slow violence provide a framework for reading the three novels not simply as stories about oil politics with women in supporting roles, but as texts in which environmental and gendered harm are mutually constitutive, each intensifying and explaining the other. It is worth acknowledging, however, that ecofeminism has itself been criticised, including by some of its own proponents, for a tendency to essentialise the connection between women and nature, treating women as inherently closer to the natural world in ways that can inadvertently reinforce the very gender binaries the framework sets out to critique. This paper does not assume that women possess some innate ecological sensibility; rather, following Mies and Shiva's (2014) more materialist emphasis, it treats the association between women and land in these novels as a socially and economically produced condition, arising from women's disproportionate responsibility for subsistence farming, water collection, and childcare within the region's existing gender division of labour, rather than as evidence of any essential affinity. Where the analysis below identifies land described in maternal or bodily terms, it treats this as a literary and ideological pattern requiring explanation, not as confirmation of a natural bond between women and the environment.

This distinction matters particularly for the reading of *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* developed later in this paper, where the language of land-as-violated-woman is deployed almost entirely by male characters for their own rhetorical and political purposes. Reading this pattern through a materialist rather than essentialist ecofeminism allows the analysis to treat such language critically, as an appropriation of gendered suffering for ends that may have little to do with women's actual welfare,

rather than accepting it as straightforward evidence of the author's or the text's feminist consciousness.

Empirical Review

Scholarship on gender, ecology, and the Niger Delta has grown considerably over the past five years, much of it converging on the three novels examined here. Michael and Daniel (2022), writing in the *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, examine ecofeminist issues in *Oil on Water*, arguing that the novel's destruction of habitat, water, and air disproportionately endangers women, children, and indigenous communities, and that Habila's female characters, particularly those associated with the river shrine, function as custodians of ecological memory even as the landscape around them collapses. Their reading supports the present study's attention to Gloria as a figure of gendered ecological guardianship, though their analysis does not extend to a comparative reading alongside *Yellow-Yellow* or *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*.

Kopdiya (2021) offers an explicitly comparative ecocritical reading of *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and *Oil on Water*, tracing how both novels represent environmental despoliation as a shared backdrop to youth militancy and displacement. This comparative approach is methodologically close to the present study, though Kopdiya's focus remains primarily on ecological description rather than on the specific representation of women's bodies, leaving room for the more targeted gendered reading this paper undertakes.

Fakemi's (2022) study in the *Open Access Library Journal* takes a more sceptical position, arguing that *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* should not be read straightforwardly as an environmentalist text, since its narrators, particularly Doye, frame their participation in oil bunkering and kidnapping as a form of personal enrichment rather than principled environmental resistance. This is a useful corrective for the present study, since it cautions against reading Doye's language of land-as-violated-body purely as ecological consciousness; as the analysis below shows, his rhetoric of "my river being raped" sits uneasily alongside his admission that he profits from the same extractive system he condemns, a tension this paper reads as evidence of how thoroughly gendered violence has become the default vocabulary for articulating grievance in the region, regardless of the speaker's actual politics.

Owhorodu (2021) examines *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* through the lens of post-traumatic growth, tracing how characters, including the women who remain largely peripheral to the novel's central male friendships, absorb and metabolise violence over the course of the narrative. This study is useful for its attention to trauma as a slow,

cumulative process rather than a single event, consistent with the slow violence framework adopted here.

Abba (2023), writing on Niger Delta poetry rather than the novel form, demonstrates that eco-activism in the region's literature increasingly resists the framing of the Delta as a "sacrifice zone," instead foregrounding artistic and communal resistance to petroculture's treatment of nature as mere resource. While Abba's corpus is poetic rather than novelistic, the argument that Niger Delta literature functions as a site of resistance rather than mere documentation is directly relevant to this paper's attention to female characters' resistance strategies.

Sam and Zibima (2023), in a mixed-methods study published in *Environmental Management*, provide empirical, non-literary confirmation of the patterns identified in the fiction: women in the Ogoni remediation project remain disproportionately affected by contaminated land while simultaneously being excluded from formal environmental decision-making processes, despite their front-line dependence on farming and fishing. This finding lends real-world weight to the fictional pattern, examined below, in which Zilayefa's mother loses her farmland to an oil spill with no meaningful avenue for redress or participation in the community's response.

Velu and Rajasekaran (2024), although writing on Imbolo Mbue's Cameroonian Novel *How Beautiful We Were* rather than a Niger Delta text specifically, offer a useful comparative frame, showing that the chronotope of oil-contaminated land recurs across West and Central African petrofiction as a device for narrating environmental and social injustice together, and that women's bodies within these narratives frequently bear the historical memory of extraction in ways male characters do not.

Earlier but still relevant scholarship situates the present study historically. Sule (2018) offers what remains one of the most direct precedents for this paper's argument, reading *Yellow-Yellow* alongside Christie Watson's *Tiny Sunbirds Far Away* to show how both novels draw attention to the violation of the female body and the environment as a coupled critique of petrodollar capitalism's patriarchal foundations. Ukeje (2004) and Ekine (2001), though predating the period under review, remain foundational for understanding the historical reality behind the fiction: both documents how Niger Delta women have used embodied, sometimes explicitly sexualised, forms of protest, most famously the 2002 occupation of oil facilities by women threatening collective nakedness, precisely because their bodies had already become sites onto which the community's grievances against the oil economy were displaced. Oriola (2012), writing in the *British Journal of Criminology*, extends this history into the era of militancy proper, documenting the specific and varied roles Niger Delta women have played, as combatants, informants, negotiators, and victims, within the insurgency that forms the

backdrop to both *Oil on Water* and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. Oriola's account is a useful corrective to any reading that would cast Niger Delta women purely as passive casualties of a masculine conflict, and it sharpens this paper's attention to the moments, admittedly limited, in which the three novels under study gesture toward female agency within, rather than only injury from, the region's extractive violence.

Taken as a body, this recent scholarship demonstrates a clear scholarly consensus that Niger Delta fiction habitually links environmental and gendered harm, and that this linkage has intensified rather than diminished as critical attention to the region's literature has grown since 2020. What the individual studies do not yet offer, however, is a single analytic frame capable of holding all three of the novels examined here in comparative view while remaining alert to the different ways each text's narratorial standpoint shapes what becomes visible and what remains, as in the case of *Dise* and the many unnamed women glimpsed only in passing in *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, off the page entirely.

While the reviewed studies individually address ecofeminist readings of *Oil on Water*, ecocritical comparisons of *Oil on Water* and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, and feminist ecocritical readings of *Yellow-Yellow*, no study identified in this review brings all three novels into a single comparative frame organised specifically around the female body as the analytic unit. Existing scholarship tends either to treat one novel in isolation, to compare two of the three texts while omitting the third, or to compare a Niger Delta text with a non-Nigerian petrofiction. Moreover, most existing studies, with the partial exception of Fakemi (2022), do not interrogate the tension between the metaphorical feminisation of land in male-narrated militant discourse and the literal, material harm experienced by actual women characters within the same fictional worlds. This paper addresses that gap by reading all three novels together and by distinguishing explicitly between figurative gendering of land and literal harm to women's bodies, treating the relationship between the two as a central analytic question rather than an assumed equivalence.

This study contributes to Niger Delta literary scholarship in three ways. First, it offers the first sustained three-text comparative reading of *Yellow-Yellow*, *Oil on Water*, and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* organised specifically around gendered embodiment, extending rather than repeating existing two-text comparisons. Second, by distinguishing between novels narrated by women and novels narrated by men, it clarifies how authorial and narratorial standpoint shapes whether the female body is represented with interiority and agency or primarily as a metaphor mobilised by male characters for their own political and economic grievances. Third, the study has pedagogical and curricular relevance for departments of English and literary studies

in Nigerian universities, where Niger Delta fiction is increasingly taught as a canon in its own right; a comparative, gender-attentive reading equips students and researchers with a framework for approaching future additions to this growing corpus.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based research design grounded in close textual analysis. The three primary texts, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), and Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010), were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of three criteria: each novel is set wholly or substantially within the Niger Delta; each engages directly with the material and social consequences of oil extraction; and, taken together, the three provide a range of narratorial standpoints, first-person female narration in *Yellow-Yellow*, first-person male narration in *Oil on Water*, and multiple first-person male narration in *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, that allows the comparative analysis of gendered perspective central to this paper's argument.

Data for this study consist of textual passages drawn from the three novels, identified through close reading for scenes and language involving environmental degradation, women's bodies, sexuality, reproduction, captivity, and resistance. Passages are cited with in-text page or chapter references corresponding to the editions consulted, allowing the analysis to remain grounded in verifiable textual evidence rather than paraphrase or generalisation. The analytic procedure followed three stages: first, identification of recurring motifs (oil spill, water contamination, transactional sex, disfigurement, captivity, sacred space, sexualised land-language, and resistance) across the three texts; second, close reading of representative passages for each motif, attending to diction, imagery, and narrative framing; and third, comparative interpretation across the three novels using the ecofeminist and slow violence frameworks outlined above.

This is not a quantitative or corpus-linguistic study; no claim is made regarding the statistical frequency of particular words or images across the full texts. Rather, the method is interpretive, consistent with standard practice in literary and cultural studies, and the passages discussed are treated as representative rather than exhaustive instances of each pattern identified. Ethical considerations are minimal given the study's reliance on published literary texts rather than human subjects, though the analysis remains attentive to the risk of flattening fictional women into mere symbols, a risk addressed directly in the analysis through attention to each character's specific narrative arc and interiority where the text provides it.

Analysis

Land as Violated Body: Oil Spills and the Maternal Farm

Yellow-Yellow opens its account of environmental harm not with an abstract description of pollution but with a scene centred on the narrator's mother's body. When a crude oil pipeline bursts and spreads across the family's farmland, Zilayefa's mother returns home coated in oil, and her daughter's first reaction is bodily concern rather than economic calculation: "As I was wondering why she needed them, I saw that her legs were stained black" (Agary, 2006, p. 3). The mother's flat, affectless response, asking only for soap and a towel, contrasts with Zilayefa's panic, and the delay in naming the cause, "Oil, Zilayefa," (Agary, 2006, p. 3), heightens the sense that the disaster has already been absorbed into the body before it is named as an event.

When Zilayefa reaches the farm itself, the description of the spill is rendered in language that anticipates the novel's later scenes of sexual exploitation: "the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path" until "there was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it, viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). The passage stresses helplessness and saturation, a land unable to resist or expel what has entered it. The community's subsequent appeal to the oil company for compensation is refused on the grounds of suspected sabotage, foreclosing any institutional remedy (Agary, 2006, p. 4), a detail that anticipates Sam and Zibima's (2023) empirical finding that Niger Delta women remain structurally excluded from environmental decision-making even when they bear the material cost of contamination.

The narrator explicitly links this single spill to a longer, slower process of dispossession: her mother and other women had "gradually lost, year after year, the creatures of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares, and who knows what else" (Agary, 2006, p. 4). This formulation aligns closely with Nixon's (2011) slow violence, since the single dramatic spill is presented as merely the visible culmination of an attritional process that has been underway for years, one that never registers as a discrete violent event until its cumulative effects can no longer be absorbed.

The River in the Blood: Water, Menstruation, and Contaminated Intimacy

The novel's most striking fusion of ecological and bodily harm occurs in a passage describing Zilayefa's adolescence, where the pain of using contaminated river water for menstrual hygiene is described in explicitly violent, bodily terms: she recalls "the pain like a hundred razor blades slashing my private part because the river water that washed it was the same water that received the waste rejected by my body in its

attempt to cleanse itself" (Agary, 2006, p. 47). The water, streaked with "blue, purple, and red, as drops of oil escaped from the pipelines," is at once the water she drinks, the water that carries away her waste, and the water that wounds her most intimate self (Agary, 2006, p. 47). This passage collapses the distinction between environmental contamination and bodily violation more completely than any other moment in the three novels under study, since the pain described is not metaphorical injury to land figured as a woman, but literal physical pain experienced by an actual adolescent girl as a direct consequence of oil infrastructure.

The same passage extends this contamination to the community's reproductive future more broadly, noting that fishing had become so poor "as though the water spirits had tied the fishes' wombs" (Agary, 2006, p. 47), a formulation that draws on Ijaw cosmology to describe ecological infertility in the same terms the narrator elsewhere uses, and fears, for her own body. This layering of literal and figurative infertility recurs later in the novel when Zilayefa recalls the folk belief that failing to care for one's mother would cause "the spirits of the water" to "tie my womb" as punishment (Agary, 2006, p. 18), so that the region's cosmology itself already imagines maternal failure and ecological withdrawal as interchangeable punishments, well before the novel's plot brings Zilayefa to her own reproductive crisis.

Transactional Bodies: The Sugar-Daddy Economy and Reproductive Coercion

Having established water and land as sites of bodily harm, *Yellow-Yellow* turns to a more directly economic register of exploitation once Zilayefa relocates to Port Harcourt. Her relationship with Admiral, a wealthy retired naval officer decades her senior, is introduced through the language of transaction from the outset; her friend and co-worker Emem warns her plainly, "The man is loaded; he can make you very comfortable," treating Admiral's interest as an economic opportunity rather than a romantic one (Agary, 2006, p. 128). The pattern of exchange, gifts for discretion, money for silence, structures the entire relationship, extending even to the household staff who are paid to keep Admiral's late-night visits secret (Agary, 2006, p. 161).

When Zilayefa becomes pregnant, Admiral's response strips the relationship of any remaining sentiment. He does not ask whether she wants to keep the child; he instructs her to see a doctor "who can take care of it," a euphemism immediately understood by both characters and by the reader as an instruction toward abortion (Agary, 2006, p. 169). The narrator's own account of her disillusionment is direct: "There was no room for a discussion. He did not ask whether I wanted to keep the child or not. He did not care" (Agary, 2006, p. 170). The recommended doctor, Dr George, is identified by Zilayefa herself as the physician "rich men sent their girlfriends to for abortions," a detail that exposes an entire informal infrastructure built to manage

the reproductive consequences of transactional relationships between oil-wealth men and young women (Agary, 2006, pp. 170-171).

Crucially, the novel refuses to resolve even this crisis cleanly: Zilayefa's own account reveals uncertainty over paternity, since "there was a possibility that the seed growing in my stomach was not planted by Admiral" (Agary, 2006, p. 171). This ambiguity denies the reader, and Zilayefa herself, the moral clarity of a single named perpetrator, reinforcing the novel's broader argument that harm in this economy is diffuse, structural, and multiply authored rather than the product of one clearly culpable individual, again consistent with the slow, attritional quality of Nixon's slow violence even when transposed from ecological to reproductive harm.

The Self-Administered Ending: River Imagery and Bodily Crisis

The resolution of Zilayefa's pregnancy crisis occurs on the night General Sani Abacha's death is announced, a juxtaposition of national and personal upheaval that the novel makes explicit. Rather than seeking Dr George's services, Zilayefa gathers plants she believes will "wash out belle" (Agary, 2006, p. 176), attempting a home remedy whose folk authority she only partly trusts. The bodily crisis that follows is rendered in language that returns, one final time, to the novel's controlling water imagery: as she loses the pregnancy, "the pain stiffened my joints, and the smell of blood stormed my nostrils as my being drifted into a river," and she describes hearing "the waves slowly chasing after each other" as she loses consciousness on the bathroom floor (Agary, 2006, p. 178). The novel thus closes its central bodily crisis by returning the narrator's suffering to the same river imagery with which it opened her mother's ecological dispossession, suggesting that the two forms of harm, environmental and reproductive, are not simply parallel but narratively and imagistically continuous within the text.

The Scarred Body: Boma and the Aftermath of Petro-Fire in Oil on Water

Where *Yellow-Yellow* centres its protagonist's own body, *Oil on Water* approaches gendered petro-violence obliquely, through the narrator Rufus's sister, Boma, whose face is permanently scarred in a fire caused by exploding oil drums when she is a child (Habila, 2010, pp. 1-2). The narrator's account of the accident is characteristically fragmented, filtered through unreliable memory, but its consequences for Boma's adult life are rendered with unflinching specificity. Her marriage to John, who had saved her from the fire as a child, ends after five years, and Rufus's account of Boma's own explanation for the marriage's collapse centres entirely on her scarred face: "It's my fault, I kept telling him to wait, wait... I know it is this face" (Habila, 2010, p. 96). The scarring becomes, in Boma's own account, both cause and

confirmation of her abandonment, a wound that continues to injure long after the fire itself has been extinguished.

The narrator's description of his mother's continued distress at the sight of her daughter is equally telling: "Mother was still unused to Boma's scarred face, it was as if she expected it to one day disappear," and their meetings routinely end in mutual weeping "till their voices went hoarse and they couldn't cry anymore" (Habila, 2010, p. 95). This detail illustrates how petro-violence's harm extends beyond the immediate victim to structure an entire family's emotional life around an injury that cannot be repaired, resonant with Oworodu's (2021) framing of trauma as a slow, cumulative, and intergenerational process rather than a single resolved event.

Captive Bodies: Isabel Floode and the Politics of the Hostage

The novel's central plot, Rufus and his mentor Zaq's search for the kidnapped British oil wife Isabel Floode, offers a different register of gendered petro-violence: the politically instrumentalised female hostage. When Rufus finally meets Isabel, the description emphasises her physical deterioration in terms that mirror the novel's broader ecological imagery of despoliation: "Her hair had been chopped off and the jagged edges hung unevenly over her ears," her "collarbones jutted out, stretching the skin," and her face was "covered in rashes," discoloured from a dye used in her escape attempt (Habila, 2010, p. 172). Her eyes are described as "hollow, lusterless," resting on things without ever "cutting below the surface" (Habila, 2010, p. 172), an image of psychological depletion that echoes the novel's repeated descriptions of poisoned water and dying vegetation elsewhere in the text.

Isabel's own account of her captivity, given haltingly to Rufus, reveals that her value to her captors lay entirely in her usefulness as a bargaining chip in the conflict between militants and oil companies, not in anything particular to her as an individual; she is, in the novel's own economy of value, interchangeable with the ransom she can generate. This positions her body, like the land around her, as an object whose worth is defined entirely by its exchange value within the oil economy, even as the narrative grants her enough interiority, her exhaustion, her wariness, her flashes of dark humour, to resist being reduced only to symbol.

The Priestess and the Shrine: Gendered Guardianship and Ecological Sanctuary

Against this backdrop of captivity and disfigurement, *Oil on Water* offers a striking counter-image in the figure of Gloria, the nurse Rufus meets at the river shrine of Irikefe. The shrine's founding myth, recounted to Rufus by a worshipper named Naman, explicitly links gendered ritual practice to ecological restoration: after "the blood of the dead ran in the rivers" following an ancient war, until "even the water in

the wells turned red," priests built the shrine specifically so that "the land needed to be cleansed of blood, and pollution" through daily ritual bathing and cries to the river (Habila, 2010, p. 78). Since that founding, the community claims, "we have managed to keep this island free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence" (Habila, 2010, p. 78).

Gloria herself occupies an ambiguous position within this sacred economy, present at the shrine but explicitly not a worshipper, employed rather than devoted (Habila, 2010, p. 77). When Rufus asks her about the disappearing bat population, she gestures toward the oil fields and answers simply, "Gas flares. They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creatures as well" (Habila, 2010, p. 76), positioning her as an unsentimental, almost clinical witness to ecological loss even within this space imagined as sanctuary. This positioning matters: Gloria is neither a symbol of pure ecological virtue nor a passive victim, but an outsider-insider whose knowledge of both the shrine's mythology and the surrounding devastation give her a distinct authority in the text, aligning with Michael and Daniel's (2022) reading of Habila's female characters as custodians of ecological memory even amid systemic collapse.

Gloria's guardianship, however, is shown to carry its own cost, one the novel discloses only gradually. It emerges that another kidnapped woman, an Englishwoman, had died at the shrine before Isabel's arrival, and that Gloria had been made a silent witness to that death. Questioned by Rufus, she recalls that armed, masked men had occupied the very room where he now sleeps, and that she was permitted to attend the earlier victim only once, too frightened to look at her properly: "There were men holding guns in that room. Wearing masks. I was too scared even to look at her properly. I wouldn't recognize her if I saw her again" (Habila, 2010, p. 205). She discloses further that she was explicitly threatened into silence, told that "if I talked about the woman or about the men to anyone, terrible things would happen to the community, and it would be my fault" (Habila, 2010, p. 205). Gloria's position as nurse and reluctant witness thus exposes a second, quieter form of gendered coercion running alongside the novel's more visible plot of Isabel's captivity: the community's own women are pressed into complicity through fear, made responsible in advance for violence they had no part in committing. Her guardianship of the shrine's ecological sanctuary and her forced guardianship of the militants' secret are, in this sense, two faces of the same vulnerability, since both position her as custodian of a knowledge she did not choose to hold.

"My River Is Being Raped": Masculinized Resistance and the Sexualized Land in Tomorrow Died Yesterday

Tomorrow Died Yesterday offers the most explicit instance in the three novels of land being described in the vocabulary of sexual violence. In a heated exchange with his friend Kaniye, the militant Doye justifies his participation in oil bunkering and kidnapping through a direct analogy between land and rape: "It's a never-ending gang rape... I didn't start it, Kaniye. I can't stop it either. I decided that since it's my oil, my river and my land that's being raped, I might as well join in" (Garricks, 2010, p. 293). The passage is remarkable for making explicit what remains largely figurative elsewhere in the corpus: the land is not merely compared to a violated body, it is named using the specific vocabulary of sexual assault, "rape," applied without qualification to oil extraction itself.

Yet the novel does not allow this rhetoric to stand as straightforward environmental consciousness. Doye's grievance is revealed, in the same conversation, to be entangled with personal resentment over a lost job opportunity and a stated motive of "taking my share of oil money" (Garricks, 2010, p. 293), prompting Kaniye's blunt rejoinder that Doye is "no different from all the people you complain about... a mercenary, a vulture" (Garricks, 2010, p. 294). This tension is precisely what Fakemi (2022) identifies as the novel's refusal of a straightforwardly environmentalist reading: the language of gendered ecological violation is deployed by a male character whose actual practice replicates rather than resists the extractive logic he condemns. The effect, for this paper's argument, is to expose how thoroughly the vocabulary of sexual violence against a feminised land has become the default rhetorical resource for articulating Niger Delta grievance, available even to speakers whose politics are self-interested rather than emancipatory.

This sexualised land-language has roots reaching back into the novel's account of the friends' childhood, when the gas flare burning perpetually on the horizon is first encountered by the boys as an object of mythic fascination rather than harm, described by young Tubo as "hellfire" issuing from a pipe leading "straight down to hell" (Garricks, 2010, pp. 60-61). The scene that follows, in which Doye kills a small crab with a stick for no evident reason beyond casual cruelty, while Amaibi protests that "it's only a baby crab... it's God's creature and it hasn't done anything to you" (Garricks, 2010, p. 61), stages in miniature the novel's later concern with unprovoked violence against vulnerable, feminised, or defenceless bodies, whether crab, land, or, eventually, kidnap victim.

Bodies Off the Page: Dise and Deola in Tomorrow Died Yesterday

If Doye's rhetoric demonstrates how thoroughly the feminised land can be conscripted into male grievance, the novel's treatment of its two most developed female characters, Dise and Deola, demonstrates the corresponding cost: women who structure the male narrators' emotional lives while remaining largely absent from the narrative's own attention. Amaibi's marriage to Dise ends after his 1997 torture and detention leave him with what his doctor's term post-traumatic impotence, a condition the narrative discloses only through Amaibi's own account of his body rather than through any access to Dise's perspective on the marriage's collapse: "After that day in 1997, I couldn't get it up any more... Dise and I broke up" (Garricks, 2010, p. 174). The single sentence in which the marriage's end is reported is characteristic of the novel's broader pattern: significant losses experienced by women are compressed into subordinate clauses within accounts centred on male suffering.

Deola, the prison nurse who eventually enters a relationship with Amaibi, is introduced primarily through the effect her touch has on his body, described in an extended passage in which his returning erection while she cleans his wound becomes, in his own words, a symbol of "life and defiance" against his torturers (Garricks, 2010, p. 174). The passage is notable for how completely it subordinates Deola's own labour, competence, and choices, she is, after all, a medical volunteer working in a Nigerian prison under evidently difficult conditions, to her function within Amaibi's private narrative of bodily and political recovery. Deola does receive her own narrated chapters later in the novel, addressing the reader directly as "Deola" in a first-person voice (Garricks, 2010, p. 189), which grants her more interiority than either Dise or the largely silent women of Doye's sections; even so, her chapters remain framed by, and in service of, the central story of the three men's friendship and political awakening. This pattern, in which the novel's only sustained female interiority is introduced through, and remains oriented around, a male character's bodily and psychological crisis, illustrates concretely what this paper has termed the asymmetry of gendered ecology across the three texts: a novel capable of describing land in the vivid, violent vocabulary of rape nonetheless struggles to grant its actual women narrative space proportionate to their significance in the men's lives.

Silence, Flight, and Small Refusals: Forms of Female Resistance

Read together, the three novels resist a single unified model of female resistance, offering instead a range of smaller, less spectacular strategies. Zilayefa's mother in *Yellow-Yellow* resists not through protest but through withdrawal, most vividly in her quiet refusal of continued participation in the village women's group

after being pressed for dues she cannot pay: "I no join dis una women group again sef. I neva see any beta tin wey come out of am. Dey go!" (Agary, 2006, p. 8). This small act of self-exclusion, delivered in Nigerian Pidgin that lends it immediacy and specificity, is not framed by the narrator as defeat but as a considered assertion of autonomy in the only domain left to her after the loss of her farmland.

Zilayefa herself resists primarily through flight and self-reliance rather than confrontation: she leaves Admiral without seeking further support from him, manages her pregnancy crisis without disclosing it to Lolo, her closest confidante, out of a wish to protect their relationship (Agary, 2006, p. 175), and closes the novel resolving to "focus only on completing my education" (Agary, 2006, p. 177), an ending that is deliberately modest rather than triumphant, consistent with the novel's overall refusal of melodrama in favour of quiet, incremental self-determination.

In *Oil on Water*, Gloria's resistance takes the form of strategic positioning rather than confrontation: her insistence that she is "not a worshipper," merely "the nurse" (Habila, 2010, p. 77), preserves a critical distance from the shrine's ideology even as she benefits from its protection, allowing her to move between the sacred community and the wider, oil-contaminated world without being fully absorbed into either. Boma's resistance is quieter still, and more costly: her decision to leave her marital home rather than remain financially dependent on a landlord, insisting to Rufus, "No. I'm not going back there. I'll look for another place" (Habila, 2010, p. 96), represents a small but deliberate assertion of control over her circumstances even as the underlying injury, her scarring and its social consequences, remains permanently unresolved.

Tomorrow Died Yesterday, narrated entirely by men, offers the least direct access to female resistance strategies, a limitation that is itself analytically significant. The absence of a developed female interiority in this novel, in contrast to the sustained first-person access granted to Zilayefa in *Yellow-Yellow*, illustrates how thoroughly the militant, masculinist framing of Niger Delta resistance can crowd out attention to the specific, embodied costs borne by women, even within a narrative that repeatedly invokes feminised land as the justification for male violence. This asymmetry across the three novels is itself part of this paper's argument: gendered ecology is represented very differently depending on whose voice controls the narrative, and comparative reading makes that difference visible in a way that single-text analysis cannot.

Summary and Recommendations

This study has shown that petro-violence in *Yellow-Yellow*, *Oil on Water*, and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* operates simultaneously on two registers: the literal, material harm experienced by women whose farmland, water, and reproductive lives are

damaged by oil extraction, and a figurative register in which the land itself is persistently described using the vocabulary of the female body, maternal, menstrual, or sexually violated. In *Yellow-Yellow*, these two registers converge most completely, since Agary's first-person female narration allows environmental and bodily harm to be rendered as genuinely continuous experiences within a single consciousness. In *Oil on Water*, the pattern is refracted through a male narrator's partial, often uncertain access to the interior lives of Boma, Isabel, and Gloria, producing a more oblique but still recognisable version of the same structure. In *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, the figurative register dominates almost entirely, with the sexualised land-language of militant grievance largely detached from any sustained attention to actual women's experience, a pattern that this paper reads as evidence of how easily gendered ecological rhetoric can be appropriated for self-interested ends.

On the basis of these findings, several recommendations follow. First, Niger Delta literary scholarship would benefit from further comparative studies that read novels by women and men against one another specifically to trace how narratorial standpoint shapes the representation of gendered ecological harm, extending the three-text model offered here to the wider and still-growing corpus of Niger Delta fiction. Second, given Sam and Zibima's (2023) empirical finding that women remain excluded from environmental decision-making despite bearing its heaviest costs, literary scholars and environmental policy researchers might productively collaborate, using close reading of fiction such as *Yellow-Yellow* to illustrate, for policy and advocacy audiences, the lived texture of exclusion that quantitative studies can only summarise statistically. Third, departments of English and literary studies in Nigerian universities, particularly those situated within or near the Niger Delta, should consider foregrounding this comparative, gender-attentive approach in the teaching of regional literature, since it equips students to read militant rhetoric, environmental advocacy, and women's lived experience as related but analytically distinct objects of study rather than collapsing them into a single undifferentiated narrative of regional suffering. Finally, future creative writing from the region, and criticism of it, might attend more deliberately to the risk this study identifies in *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*: that the language of sexual violation, once established as the default idiom for describing ecological harm, can be mobilised by speakers whose actual politics have little to do with women's welfare, a risk best guarded against through continued critical attention of the kind this paper has attempted.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that petro-violence in contemporary Niger Delta fiction is inseparable from questions of gender, not simply because women happen to suffer

alongside a devastated environment, but because the literary language used to represent environmental harm in these three novels is persistently and specifically gendered, drawing on maternal, menstrual, and sexual vocabulary to make ecological catastrophe legible as violence. Reading *Yellow-Yellow*, *Oil on Water*, and *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* together reveals both the consistency of this pattern across texts written from markedly different narratorial standpoints and the significant variation in how much interiority and agency each text grants to the women whose bodies carry this symbolic weight. Where Agary's first-person female narration allows environmental and bodily harm to be rendered as a single continuous experience, and Habila's more oblique narration still grants his female characters moments of resistant self-definition, Garricks' entirely male-narrated novel risks reducing the feminised land to rhetorical resource for grievances that are not, in the end, primarily about women at all. Attending to these differences, this paper suggests, is essential to a fuller understanding of how Niger Delta fiction imagines both ecological devastation and the possibility of resistance to it, and it points toward continued critical and pedagogical work that keeps the specific, embodied costs borne by women visible within a literary tradition that has often used their suffering as its most powerful, and most easily appropriated, metaphor.

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