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## VIOLENCE, NATURE, AND HUMAN CULTURE: ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE AESTHETICS OF DEATH IN ADINOYI ONUKABA'S *THE KILLING SWAMP*

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### Abstract

Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba's one-act play *The Killing Swamp* (2009) dramatises the final hours and execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni environmental activist hanged in 1995 by Nigeria's military regime alongside eight others for protesting oil-related ecological devastation in the Niger Delta. The symbolic "killing swamp" functions as a powerful metaphor for the entanglement of state violence, systemic injustice, and environmental degradation, exposing how human culture inflicts simultaneous harm on people and the natural world. Although Niger Delta literature has grown significantly in its critique of petro-capitalism and human rights abuses, ecocritical scholarship remains limited. This study examines the intersections of violence, nature, and human culture in *The Killing Swamp* through ecocritical lenses, with a sharpened focus on the aesthetics of death. It offers a more systematic interrogation of how the text represents nature and the environment, nonhuman agency, and ecological ideologies. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism as developed by scholars such as Glotfelty and Buell, my study reveals that Onukaba's aesthetics of death underscore the inseparability of human violence and ecological harm. By positioning the Niger Delta as a sacrificial landscape, Onukaba's work affirms literature's vital role in fostering awareness of systemic injustices while advocating for ecological and social renewal.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, violence, aesthetics of death, human-nature, cultural decay.

### Introduction

The one-act play *The Killing Swamp* by Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba (2009) emerged at a pivotal moment in the history of postcolonial Nigeria: the brutal execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists on November 10, 1995, during the military rule of General Sani Abacha.<sup>1</sup> It represents the climax of the violent nexus of petro-capitalism, state oppression, and ecological destruction in the Niger Delta, where decades of oil production by multinational firms, mainly Shell (with the support of the Nigerian state), had devastated farmlands, rivers, and livelihoods since the commencement of commercial oil production in the late 1950s.

The setting, the killing swamp, is not merely a passive location in the play but a stage of sacrifice and moral decay. Here, the destruction of human bodies and the degradation of the nonhuman environment are intertwined, presenting the Niger Delta as a sacrificial landscape where

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 106-31.

ecological catastrophe and socio-political death converge. This paper analyses the intersection of violence, nature, and human culture in *The Killing Swamp* through ecocritical perspectives, with particular attention to the aesthetics of death. It interrogates the representations of nature, the environment, nonhuman agency, and ecological ideologies in the text as vehicles through which Onukaba critiques petro-imperialism while advocating resistance and environmental justice in postcolonial Nigerian literature.

This paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the next section presents the historical context of the Niger Delta/Ogoni crisis, highlighting the principal institutions and actors involved. The subsequent sections employ postcolonial ecocriticism to examine the symbolic representations in the play, the aesthetics of execution and sacrifice, and their broader implications for discourses of ecological renewal. Lastly, I conclude with reflections on the continuing relevance of the play.

### Historical Context

The Niger Delta is a vast wetland region in southeastern Nigeria that has experienced severe environmental and social crises since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 1956. Royal Dutch Shell (then Shell-BP) commenced extensive oil extraction, resulting in widespread environmental degradation through oil spills, gas flaring, soil erosion, and water pollution, all of which devastated fishing grounds, agricultural lands, and biodiversity.<sup>2</sup> By the 1990s, the region, inhabited by various ethnic groups including the Ogoni, had become acutely marginalised as oil revenues continued to enrich the federal government and foreign oil companies, while the local population suffered from poverty, ill health, and displacement.<sup>3</sup>

The Ogoni people, numbering approximately 500,000, organised themselves under the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990. Led by the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP issued the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* in 1990, demanding environmental remediation, resource control, and equitable revenue sharing, while framing oil exploitation as a form of ecological warfare.<sup>4</sup> This led to peaceful demonstrations, including mass protests that attracted international attention. In response, however, the Nigerian state resorted to violence, including military raids on Ogoni communities.

The principal actors in the crisis included the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (the major multinational operator), the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (its state partner), and the military regime led by Sani Abacha (1993–1998), which deployed security forces to protect oil interests. At the height of intra-group conflicts, four moderate Ogoni chiefs were killed in 1993, and in 1994, Saro-Wiwa and eight others—Saturday Dobe, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuata, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kiobel, and John Kpuine—were arrested on charges of

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (London: Penguin, 1995), 45-67.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999)45-60.

<sup>4</sup> David Ekanem Udoinwang, "Eco-Poetics and Politics of Nationhood in Nigerian Literature," *AKSU Journal of English* 17 (2017): 1–16.

incitement. They were subsequently convicted of murder by a special military tribunal that attracted widespread criticism for failing to observe due process. Although Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton appealed to the international community to prevent the executions, the nine men were hanged on November 10, 1995, in Port Harcourt. Their execution epitomised the convergence of petro-capitalism, authoritarian violence, and ecological destruction that forms the historical backdrop of Onukaba's play.<sup>5</sup>

## Literature Review

Ecocriticism, as a critical approach to studying the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emerged in the late twentieth century in response to the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional literary criticism and as an ethical call for greater responsibility toward the nonhuman world. According to Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, it is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, focusing on how literary texts both represent and shape environmental perceptions and crises.<sup>6</sup> While early Anglo-American ecocriticism emphasized wilderness aesthetics and conservationist ideology, postcolonial ecocriticism has expanded the field by foregrounding environmental justice, slow violence, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and neocolonial exploitation in the Global South.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, in the words of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, argues that environmental degradation cannot be separated from histories of imperial domination, racial inequality, and cultural displacement.<sup>7</sup> It examines how literature from formerly colonised societies reveals the interconnected suffering of humans and the nonhuman environment under extractive capitalism. This critical approach has become increasingly influential in African literary studies, particularly in analyses of ecological violence. Cajetan Iheka examines African literary representations of ecological crises, demonstrating that agency emerges not only through human struggle but also through the agency of landscapes and other nonhuman entities, all of which are rendered vulnerable.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence—the gradual, often invisible destruction caused by environmental degradation—has proved particularly relevant to the oil-induced devastation of the Niger Delta, where decades of pollution, gas flaring, and biodiversity loss have accumulated into profound human and cultural tragedies.<sup>9</sup>

Within Nigerian ecocritical scholarship, the Niger Delta has attracted considerable attention as a paradigmatic site of petro-violence, where multinational oil exploitation, state complicity, and local resistance intersect. David Ekanem Udoinwang's survey of the eco-poetics and politics of nationhood traces representations of ecological catastrophe in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, the novels of Helon Habila and Kaine Agary, and the plays of Tess Onwueme, among others, as expressions of national malaise and the marginalisation of minority communities.<sup>10</sup> These works employ images of

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<sup>5</sup> Cajetan N. Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*.

<sup>9</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

<sup>10</sup> Udoinwang, "Eco-Poetics and Politics of Nationhood in Nigerian Literature,"

environmental devastation to advocate resource control and accountability, frequently portraying the Niger Delta as a killing field where ecological and political violence converge. Dramatic literature, however, remains comparatively underexplored. Although the plays of Arnold Udoka and the eco-dramas of Ahmed Yerima have occasionally been examined for their portrayals of governmental failure and youth militancy, ecocritical studies of Niger Delta drama remain limited.

Onukaba's *The Killing Swamp* occupies a distinctive yet insufficiently examined position within this body of literature. The play literalises the killing swamp as both a site of execution and a metaphor for the oil-devastated Ogoni landscape through its dramatic reconstruction of the final hours of Ken Saro-Wiwa (fictionalised as Kenule) and the Ogoni Nine before their execution in 1995. The action unfolds in a remote bush beneath a decaying noose suspended from a tree, evoking the poisoned wetlands of the Niger Delta. Throughout the dialogue, explicit connections are drawn between the deaths of the protagonists and the polluted creeks, oil-soaked swamps, and disrupted ecological systems. Kenule's defiant speeches elevate martyrdom while insisting that the true crime lies not in murder but in resistance to exploitation: "we have only been found guilty of obstructing the flow of oil from our soil."<sup>11</sup> The aesthetics of death—expressed through solitary suffering, failed executions resulting from inadequate facilities, and imagery of bodies dissolving into the soil—transform execution into an extension of ecological genocide. The betrayal by an Ogoni Major further underscores the complicity of human culture in both human and environmental violence.

Thematically and socio-politically, scholarship on the play have remained largely descriptive. Udoinwang situates it within Niger Delta eco-literature as a dramatisation of state terrorism and Ogoni ecological activism under MOSOP, highlighting its articulation of minority struggles for survival and environmental justice. The play has also appeared in broader surveys of conflict literature, including the work of P. K. Malreddy on militant metaphors, but has not received sustained ecocritical analysis alongside texts such as *Oil on Water* by Habila<sup>12</sup> and *Yellow-Yellow* by Agary.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, existing studies have not examined the aesthetics of death—the artistic strategies through which mortality is visually, dialogically, and symbolically fused with violated nature and disrupted human culture. Consequently, important questions remain unanswered regarding how the swamp functions as a liminal eco-cultural space, how the tragic beauty and absurdity of death critique petro-imperialism, and how cultural practices of solidarity, such as the characters holding hands at the moment of execution, resist ecological erasure.

This review therefore identifies significant gaps that the present study seeks to address. While ecocritical scholarship has effectively explored narratives of slow violence and resistance in the Niger Delta, insufficient attention has been paid to the performative dimensions of drama and the aesthetics of death within eco-cultural contexts. Existing scholarship mentions *The Killing Swamp* only peripherally, giving priority to political biography or general conflict narratives over its environmental dimensions. In line with the concerns raised in Chapter One—particularly the problem statement regarding the unexplored nexus of violence, nature, and culture in Onukaba's dramatisation of martyrdom—and the study's objective of deploying an ecocritical framework, this paper offers the

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<sup>11</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Helon Habila, *Oil on Water* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Kaine Agary, *Yellow-Yellow* (Lagos: Dtalkshop, 2006).

first extended ecocritical interrogation of the play. By examining how the setting, dialogue, and aestheticisation of death transform human violence against nature into cultural and mortal violence, the study provides new insights into the role of literature in confronting petro-violence and environmental injustice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts postcolonial ecocriticism as its primary theoretical lens to interrogate the intersections of violence, nature, and human culture in *The Killing Swamp*, with particular emphasis on the aesthetics of death as manifested in the play's dramatisation of Ogoni martyrdom and ecological devastation in the Niger Delta. Postcolonial ecocriticism emerges from the recognition that environmental crises in formerly colonised regions are inseparable from histories of imperial exploitation, racial hierarchies, and ongoing neocolonial extractivism. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin articulate this framework as an ethical and political project "that examines transverse relations between humans, animals, and the environment across postcolonial literary texts, while insisting that ecological degradation cannot be divorced from social injustices rooted in colonialism and its legacies."<sup>14</sup>

Building on foundational ecocritical scholarship, which defines the field as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,"<sup>15</sup> postcolonial ecocriticism critiques the anthropocentric and wilderness-centred tendencies of early Anglo-American ecocriticism. Instead, it foregrounds how colonial practices such as resource extraction, land dispossession, and environmental racism continue to manifest in postcolonial contexts through multinational corporations and complicit state apparatuses. In African literary studies, this approach has been productively extended by Cajetan Iheka, who argues that "African texts reveal ecological violence and nonhuman agency while challenging narratives that naturalise crises or obscure shared vulnerabilities between human communities and environments."<sup>16</sup> Iheka's concept of *Naturalizing Africa* highlights how literature documents attritional harm and resistance, positioning literary texts as sites of both critique and alternative ecological imaginaries.

Central to this framework is Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, which describes "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>17</sup> In the Niger Delta, slow violence manifests through decades of oil spills, gas flaring, soil and water contamination, and biodiversity loss—processes that accumulate incrementally yet culminate in spectacular human deaths, as dramatised in Onukaba's play. Nixon's framework illuminates how petro-imperialism renders ecological harm gradual and unevenly distributed, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities while evading immediate accountability. Applied to *The Killing Swamp*, the concept of slow violence bridges the play's literal executions with the metaphorical "killing" of the Ogoni swamp ecosystem, where the protagonists' deaths extend the attritional assault on land, culture, and life itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 12-15.

<sup>17</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

The study further integrates postcolonial ecocriticism's engagement with aesthetics, specifically the aesthetics of death, to examine how Onukaba employs dramatic elements—including setting, dialogue, symbolism, and performance—to represent mortality as an eco-cultural phenomenon. While ecocriticism has explored grief, mourning, and ecological lament in relation to environmental loss,<sup>18</sup> this study extends such inquiries to dramatic representations of human death intertwined with violated nature. The play's swamp setting functions as a liminal space where execution mirrors ecological genocide. The decaying noose, failed hangings, and imagery of dissolution evoke both mortal finality and the swamp's toxic transformation under oil extraction. By aestheticizing death through tragic solitude, ironic incompetence (“mediocre facilities”), and defiant solidarity, the text critiques petro-violence as a form of necropolitics that devalues Ogoni lives and landscapes alike.

This theoretical synthesis aligns with the problem statement presented in the introduction above which identifies the underexplored nexus of human mortality, environmental degradation, and cultural resistance in Niger Delta drama. While existing scholarship on *The Killing Swamp* emphasises its socio-political themes or Ogoni activism,<sup>19</sup> it largely subordinates the play's ecocritical dimensions and overlooks the aesthetics of death. Postcolonial ecocriticism, augmented by the concepts of slow violence and aesthetics of proximity or grievability, addresses this gap by providing analytical tools for examining how the play stages death not merely as political martyrdom but as an extension of ecological violence that rebounds upon human culture. Through close textual reading informed by these theoretical perspectives, this study advances understanding of African drama's role in confronting petro-imperialism, environmental injustice, and the entangled fates of people and place.

### Research Methodology and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using an interpretive, desk-based approach centred on textual analysis and close reading of Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba's *The Killing Swamp*. Qualitative methodologies “are especially suited to literary and ecocritical inquiry because they prioritize depth, context, and the interpretive construction of meaning over statistical generalisation or quantification.”<sup>20</sup> In line with established practices in postcolonial ecocritical studies of African literature, this study employs content analysis and close textual examination to uncover how literary devices—including setting, dialogue, symbolism, and performance elements—aestheticise death as an extension of ecological and cultural violence in the Niger Delta.

The methodology is entirely library- and text-based, requiring neither fieldwork nor surveys, interviews, or other forms of empirical data collection. The primary source is the one-act play *The Killing Swamp*, published by Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited. Secondary sources include

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<sup>18</sup> Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman, eds., *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Udoinwang, “Eco-Poetics and Politics of Nationhood in Nigerian Literature.”

<sup>20</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 44-45.

theoretical works on postcolonial ecocriticism,<sup>21</sup> slow violence,<sup>22</sup> and existing scholarship on Niger Delta literature and Onukaba's drama.<sup>23</sup> These materials were sourced from university libraries, academic databases, and other scholarly repositories.

Data collection consisted of repeated and systematic readings of the play, guided by the objectives of the study as outlined in the introduction to examine the aesthetics of death—visual, dialogic, and symbolic—and its entanglement with violated nature and fractured human culture. Key passages were identified and coded thematically around core motifs, including the swamp as a toxic execution site and metaphor for petro-degradation, the “loneliness of death,” failed hangings resulting from “mediocre facilities,” imagery of dissolution into the void, and acts of defiant solidarity, such as the characters holding hands at the moment of execution. The analysis proceeded through a layered ecocritical framework: first, by identifying representations of environmental harm and human mortality; second, by interpreting these through Nixon's concept of slow violence and Huggan and Tiffin's postcolonial ecocritical framework; and third, by evaluating how the dramatic form itself—its seamless one-act structure and minimalist staging—intensifies the aesthetic impact of eco-cultural death.

This interpretive procedure aligns directly with the theoretical framework of the study—postcolonial ecocriticism augmented by the concepts of slow violence and aesthetics of proximity or grievability—and addresses the gaps identified in the literature review. While previous scholarship on *The Killing Swamp* has remained largely socio-political or thematic, treating environmental elements only peripherally, the present methodology foregrounds the hitherto neglected aesthetics of death in dramatic performance, offering the first sustained ecocritical close reading of the play. The research design therefore addresses an important scholarly lacuna concerning drama's unique performative capacity to stage the ways in which ecological violence rebounds upon human bodies and cultures.

Ethical considerations are minimal, as the study engages exclusively with published literary materials. Nevertheless, due care has been taken to maintain respectful engagement with Ogoni history and the legacy of Ken Saro-Wiwa throughout the analysis. The principal limitation of the study lies in the inherent subjectivity of interpretive literary analysis and its focus on a single dramatic text. However, these limitations are mitigated by the depth of textual engagement and the rigorous application of established theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the methodology ensures that the study's findings remain firmly grounded in the text while contributing fresh insights to African ecocriticism and Niger Delta literary studies.

### **Synopsis of Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba's *The Killing Swamp***

*The Killing Swamp* is a one-act play by the Nigerian playwright and journalist Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba. It is a fictionalised account of the final days preceding the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa (renamed Kenule in the play), the renowned Ogoni environmental activist, author, and leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The play re-enacts the controversial hanging of Saro-Wiwa

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<sup>21</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*; Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*.

<sup>22</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

<sup>23</sup> Udoinwang, “Eco-Poetics and Politics of Nationhood in Nigerian Literature.”

and eight other Ogoni leaders (collectively known as the Ogoni Nine) by the military government of General Sani Abacha following a widely condemned trial.

The action unfolds in real time in a remote clearing in the bush—a symbolic killing swamp or execution site within a Niger Delta prison. This setting gives the play the classical unities of time, place, and action. The austere setting features a noose hanging from a tree in a swampy, oil-depleted environment, symbolising not only the imminent execution of the protagonists but also the destruction of the ecosystem resulting from decades of oil extraction in Ogoniland.

The dramatic action consists primarily of intense dialogues between Kenule and his executioners, including a Sergeant (the hangman), a Major, and other military personnel who assist in carrying out the execution. A female character, Asabe, appears intermittently, providing moments of human connection, compassion, and resistance. As Kenule confronts his impending death, he mocks the injustice of his trial and links his personal fate to the broader struggle against environmental exploitation, state violence, and the disruption of the natural order caused by oil extraction, which has poisoned the lives, farmlands, rivers, and creeks of the Ogoni people. Through sharp dialogue infused with wit, humour, sarcasm, and philosophical reflection, the play presents both a political indictment and a moral testimony.

Recurring themes include the indignity surrounding the hastily arranged execution site, the incompetence and “mediocre facilities” that repeatedly frustrate the hanging process, and Kenule's unwavering dignity and resistance despite betrayal and isolation. Moments of apparent solidarity and human intimacy further underscore his humanity in the face of death, while the play subtly connects his personal execution to the slow violence inflicted upon the land and its people through decades of ecological destruction.

In the author's note, Onukaba emphasises that the performance should proceed seamlessly without interruption, thereby sustaining the dramatic intensity of the final reckoning. Although based on historical events, the play incorporates fictional elements to honour the legendary courage, resilience, and bohemian spirit of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Ultimately, *The Killing Swamp* transforms a personal tragedy into a powerful indictment of petro-violence, state terrorism, and the systematic destruction of both human communities and the natural environment in the Niger Delta. It stands as a tragic dramatic tribute to Saro-Wiwa's martyrdom while simultaneously offering a profound reflection on resistance, injustice, and the aesthetics of death within the context of ecological and political oppression.

### **Ecocritical Analysis and Discussion of *The Killing Swamp***

*The Killing Swamp* is a one-act play that imagines the final hours of Ken Saro-Wiwa (fictionalized as Kenule) and the Ogoni Nine before their execution on 10 November 1995 by the military government of General Sani Abacha. The genesis of the play lies in the events of the early 1990s, when Saro-Wiwa founded the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) to protest decades of environmental degradation caused by the oil extraction activities of Shell and other multinational corporations. Oil production in Ogoniland, which began in 1958, resulted in extensive oil spills, gas

flaring, and environmental pollution that devastated farmlands and rendered rivers and creeks lifeless—an example of what Rob Nixon terms slow violence: “a violence that is not immediately apparent, a violence of postponed annihilation that is scattered randomly through both time and space.”<sup>24</sup> The executions of 1995 marked the spectacular culmination of this prolonged ecological assault, transforming environmental destruction into state-sanctioned human death. By dramatising these historical events fourteen years later in a play shortlisted for the Nigeria LNG Prize in 2010, Onukaba does more than recount history; he aestheticises it through an ecocritical lens that positions nature not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active participant and victim of postcolonial petro-violence. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism,<sup>25</sup> this study examines how nature and the environment, nonhuman agency, and ecological ideologies are represented in the play, where the swamp, rivers, creeks, and soil become symbolic spaces that personify the land and actively participate in the political struggle.

The Niger Delta wetland immediately emerges as the play’s central symbolic landscape through its title, *The Killing Swamp*—an ecological space where the destruction of human life mirrors the destruction of nature. As the stage directions indicate: “The location is a fresh clearing in a bush outside a prison. A noose dangles from a large tree branch above a stool placed directly below”<sup>26</sup> (stage directions which implied swampy scenery). Kenule repeatedly questions the choice of location: “who chose this bush.”<sup>27</sup> This question emphasises both the hurried and humiliating nature of the execution while simultaneously evoking the image of the devastated wetlands of the Niger Delta transformed into an execution ground. Within postcolonial ecocriticism, such landscapes are never neutral. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin contend, “that postcolonial literatures are foregrounding the transverse relations between humans, animals as well as the environment as well as revealing how colonial and neocolonial extractivism makes landscapes complicit to violence.”<sup>28</sup> The swamp therefore functions not merely as a setting but as a physical manifestation of violence. The same polluted wetlands whose fertility has been destroyed now become the site upon which human bodies are sacrificed. This convergence of ecological destruction and human death corresponds with Cajetan Iheka’s notion of the “naturalization of Africa,” whereby African literary texts attribute agency to nonhuman entities while demonstrating the shared vulnerability of people and the environment.<sup>29</sup> The swamp does not simply witness death; rather, it becomes an extension of petro-imperialism, with its toxicity symbolically returning violence to the human body.

The personification of the land continues throughout the play, transforming the environment from an inert resource into a suffering, living entity endowed with agency. Early in the drama, Kenule describes the Ogoni struggle in explicitly physiological terms: “my cause-our cause, I must say-is a national one: to excise from the heart of this sick and frail nation a malignant tumor; to remove this lump of injustice from the heart of this nation; to rid this pitiable land of a deadly virus. A noble cause,

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<sup>24</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*; Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*.

<sup>26</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*.

eh?”<sup>30</sup> Here, the nation and its land are anthropomorphized as diseased, afflicted by a malignant tumour and a deadly virus brought about by the destructive consequences of oil exploitation. This medical imagery aligns with ecocritical interpretations of environmental racism, in which colonised landscapes become pathologized while the structures responsible for their destruction evade accountability.<sup>31</sup>

Kenule later identifies these responsible agents explicitly: “I have told them to hold the oil companies accountable for the dead creeks and oily swamp. I have opened their eyes to the atrocities of the oil companies which have wasted their rich fertile land and polluted the creeks and rivers that supply them drinking water and sea food.”<sup>32</sup> The creeks are “dead,” the swamp is “oily,” the land is “wasted,” and the rivers are polluted. These descriptions personify the environment, enabling it to function symbolically as a witness and accuser of ecological injustice. Even the soil acquires existential significance in Kenule’s meditation on death: “there is nothing more miserable than the loneliness of death. But when men in similar fate flock together to the bitter end, holding one another for support, the agony of forced exit becomes much more bearable and the soul dissolves splendidly into the void from which it sprang.”<sup>33</sup>

Here, the dissolution of the soul evokes a natural return to the earth, contrasting sharply with the unnatural contamination of the land caused by oil extraction. Nonhuman agency becomes even more explicit when the Major accuses Kenule: “you have turned the Delta to the killing swamp,” to which Kenule responds by redirecting responsibility: “hold the Nigerian Government and the oil companies responsible.”<sup>34</sup> The swamp appears to kill, yet its destructive agency is itself the product of human violence—specifically that of the state and multinational corporations. This reversal exemplifies a central ecocritical insight: nature, having suffered degradation, reflects that violence back upon humanity.

The setting is therefore not merely peripheral to the political conflict but central to it, demonstrating the continuity between slow ecological violence and spectacular state execution. Historically, Saro-Wiwa’s activism between 1990 and 1995 responded to decades of unchecked oil spills—Shell alone recorded more than 2,000 spills during the 1990s—as well as the displacement of fishing and farming communities following the publication of the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* by MOSOP. Onukaba incorporates this historical context through Kenule’s speeches, which connect his personal fate to the broader environmental struggle: “we have not been found guilty of murder. We have only been found guilty of obstructing the flow of the oil from our soil.”<sup>35</sup>

The “obstruction” referred to here is environmental activism itself—the demand for environmental remediation, compensation, and resource control—criminalised by the Nigerian state as treason. This reflects ecological ideologies of extraction in which the wetlands of the Niger Delta

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<sup>30</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

<sup>32</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 32-33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

are treated as expendable resources, illustrating what Iheka describes as ecological violence that naturalizes nonhuman suffering for the benefit of political and economic elites.<sup>36</sup>

This critique is reinforced through the play's stage directions: "Sergeant kicks the stool, the noose tightens and snaps again. Kenule lands on the floor, screams in pain. Sergeant becomes even more nervous. Major is ashamed."<sup>37</sup> The failed hanging, resulting from defective execution equipment, mirrors the deterioration of the physical environment itself. Kenule satirises this institutional incompetence: "this is what you get in a land of mediocre: mediocre facilities, mediocre hangmen. What a shame!"<sup>38</sup>

The state's administrative failure becomes inseparable from its environmental failure. The same neglect that permits ecological destruction also produces judicial injustice and political violence. Furthermore, the betrayal of Kenule by an Ogoni Major, who is also his cousin, symbolises the erosion of communal solidarity under petro-capitalism, demonstrating how ecological violence fractures cultural relationships and turns members of the same community against one another. Death in the play is ultimately aestheticised as an eco-cultural phenomenon. Kenule's reflection on "the loneliness of death"<sup>39</sup> parallels the isolation of a polluted and abandoned landscape. His final declaration of resistance—my ideals will never die...will never die. (Yells) The struggle continues!<sup>40</sup>—transforms martyrdom into an affirmation of ecological justice rather than merely religious salvation.

This resonates with Huggan and Tiffin's call for postcolonial ecocriticism to address the intertwined suffering of humans and nonhuman nature.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the play, the swamp, rivers, creeks, and soil are not incidental environmental references but symbolic structures carrying the ideological weight of the narrative. They accuse, resist, mourn, and testify. Through the dramatisation of execution within the killing swamp, Onukaba demonstrates that the executions of 1995 were not isolated political events but the visible culmination of a process of slow violence that began with the first commercial oil drilling in 1958 and continues through ongoing oil spills, gas flaring, and environmental degradation.

In sum, *The Killing Swamp* makes a significant contribution to African ecocriticism by dramatising how violence inflicted upon nature ultimately rebounds upon human culture and mortality. Its personified landscape—wasted, polluted, animated, and mournful—embodies the ecological consequences of petro-imperialism while situating the tragedy of the Ogoni people within the broader history of neocolonial extraction. As Nixon observes, "the manifestation of the slow violence in such text requires moral reaction."<sup>42</sup> The play addresses a significant gap in African dramatic literature by demonstrating the capacity of theatre to represent nonhuman agency and eco-cultural violence with emotional urgency and tragic force. Even the uninterrupted dramatic structure

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<sup>36</sup> Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*.

<sup>42</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 3.

prescribed in Onukaba's authorial note mirrors the relentless flow of oil and the equally unbroken denial of justice, ensuring that the symbolic power of the killing swamp continues to resonate long after the performance has ended.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

This study has examined Adinoyi Ojo Onukaba's one-act play *The Killing Swamp* through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, with particular attention to the aesthetics of death and the intersections of violence, nature, and human culture within the context of petro-violence in the Niger Delta. The study addressed the underexplored relationship between ecological degradation and human mortality in Niger Delta drama, particularly as represented in the dramatisation of the 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine. It specifically investigated how the play represents death as an eco-cultural phenomenon and how the swamp functions simultaneously as a literal site of execution and a metaphor for environmental genocide.

The study situated *The Killing Swamp* within the broader development of ecocritical scholarship, tracing the evolution of ecocriticism from its Anglo-American focus on wilderness and conservation to its postcolonial engagements with environmental justice, slow violence, and the enduring legacies of colonialism and neocolonial extraction in the Global South. The works of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, Cajetan Iheka, and Rob Nixon provided the theoretical foundation for understanding how African literature represents the interconnections between ecological degradation, social injustice, and human suffering. Although existing scholarship on Niger Delta literature have extensively examined oil-induced environmental destruction in fiction and poetry, dramatic literature remains comparatively understudied. Likewise, previous studies of *The Killing Swamp* have largely emphasised its socio-political dimensions while paying relatively little attention to its ecological aesthetics.

Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, Nixon's concept of slow violence, and Iheka's notion of naturalizing Africa, this study adopted a qualitative, desk-based methodology involving close textual reading and interpretive analysis of the play within the historical context of oil exploitation in Ogoniland from 1958 through the executions of 1995. This theoretical synthesis provided an effective framework for examining nonhuman agency, the personification of landscapes, and the ways ecological violence rebounds upon human bodies and cultures.

The ecocritical analysis demonstrated that *The Killing Swamp* transforms the Niger Delta swamp into an ecological killing field where human execution mirrors environmental destruction. Throughout the play, the landscape is consistently personified: the nation and the land are portrayed as "sick and frail" with "a malignant tumor;"<sup>44</sup> the creeks are described as "dead" and the swamp as "oily";<sup>45</sup> and the soil becomes the medium into which the human soul "dissolves splendidly into the void".<sup>46</sup> These representations endow the environment with agency, transforming the swamp from a passive backdrop into an active participant in the unfolding tragedy. Rather than merely providing the setting

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<sup>43</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

for the execution, the environment itself becomes causally implicated in the conflict, symbolising the cumulative consequences of decades of ecological exploitation driven by petro-imperialism.

This study further established that the minimalist staging of the play, the ironic incompetence surrounding the execution, and the aestheticisation of defiant solidarity collectively transform death into a powerful act of ecological and political resistance. Onukaba situates the martyrdom of 1995 within a much longer history of environmental degradation that began with commercial oil production in 1958, thereby revealing the executions as the visible climax of decades of slow violence that continue to shape the Niger Delta. In this regard, *The Killing Swamp* emerges as one of the most compelling dramatic interventions in African ecocriticism, demonstrating how spectacular acts of state violence are inseparable from the incremental destruction of the natural environment. The polluted wetland becomes both witness and victim, while the personified landscapes—wasted, oily, and lifeless—acquire an accusatory voice that challenges anthropocentric narratives and reflects Iheka's emphasis on the shared vulnerability of humans and the nonhuman world.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the play's aesthetics of death—marked by loneliness, solidarity, tragic dignity, and ironic incompetence—serve as a critique of necropolitics and an affirmation of cultural resistance.

By foregrounding these ecological dimensions, this study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship. Previous studies have tended to treat the environmental motifs of *The Killing Swamp* as secondary to its political and biographical concerns. This study instead demonstrates that the play's dramatic form itself functions as a performative site where ecological destruction, human mortality, and cultural disintegration converge. Consequently, the study contributes to expanding ecocritical readings of African drama by illustrating how Niger Delta theatre can expose the dynamics of slow violence, attribute agency to the nonhuman environment, and hold systems of ecological injustice accountable. Ultimately, Onukaba's play elevates the martyrdom of Ken Saro-Wiwa beyond individual sacrifice, transforming it into an enduring symbol of the intertwined ecological and cultural violence produced by postcolonial petro-imperialism. In so doing, it reaffirms literature's moral responsibility to confront environmental injustice and advocate ecological and social renewal.

The findings of this study also point to several important directions for future scholarship and practice. First, there is a need for further postcolonial ecocritical analyses of Niger Delta drama, particularly the works of playwrights such as Tess Onwueme and Arnold Udoka, in order to broaden scholarly understanding of dramatic representations of petro-violence and nonhuman agency. Second, interdisciplinary research that brings together environmental humanities and performance studies would provide valuable insights into how stage productions of *The Killing Swamp* and related texts can raise public awareness of ongoing environmental crises in the Niger Delta, including recent oil spills and the impacts of climate change. Third, literary scholarship such as this should continue to inform environmental advocacy by supporting initiatives aimed at the cleanup of Ogoniland, consistent with the findings of the UNEP 2011 report, while also encouraging greater corporate accountability for ecological destruction, as reflected in the play's indictment of environmental genocide.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, *The Killing Swamp* should be more fully integrated into the teaching of African literature, ecocriticism, and postcolonial studies to deepen students' understanding of the complex relationships between

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<sup>47</sup> Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 12-15.

<sup>48</sup> Onukaba, *The Killing Swamp*, 31.

environmental degradation, human suffering, and cultural resistance. Finally, greater efforts should be directed toward the preservation, digitisation, and comparative ecocritical study of both published and unpublished Niger Delta plays in order to amplify marginalised voices and enrich scholarship on environmental justice in African literature.

Taken together, these recommendations extend the insights generated by this study beyond literary criticism into teaching, environmental advocacy, and future research. In this way, the enduring ecological and ethical message of *The Killing Swamp* can continue to resonate beyond the pages of the text, contributing meaningfully to ongoing conversations about environmental justice, cultural memory, and the responsibilities of literature in postcolonial societies.