

Oil Politics and Subaltern Crises in Niger-Delta Poetry: A Study of Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket*

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Abstract

The paradox of wealth and despair in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria has inspired a growing body of works that interrogate the crises in the region. Poetry is a veritable medium for documenting these struggles and vocalising the aspirations of the people. Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* stands as a reflection of the socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation faced by Niger-Delta communities as a result of oil exploration and exploitation. The collection critiques the exploitation of natural resources and marginalised groups, and exposes the complicity of state actors and multinational corporations involved in these injustices to the subalterns. This study adopts resistance framework to analyse Obi's portrayal of class struggle and the commodification of resources in the region. It situates *Tears in a Basket* within the spectrum of Niger-Delta resistance literature and examines how the poet highlights the alienation and dispossession of local communities. The study reveals that Obi's work successfully critiques the manipulation of the natural together with human resources, and highlights the collaboration of capitalist agencies and state operatives in mounting and prolonging inequality. Her clear imagery accentuates the cultural and environmental degradation fashioned and executed by oil exploration and extraction, while also reflecting the resilience and aspirations of the subaltern Niger-Delta people. The poems, in addition to the documentation of the lived realities, also envision a future where environmental justice and sustainability shall prevail. This is the conclusion of the paper. Finally, the paper underscores poetry as a vehicle for critiquing systemic exploitation and advocating reform.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Environmental Justice, Exploitation, Niger-Delta, Oil Politics, Subaltern.

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INTRODUCTION

The Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is the primary oil-producing region. However, it graphically demonstrates a paradox where immense natural resources coexist with systemic poverty and environmental degradation. This has constantly impacted negatively against the subalterns till today, hence a renewed study has become inevitable. Multinational corporations, in alliance with some state actors, have prioritised profit over the welfare of local communities. As Okunoye (2008, 110) observes, this has resulted to ecological destruction and the displacement of traditional livelihoods. This level of exploitation has inspired a robust tradition of protest literature and as such, poets from the Niger-Delta articulate resistance against these injustices. Inyang and Orhero (2020, 37), in this regard, are of the opinion that the traditions of African poetry groom the artist to muse on societal experiences and conditions for the articulation of his creative imagination. The contemporary African poet has been bequeathed with roles from traditional repertory where the poet manifests either as the griot whose song satirises the ills of society or praises the virtues. This study examines the Socio-Political and Environmental Engagements in Niger-Delta Poetry, Alienation and the Burden of Exploitation, Systemic Oppression and Resistance, Environmental Despoliation and the Betrayal of Communal Ethos, and Exploitation and Environmental Degradation, all against the backdrop of their impact on the masses. Although many scholars such as Ejiodu, Okwechime, Inyang and Orhero have explored the themes of oil politics and resistance in Niger-Delta poetry as well as its central role in capturing the struggles of marginalised communities, a more focused analysis of how Obi's poetry embodies the capitalist tensions and environmental despair unique to the region remains necessary. This paper addresses that gap while building and contributing to the discourse on the role of Niger-Delta literature in challenging exploitation and advocating for systemic change.

Notably, the early practitioners of African poetry were integral to the preservation and transmission of cultural values. They acted as proponents of justice and mediators for social change. Their creative efforts were deeply entrenched in addressing the socio-political realities and environmental challenges of their immediate communities. African poetry, historically, has functioned as a reflective dialogue with the shifting dynamics of society thereby positioning it as a vehicle for critiquing socio-cultural, political, economic and ecological injustices. This characterisation underscores the role of African poetry as both a mirror and a voice of dissent within the broader context of the continent's historical and contemporary struggles. Thus, the authors could further highlight that contemporary African poets expand these inherited roles. While the griot's repertoire often focuses on eulogy, satire and direct societal critique, modern poets engage with diverse themes such as identity, migration, and environmental justice, which are reflective of Africa's evolving socio-political landscape. For instance, poets like Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare combine traditional oral aesthetics with global literary influences which illustrate how African poetry evolves while retaining its societal focus, although they also engage in discourses on other social and environmental concerns.

Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* belongs to this tradition since it addresses the socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation caused by oil exploitation. Her poetry critiques the capitalist commodification of natural resources and the marginalization of Niger-Delta communities. This aligns with critiques of class oppression and ecological ruin. According to Akani (2016, 174), poetry, as a vital aesthetic property that evokes emotions and thoughts, plays important roles in highlighting the disturbing determinants constantly militating against the beauty and pleasures of the environment. Obi's vivid depictions of dispossession reflect the struggles of a region battling environmental collapse while exposing the failures of those entrusted with its governance. Since these depictions cannot just be glossed over, this study therefore examines *Tears in a Basket* by taking cognisance of the capitalist treatment of the subalterns, focusing on how Obi's work critiques systemic exploitation and underscores the region's demand for justice.

Any meaningful discourse on the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria must have recourse to the overwhelming circumstance of environmental justice and environmental degradation. Suffice it to note here that environmental justice and environmental degradation negate each other. This is due to the situation of Africans and especially Niger-Deltan's relying heavily on the natural environment in its raw state for survival in the light of the heavy pollution going on daily in the region. Just as the degradation affects the natural environment, so it affects humans. In the light of the injustice pervading the region, it became pertinent for literary artist, critics and environmentalist to seek pathways to justice for the environment, and ultimately for humans. According to OECD (2024), "environmental justice seeks to redress an array of recurring challenges faced by various communities and groups. These include disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, unequal access to environmental amenities, and concerns about the uneven implications of environmental policies" (3).

The attempt at righting the wrongs done the environment is a step towards bringing justice to bear on the relationship between humans and the environment. This is one of the duties which writers have started engaging in. The primary target of this endeavour is to circumscribe the high velocity of the dive towards the destruction of the biosphere and all others of the universe. The fulcrum of the need for environmental justice is the identification of the conditions within the environment. Thus, OECD states that, "an environmental justice lens highlights the linkages between environmental and social conditions. It sheds light on how different levels of environmental quality and protection contribute to the health and wellbeing of some groups, while harming the welfare of others. It also highlights how the environmental goods enjoyed by some groups may come at the expense of those enjoyed by others. Finally, it explores how the ability to influence political change and related decision-making processes vary across groups and communities" (10).

The need for environmental justice has become all important considering the suffocating level of pollution in the world of today; and the level of pollution which has become monumental as a result of the heightened magnitude of the industrial waste. These, in addition to the boom

in the world population and with the demands to meet with survival of the subalterns and maintain the colossal greed of the social and economic elite, have made matters worse. In recognition of these situations, UNDP (2022) has said that, “we are facing a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, and pollution. This triple planetary crisis impacts the full enjoyment of human rights (including social, economic and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights) both directly and indirectly. These interlinked crises act as threat multipliers, amplifying conflicts, tensions and structural inequalities, and forcing people into increasingly vulnerable situations. Environmental threats, as they intensify, will constitute one of the greatest challenges to human rights in our era and are already contributing to people being left behind in the quest to achieve sustainable peace and development, increasing environmental injustices” (5).

UNDP has concluded that, “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is considered a foundation of human life” (8) while blaming “... human action – and inhuman inaction” (8) for the crises in the world today. Some of the sectors affected by the crises include health, housing, water, education, adequate food and even life of both human and the “others.” This is because humans have become so dominant an element that earth now grunts under the weight and burden of her dominance. Ejiodu (2024) has argued that the trajectory of human involvement of today is a guarantee for annihilation of everything and humans if it is not curtailed and redirected.

Among the sub categories of humans, the degradation of the earth has been blamed on the poor, the subaltern. “The poor have traditionally taken the brunt of the blame for causing society’s many problems including environmental degradation. There is a general consensus that poverty is a major cause of environmental degradation” (Duraiappah 1996, 1). However, there are pockets of humanity that share a different opinion. To this latter group, the cause is industrial and elite population. To put things in another perspective, Bentley (2022) posits that, “environmental degradation occurs when ecosystems are destroyed, wildlife is wiped out and natural resources like air, water and soil are depleted. This concept encompasses any environmental change or disturbance that is seen as harmful or undesirable. ... Human actions that extract resources from the environment faster than they can be replaced have a direct or indirect impact on it. The ecosystem might degrade in a number of ways. When common resources are exhausted or ecosystems are destroyed, the environment is perceived as corrupted and ruined” (1).

She then concludes that the “... environmental deterioration is a result of a variety of elements, such as social, economic, environmental, political, and administrative ones” (1). This places the responsibility on humans without distinction. Ali and Rahman (2024) corroborate this. According to them, “human activities are the primary drivers of this deterioration, impacting both natural and human systems” (1).

The environment is an element that is so important that none - humans and the others - can survive without. This position is underscored by the assertion made by Ali and Rahman.

According to them, “the environment encompasses everything around us, vital for sustaining life on Earth. The environment encompasses all factors surrounding a living organism, both natural and man-made. Derived from the French word ‘*environner*,’ meaning to encircle, it includes physical aspects such as land, air, and water, along with social, economic, and political dimensions. Organisms, from viruses to humans, rely on the environment for survival, reproduction, and propagation. However, environmental degradation has become a pressing global concern, encompassing issues like pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and climate change” (1).

According to Choudhary, Chauhan and Kushwah (2015), “Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife” (1). The environment and its degradation also constitute concerns to Maurya et al. (2020), who posit that, “the environment is something we are very familiar with. It is everything that makes up our surroundings and affects our ability to live on the earth” (2). Continuing, they opine that, “environmental degradation is [the] deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources which include all the biotic and abiotic elements that form our surroundings that is air, water, soil, plant, animals, and all other living and non-living elements of the planet of earth” (2).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Subaltern Concern and its Application in Niger-Delta Literature

The degradation of the environment has been known to affect the masses much more than the elites. Society has over the years been stratified along the divide of economic status. This has given rise to the wide classification of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat which is composed primarily of the masses. This latter group could at best be classified as subaltern. They are those at the lower rung of the societal ladder and they suffer most both socially and economically. Along with the others of the environment they form the larger classification encompassed in the broad spectrum of the subaltern. This has been the concern of literary works from the Niger-Delta region, where societal stratification has operated and operates widely. This subclassification of the society is the capitalist approach to life and living. Literary critics generally critique capitalist systems by revealing how literature reflects and reinforces the exploitation of the working class by the ruling elite (Eagleton 2002, 5). Niger-Delta poetry “... draws close attention to the unfair exploitation of the masses by the political class and seeks a reversal of the system so that a greater portion of the people’s wealth is entrusted to the people who produce it” (Oburumu and Nwoga 2024, 1).

African literature has proven particularly a fertile ground for analysis of the treatment of the subalterns, especially given its historical entanglement with colonialism, neo-colonialism, and systemic economic exploitation of the masses and the others. The literary canon of Africa often grapples with the aftermath of imperialism which exposes inequalities perpetuated by capitalist and imperialist structures. Scholars like Ngũgĩ (1986, 45) argue that African literature

serves as a weapon for resistance, addressing the dehumanization of indigenous populations and advocating for socio-economic liberation. Readings of African texts frequently uncover how authors critique the commodification of natural resources and labour, as well as the resultant societal alienation, which naturally gives rise to resentment and resistance. For instance, Niger-Delta literature exemplifies this tradition of resistance. It addresses the profound socio-economic inequalities stemming from oil exploration and exploitation. Tanure Ojaide's works, especially poetry, for instance, foregrounds the environmental destruction caused by multinational oil corporations and the complicity of local elites, embodying what Marx described as the exploitation of labour and resources for capitalist gain (Okunoye, 112).

Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* aligns with this trajectory as it offers a poignant critique of the capitalist structures that have devastated the Niger-Delta. Her poetry foregrounds the plight of marginalised communities whose livelihoods have been obliterated by oil spills, gas flares, and economic disenfranchisement. Through vivid imagery and emotive language, Obi's work amplifies the voices of those rendered invisible by the oil economy. While Obi's poetry is rooted in localised experiences, it resonates with broader subaltern concerns, particularly the alienation of the people and the commodification of human and natural resources. This study positions *Tears in a Basket* as a significant contribution to Niger-Delta literature, underscoring how Obi's work critiques systemic exploitation and reflects the enduring struggles of the region.

Socio- Political and Environmental Engagements in Niger-Delta Poetry

Niger-Delta poetry has emerged as a crucial medium for articulating the socio-economic and environmental realities faced by communities in the region. Scholars have long acknowledged the role of poetry in documenting the struggles in the region, especially against the exploitation of its oil wealth and the resultant ecological destruction. Ojaide, a prominent voice in Niger-Delta literature, has described the poetry of the region as a form of "protest art, one that speaks directly to the marginalisation of its people and the degradation of their environment" (Ojaide 1999, 23). His work not only critiques the activities of multinational oil corporations but also highlights the failure of local and national authorities to safeguard the region's resources and its inhabitants.

Similarly, Okunoye's work also situates Niger-Delta poetry within the broader framework of environmental and postcolonial studies. It explores how poets employ their craft to challenge systemic exploitation and environmental negligence. Okunoye observes that the themes of Niger-Delta poetry often revolve around loss - the loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and ecological balance - as communities grapple with the consequences of unchecked oil exploration (114). This thematic focus has positioned Niger-Delta poetry as a vital form of resistance literature, deeply rooted in the lived experiences of its people. Okunoye's position on the themes of loss in Niger-Delta poetry provides a poignant framework for understanding the socio-political dimensions of this literary tradition. His focus on livelihoods, cultural heritage,

and ecological balance captures the immediate and pervasive impacts of oil exploration. However, the Niger-Delta narrative is as much about reclamation as it is about loss, with poets striving to assert dignity and justice amidst profound degradation (Ezeigbo 2005, 34). Thus, while loss is a central theme, it is pertinent to state here that it is often a precursor to defiance and renewal.

Okuyade is another critic who has paid much attention to Niger-Delta poetry. He has critiqued the poetry of poets like Tanure Ojaide and Ibiware Ikiriko. He has been able to x-ray the colonial atmosphere of invasion, denigration and destruction of the Niger Delta environment, mainly for economic reasons. The colonial masters, in conjunction with their capitalist corporations have planted the seed of destruction of the environment and the impoverishment of the masses. This same attitude is generally nursed by the successive government and the elites. This is a major issue of the integration of colonisation principles and organised greed into the polity and entity called Nigeria which has now put the stamp of corruption on her. Okuyade's focus is not so much on resistance as it is on enlightenment and the fight against corruption and environmental injustice.

Another critical perspective is the historical contextualisation of literature. Nwagbara (2011, 41) argues that the advent of oil exploration in the Niger-Delta was not merely an economic activity but a colonial-style annexation of indigenous resources. The literature, therefore, reflects an ongoing struggle against neo-colonial exploitation, where poets serve as custodians of the region's history and collective memory. For instance, the poetry often critiques the complicity of both local elites and foreign corporations in perpetuating socio-economic inequality. Okunoye also underestimates the role of language in Niger-Delta poetry. As Egya (2012) explains, poets from this region often blend English with indigenous languages to emphasise cultural identity and solidarity (102). This linguistic strategy reinforces the poets' connection to their heritage while also resisting the dominance of Western literary traditions. Through this lens, the loss of cultural heritage becomes not just a theme but also a formal concern, as poets strive to preserve their linguistic identity amidst globalization.

Furthermore, the ecological dimension of Niger-Delta poetry calls for a closer examination. Alagoa (1999) observes that the poetry functions as an "environmental manifesto", vividly portraying the degradation of land and water while advocating for ecological restoration (76). The juxtapositioning of images of natural beauty with those of pollution and decay helps the poets evoke a sense of urgency, compelling readers to consider the long-term consequences of environmental negligence. Again, the engagement with global capitalism deserves more emphasis. Okunoye briefly touches on oil exploration's impact but fails to highlight the broader systemic dynamics. As Watts (2004, 64) contends, the Niger-Delta serves as a microcosm of global resource conflicts, where the exploitation of natural wealth often correlates with human suffering. This global perspective situates Niger-Delta poetry within a wider discourse, making it a powerful critique of not just local governance but also the global economic order.

The application of oil infrastructure has also been implicated in the devastation wreaked in the Niger-Delta region. Aghoghovwia (2017) has as its major concern the degradation of the environment through the instrumentality of oil infrastructure, which also engenders the devaluation of human life. The human population has been exposed to the dangers inherent in the operations of the oil companies and conglomerates. Consequent upon the activities of exploration and exploitation of oil, both humans and the “others” suffer grievously. Among the human substrata, the masses suffer most. However, the resistance by the downtrodden populace is only touched on by Aghoghovwia. The subaltern resistance is not so much emphasised.

Nnimmo Bassey, a known environmentalist, operating around the domain of environmental protection dwells on the pollution and devastation of the ecology and the poisoning of the people who depend on the earth (waters, forest, etc) for survival, and calls on the powers that be to adjust their operational methods and coverage to ensure sustainability of the ecosystem and humanity (Bassey 2012). Again, the focus leans away from direct resistance and aligns more with the preservation of the land.

Aghoghovwia Philip Onoriode. (2013) aligns with Bassey in the assertion that in the process of resource extraction, communities are dislodged from their natural and material means of production and survival, disconnected from their systems of livelihood and made to become onlookers in the matters of their survival. Here, Aghoghovwia focuses on incitement, resulting from the deplorable conditions in which the masses find themselves. However, it must be pointed out that there has not been actual call for resistance based on real action. It is a case of the preparation of the people’s mind to galvanise them for the future. It is not about now. The sense of urgency and immediacy is not expressly stated.

Continuing, Aghoghovwia (2013) engages in the interrogation of the operations and impacts of the oil explorers and their operations on the environment. He calls for justice for the environment. However, what it fails to do is to implement the call for all-out war against both environment and human injustice. The other focus is the evocation of the nostalgic feelings of the past in the present, the remembrance of the childhood experience of fishing and life on the rivers. All these have been negated by the oil infrastructure which have become the artery for the draining of the “blood” of the land. Via this, the humans are emasculated since the basic sustenance of life has been drained from them. This is a major reason the Niger-Delta people continue to write condemning the activities of both the oil prospectors and the accomplice governments. It also accounts for the continued outcry by writer and critics for attention from the elites and their masters, (the erstwhile colonial lords) along with their entrenched capitalist outfits to mitigate their attacks on the environment and the people.

Riding on the same tide, Akpore and Okagbare sought to engage on matters concerning the ecosystem and how it could be made habitable for mankind. As in the other cases, the attention has not been on the fight to resist the powers that be as they destroy the ecosystem and make life unbearable, but as alternatives to the plundering of the ecosystem.

As outlined above, scholars have explored the narrative strategies employed by Niger-Delta poets to foreground the human cost of environmental degradation. Some of these analyses underscore the poets' use of imagery, symbolism, and local expressions to evoke the emotional and physical toll of oil exploitation on the inhabitants (Nwoga 2022, 1; Yeibo 2012, 57). Through their works, these poets construct a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of development, which often marginalises the voices of the communities most affected by oil-related activities.

Sophia Obi's *Tears in a Basket* contributes to this growing body of poetry by blending personal and communal experiences to critique the socio-political structures perpetuating the Niger-Delta's plight. Thus, this current study builds on the existing scholarship. Although, unlike some earlier works which focus primarily on ecological devastation, this study, in addition, examines the human consequences of economic disempowerment and political neglect. The emphasis on the lived realities of women and children, often the most vulnerable in conflict-ridden regions broadens the scope of the study to include not just oil politics, but gendered perspectives on exploitation and survival.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Alienation and the Burden of Exploitation in "Tears in a Basket"

The poem "Tears in the Basket" offers profound critique of class oppression, the commodification of natural resources, and the alienation of a once-thriving community. It resonates deeply with the realities of oil politics in Nigeria, a microcosm of global capitalist exploitation. The refrain, "We are sacrificial leeches, waiting to be squashed" (19), serves as the poem's thematic anchor as it encapsulates the helplessness and expendability imposed upon the Niger Delta people. The metaphor of **sacrificial leeches** is deliberately paradoxical. Leeches are often seen as parasitic, yet Obi's use repositions them as victims of a predatory capitalist system. This dual imagery underscores the dehumanization experienced by the exploited and therefore aligns with Marxist thought, which critiques systems where human lives are subordinated to profit motives (Eagleton 2002, 35). By repeating this refrain, Obi amplifies its emotional impact and forces the reader to confront the cyclical nature of exploitation and despair.

The opening lines encapsulate the anguish and resilience of a region battered by socio-political and environmental exploitation:

Winds of bitter memory slap me silly
As I cock my ears to the drumbeats
Of the Niger Delta.
Naked dances and dreams have been dampened
By the cold winds of neglect. (19)

The “winds of bitter memory” metaphorically evokes the historical injustices and ongoing struggles of the Niger-Delta communities. These winds are not merely atmospheric phenomena, but manifestations of the collective trauma inflicted by decades of oil exploitation, political neglect, and systemic marginalization. The personification of the winds “slapping” the speaker underscores the relentless assault of these injustices on the psyche of the oppressed. The injustice is not only on the psyche but also the physical being. That “Naked dances and dreams have been dampened / By the cold winds of neglect,” further illustrate the erosion of cultural and aspirational vitality. The phrase “naked dances” evokes images of communal joy and authenticity, of the African people which are now overshadowed “by the cold winds of neglect” arising from the insensitivity of the capitalist orientation and application. This neglect, a product of systemic corruption and capitalist exploitation, aligns with Marxist concerns about the alienation of communities from their cultural and material wealth (Adesanmi and Dunton 2010, 6).

Moreover, the imagery of “dreams ... dampened” speaks to the destruction of hope and potential, as the Niger-Delta’s natural and human resources are drained for profit. Obi’s use of weather metaphors (winds and cold) mirrors the pervasive and chilling effects of these injustices on the region’s socio-economic fabric.

Historical betrayal is also a recurring motif in the poem, as seen in the lines:

I am yet to fathom the obtuse grooves
On the foreheads of our forefathers
Who, unceremoniously, gave our fate away
On a stained platter of gold. (19)

Here, Obi implicates previous generations in the enduring exploitation, suggesting that their complicity or failure to resist laid the foundation for contemporary suffering, just as Awoonor (1988) has done in “Songs of Sorrow”. The “stained platter of gold” is a potent image, combining opulence with corruption and betrayal. Gold, a symbol of wealth and royalty/ rulership, is stained with the blood and tears of those sacrificed in its pursuit. This critique aligns with Marxist historical materialism, which examines how economic decisions shape societal trajectories, often at the expense of the proletariat (Marx and Engels 2002, 49).

The poem’s interrogation of psychological alienation is evident in the stanza beginning with:

How do we think
When our thoughts are images lost in muddy streams,
Dangling on hooks that mock our existence? (19)

The muddy streams evoke the polluted waters of the Niger-Delta, covered in crude and obliterating lives of the flora and fauna. It is a literal and figurative representation of environmental degradation and mental disorientation. The “hooks that mock our existence” symbolise the entrapment of the Niger-Delta people in an exploitative system that denies them autonomy.

Obi further critiques the erosion of cultural expression in the lines: “How can we sing / When our folksongs are distorted grunts / Raking up our sorrowing lungs.” Folksongs, emblematic of communal identity and oral tradition, have been reduced to distorted grunts, a metaphor for the loss of voice in the face of systemic oppression. The sorrowing lungs evoke the physical and emotional toll of living in a polluted, disenfranchised region. This resonates with the analyses of cultural degradation under capitalist systems, where traditional practices are either commodified or erased (Yeibo 2012, 58).

The poem concludes with an interrogation of superficial joy: “Why do we even smile, / When beneath our plastic joy / Painful tears flow freely.” The juxtaposition of plastic joy and painful tears underscores the psychological toll of maintaining a facade of contentment amidst pervasive suffering. This false consciousness reveals how ideological constructs mask the realities of oppression and creates an illusion of stability while perpetuating systemic inequalities (Marx and Engels 2002, 51). Obi’s critique is not limited to external forces but also addresses the internalised acceptance of these conditions, urging a reawakening of consciousness.

Sophia Obi’s “Tears in the Basket” transcends mere lamentation to offer a searing critique of the socio-economic and political realities of the Niger-Delta. Through vivid imagery and emotive language, the poem articulates the alienation, disempowerment, and resilience of a community ensnared by oil politics.

Systemic Oppression and Resistance in “Tomorrow’s Debris”

Sophia Obi’s “Tomorrow’s Debris” (Stop the Killing) is another haunting portrayal of societal decay and the devastating effects of violence on subaltern individuals and their communities. The poem also critiques the systemic injustices of class struggle, environmental destruction, and the erosion of humanity. Obi’s imagery and evocative language underscores the human cost of political and economic exploitation, rendering the poem a compelling commentary on the Niger-Delta’s plight. It begins with the speaker’s vulnerable position:

I pop up my head in the midst of wolves,
who wine and dine on the toil
of the weak and wasted. (12)

The metaphor of wolves represents the exploitative elite, whose wealth and comfort are built on the suffering of the underprivileged. The phrase “weak and wasted” further highlights the dehumanization of the exploited. This reduces them to mere tools in the hands of the bourgeoisie for the accumulating wealth.

In the lines, “From among the battered thatches / I hear the wailing of thirsty souls / who till and toil, hungry for love” (12), the poet persona shifts focus to the everyday struggles of marginalised communities. The battered thatches symbolise dilapidated homes, reflecting both physical and emotional neglect. The thirsty souls represent individuals stripped of basic human dignity, emphasising their longing not only for sustenance but for compassion and justice. This

depiction echoes the notion of the alienation of the masses, where workers are estranged from their labour, communities, and humanity.

Environmental degradation is starkly depicted: “The soil and rivers mourn, / heavy with the weight of the dead” (12). The mourning soil and rivers serve as metaphors for a natural world irreparably damaged by human greed and violence. This image resonates with the ecological consequences of oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta, where pollution and destruction have decimated livelihoods and ecosystems (Okunoye 2008, 115). Obi’s use of anthropomorphism -giving the environment the capacity to mourn - emphasises the interconnectedness of human and ecological suffering.

The plight of children is powerfully conveyed in:

And orphans bury their agony
in their baffled hearts
their screams, sharp as the missiles
that torment them day and night. (12)

The juxtaposition of innocence with the violence of missiles underscores the indiscriminate nature of conflict, where even the most vulnerable are not spared. The orphans “baffled hearts” signify their inability to comprehend the chaos around them, a reflection of the senselessness of war and systemic neglect. This is akin to Wole Soyinka’s (1996) treatment of the theme of war in “Civilian and Soldier” where even the soldier is ignorant of the core reason he fights and dies. This portrayal aligns with the critiques of class conflict, where the most marginalised bear the brunt of societal upheavals.

Obi expands on the generational trauma stating that: “Out in the fishing-ports, cities, deserts / the infinite wail of orphans / echoes in search of dispatched parents.” The “fishing-ports” and “cities” are emblematic of the Niger-Delta’s resource-based economy, devastated by exploitation and violence. The infinite wail symbolises the enduring pain of loss, while the phrase “dispatched parents” gives insight into the brutality of their absence. This critiques how capitalist systems, often supported by violent structures, disrupt family units and social cohesion. The poem’s concluding lines deliver a grim, yet reflective observation:

Beneath the rusty roofs of hatred,
the extremist survives the wasted city
while orphans
wail their endless agony
among tomorrow’s debris. (12)

The “rusty roofs of hatred” encapsulates the corrosive effects of prolonged conflict and exploitation. The “extremist” surviving amidst the ruins symbolises how societal decay breeds radicalization, perpetuating a cycle of violence and despair. Obi’s reference to tomorrow’s debris serves as a reminder of the ongoing destruction that threatens future generations.

Environmental Despoliation and the Betrayal of Communal Ethos in “Swamps of Our Time”

The opening lines in “Swamps of Our Time” liken the Niger-Delta to my mother’s love (18). This underscores its boundless generosity and capacity for forgiveness despite being mocked” and exploited.” The phrase “forgives those who mock her nudity” conveys the region’s vulnerability, stripped bare by unrelenting economic exploitation. This stark imagery critiques the capitalist plundering of natural resources, where the wealth generated by the Delta’s oil industry is diverted to sustain the opulence of select elite, leaving its inhabitants impoverished. The poet amplifies this critique through the juxtaposition of “mansions” built with the Delta’s resources and “tattered huts” where her children reside - a portrayal of the unequal distribution of wealth. The poet’s lament extends to the ecological ruin inflicted upon the Delta. The polluted soil, described as marching with shameless pride (18) becomes an ironic metaphor for resilience amidst devastation. The reference to soil that once “fed naked children” evokes nostalgia for a pre-capitalist era characterised by communal peace and sustainable living. However, this pastoral ideal has been displaced by the environmental degradation wrought by capitalist industrial activities, underscoring the destructive nature of profit-driven systems.

The poet’s rhetorical questions, such as “Can you turn back the swamps of time?” and “Can you chasten the sands of life?” (18) give a collective sense of helplessness. These questions critique the seemingly irreversible damage caused by exploitative practices of the oil infrastructures and the views about the alienation of communities from their natural and socio-economic environments. This alienation is further emphasised in the closing lines, where the Niger-Delta grieves for her children who “give bountifully / Yet feed on remnants.” The imagery of giving generously while subsisting on leftovers exposes the exploitation inherent in the Delta’s oil economy, where local communities are denied the wealth which their land generates.

Exploitation and Environmental Degradation in “Oloibiri”

Sophia Obi’s “Oloibiri”, just like the other poems analysed above, is also a reflection on the enduring consequences of oil exploration in the Niger-Delta. The imagery and tone of the poem vividly depict the socio-economic exploitation and environmental degradation that characterise the region’s history. The opening lines critique the so-called independence of Nigeria, which has failed to liberate its oil-rich regions from exploitation:

At last I am free,
Free from bondage
Yet,
Desolate like a wealthy aged whore. (13)

These lines signal a tragic paradox of freedom overshadowed by despair. Here, the reference to a “wealthy aged whore” suggests a loss of dignity, as wealth derived from oil has led to widespread neglect and impoverishment of the people. As Fanon (1963, p. 55) posits in *The*

Wretched of the Earth, postcolonial societies often grapple with neo-colonial forces that perpetuate socio-economic inequalities.

The imagery in “Oily tears rolling through my veins / To nourish households in the desert” encapsulates the exploitation of the Niger-Delta’s resources to benefit distant regions while local communities remain impoverished. It also highlights the divide between the North and the South, a dichotomy which resonates throughout the world. Obi (2010, 224) aptly notes that the wealth generated from oil extraction “rarely translates to improved living conditions for host communities.” The poem’s tone of lament underscores the betrayal and despair of a region drained of its resources. Obi’s environmental critique is most evident in the lines, “The smoke and stench / Of my crude flow desecrates / My marine reserves.” The desecration of natural resources speaks to the ecological damage inflicted by oil companies. For instance, Watts (2008), in his analysis of oil politics, observes that environmental degradation often becomes “a weapon of domination, and transforms the entire ecosystems into sites of human and ecological despair” (66). This degradation underscores the capitalist disregard for sustainable practices, since it prioritises profit over environmental preservation. This is a practice which negates the principles of environmental justice; a practice which anchors its existence on the anthropocentric disposition.

The poem transits into overt criticism of inequitable wealth distribution:

I frown
Yes, I frown at the daily discovery
Of unrequited oil returns
The harvest belongs to the tyrant. (13)

The tyrant symbolizes the corrupt elite who monopolise the wealth derived from oil. Augustine Ikelegbe’s study on conflict in the Niger-Delta highlights the role of these elites in exacerbating regional inequalities, fuelling unrest and resistance (Ikelegbe 2005, 210). Obi’s repetition of “I frown” reinforces the indignation of the Niger-Delta against these exploitative practices.

Obi concludes with a rallying call for self-determination, captured in the lines: “I hear the celebration, / The joyful uproar that comes / With controlling the blessings / Of my God-given inheritance” (14). This hope for regional autonomy aligns with the arguments of Okome (2004, 122), who advocates for resource control as a means of addressing systemic marginalization. Obi’s vision of an empowered Niger-Delta underscores the potential for transformation through local resistance and resource management.

CONCLUSION

This study examined poems from Sophia Obi’s *Tears in a Basket* through the lens of the subaltern concern. It focuses on the themes of oil politics, environmental degradation, and socio-economic exploitation in the Niger-Delta people and space. Each poem offered a distinct exploration of how resource wealth has paradoxically led to the impoverishment and alienation

of local communities. From “Tears in a Basket” to “Oloibiri,” Obi’s poetry captures the anguish of a region burdened by exploitation, while amplifying calls for justice, equity, and reclamation of dignity. The findings show that Obi’s work effectively critiques the exploitation of both human and natural resources and highlights the complicity of capitalist forces and state actors in perpetuating inequality. Her vivid imagery underscores the environmental and cultural destruction wrought by oil extraction, while also reflecting the resilience and aspirations of the Niger-Delta people. These poems not only document the lived realities of exploitation but also envision a future where justice and environmental sustainability prevail. Therefore, it is essential for future research to expand on this analysis by investigating the representation of oil politics in other poetic works from the Niger-Delta and beyond. Thus, comparative studies with other regions of the world affected by resource exploitation could provide broader insights into global patterns of resource control and marginalization and as well offer a more holistic understanding of the cultural and environmental costs of extractive economies.

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