



Corruption and Environmental Pollution: A Critique of Gabriel Okara's *the Voice*

Chukwuyem Othniel Omijie*, Cynthia Chinenye Nwokolo

¹Department of English and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

omijieothniel@gmail.com

²Department of English Literary Studies, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Nigeria.

Cynthia.nwokolo@dou.edu.ng

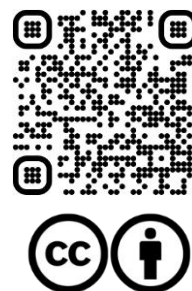
*Corresponding Author

Received: 02 Jun 2023; Received in revised form: 01 Jul 2023; Accepted: 08 Jul 2023; Available online: 15 Jul 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Many African authors have consistently embraced topics related to land concerns and the environment that are crucial to local, cultural, and societal development. This essay analyzes Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* for the depiction of environmental deterioration brought on by corrupt leadership, and the blatant display of power to silent those who speak against injustice. While corruption is a recurrent issue in Nigeria Delta literature, the theme of environmental degradation shows the disastrous effects of oil exploration and exploitation on the Niger Delta area. The paper examines the degree of corruption and pollution in the text under investigation and their repercussions on the ecology of the host communities, which are mostly farmers and fishermen, using Eco-Criticism and Post-Colonial Literary Theories as its theoretical framework. The article makes a connection between these crimes and the West's insensitivity to the misery of the people as a result of its drive for possession. This causes nature to stagnate and the environment to deteriorate. To assess Okara's depiction of power struggles and excessive desire in the midst of abundance through his characters and the community's setting, the paper chooses quotes from the book. It develops the connection between the author and his community as the voice of Africa's oppressed people.



Keywords— Degradation, Eco-criticism, Environmental pollution, Disillusionment, Oil Spill

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to its detrimental effects on society, corruption has grown to be a major problem. One of the biggest barriers to growth in Africa and other developing nations worldwide is this. African society has been deeply impacted by corruption, which has caused incalculable pain for the populace. Corruption may be seen in practically every area of society, whether it be minor or large. According to Morris (1991), corruption is the dishonest or fraudulent behavior of persons in positions of authority, frequently involving bribes. It is the improper exercise of authority for a personal gain. In actuality, corruption serves to keep the wealthy, wealthy and the poor impoverished. Powerful people utilize it for their own personal gain, to conceal the truth, and to distort reality

(Morris, 1991). Nigeria in particular, as well as other African nations generally, continue to struggle with corruption, which poses significant social, political, and economic challenges. Where there is no discipline or firm moral norms to control it, it spreads. Political and societal corruption may take on many different shapes and manifests itself either via bribery or embezzlement. In a fictitious scenario that is similar to Nigeria, the two novels included complete examples of corruption, a failing social structure, and environmental degradation.

A lot of African literature is devoted; at first, it served as a way to honour Africa and her environmental blessings. Later, it was used to fight against colonialism. It is currently being used as a true weapon to portray the postcolonial disenchantment in African countries. Because

they have continued to pay special attention to the African environment in their many literary works, many African authors today are environmentalists. They predict that Western actions and those of its supporters in Africa will lead to a decline in the natural environment of the African continent. For Africans, land and rivers are valuable resources that cannot be manipulated. The environment is seen as a significant entity. The majority of Africans are farmers and fisherman who depend on the land and rivers that make up their environment for their livelihood. Given that they are mostly farmers and fisherman, respectively, land is related to the people's culture, spiritual heritage, and physical legacy in traditional African civilization among the Niger Delta people of Nigeria. One of the most vibrant and pressing topics of our day is the environment. Due to the extent of the destruction caused by human activity, the environment is in crisis on a worldwide scale. One of the most common topics in Niger Delta literature is environmental damage. The Niger Delta is home to Nigeria's oil and gas sector, which has severely affected the ecology. The land, water, and air have been poisoned by oil spills, gas flare-ups, and other operations, destroying local ecosystems and robbing residents of their means of survival. The effects of environmental destruction have been extensively discussed in literature. For instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1985) explores the effects of oil drilling on the Niger Delta's ecology and the indigenous populace in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. Similar to this, the 2010 novel *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila is a fictitious account of the search for a kidnapped oil executive's wife in the Niger Delta. The narrative explains how fights over resources have caused murder in the region and how the oil industry has ruined the ecology. The negative impacts of corrupt human behavior on the environment have been made more widely known by writers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Voice by Okara has drawn a variety of criticisms. Studies on Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, including a review in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, support the idea that the book is a captivating and inventive work of literature distinguished by the clarity of its narrative structure and language. The story's seeming simplicity is deceptive; rather than stemming from the author's frailty, it is the consequence of meticulous writing. Additionally, in 1968, Canadian author Margaret Laurence stated in her book on *Nigerian literature: Long Drums and Cannons*, that Okara's work *The Voice* was "unquestionably one of the most memorable novels produced in Nigeria." Even though many research have been done, they are still insufficient since they do not fully understand how

thorough *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara is. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to evaluate how the novel portrays corruption and environmental devastation. Since Okara's groundbreaking work, further local authors have emerged, covering a range of subjects and methodologies. In his plays *Basi and Company* and the novel *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa tackles issues including societal inequality, governmental corruption, and the struggle for human rights. Ifowodo, a poet and scholar from Nigeria, claims that the literature of the Niger Delta is 'distinct from other forms of Nigerian literature in its preoccupation with the degradation of the environment, the exploitation of oil resources, the struggle for social justice, and the quest for identity and cultural authenticity' (Ifowodo: 2004).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Several scholarly frameworks have been used to study the growing thematic preoccupations in Niger Delta literature. One of the most well-known theories, known as postcolonial theory, focuses on how literature responds to and reflects the legacy of colonialism and empire. Postcolonial theorists believe that literature has the power to challenge conventional narratives and promote social change. Ecocriticism, which examines the connection between literature and the natural world, is another academic framework used to analyze this essay. This suggests how people and nature interact. Thus, ecocriticism addresses ecology, environmental deterioration, and the exploitation of the environment and other living things. This is due to the fact that the effects of human behavior are harming the planet's fundamental life support system and hence the ecosystem. This theory offers a deeper understanding of the plight of the Niger Delta people when applied to Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*. According to ecologists, literature may encourage environmental activism and environmental consciousness by shedding light on how humans interact with nature, Okoye, (2013). Due to the corrupt actions of the authorities and the resulting damage to the environment and the populations living nearby, corruption and environmental concerns have emerged as prominent themes in the majority of African literary works in the past ten years. The necessity to protect and conserve the natural world, including endangered species, has been argued for in order to maintain the ecosystemic chain. Before now, a lot of African authors were more focused on the immediate socio-political effects of colonialism and have now realized the need of focusing on environmental challenges that have continued to overshadow Africa in the neo-colonial age. An example of how ecocriticism is used to analyze Niger Delta literature is seen in Christopher Anyokwu's essay 'The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: An Ecocritical Perspective'. Anyokwu (2015) argues in this

article that because Ojaide's poetry illustrates the catastrophic impacts of environmental contamination on the ecology, it promotes environmental action and awareness.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study entails a close analysis and critical study of the primary text in order to arrive at the different instances in and various aspects of the text that might substantiate the argument, apart from the primary text, various secondary sources like articles, research papers and journals were instrumental in analyzing the text and in forming and sustaining the argument. Also, the Post-Colonial Theory' has been used in this paper to project the ways in which corruption and post-colonial disillusionment and the resultant effects can be seen in the text.

IV. DISCUSSION

Depiction of Corruption in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

The Voice by Okara is a novel that examines post-independence disillusionment while imagining a society transitioning from a traditional economy to modernity. As such, it can be interpreted as belonging to 'oxymoronic literatures', or African 'literatures expressive of the novel', in which the protagonist, Okolo, questions the lack of moral values in his society. Although the educated Okolo does not specify what he means by 'it' throughout the story, the reader may infer that 'it' refers to moral principles and social consciousness. Thus, those who are interested in a conservative hold on power view Okolo's quest as a threat. It suggests a look within and the elimination of corruption and selfishness. Okolo is troubled by the community leaders' and their followers' abandonment of moral principles. He questions the elders and Chief Izongo, challenging them to prove their mettle. They then demand that he quit seeking for 'it' or suffer the repercussions. Chief Izongo orders Okolo to be tortured and exiled from the community for refusing to call an end to his quest. When Okolo moves to Sologa, he discovers that the city lacks 'it' as well. He finds himself in a home filled with human remains when he first arrives in this town. Later, he runs into a police officer and tells him about the bones. The policeman remarks that the owner of the home is a 'bigman' who is impervious to difficulties. The policeman takes leave to look into Okolo's accusation after the naive Okolo demands that he act. He walks some distance, hides in a phone booth, and then slips inside a pub. Okolo keeps meandering across the city after futilely waiting for the constable. But everywhere he goes, people advise him to give up on his search for 'it'. When Okolo

makes the decision to go back to Amatu, he discovers that everyone is having a party to mark his leaving. Chief Izongo is infuriated about Okolo's return and orders that he be tied to a canoe and drowned in the river.

As Okara portrayed in his book, bribery was widespread in Amatu and Sologa in *The Voice*. The mundane and commercial activities get shadier and more false. Okolo had a prize on his head, and anyone who apprehended him would receive a reward, according to Chief Izongo. A mother instructed her son to go find Okolo, one of the major actors in the resistance, in the novel in order to accuse him and receive compensation. 'Nothing can be done freely in Sologa', her son retorted. The son fumbles with words. He muttered, 'I have no money to find him'. 'Money? Will you spend money to discover him'? His mother questioned, doubting. 'Money is inside everything in Sologa; without it, I can't find him'. (Okara: 8) In actuality, this is more of a simple assumption about the position bribery occupies in society as a method of problem-solving.

The rise of bribery as a societal plague in *The Voice* also contaminates the area of justice and fairness. Regardless of socio-economic standing, everyone is complicit in this immoral behavior. Starting with the police officers, the Prime Minister appointed Chief Izongo. The average Amatu or Sologa resident is not excluded. In this book, Okaramade reference to a police officer who told Okolo that one way to become rich quickly is by bribery:

His insides were moved by the words this man spoke, Okolo. He stirred them inside of him and then stared. This man claimed to have brought bags of cash home and was heading back to Sologa. Being a police officer was the finest job there is, in his opinion, especially if one has a lucky head. If you're fortunate enough to catch a wealthy merchant robbing a sizable Whiteman's shop, you'll be up on your knees in cash (p.104).

The reality of societal oppression and brutality is given a lot of emphasis in Okara's writing. Warnings and fear were no longer sufficient to quell the opposition to the established order. Chief Izongo's attempt to win Okolo around to his cause by using gentle and loving methods was unsuccessful. As a result, they realized that utilizing violence against them was necessary to eradicate the causes of the conflict and dissent. When it came to Okolo or anybody else who disagreed with the established order, Chief Izongo and his supporters showed neither tolerance nor pity. In the novel, when it comes to criticizing the

system, everyone who is suspected must be detained and jailed, which is a clear example of the misuse of authority. The Amatu residents who support the system and Izongo's messengers have injured and abused Okolo personally:

Like ravenous wolves gnawing at bones, the crowd began to snap at him. They carried him in silently, much like ants carrying a piece of fish or yam. After that, they pushed and dragged him past thatched houses that in the dark resembled pigs with their snouts in the ground, past mud walls with pitying eyes, past concrete walls with concrete eyes, and along the water's edge like soldier ants with their prisoner (p. 38–39).

When Chief Izongo's attempt to bribe Okolo fails, he is forced to resort to violence and societal tyranny. As a result, Chief Izongo set out to discredit Okolo by attributing to him crazy; by referring to him as a madman, his statements will have no meaning and will never be taken seriously. Okolo is almost immediately shown as an aberrant individual in the first words of the book: 'So the town of Amatu talked and whispered; so the world talked and whispered. Okolo, they said, lacked a chest. He lacked a powerful chest and a shadow. In this world, everything that tarnished a man's reputation was said about him'. (Okara: 23)

Okara emphasized the abuse of social oppression as a means of demoralizing critics of the status quo. Demoralizing opponents is one of the ways individuals in authority practice social tyranny. As he brags in front of his people, saying, 'It was a great task I performed, my people'. Okolo is exiled from his home village in *The Voice* because Chief Izongo sees him as a danger to his authority, a fantastic job at removing him. It was a risky assignment, but it had to be completed for the benefit of everyone' (Okara: 72).

Okara said that it was essential to establish an anti-system that would combat both societal oppression and the corrupt behaviour of authorities. Okara demonstrated this attraction by causing his characters' conscious selves to rebel against the system. Okolo is stronger than he was before his banishment when he returns to Amatu. He no longer has any fears and is prepared to face Izongo in front of the entire town. In truth, Okolo returned to announce his voice, which he has retained for a long time:

Yes I am going to meet him!

Don't go. They say they will send you away for ever and ever if you come back

They cannot a thing do to me. The town is there gathered and I want to face him before their eyes.

I want the people to hear my voice. My inside just now is like a whirlpool and I am dizzy.

I know not what to think (p.116)

Okolo did not conceal his disagreement to Izongo's actions or exhibit any reluctance or fear to oppose his regime. When Tuere and Ukule attempted to prevent him from approaching Izongo, he reaffirmed this. 'Am I here to hide like a criminal, then? Do I have to flee? No, the honest words never flee from the dishonest ones. I am going' (116). He began by going from village to hamlet and asking them if they had it. His mission was to increase people's awareness of their surroundings through this journey. Half of his battle to save society from the corrupt practices of the leaders and those in the corridors of power is represented by his hunt for answers. Okolo is a rebel in the sense that he wants to make Amatu and Sologa's morale, discipline, and social order normal again. Okolo has a strong will and a brave heart, which enable him to fight for as long as the battle lasts since he can't hold back his feelings of rage and disappointment for very long. The corruption and disappointment in post-independence Nigeria in particular and the African continent in general are reflected in Okara's *The Voice*.

Disillusionment and corruption are interwoven to such an extent that, wherever corruption exists, individuals who surrender to it or endure its effects eventually become overwhelmed by feelings of disillusionment, despair, and disappointment. Chief Izongo is viewed as a figure of disappointment because of his dishonest, avaricious, and self-centered behaviour. Chief Izongo always refers to their own progress when he uses the word 'progress'. Since they are just concerned with their own interests and not the well-being of the nation. Politics had a purpose other than the sake of the nation for avaricious and self-centered leaders like Izongo. For him, gaining personal wealth through corruption and bribery is a simple path to power.

In *The Voice*, Okara emphasizes how his characters were frustrated by the actions of their leader yet were unable to do anything about it. In one of his assertions, Ukule disputes even the reality of masculinity in his culture; according to him, men can only achieve manhood after they pass away. 'If in this world we could recreate ourselves, I would become a man', he says. 'I'll come back to life when I pass away as a man; I'll still be a man, but I won't be disabled. There is nothing I alone or you and I can do to change their insides' (115). Tebowei

further proclaimed to Okolo in the following words 'These happening things make my inside bitter, perhaps more bitter than yours' (48). 'If the globe turns this way, I'll take it; if it turns another way, I'll take it, says one of the messengers. I take the world with both hands, no matter what happens. I don't worry about it since I enjoy to sleep with my wife and my son' (25). People choose to be sycophants, hypocrites, and passive as the sole means of protecting themselves and the people they care about even when they are aware of the corrupt behaviors that are common in their culture. Unlike many male characters, Tuere, a female character who supports Okolo and holds the same opinion about the corrupt political system, is not hesitant to express her opinion on Izongo's actions in an open manner. She seriously proclaimed 'Amatu is lost, yes, Amatu is lost', yet at the same time, like practically all the characters, she was overcome with a sense of disappointment' (114).

Environmental Degradation in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

The Niger-Delta environmental disaster is shown in *The Voice* while it is in transition. Although the work does not explicitly state itself in this manner, the language used, the way the characters are presented, and the riverine environment all make this point quite evident. The novel's clever usage of Ijaw English in the text's representation has drawn a lot of criticism. The focus on the river is another indicator that the work is set in the Niger Delta. In the book, rivers stand out as a means of travel and a location for disposing of trash. After being exiled by Chief Izongo, Okolo journeys to Sologa using the river as a route. A little earlier in the book, we observe peasants using the river to get back to the settlement at dusk: 'And, on the river, canoes were crawling home with bent backs and tired hands, paddling. A girl paddled, driving her paddle into the sweet-tasting river while wearing nothing but a towel tied around her waist and the half-ripe mango breasts' (26). The paddlers appear to be returning from a hard day's work because of their tiredness. More specifically, the returnees' 'bent backs' and 'tired hands' imply that they are non-mechanized farmers. These farmers must work with their backs closer to the earth and rely heavily on their hands. The metaphorical language used to depict the expanding breasts is also agricultural. The fact that the river is essential to Amatu's village's transportation system is of the utmost importance in this context. The last scene of the book, in which both Okolo and Tuere are floating on the river, illustrates the novel's predominance of the river:

The next morning, as dawn dawned, it did so while a canoe was drifting aimlessly down the river. Okolo and

Tuere were also in the boat, their feet tied to the seats and they were seated back to back. They were swept downstream by the water like trash from one bank of the river to the other. The canoe was then sucked into a whirlpool. It continued to spin while being gradually dragged into the centre, eventually dissipating. And as if nothing had happened, the water just rolled over the top and the river continued to flow (*The Voice*: 127).

The method used by Chief Izongo to murder Okolo and Tuere is noteworthy for promoting the notion that the water is a landfill. Susan Signe Morrison correctly notes in *Waste Aesthetics: Form as Restitution* that once something has lost its function and becomes garbage, it is convenient to ship it to underdeveloped regions of the world, and then those regions of the world also turn into rubbish (Morrison: 2015). Although the dumping of rubbish into poor African countries by Western countries is the background of Morrison's work, the insight of her work is applicable here. It's crucial to comprehend the river after Chief Izongo decided to dump human waste in it that she came to the conclusion that the dump site also becomes garbage. The water and the creatures that live in it are also discarded along with the humans. This dumping is noteworthy because it foreshadows the eventual dumping of garbage from oil exploration in the waterways. Chief Izongo's choice to drown his opponents and the disposal of oil production effluent in these rivers have remarkable similarities. Aside from the pollution that both of these activities produce, it is notable that Chief Izongo views people as 'waste' because they get in the way of his excessive ambition to amass riches and power. They drifted like garbage, as stated in the excerpt above. According to the definition of debris in the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 'the remains of anything broken down or destroyed; ruins, wreck', the parallel is likely intended to emphasize how similar the bodies are to the wreckage left behind by Chief Izongo's travels. As we will see in the books, the hazardous waste from oil exploration has little impact on the firms' efforts to maximize their profits. The corporations' decision to dump the garbage in the water rather than discover more costly but more effective ecologically responsible disposal options is another sign of an unrestrained pursuit of money. To put it another way, the drowning of Okolo and Tuere prepares us for the effects of oil exploration on the seas as witnessed in modern Delta novels like *Tides* by Okpewho and *The Activist* by Ojaide. Several times throughout the book, the actual countryside is mentioned.

In the beginning of the book, Okolo glances out the window and provides the first and only in-depth description:

Okolo was standing by a window as the day was coming to a close. Okolo stood and saw the sun setting behind the descending tree tops. The river was flowing and reflecting the setting light like a memory that was fading away. It resembled the face of an idol, with the back hidden from view. Okolo observed the palm trees. They appeared to be possessed ladies with downy hair who were dancing. Egrets were making their way home as they drifted lazily across the river like white flower petals. Additionally, boats were paddling their way home down the river with bowed backs and worn-out hands. A girl paddled, pushing her paddle into the river with a sweet within, wearing just a towel tied around her waist and the half-ripe mango breasts (*The Voice*: 26).

One cannot ignore the features of the terrestrial and aquatic components of the ecosystem described here given the representation of the damaged environment in more contemporary books set in the Delta. The river appears to represent an evening scene with sunset, 'reflecting the finishing sun'. The word 'possessed' used to describe the trees' dance alludes to their ferocious swaying in the wind. Egrets and other aquatic animals are described as being flawlessly white and brilliant. We also saw worn-out bodies coming back from the farm. The sentence accurately depicts the inhabitants of this habitat, both people and non-humans. It is amazing that the narrator is unable to understand the aggression that these bodies represent against the river. In actuality, the boat 'spun round and round, was slowly drawn into the core, and at last disappeared', according to the narrator. And as if nothing had occurred, the water just rolled over the top and the river continued to flow (127). According to the text, the violence Nixon speaks to 'disappeared', or was out of sight, from the boats with the victims. The water that covers it further supports the disappearance. The river 'flowed smoothly over' the boats once more, the narrator says. The line makes note of the representational difficulty in depicting premeditated violence. Given that the drowning has no immediate, spectacular result and that the bodies disappear from view quickly, it is simple to downplay the violence it represents and discourage the examination of the immediate and long-term ecological repercussions.

V. CONCLUSION

An essential instrument in the development of a country's awareness is literature. However, the particular historical circumstances that shape a writer's response to such events vary from one location to another. The ruling class, who are the immediate historical forces influencing these occurrences, are consequently the target of the author's response and complaints. As a result, the author acts as the voice of Africa's oppressed people. Salman Rushdie's claim that 'writers and politicians are natural rivals' is supported by this critique of the political establishment. Both factions compete for the same area while attempting to remake the world in their own image. The book also challenges the mainstream political narrative of reality. (1991: 14). This research paper has demonstrated how Okara's *The Voice* explores the themes of corruption and environmental destruction. Through the same main subtitles of bribery, brutality, social oppression, and anti-system resistance, Okara produced corruption.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anyokwu, C. (2015). 'The Poetry of TanureOjaide: An Ecocritical Perspective'. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, 5(1), 1-12.
- [2] Gikandi, S. (1999). 'Reading Ken Saro-Wiwa'. *Africa Today*, 46(3), 93-106.
- [3] Ifowodo, O. (2004). 'Poetry and politics: The case of the Niger Delta'. *Wasafiri*, 20(1), 64-73
- [4] Okara, Gabriel (1964). *The Voice*. London: Heinemann.
- [5] Okoye, C. (2013). 'Oil, hegemony, and the language of resistance in Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy'. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49(2), 171-18
- [6] Hornby, A.S. et al., editors. (2013). *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English*. ed 8th. Oxford UP.
- [7] Margaret, Laurence. (1968). *Long Drums and Canons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*. Michigan: University of Michigan.
- [8] Rushdie, Salman. (1991). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books.
- [9] Stephen D. Morris. (1991). *Corruption and Politics in Contemporary Mexico*. London: The University of Alabama Press,