



## Mapping Neocolonial Extractivism: Corporate-State Collusion and Environmental Degradation in Isidore Okpewho's *The Tides*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the neocolonial environmental crisis depicted in Isidore Okpewho's epistolary novel *The Tides* (1993). This investigates how postcolonial corporate-state collusion effects degradation of the ecosystem and marginalizes the indigenous populations in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Grounded in neocolonial theory and particularly by drawing on Kwame Nkrumah's formulation of neocolonialism alongside Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence"—it addresses three primary research questions: How do foreign oil conglomerates and state apparatuses collaborate to perpetuate neocolonial extractivism; in what ways does *The Tides* articulate environmental destruction and socio-political disenfranchisement and how do indigenous communities construct modes of ecological resistance and identity preservation against this systemic degradation. The study is done by applying a qualitative textual and discourse analysis methodology while critically evaluating the correspondences between two retired journalists that highlight the structural link between capital accumulation, habitat destruction, and community displacement. The analysis finds that the novel essentially embodies an apocalyptic vision of the environmental ruin, reframing local ecological degradation as an extension of capitalist imperialism besides advancing an activist ecocritical stance—positing environmental preservation as vital to cultural and national sovereignty and offering a critical framework for re-evaluating human-environment relationships within postcolonial African literature.

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### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The Niger Delta, one of the world's largest river deltas and a major biodiversity hotspot has long been conspicuous by resource extraction. Since the discovery of commercial crude oil at Oloibiri in 1956, the region has been experiencing what may be called a "paradox of plenty": its oil generates enormous wealth for national and international markets, while local communities suffer ecological destruction, displacement, poverty, and political marginalization. Before large-scale oil production, the Delta's rivers, forests, mangroves, and farmlands supported fishing, farming, trade, and cultural life. Decades of oil exploration have severely damaged this relationship between people and their environment. Rob Nixon describes such gradual environmental destruction as "slow violence," a form of harm that is "neither instantaneous nor spectacular, but rather incremental and attritional" <sup>[2]</sup>. Postcolonial African literature increasingly presents this environmental crisis as a continuation of colonial and imperial systems of control. Published in 1993, Isidore Okpewho's *The Tides* is an important early Nigerian novel about the social and environmental consequences of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Written in the form of letters between two journalists, Tonwe Brisibe and Piriye Dokumo, the novel connects events in Lagos with the environmental crisis in the Delta. After losing their jobs at a national newspaper, Piriye remains in Lagos while Tonwe returns to his rural homeland. Their correspondence reveals how oil companies, government officials, and local elites work together to exploit the region. The novel also draws on important

historical events, including the nineteenth-century palm-oil trade, Isaac Adaka Boro's 12-Day Revolution, and Ken Saro-Wiwa's activism with the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). More significantly, it anticipates the armed militancy that would later emerge in the Niger Delta.

This study combines Neocolonial Theory and Postcolonial Ecocriticism, with insights from Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Kwame Nkrumah defines neocolonialism as a condition in which a formally independent country remains economically and politically controlled by external powers (ix). In Nigeria, this system can be seen in the relationship between multinational oil companies, the state, and local elites. Foreign corporations benefit from oil extraction, while government institutions protect their interests and often suppress communities that resist exploitation.

Postcolonial ecocriticism substantially supplements to this analysis by connecting environmental destruction to colonial history, global capitalism, and unequal systems of power. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that environmental problems in formerly colonized societies must be understood in relation to imperial and economic structures <sup>[2-4]</sup>. Nixon's concept of slow violence further explains how oil spills, gas flaring, water pollution, and destruction of farmland produce damage that accumulates gradually but has serious long-term consequences.

Fanon's emphasis on land is also important to the novel. He argues that "the most essential value, because it is the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" <sup>[9]</sup>. In *The Tides*, the struggle over land and natural resources is found to be sketched as a struggle for dignity and survival. Said also describes imperialism as a form of "geographical violence" in which the control and displacement of people from their land become central to imperial power (77). Keeping these contexts in view, the novel can be read as a critique of a postcolonial state where political independence could not much result in economic or environmental freedom.

### **Neocolonial Extractivism and Corporate-State Collusion**

The central political argument of *The Tides* is that foreign oil companies and the Nigerian ruling class work together to maintain a system of exploitation. Although Nigeria is formally independent, the Niger Delta remains tied to international capital through oil production. The state therefore functions as a protector of corporate interests rather than as an effective defender of the communities living in oil-producing areas. Okpewho presents this relationship through economic pressure, political manipulation, and physical violence. Local people are sometimes offered money or other benefits to support oil operations. The character Okpene, for example, initially sympathizes with local fishermen but eventually gives in to economic pressure and assists the oil companies. Such characters show how neocolonial systems do not depend only on direct foreign control; they also depend on local people who become intermediaries for external interests. When persuasion fails, the state uses force. The treatment of Ebika demonstrates how police and military institutions tend to protect the existing system. After being arrested and severely mistreated, Ebika describes his condition:

The whole day passed, and the second night too, and I still wasn't given anything to eat, nor was I allowed even a moment's exposure to the open air. It wasn't until the mid-morning of the third day that I heard the lock turning and saw the door open wide. A guard shouted my name and told me to come out. I crawled my way out, weak and thoroughly broken. I felt my eyes were swollen. My waist was aching. My knees could hardly support me. There was blood and shit all over my clothes. I was stinking, man, and I was starving. (Okpewho)

In Fanon's concept of colonial power, instead of challenging oppression, the intermediary only helps to enforce it. The police and military in *The Tides* similarly become instruments of the state and the corporate power. Their role is not to protect the people but to silence opposition.

The novel is also a critique of the racial attitudes of the foreign corporate power. A white engineer dismisses the Ebrima people as "illiterate natives who know nothing about what the oil industry is trying to do for them" (Okpewho 12). His statement represents environmental destruction as a necessary price for modernization. More disturbing is his order that complaints should be dealt with using "rifle-butts" (Okpewho 12). The scene suggests that corporate interests and state violence are closely connected. The local officials also participate in this system. Freeborn Batowei, for instance, represents the bureaucratic side of oppression. Tonwe questions whether the people are more threatened by "the shameless duplicity of the bureaucrat or the brazen insolence of the arrogant soldier" (Okpewho 85). The novel thus presents the bureaucrat's pen and the soldier's weapon as two forms of the same neocolonial power.

The fictional 'Delta' in the novel apparently represents the Niger Delta, a region whose modern exploitation has roots in colonialism. Oil was discovered there in 1956, during British rule, and the extractive system established under colonial administration continued after independence. As Norman Hodges argues, colonial powers sought to transfer only the "trappings" of authority without transferring genuine power <sup>[12]</sup>. The political independence therefore did not completely end economic dependence. Maximilian Feldner places Nigeria within a wider pattern of resource extraction in Africa, noting that neocolonialism operates through the extraction of resources such as coltan, cobalt, diamonds, gold, and oil (517). In the novel, the fictional Freeland Oil represents this global corporate system. Its name itself suggests the transformation of indigenous land into commercially available territory. Okpewho does not treat environmental destruction as a separate ecological problem. Instead, he shows that polluted rivers, damaged farmland, and destroyed communities are consequences of the same political and economic system that controls the people. This organizational dimension is particularly important because environmental outcomes are also shaped by the extent to which institutions embed sustainability within their internal practices and employee relationships. Research on green human resource practices indicates that organizational mechanisms can strengthen employee commitment to environmental objectives and translate that commitment into environmental outcomes (Tasleem, 2026) <sup>[31]</sup>. This is where postcolonial ecocriticism becomes particularly useful. The environment cannot be separated from questions of power,

colonial history, and economic inequality. Nixon's idea of slow violence is especially relevant. The damage caused by oil extraction is often gradual and therefore less visible than sudden acts of physical violence. In the Tides, oil slicks kill fish, chemical dispersants threaten aquatic life, petroleum contaminates farmland, and gas flaring damages the atmosphere. Tonwe raises these concerns during an environmental committee meeting, asking whether the chemicals used to remove oil from the water might themselves harm fish and the people who consume them (Okpewho 130). Frank Segal, the managing director of Freeland Oil, refuses to accept responsibility and tells Tonwe to "direct [his] complaint to God, 'cause he's the one that makes the waters flow" (Okpewho 130). His response represents the irresponsibility of corporate power. The consequences of this environmental destruction are clearly described by the fisherman Mr. Opene. He explains that oil has destroyed villages and fishing grounds: The village has been completely wiped by the floating oil, and most of the people have resettled in Burutu. There is practically no fishing life there anymore, because the fishes die and float on the black surface of the water in large numbers. (Okpewho 26–27) The passage shows that environmental damage also includes social and cultural destructions. Fishing is not merely an economic activity; it is part of the community's way of life. When the rivers become unusable, people lose both income and their connection to their ancestral environment. These words of Opene capture this injustice candidly: "Oil is money. Money for the government. Money for many people. But not our people" (Okpewho 26).

### **Resistance, Violence and the Limits of Peaceful Action**

The novel explores the different forms of reactions and resistances that result from these ecological violences. The character of Tonwe represents peaceful resistance, while that of Ebika Harrison -also known as Bickerbug- represents a militant approach. The epistolary nature of the novel allows Okpewho to place these positions in dialogue. Tonwe witnesses environmental destruction directly in the Delta, while Piriye observes political developments in Lagos. Recognizing the contradiction between national development and local suffering, Piriye argues that national unity is meaningless when the native people are living in squalor and disgrace and the resources that have traditionally supported them are being destroyed (Okpewho 7). Becoming increasingly frustrated with peaceful approaches, Ebika now affirms that the people must act for themselves:

Nobody is going to do anything about the suffering of our people if we don't do it ourselves... I have a mission, and that is the salvation of our people from the inhuman devastation which policies formulated by corrupt officials here in Lagos have constantly brought about. (Okpewho 21)

His radicalism eventually leads him to bomb the Kwara Dam in an attempt to restore the natural flow of water to the creeks. His actions anticipate the armed militancy that would later become a major feature of Niger Delta politics. Tonwe, however, strongly rejects violence. He declares, "I will have nothing to do with any measure that does not appear to me to be aimed at achieving a peaceful solution to our problems" (Okpewho 178). His opposition to violence is influenced by the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War. Yet the novel gradually shows the limitations of peaceful action when institutions themselves are corrupt.

The traditional leaders also fail the communities. Chief Zuokumor protects his relationship with Atlantic Fuels and dismisses local complaints about polluted water (Okpewho 125). Similarly, Commissioner Freeborn Batowei refuses to take meaningful action. His explanation focuses on political instability and repeated military coups rather than on the suffering of the people (Okpewho 79–80). His response needs to be seen in terms with a wider culture of political self-preservation.

Through these characters, Okpewho shows why resistance has become increasingly radical. When government institutions, traditional leaders, and corporations all tend to protect the same system, peaceful approaches appear ineffective. However, it would be wrong to say, the novel only justifies the means of violence; it also simultaneously presents the case of the difficulty faced by communities in choosing from the moral and political courses, who's peacefully made demands are generally being ignored. The novelist successfully brings this desperate situation of the masses to the view of the readers.

### **Calling on Environmental Justice, Political Justice and Economic Justice**

The Tides is well placed within the tradition of Niger Delta petrofiction, a body of literature concerned with oil, environmental destruction, poverty, and political conflict. Writers such as Kaine Agary, Tanure Ojaide, and Isidore Okpewho have used literature to document the experiences of communities affected by oil extraction. The ecological crisis has produced unemployment, displacement, poverty, insecurity, and the loss of traditional livelihoods. Chinyere Nwahunanya captures this relationship between environmental and human suffering by observing that "as the land bleeds oil, so the people's tears" increase under poverty and political violence <sup>[16]</sup>. Tanure Ojaide similarly writes about the destruction of his homeland and the pollution of its rivers (Ifejirika 61). The work of Ken Saro-Wiwa provides an important historical and literary context for Okpewho's novel. Saro-Wiwa describes the Ogoni struggle as involving two connected forms of violence: ecological destruction by multinational oil companies and political oppression by the state. He argues that the first war destroys "flora and fauna," poisons the air and water, and eventually causes "the land" itself to die <sup>[12]</sup>. His activism demonstrates that environmental justice in the Niger Delta is inseparable from political justice. Being published in 1993, The Tides appeared shortly before Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine were executed in 1995. The novel therefore occupies an important position between earlier postcolonial writing and later petrofiction. Later works such as Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) deal more directly with armed militancy, kidnapping, and the expansion of petroculturalism. Okpewho's novel anticipates these developments by showing the growing frustration that produces militant resistance. The epistolary structure is particularly effective because it connects personal experience with wider political events. Tonwe's letters reveal the environmental crisis from within the Delta, while Piriye's letters connect it to political developments in Lagos. The form therefore reflects the divided but interconnected nature of Nigeria's political and economic system.

Isidore Okpewho's *The Tides* presents the environmental

crisis of the Niger Delta as a political problem rooted in neocolonial power. The novel shows that oil extraction does not simply damage rivers, forests, farms, and fishing grounds; it also destroys livelihoods, weakens cultural identity, displaces communities, and produces political conflict. Foreign oil companies depend on the cooperation of state officials and local elites, while the state uses economic pressure, propaganda, and violence to protect extractive interests. A combined reading through Neocolonial Theory and Postcolonial Ecocriticism makes these relationships clearer. Nkrumah's concept of neocolonialism explains the continued influence of foreign capital after political independence, while postcolonial ecocriticism connects environmental destruction to colonial history and global capitalism. Nixon's concept of slow violence further reveals how ecological damage develops gradually but produces lasting social consequences. Fanon's emphasis on land and Said's understanding of imperialism as geographical violence demonstrate why the struggle for environmental protection is also a struggle for dignity, identity, and political freedom. The novel also refuses to portray Niger Delta communities as helpless victims. Through Tonwe, Piriye, and Ebika, Okpewho presents different forms of resistance, from journalism and peaceful advocacy to militant action. At the same time, the novel shows why peaceful resistance becomes difficult when government institutions, traditional authorities, and corporations cooperate against local communities. Ultimately, *The Tides* argues that the survival of the Niger Delta's people cannot be separated from the survival of its environment.

### Conclusion

Okpewho exposes a system in which oil wealth benefits the state and international capital while the communities that produce that wealth bear its environmental and social costs. In Nkrumah's terms, neocolonialism produces "power without responsibility" for those who control the system and "exploitation without redress" for those who suffer from it (xi). *The Tides* therefore remains a significant critique of extractive capitalism and a powerful call for environmental justice, political accountability, and a more equitable form of postcolonial development.

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