

Ecological Justice and Human Struggles: An Eco-critical Study of Arnold Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream*

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Abstract

This paper examines an eco-critical analysis of the environmental and social consequences of oil exploitation in Nigeria's Niger Delta, as depicted in *Udoka's Long Walk to a Dream*. The aim of the research is to examine how the play critiques the intersection of environmental degradation, social injustice, and resistance movements in the region. The findings of the study show that the play highlights the devastating effects of oil extraction on local communities and the environment, while also exploring the resistance of local groups demanding ecological justice. The conclusion emphasizes the need for systemic changes to address environmental and social equity. Based on these findings, the paper recommends strengthening environmental regulations, holding corporations accountable, empowering local communities, and promoting international advocacy for environmental justice.

Keywords: Ecological Justice, Ecocriticism, Environmental Degradation, Resistance Movement Niger Delta

Introduction

Environmental degradation is among the most critical global challenges, particularly for marginalized communities whose livelihoods are inextricably tied to the natural environment. Through literature, the interdependence of human and ecological systems becomes both a subject of critique and a call to action. Arnold Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream* examines the intersecting crises of environmental exploitation, social injustice, and resistance in Nigeria's Niger Delta. By dramatizing the lived experiences of oppressed communities, Udoka critiques the exploitative practices of multinational corporations and the complicit negligence of political authorities. This analysis, through the lens of ecocriticism, unpacks the narratives portrayal of environmental resistance and the moral imperatives it demands of humanity.

Synopsis of *Long Walk to a Dream*

Long Walk to a Dream is a play set in the oil-rich, ecologically devastated Niger-Delta, specifically Peteke Kingdom. The story begins with Wariboko, the first son of King Pereware, who is reluctantly helping Odum, the priest; prepare a shrine for a council of elders. Wariboko's reluctance stems from his involvement in the Pogwa Boys, a radical group opposing Prime Oil's exploitation of the land. The group, made up of young men from Peteke Kingdom, is divided on how to respond to the crisis, with some advocating for violence, while Wariboko and Boro push for restraint. During the council meeting, a madwoman named Sekiri interrupts, warning of plenty of mad men. After her dismissal, the Pogwa Boys surround the shrine and are allowed to present their grievances.

The situation escalates when a bloodied Altar Boy, Woman, and Catholic Priest burst into the meeting, followed by Senator Ibinabo, who reveals that the Catholic Church in Ogiri was bombed during Morning Mass. She narrowly escaped death and expresses concern for Miene, a journalist who was also

involved in the bombing and has gone missing. The tension rises further when Monsignor Ekaikaw, the priest, limps in after receiving medical treatment. The reappearance of Miene reassures Ibinabo that the events will be reported to higher authorities, including the Governor and President. Ibinabo contacts the President, who promises justice. The play concludes on a hopeful note, with the community uplifted by the President's promise, which carries weight due to his reputation for integrity.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, analyzes the representation of nature in literature and the ways in which these representations influence cultural perceptions of the environment. As Greg Garrard notes, literature concerns "how literature reflects, engages with and influences our attitudes towards the environment" (15). It bridges literary studies and environmental theory, emphasizing how texts represent the relationship between humans and nature (Salma Monai & Joni Adamsen 5). While traditional ecocriticism often focuses on preserving the natural world for its intrinsic value, more recent approaches such as ecofeminism and postcolonial ecocriticism challenge the systemic inequalities that perpetuate ecological harm. For instance, Greg Garrard's concept of ecojustice examines how marginalized communities disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental degradation. These frameworks are particularly pertinent in the Niger Delta, where oil extraction exacerbates economic inequities and ecological crises.

Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream* conforms to these theories, critiquing the ecological destruction caused by multinational oil corporations. Beyond portraying physical devastation, the play interrogates the sociopolitical systems enabling this exploitation. The protagonist, Wariboko, embodies a community's resistance, illustrating the power dynamics between local traditions and global capitalism. Such themes resonate beyond the Niger Delta, offering insights into global struggles for environmental equity.

Environmental Degradation and Resistance in *Long Walk to a Dream*

The Niger Delta, as depicted in *Long Walk to a Dream*, is not just a geographical setting but a contested space where environmental degradation and social injustice intersect. Udoka portrays the devastating effects of oil exploitation through vivid imagery and the experiences of his characters. Gas flaring, pipeline explosions, and oil spills that have become the lot of the people termed by the author as "earth-shaking explosions" (Udoka 23) underlining the multifaceted crises plaguing Petek Kingdom. This depiction also corresponds to the ecojustice movement, which emphasizes how the ecological harm is borne disproportionately by marginalized communities. As Boro declares in the play: The first reason for the struggle is the environment. The second reason is the environment. And the third reason is the environment! Not cash! If the environment dies, we die (Udoka 37).

This statement reflects the ecojustice critique of neoliberal exploitation. Boro's advocacy for cautious, collective action highlights the tension between violent rebellion and nonviolent resistance, a recurring theme in postcolonial ecocriticism. His leadership contrasts with Teke's impulsive aggression, illustrating the moral and strategic dilemmas faced by resistance movements.

Symbolism and Localized Resistance

Udoka integrates potent symbols to emphasize the stakes of ecological resistance. The recurring motif of polluted waterways, as described by Sekiri, encapsulates the degradation of life-sustaining ecosystems: "I caught the fish in the creek last week... My canoe could not go far because of the black oil on the water. As I was waiting, the poor, dead fish floated to me quickly; I rescued it" (Udoka 29).

Sekiri's dialogue weaves personal tragedy into a broader narrative of ecological collapse. Her mental state mimics the disarray of her environment, drawing attention to ecofeminist readings that link the exploitation of land to the marginalization of women. Furthermore, her seemingly nonsensical statements about sharing the poisoned portray the communal suffering induced by ecological harm.

The Pogwa Boys embody the region's resistance to systemic oppression. Their debate over strategy whether to adopt violent measures or seek dialogue points to the historical struggles of Niger Delta activists. Wariboko's preference for diplomacy brings to the forefront Udoka's overarching message: sustainable change requires collective action grounded in reason, not reaction. This complies with Ken Saro-Wiwa's nonviolent advocacy, which the play explicitly honours through the character Kenule.

Broader Implications: From Niger Delta to the World

The play's depiction of ecological devastation transcends its local context, inviting audiences to consider its implications for global environmental policies. Just as Peteke Kingdom grapples with the consequences of oil exploitation, other regions face similar challenges under the Anthropocene's framework. This indicates that the environmental era, marked by humanity's profound impact on the planet, demands urgent reevaluation of development paradigms.

By juxtaposing Peteke's plight with global examples, *Long Walk to a Dream* critiques the systemic inequalities perpetuated by extractivism. It calls for an ecocentric worldview that prioritizes sustainability and equity. Udoka's vision extends beyond mere critique, advocating for actionable solutions rooted in community empowerment and international solidarity.

Historical Resonances and Global Parallels

While *Long Walk to a Dream* is rooted in the specific struggles of the Niger Delta, its themes resonate globally. The exploitation of Peteke Kingdom parallels ecological injustices in other resource-rich regions, such as the Amazon Rainforest and Indigenous territories in Canada. In each case, multinational corporations prioritize profit over the welfare of local communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and environmental destruction.

The historical allusions to figures like Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa reinforce this broader relevance. These characters signify the sacrifices made in the fight for ecological justice, their legacies serving as a rallying cry for continued resistance. However, Udoka's nuanced portrayal avoids hagiography, instead highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in activism. For example, Boro's shift from militant resistance to caution reflects the internal tensions within the Niger Delta's struggle for self-determination.

Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream* critically examines the devastating consequences of environmental degradation in Nigeria's oil-producing states. In a 2016 interview with Iveren Sambe, Udoka explained: "Although *Long Walk to a Dream* borrows from the story of the summary execution of four Ogoni chiefs in a shrine; and the characters bear Annang and Izon names, the play speaks for all the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta" (Sambe Interview).

This perspective aligns with Jonas Akung's observation that the play "portrays liberation struggles tied to the Niger Delta question, using compelling narratives to illustrate ecological and socio-political issues" (203). Udoka further elaborated in a separate interview with Edozie Udeze, revealing his firsthand experience with oil pollution and its impacts: "As a native of Abak in Akwa-Ibom State, I grew up amidst the throes and throngs of oil

pollution, oil exploration, and the attendant consequences... Now, the people are avowed to pay the ultimate price to redeem their situation.”

At its heart, the play underscores the inseparability of ecological health and community survival. Boro, a central character, encapsulates this message in the first scene during his conversation with the king, emphasizing that the environment poses a threat to the survival of Peteke Kingdom, and that its degradation is the primary cause of struggle because if the environment perishes, the very existence of the kingdom and its people is at stake.

This sentiment relates to the ecojustice movement, which, as Saro-Wiwa declared in his 1992 address to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, seeks to ensure that communities devastated by resource extraction receive justice and reparations (Saro-Wiwa 1).

The plight of Ogoni land is emblematic of this struggle. Chief Nzidee's 1970 petition to the then Rivers State military governor decries Shell-BP's operations, asserting they were “seriously threatening the well-being and even the very lives of the Ogoni” (Nzidee 3). This ecological crisis is vividly depicted in the play's opening, where a pipeline explosion disrupts the shrine meeting. Odum laments, “Oh, pipeline explosions. Another spillage, I suppose, and that has become our lot” (Udoka 23).

Similarly, Sekiri's fragmented dialogue highlights the pervasive despair: “I caught a fish in the creek last week... My canoe could not go far because of the black oil on the water. As I was waiting, the poor, dead fish floated to me quickly; I rescued it” (Udoka 29). This portrayal harmonizes with J. Ushie's assertion that the Niger Delta has been “completely vandalized”, leaving its people “amid oil spillages and round-the-clock gas flares” (Ushie 8-9).

The historical context of figures like King Jaja of Opobo, Isaac Adaka Boro, and Ken Saro-Wiwa further enriches the play's narrative. King Jaja's resistance to colonial exploitation typifies an early struggle against ecological imperialism. Similarly, Boro's 1966 declaration of the Niger Delta Republic marked the first armed protest against systemic oppression, while his eventual death underscored the region's fraught battle for autonomy (Akung 203).

Ken Saro-Wiwa's leadership in the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) represents the non-violent counterpoint to Boro's militancy. Saro-Wiwa's activism culminated in his 1995 execution, which Amnesty International decried as a government clampdown on dissent (Amnesty International). His martyrdom galvanized global awareness of the Niger Delta's plight, highlighting what *Human Rights Watch* described as “systematic repression” aimed at silencing opposition (*Human Rights Watch* 18).

Udoka honours Saro-Wiwa's legacy through the character of Kenule, who embodies resilience and resistance. The narrative's exploration of ecological degradation and socio-political oppression invites reflection on the systemic issues that perpetuate exploitation in the Niger Delta.

As A. Rowell notes, multinational corporations like Shell have long benefited from governmental complicity, enabling the continued devastation of the region (Rowell). This complicity is further evidenced by J. R. Udofia's 1990 letter to the police commissioner, highlighting threats of disruption during peaceful protests against Shell (Udofia 2).

Ultimately, *Long Walk to a Dream* illustrates how the intertwined struggles for environmental justice and human dignity persist in the Niger Delta. The play's dedication to eco-martyrs such as King Jaja, Isaac Boro, and the Ogoni Nine underscores the

enduring fight for liberation and ecological restoration.

The Niger Delta's environmental crisis is central to the narrative of Arnold Udoka's piece, *Long Walk to a Dream*. The play captures the devastating consequences of oil exploitation, particularly for women and marginalized communities. Female characters such as Senator Ibinabo, Usenekong, and Miene suffer severe injuries from a bomb blast linked to Prime Oil, a fictionalized symbol for oil cartels like Shell, Chevron, and Texaco. These corporations, as Amnesty International reports, have perpetuated cycles of violence in the region, with peaceful demonstrations met with systemic repression, harassment, and violence against communities (Amnesty International 6-7).

Udoka mirrors this reality through his characters' experiences. Wariboko's declaration reflects the plight of these communities: "This council is aware that all the communities that have decided to call the attention of the oil gangs to their plights have been invaded, bruised, raped, and annihilated on the accusation of being sponsored by faceless moneybags. We are putting it to this council that enough is enough" (Udoka 61).

This statement underscores the pervasive use of violence to silence protestors, a pattern that Amnesty International also documented in its 1994 report on the Ogoni crisis. The report highlighted systematic military repression and human rights abuses orchestrated to safeguard corporate interests. Similar patterns of intimidation occurred during peaceful rallies against Shell in Iko in 1980 and 1987, where homes were destroyed, leaving hundreds homeless (Rowell 16).

The play's narrative also identifies with historical records, such as Chief W. Nzidee's 1970 petition, which decried the environmental degradation caused by Shell-BP operations in Ogoni land. Nzidee's letter to the military governor emphasized that the company's activities were "seriously threatening the well-

being and even the very lives of the Ogoni" (Nzidee 3).

The environmental justice movement's most poignant moment, however, revolves around Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa, as Human Rights Watch describes, tirelessly campaigned for the rights of the Ogoni people through the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). His activism highlighted the ecological destruction and human rights abuses inflicted by oil companies operating in Ogoni land. In 1992, during the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in Geneva, Saro-Wiwa declared: "Petroleum was discovered in Ogoni in 1958, and since then, an estimated \$100 billion worth of oil and gas has been extracted from Ogoni land. In return, the Ogoni people have received nothing" (Saro-Wiwa 4).

Saro-Wiwa's leadership culminated in the publication of the Ogoni Bill of Rights in 1991, which empowered MOSOP to seek international intervention in the face of federal neglect. However, his activism led to his arrest and eventual execution in 1995, alongside eight other Ogoni activists. Amnesty International denounced Saro-Wiwa's death as a miscarriage of justice, emphasizing his role as a prisoner of conscience (Amnesty International 12).

The systemic militarization of the Niger Delta, vividly depicted in *Long Walk to a Dream*, was intensified under General Abacha's regime. Leaked directives from Shell to its Nigerian counterparts illustrate corporate complicity in suppressing resistance (Rowell 304). Additionally, Human Rights Watch revealed that the murder of the Ogoni Four was used as a pretext for the military's brutal "wasting operations" in Ogoniland, spearheaded by Lt. Col. Komo and Major Okuntimo (*Human Rights Watch* 14). These operations targeted protestors, resulting in arrests, beatings, and the widespread destruction of property.

Udoka symbolically represents the Ogoni Four in the play as Chief Timi, Chief Sokari, Chief Nimi, and Chief Etete, who suffer "emotional death" due to their inability to alleviate the community's suffering. This narrative parallels historical realities, reflecting the unrelenting environmental violence that has plagued the Niger Delta.

Furthermore, Pere's advocacy for dialogue reflects Udoka's vision of non-violent conflict resolution. Pere advises, "Never respond to conflict with conflict. Embrace and employ dialogue. Dialogue slaughters conflict, and that way you win both the war and the battle" (76). This perspective echoes Ken Saro-Wiwa's principles of peaceful resistance and the pursuit of ecological justice.

While Saro-Wiwa's vision remains unfulfilled, Udoka's play reaffirms hope for a sustainable future in the Niger Delta. Recent efforts, such as the \$1 billion clean-up program initiated in Ogoniland in 2016, signify incremental progress. However, as highlighted by J. Ushie, the region's environment remains deeply scarred:

Fifty years of crude oil exploitation has rather left the Niger Delta environment completely vandalized, its people living amid oil spillages and round-the-clock gas flares... Instead of fetching Niger Delta gold bracelets, crude oil has fetched them handcuffs; instead of fetching them gold necklaces, it fetched them nooses (Ushie 8-9).

Through its nuanced portrayal of the Niger Delta's struggles, *Long Walk to a Dream* amplifies the voices of those fighting for ecological justice, serving as both a tribute to past martyrs and a call to action for future generations.

Conclusion

Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream* offers a scathing critique of the ecological and social consequences of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, underscoring the imperative of community empowerment and ecological justice. Through an eco-critical lens, the play advocates for sustainable development and emphasizes the need for corporate and political accountability in mitigating environmental degradation.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the ecocritical insights gleaned from *Long Walk to a Dream*, the following actionable recommendations are proposed to address environmental conservation challenges in the Niger Delta and beyond.

1. Legislative Reforms for Environmental Accountability

Anti-Gas Flaring Laws: The Federal Government of Nigeria should enact and enforce stringent anti-gas flaring legislation. The National Assembly should pass such laws, while the Ministry of Environment and the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) enforce compliance through periodic inspections and penalties. Oil companies like Shell, Chevron, and ExxonMobil should adopt flaring reduction technologies as mandated by these laws. Oil companies must only proceed with projects that meet EIA standards, with oversight from local state governments.

2. Corporate Environmental Responsibility

Mandatory Clean-Up Commitments: The Federal Ministry of Environment and National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) should require all oil companies to establish dedicated clean-up funds. These funds should be monitored by third-party organizations, such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Ecological Restoration Targets: The Nigerian government should mandate restoration targets for oil companies, with

monitoring by the Environmental Audit Committees at the federal and state levels. Restoration projects should involve local NGOs and scientific experts from Nigerian universities.

3. Community Empowerment Strategies

Community Resource Management Committees: Local governments, in collaboration with traditional rulers, should establish these committees to oversee natural resource management. They should be supported by NGOs like Friends of the Earth for training and capacity building.

Revenue Sharing Mechanisms: The Federal Government should institute revenue-sharing policies where 10-15% of oil royalties are directly allocated to host communities. The Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) should manage disbursement to ensure equity and transparency.

4. Educational and Advocacy Initiatives

Cultural Preservation Programs: The National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) should collaborate with playwrights and artists to create performances that highlight ecological issues, using works like *Long Walk to a Dream* as inspiration.

5. Technological Innovations for Sustainability

Real-Time Monitoring Systems: The National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA), in partnership with international organizations such as NASA, should deploy satellite technology to monitor environmental violations in the Niger Delta.

Energy Transition Initiatives: The Federal Ministry of Power should collaborate with renewable energy firms like Solar Nigeria and international donors, such as the World Bank, to establish solar and wind power projects in oil-producing areas.

6. Strengthened International Collaboration

Global Partnerships for Environmental Justice: The Nigerian government, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should collaborate with organizations like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Amnesty International to hold oil corporations accountable for environmental degradation.

Global Advocacy Platforms: Environmental NGOs, including Friends of the Earth and Climate Action Network, should use forums like the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) to highlight the plight of Niger Delta communities and lobby for global support.

7. Integrated Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

Legal Support Systems: The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) should provide legal aid to affected communities, enabling them to seek compensation for ecological damages through courts and arbitration bodies like the International Criminal Court (ICC).

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