

UNEARTHING ECOFEMINIST MEANINGS THROUGH LINGUISTIC PATTERNS IN PETER OMOKO'S *MọTẹKORO*

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Abstract: The exploitation of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria by oil multinational companies is no longer news. For decades, it has been a case of oil spills, land devastation, and agitation from local communities. Amid armed conflicts, there have been cases of sexual violence against women which is not reported on mainstream media. Ecofeminism states that the degradation of the environment and the poor treatment of women are connected. This theory has permeated various fields of learning, including language, literature, psychology, and politics. This study examines eco feminism nuances through linguistic patterns in Peter Omoko's *MọTẹkoro*, (in the Collection River Songs and Testament). This poem succinctly deals with the rape of women in the Niger Delta conflict and the devastation of the land by oil multinational companies. Applying the qualitative research and using *MọTẹkoro*, as a case study, the researcher identifies intense graphic linguistic choices expressing ecofeminism while juxtaposing them with the violent rapes of women. Conclusively, the study establishes that the poem concisely expresses the connectivity between the ravaging of the region and the sexual assault of its women in times of conflict.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Ecofeminism, Rape, Degradation, Exploitation

Introduction

The degradation of the Niger Delta environment of Southern Nigeria has been a deep concern to both local and international bodies saddled with the conservation of the environment. No part of the environment has been spared: the flora, fauna, marine life, and the atmosphere. Petroleum exploration and production have done their share of good for the Nigerian economy. Nigeria is estimated to have 176

trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, (Majorwaves, 2025), making it among the world's top ten gas endowments and the biggest Liquefied Natural Gas exporter (Twumasi & Merem, 2006). However, the resultant effect has left people impoverished because the land has been left in a contaminated state.

Oloruntegbe and Akinsete (2009), in their quest for empirical evidence, took water and soil samples from four locations in the Niger Delta and two locations outside the area for control. The samples were tested for temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen, salinity, oil and grease, and heavy metal sediments. The result of the analysis showed high hydrocarbon pollution relative to what obtains elsewhere. Otekenari (2023) states that increasing soil sterility and diminishing agricultural output have forced farmers to move or seek illicit sources of living. The degradation of traditional fishing grounds worsens hunger and poverty in the riverine communities. The entities at the receiving end are the poor who have no means of escaping the ravaged land and the also stupefied Niger Delta environment, still reeling from the after-effects of violent ravishment. *'Now darkness has met us/ all at home'* (line 228) becomes a testament of a system that has failed to protect nature and womanhood.

This environmental degradation by the oil multinational corporations has fueled criminal activities, creating social conflicts and criminality (Ogadi, 2012). It is pertinent to note that none of the stakeholders can be absolved of crimes in the region. While the drilling, gas flaring, and neglected oil spills are going on with the oil corporations, illegal oil bunkering, kidnapping, and other criminal activities are being perpetrated by the locals. On the part of the government, they pay lip service to the clean-up of the region. Peter Omoko, a playwright, poet, and academic scholar, has written particularly about the state of the Niger Delta region in his collection of poems, *River Song and Testament*. *'Mọtẹkoro'* (Girl is gold), which is one of the poems, is a metaphor of the violent rape of the region. *'Girl'* here is a symbolic representation of womanhood, innocence, and reproduction. *Mọtẹkoro* is gold; therefore, she is priceless wealth. Gold is not found on surfaces; you have to dig deep to access it, just the same way you dig deep to drill for crude oil. *Mọtẹkoro* is a graphic, metaphoric presentation of the degradation of the Niger Delta environment and womanhood.

Theoretical Framework

Eco-feminism is prominent among the branches of feminism, as the theory that explores the relationships between women and the natural environment. The term was first introduced by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. As a theory, ecofeminism merges ecology and feminism, emphasising the connection and closeness between women and nature, along with their shared unjustified subjugation and exploitation within a patriarchal framework.

Sagan (2020) asserts that “both as individual animals and as a planetary civilisation we depend upon the bodies and bodily knowledge of our nonhuman planet mates.” Nonetheless, eco-feminists argue that while there are links between human and non-human nature, the interdependence between women and nature is stronger than that of men and nature. One significant aspect highlighting this connection is, arguably, “the concept of maternity: both are mothers” (Valera 2017). Furthermore, Plumwood (1993) claims that although contradictions exist in understanding their relationship, it is evident that women are connected to nature through qualities such as “empathy, nurturance, cooperativeness, and connectedness, reproductive capacity, which cannot be shared by men.” She adds that the phenomena of ‘backgrounding’ and ‘instrumentalisation’ of nature closely parallel that of women.

Similarly, Merchant (1980) notes that women and nature have an old-age association and an affiliation that has persisted through various cultures, languages and history. Consequently, Warren (2000) identified ten significant connections between women and nature. To illustrate this relationship in the Indian context, Shiva (2010) explains that women are intricately linked to nature in both their imagination and everyday lives. She expressly states that nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle on one level, and she is reared by the feminine on another level to produce life and offer nourishment. Overall, since its introduction in 1974, there has been extensive contemplation on the various bio-anthropological and socio-cultural relationships between women and nature.

Additionally, ecofeminism ties together the exploitation of nature and gender domination, asserting that patriarchy is the root cause of this domination and exploitation. Gaard (1993) affirms that the fundamental idea behind ecofeminism is that the ideology legitimising oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality,

physical abilities, and species is the same ideology that supports the oppression of nature. Thus, many eco-feminists propose that efforts to liberate women will have no success until the same act is extended to nature. Consequently, eco-feminists advocate for the eradication of all forms of oppression.

Gaard and Murphy (1998) further suggest that ecofeminism concerns the connection between women and nature, examining the abuse against nature, the repression of women, class oppression, prejudice, imperialism and neocolonialism. Moreover, it challenges and seeks to disrupt the tiered binary divisions (such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, humans/animals, and white/non-white) in which men dominate as reason, subject, and master, reducing women to nature, object, and slave.

Within this framework, Legler (1997) points out that ecofeminism, as a literary criticism method, represents a hybrid critique that merges environmental or ecological analysis with feminist literary critique. It provides literary and cultural critics with a unique blend of literary and philosophical insights to investigate how nature is depicted in literature, along with how these representations relate to gender, race, class, and sexuality. A central aim of ecofeminist literary critics is to scrutinise the cultural construction of nature, which includes an examination of language, desire, knowledge, and power.

Research on ecofeminism has continued for years, highlighting the economic hardships faced by the most vulnerable, namely, women and children. Amadi et al. (2015) found strong links between environmental degradation and the exploitation of women. They argue that this is because women are the breadwinners of their families, and any environmental decline ultimately impacts them. However, their work primarily focuses on climate change effects and environmental disasters rather than sexual exploitation. Davies (2023), applying ecofeminism theory, demonstrates that environmental degradation parallels sexual exploitation, as exemplified in Kaine Agrey's 'Yellow, Yellow.' Ifechelobi & Emmanuel (2017) reinforce this connection, explaining that both are rooted in shared fertility, productivity, and vulnerability. Naqvi and Batthi (2025), in their analysis of Fahmida Riaz's 'The Body Torn' and other poems, explore how the poet employs metaphors, pronouns, and syntactic patterns to reveal links between gendered experiences and environmental

issues. Using qualitative methods, their findings show that Fahmida's language critiques patriarchal structures and ecological exploitation, although it does not directly address the sexual exploitation of women in relation to land exploitation.

Despite the attention given to ecofeminist works concerning the Niger Delta region, there is a paucity of linguistic analysis. Most works focus on thematic concerns, not paying attention to the linguistic patterning that projects the themes. In seeking to close this gap, this work adds to the corpus linguistics of works that structure the language of ecofeminism in the Niger Delta.

Aside from the ecofeminist theory on which this work is based, we will be analysing the linguistic style used by the poet to convey ecofeminist nuances. Linguistic stylistics studies the devices in language, lexico-semantic and syntactical patterns. Ayeomoni (2003) reiterates that, like other disciplines, the linguistic study of texts is precise and definite as it employs objective and verifiable methods of analysis and interpretation. For the analysis of the text, the lexico-semantic level, syntactic/clausal level, phonological level, graphological level, and figurative meanings will be examined. At the lexico-semantic level, the lexical choices made by the poet to express ecofeminist nuances will be examined. The syntactic level has to do with arrangements of units larger than a word, which include phrases, clauses, and sentences. The phonological level deals with the sound play employed by the poet to heighten imagery and emotions. Ultimately, it comes down to how Peter Omoko uses language to convey his message.

Consequently, this study examines the interconnectedness and exploitation of women and nature by a governing system through ecofeminist lens and linguistic patterns in Peter Omoko's poem, *Motekoro*, which serves as the primary focus of this research. Additionally, various secondary sources, including reference books and e-journals, were consulted to gather further information for the study. The data is analysed through a qualitative research method. Moreover, the themes of representation, governmental exploitation, and the domination of women and nature are utilised as analytical tools in the poem's analysis.

***Mọ̀tẹ̀koro*: The Linguistic Patterns and Eco-feminism Connection**

Lexico-Semantic Field

The lexico-semantic field refers to words that are semantically related and belong to the same conceptual field. As earlier mentioned, *Mọ̀tẹ̀koro* is a 7-part poem filled with sexual imagery that deals with the degradation of the Niger Delta environment vis-à-vis the violation of a young lady. Peter Omoko delves into a world of intricately crafted words to bring out the ecofeminist nuances in the poem. When we are introduced to *Ọ̀mọ̀tẹ̀koro* in Part 1. *Ọ̀mọ̀tẹ̀koro comes like a dove coiled /in burning faggots to break/the palaces of calloused hearts...* (lines 1-3). From the word choice, we find *Ọ̀mọ̀tẹ̀koro* being compared to a dove, which is a symbol of purity and innocence. This was the innocent and virgin state of the land before oil was discovered in Oloibiri and the craze for the violation of the region began in earnest, first by the multinational oil corporations, later joined by the locals and then enabled by the Government. These fields of aggression are found in the following expressions: 'faggots to break', 'vexed pythons', 'thronging barbs', 'puncture', 'mangled vaults'. There are other references to her connectivity with nature and its degradation. '*...breaking hazy tunic of martyred blood/ flowing, flowing, flowing...*' (lines 32-34). '*The rain that puts a thousand droughts to sleep/ the volcano of ruptured feelings/vomiting lavas through the skin of defeated mountains*' (41-44).

These lines above are metaphoric references to the defeated state of the region. Being a poem that tries to compare the degradation of womanhood to the degradation of the Niger Delta region, Omoko, in this work, uses a lot of lexicons associated with the earth, for example, mountains, wind, oyster, volcano, forests, mangrove, etc

Also *Ọ̀mọ̀tẹ̀koro* takes on the attributes of rain that ends dryness; another symbol of productivity. The *volcano of ruptured feelings* speaks to the deep emotional outbursts peculiar to women. However, there is a caveat: her emotions erupt through defeated mountains. Despite her capabilities, she is brought down by those who exploit her. This is expressed graphically in sexual intercourse, likened to the activity of drilling oil. *... registered in contours of fleshy foliage/ skin wobbling under a silky duvet/ retracting and bulging/ ..lying on embroidered mats/ stained in innocent blood/as ruptured hymen/ Sneezes scarlet tears of triumph* (lines 62-70). Part 2 ends with the violation of *Ọ̀mọ̀tẹ̀koro* likened to the degradation by oil corporations. Peter Omoko uses

descriptive words to depict this exploitation, *retracting and bulging, seizing naked abdomen, stained in innocent blood, ruptured hymen, they gang-raped,rape-ganged, spread weeping thighs*

The female body is presented as a landscape that is brutally penetrated, torn, and exploited, mirroring the environmental destruction. *Omọ̀tẹ̀koro's* people welcome all comers for further degradation, and her fame is 'noised abroad'. *'Omọ̀tẹ̀koro's adjusted pubic is a toxic to a lone rigid vein/ she must be wedded to the clan' perverse albinos clap to high heavens to possess tender thighs/ at the festival of hymen dance/ groundnut pyramids knocked their heads against Aso Rock seizing naked abdomen/ cocoa barns caught fire...palm oil bowls vomited blood in the genocide of the clan...* (86-97).

Okechukwu (1998) reports that an academic research undertaken in Nigeria came to the finding that the armed security forces have been primarily responsible for gender-based violence, for example, rape, sexual slavery, and forced pregnancy that took place in Ogoni land between 1990 and 1998. Lines 112-128 bemoan corporate plundering of the land. *Iphri wails a sea of tears/ o mourn impotent forests/ hypnotised by the scent of hurled carrots/ dangling in majestic silhouettes/ as anxious testicles summoned pellets of spermatozoa/ for the ritual of rape/ they parted excited skirts/ split greasy nipples/ and spread weeping thighs/ they gang raped/rape ganged/ Alas the calabash was broken/ to expose the morbid riddle of the delta.*

These are the existing forms of pollution that can be derived from oil and gas exploitation and exploration in Nigeria. It is the slow poisoning of the environment and destruction of vegetation and agricultural land by oil spills, which occur during operations. This is the exact problem and issue in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Peter Omoko expresses this poetically this way. *Her hands are spread/ to the terminals at Escravos, her legs to the oil platforms/at Bonny oceans/ her pants and bra are torn/ and cast into the tilling plant at Utorogun/ to flare virgin gas across barren countries/ to the relish of multinational syndicates/ who salivate at the sight of wetted cunt...*(182-190).

Phonological Patterns

The poem is written in free verse, lacking a regular rhyme scheme and metre. This contributes to the organic, unsettling, raw, and uncontained imagery the poem presents. The lack of traditional poetic structure also signifies a departure from

conventional forms, aligning with the themes of disruption. The sound patterns in this poem play a vital role by bringing the images being created to life. | *Tyrantkings cried* (99), the repetition of the plosives /t/ and /k/ creates a harsh tone typifying the harshness of the kings. *Rape-ganged, ganged-raped, rape-ganged* (119-122). The repetition of the velar plosive /g/ produces an emotive force emphasising the repetitive and violent rape of the Niger Delta region and Mọṭẹkoro. The repeated /k/ in 'cuddled by the cudgels' creates a jarring contrast between tenderness and tools of violence. The repetitive use of alliteration, *flowing, flowing, flowing* (34), combined with the word itself, presents an eerie feeling as the martyred blood flows.

Syntactic Patterns

Omoko uses various syntactic patterns to bring out the ecofeminist nuances. For example, the poem is heavy with vivid noun phrases contributing to the disturbing imagery of land and sexual imagery, *undulating creases, thronging barbs, orgy fever, perverse albinos, impotent forests* (103)..... He uses a lot of active verbs, like empties, kindle, conjure, etc, making the poem dynamic, contributing to its disturbing imagery. There is a constant shift in sentence length from short phrases 'on succulent lips' (101) to longer sentence structures 'mud skippers gyrate under shattered duvet (138).

Graphological Pattern

The poem is made up of 21 stanzas and 257 lines. It is written in free verse with the minimal use of punctuation. Enjambment and the absence of conventional punctuation give the poem a sense of unbridled flow. Even though the poem is in seven parts, the use of enjambment does not create separateness in the poem, giving a singular whole. Lines 119-122 are slanted, foregrounding them in the poem, drawing attention to the rape scene. This technique is also repeated from lines 133-137, highlighting the destination of the Niger Delta wealth 'Paris cruise' (133). 'London's cottage' (134). 'Swiss account' (135). Dubai's estate' (136), America's laurels" (137). These cities are presented as reward destinations after exploiting the Niger Delta.

Figurative Meanings

The poem is replete with figurative language, examples- *örgy fever blazing*, equating intense sexual energy with a destructive fire, *loosed vexed pythons*, referring to the aroused male organ, also symbolising the oil drilling pipes used in ravaging the land. Personifications like *lips of the wind*, *thighs laughing in ecstasy*, (76).....

Calabash was broken to expose the morbid riddle of the Delta. |Here, the calabash symbolising life and a woman's fertility is broken to reveal the secrets of resource exploitation, environmental degradation tied to violence.

Conclusion

Peter Omoko uses linguistic patterns to deliver a powerful and explicit ecofeminist indictment of resource exploitation and its connection with gendered violence. The most striking ecofeminist linguistic pattern is the continued and intensified personification of the Niger region as *Mọtẹkoro* whose body is subjected to extreme violence. *Mọtẹkoro's* mangled breasts, battered lips and struggling nipples are explicit linguistic parallels between the exploitation of the earth and violence against women. The phrase 'petrochemicals of greed' encapsulates the poem's critique of the driving force behind the destruction, prioritising profit over ecological and social wellbeing. In conclusion, Peter Omoko uses powerful, brutal linguistic imagery to solidify his message, which is that the environmental devastation of a region, exemplified by the Niger Delta, is inseparable from the violation and suffering of the female body. The linguistic choices ensure the reader does not escape the reality of this interconnected destruction.

Recommendations

Mọtẹkoro by Peter Omoko is a testament of sorts to the devastating effects of oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta. It is disheartening to note that while the land is being ravaged, the women of the land are not left out of the exploitation. It is recommended that Human Rights watchdogs like Amnesty International, International Federation of Women Lawyers use their platforms to draw attention to human rights abuses in the Niger Delta region and pursue justice for victims. The government should live up to its responsibility of the security of the people and the environment. We must not just be concerned about the food, but also the kitchen in

which it is prepared. One cannot be separate from the other. Training and re-training of the armed forces is necessary to reduce instances of rape in these oil-rich communities and, with time, come to embrace their responsibility of being protectors and defenders. The Government should also have the political will to prosecute exploiters of both human and natural resources, and then the land and people will have a form of respite from age-long oppressions. This theory will not only resonate in the negative but also in the positive.

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