

Nnimmo Bassey's Aesthetic Imagination and Social Meaning in *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood*

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Abstract

This paper explores Nnimmo Bassey's poetry collection: We Thought it Was Oil but It Was Blood. It interrogates the aesthetic imagination and language use in the construction of the poem as a text, and the social meaning wrapped in such imagination and language use. This paper draws insight from postcolonial ecocriticism and critical functional linguistics as theoretical frameworks. The methodology this paper adopts is qualitative, descriptive, and critical. The guiding motivation for this research is the dearth of critical study on Bassey's We Thought it Was Oil but It Was Blood. The research problem and gap this study seeks to bridge is the minimal attention the available scholarship on Bassey's poetry offered to the exploration of aesthetic imagination and social meaning construed through the internal formal structure of the poem, realised through stanzas, and structures and the linguistic configuration such as deixis, metaphorical schemas. The analysis shows that place deixis, pronouns adjective, and metaphors are important linguistic designs Bassey deploys in construing his aesthetic imagination, particularly the social realities of the Niger Delta region such as the contentious issue of environmental justice, ecological despoliation, minority rights, and agitation whenever resource control is mentioned.

Keywords: Aesthetic Imagination; Social Meaning, Ecocriticism, Functional Linguistics, Niger Delta

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Introduction

Immanent in the form of a poem is a sociological meaning foregrounded through a poet's language use. From a functionalist purview, the foregoing assertion projects poetry as a text type with functions beyond

the aesthetic configuration of an imaginary universe. This function includes a homologous relation. It is a mimesis of the real human society which it echoes, particularly the condition therein. And from this real human world, a poem also draws its emergence.

Poetry achieves this function of mimesis through its deployment of language. Language, as used here, is deployed from the functionalist purview to mean a sociological artefact deployed in the construal of social experiences and ideation (see Kamalu, 2018, Halliday and Matthiessen 2006).

The main thrust of the functionalist model is the submission that language is a socio-semiotic system (Halliday 1978). This proposition is useful in literary analysis because literature is conceived as an “organization of language” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 2). The rationale for adopting the functionalist model alongside postcolonial ecocriticism in this study of Bassey’s poetry is that while ecocriticism guides the conversation in this study around the thematization of environmental damage in the postcolonial Niger Delta, functional linguistics provides the linguistic model to explain how the analysis of language use in the poem reveals the theme.

Nnimmo Bassey’s *We Thought it Was Oil But It Was Blood* could be read as an interventionist craft. What this means is that poetry for Bassey is a medium for socio-aesthetic consciousness-raising where his “passions, and his desires, his great aspirations and social affirmations, the character and structure of the polity, freedom, justice and social change” (Udenta, 2015, p.15) could be conveyed.

Sadly, Bassey’s poem has not enjoyed the critical attention it deserves considering the pioneering role he has played both as a frontline activist and as a poet. Not only that, the criticism on his poem has been on its thematic concerns while the analysis of how language could construe the social meaning he projects has received minimal attention.

For example, Aghoghovwia (2014) explored the “politics of transnational petro-environmentalism”, in the poem where he argued that in Bassey’s poetry, “The Niger Delta features in the global public imagination as the archetypal theatre of crude oil production in Africa, and in the Global South Generally” (p.60). On the other hand, Maledo, and Edhere (2021) aver that the poem “walks a thin line between commitment to poetry and

commitment to the struggle of environmental activism in bringing issues of social and environmental justice into the public sphere” (p.130).

Bassey’s poetry has been explored as a reference to the unbroken will-power of the Niger Delta people in the struggle for resource control, economic inclusion and political integration (Gomba, 2016, p.141). Other critics have read Bassey’s poem as a type of eco-activism which calls attention to “the devastation that oil extraction has brought to the people and critiques the ways in which the trajectory of oil permeates every aspect of being and dominates the quotidian for the inhabitants of this environment” (Abba and Onyemachi (2020, p.10).

The research problem in this study is the minimal attention the available scholarship on Bassey’s poetry offered to the exploration of aesthetic imagination and social meaning construed through the formal structure of the poem, realised through stanzas, and the linguistic configuration such as deixis, adjectives, personal pronoun, and metaphorical schemas. This is the gap this study bridges.

The study notes that despite the advancement in the study of aesthetic designs and the formal structure of a poem evident in the works of Roman Jakobson, Viktor Schlovsky, and I. A Richard, there is a decline in the textual analysis of poetry and its social meaning in contemporary times. The present efforts in literary scholarship tilt to the analysis of the novel as a text form. One among several excuses given is the opaque nature of poetry and the complexity of its analysis. This paper stresses that such worry, while legitimate can be resolved through engaging and subjecting the criticism of poetry to the test of new, eclectic theoretical models and analysis.

Methodology

The methodology deployed in this paper is within a qualitative, descriptive and analytic approach with insights from a combination of Functional linguistics and postcolonial ecocriticism. Functional linguistics is pivotal in

accounting for the correlation between text and its social meaning. It was pioneered by Halliday (1978) who underscores the social dimension of language as social semiotics. The functional model has been expanded by Fowler (1981, 1989) to show how literary texts such as novels engage language to communicate social meaning. The departure this paper makes from the Fowlers application of the functional model is that it deploys this model in the analysis of poetry. This is to underscore, how the structure of a universe of how a work of literature (poetry) is homologous to the society which it acts as a mediator (Anozie, 2010, p. 596).

This is focal because embedded in text structures are social ideologies and meanings of which poetry, is not exempted. Thus, in this paper, the analysis will demonstrate how the poem as a text type or form, its structure, and language illuminate social meaning. This study will demonstrate how formal elements such as stanza, linguistics structure serve to project the environmentalism of the poor in the Niger Delta which is a major issue raised by Nixon (2011) in his postcolonial ecocriticism.

The postcolonial ecocriticism of Nixon (2011) focuses on the environmental impact of human activities like oil exploration in places like the Niger Delta region. The impact manifests in terms of "massive pollution and the degradation of farmlands, rivers, and waterways (Udumukwu, 2019, p. 23). Nixon (2011) describes such impact as a slow type of violence because of the fatal or detrimental changes on ecology which such human activities engender and the protracted manner of its manifestation (p.2). Postcolonial ecocriticism and functional linguistics are two different conceptual models, however, this study synergized these two concepts? The reason is that, while the postcolonial ecocriticism of Nixon lacks the linguistic capability to explain how language could explicate the thematic concerns it explores, functional linguistics provides such resources.

Results and Discussion

Aesthetic Imagination and Organic Structure in *We Though it Was Oil but It Was Blood*

We Thought it Was Oil But It Was Blood is a lachrymal dithyramb of thirty-six poems contained in one collection chronicling the dilemma of the Niger Delta region at a crossroad: between economic exclusion from its oil wealth as a minority in the Nigerian state and the environmental disaster which oil exploring activities portend for the region. Worthy of note is that the twin evil of economic exclusion and eco-degradation are some of the reasons for violent activism in the region.

The poem is structurally divided into six parts. Every poem in the collection is thematically related with a thematic run-on-line which continues the thought process which begins from one poem to continue in another poem in the collection. The tone and prevalent atmosphere which pervade each of the poems are projected through the linguistics structures and the poet's choice of words.

The organic structure of the poem as a text type is punctuated by choruses. While some of the poems like "Give back" and "We thought it was oil [...]" are laced with metaphors such as gloom, and doom to "give voice to the bitter songs/placed in [the] palate" (Bassey, 2002, p. 60) of the people of the Niger Delta. But the "bitter song" comes after, a moment of rejoicing as we see in the opening poem "We thought it was oil [...]". The persona expresses joy over the many good prospects oil wells and exploration carries with it. This is what evoked the sense of rejoicing:

*The other day
We danced in the street
Joy in our heart
We thought we were free
(Bassey, 2002, p. 13)*

We need to mark the use of person deixis in the poem, represented by the first person pronoun "we" in a plural sense. Such pronouns are imbued with the agentive role of an

existential subject, and it speaks of a collective, or a group voice, and the experiencers of a phenomenon. This is crucial because such linguistic items or deixis imbricate the poem with meaning beyond their grammatical context and functions by pointing to a social meaning or idea beyond the linguistic context (see Fowler 1981, p.188). For instance, the lines shown below which is an excerpt from, "We thought it was oil [...]" show the formal arrangement of the poem and the ethnolinguistic construct reflected in the poem.

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood [...].*

*Dried tear bags
Polluted streams
Things are real
When found in dreams
We see their Shells
Behind military shields
Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs
Drilling our souls*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood [...].*

*They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will RISE
We may die
And yet stay alive
Placed on the slab
Slaughtered by the day
We are the living
Long sacrificed*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood [...]
(Bassey, 2002, p. 66)*

An alert finger should be placed on the reoccurring chorus, "We thought it was oil /But it was blood [...]" from the excerpt above which serves as a response to the antecedent poem while the chorus serves as a precedent. The chorus has traces of the oral repertoire of the African, particularly a call and response feature of the Niger Delta folksong. Aghoghovwia (2014) also reiterates this

formal organic quality of Bassey's poem stating that:

The poem is modeled on a call-and-response motif of folksongs associated with most indigenous communities in the Niger Delta. Bassey bears witness to a history of oil-related crises in the Niger Delta and uncovers how Big Oil in cahoots with the Nigerian state continues to deploy military tactics to suppress any form of people's resistance. The poet associates oil with the image of blood to project a narrative of socio-environmental destruction. He deploys concrete images of filth, violence, war, and death, in the form of "blood," "gallows," "black holes," "slaughtered on the slab," "bright red pools," to give graphic expression to how the oil encounter in the Niger Delta, in all its manifestations, has inflicted violence and destruction on the environment and brought untold hardship to the people. (p. 66)

Another important organic structure the poem draws attention to is the temporal deictic reference evident in the noun phrase, "the other day" in the poem, "We thought it was oil [...]" which expresses the spatio-temporality of an event, even though the exactitude of such reference is not stated.

*The other day
We danced in the street
Joy in our heart
We thought we were free
(Bassey, 2002, p. 13)*

Deictics refer to the quality of a linguistic structure which enables it to point to a place, indicate time and person. In the context of the poem, deictics refer to the poet's choice of a word that points to the semantic universe in the poem, the time of the events within this universe and the persons or agents involved in the event in relation to a context (Fowler, 1971, p. 61). Deictics is evident in Bassey's deployment of the adverbial group such as, "other day" which points to a day before the present moment or time of conversation. This is a time in the past. Importantly, what occurred within this time past is relevant in the present moment within the world of the poem.

Bassey also engages metaphors of movements in his linguistic construction of the aesthetic imagination in the poem's organic form. This is captured in the word "Dance". "Dance", has a connotative meaning even though it is a material process. The word "dance", as used within the linguistic structure of the poem, the lexico-semantic function of "dance" speaks of an action evoking excitement, carried out by the people within a time reference known as "the other day", for the people "danced" and "joy" welled up in their heart.

In the linguistic context of our interrogation, we can situate this act or dancing and the phenomenon of joy that it carries with it, such as a mental state necessitated by the presence of such icons of modernity such as oil flow stations, oil refinery, and the promises of petrol dollars among others. But this dancing is short-lived as captured in "We thought it was oil [...]";

*Looking up,
Far from the crowd
We beheld guns
Red-hot guns (Bassey, 2002, p. 13)*

It is worthy of mention that poetry like every genre of literature offers its meaning through double articulation. This is the allegorization of reality through symbolic representation where the meaning of a lexical item transcends its denotation to include other metaphorical suggestions. Understanding this will enable us to map a connection between Bassey's aesthetics and his social commitment to the Niger Delta region and poetry's medium of communication which is figurative. For instance, the contextual usage of linguistic structures like "red-hot", and "gun" as their referential meanings transcend the surface realization they depict. What this suggests is that the possible meanings a reader may infer from the rhetorical designs deployed by Bassey in the poem's organic structure is different from the denotative sense of the same word or language used in everyday discourse. This is what is implied by the language of literature being different from everyday language (Fowler 1989, p.13), hence the need for disambiguation.

The lexico-semanticity of "Guns" suggest violence and forceful coercion. These guns are "red-hot", a descriptive term suggesting or foregrounding danger. We arrive at this semantic mapping through the indexical function of danger associated with the colour red. And beyond that, thus, the red-hot gun semiotized as a tool for repression and securing forced obedience.

The Niger Delta region in Nigeria is the focal setting the poem portrays. The region is depicted as an eco-space where small arms proliferation is common as captured in the lexical item "the guns". The phrasal group "the guns" also speak of military might or power. The specificity which the definite article confers on "guns" suggests not just any type of gun but "the guns". This alludes to the atrocities and instigation of an atmosphere of danger created by the Nigerian government through its military arm deployed to terrorize the people of the Niger Delta region. A historical example of the deployment of "the guns" which evokes traumatic memory to the Niger Delta people is the Odi Massacre (November 20, 1999) during the era of Olusegun Obasanjo as the civilian president of Nigeria.

Apart from the Odi massacre which is one of the possible allusions we can draw from the poem through its use of the phrasal structure "the guns", *We Thought it Was Oil...* also speaks of other forms of repression the Niger Delta region is subjected to which includes ecological repression, human repression, economic repression and psychological repression. Albeit, the minority people of the region are undeterred and resolute in their demand for equity and justice as they are willing to pay the ultimate price- that is death -for their land (Gomba, 2016).

The social reality in the Niger delta as portrayed in the poem foregrounds "biopower" the systems and technologies put in place by the government of a place to subjugate the people through instruments of coercion such as the gun (see Foucault et al., 1997, 256). What Bassey achieves by his foregrounding of biopower is that he amplifies the functions of poetry not just as art for

aestheticism, but also as a tool that could be deployed for social activism. This is further demonstrated through the aesthetics of violence in the lines, "who will be slain the next day?" and, "first it was the Ogonis/today it is the Ijaws" (Bassey, "We thought it was oil[...]", 2002, p.14).

Bassey further engages descriptive adjectives to capture the drilling instrument used by the oil extractive industry as evident in "We thought it was oil [...]", in the line "evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs" (Bassey, 2002, p. 14). Such adjectives are deployed to portray the oil exploration activities as not being compatible with the environment and also as a source of violence or harm to ecology. The long term effect is the damage which such activity causes to the sky as we see in the line "... a scrambled sky/ a million black holes/ a burnt sky" (Bassey "We thought it was oil [...]" 2002, p.14).

Bassey portrayal of the process of oil exploration is synonymous with puncturing the earth such that the earth bleeds. This also accentuates the injury done to the sky during drilling processes. This drilling activity in search of crude oil creates atrophy and ecological death as captured in the poem "When the Earth Bleeds", in the line, "Oil makes life stop" (Bassey, 2002, p.16). This is because it has the potential of making the earth sick and eliminating all life forms through:

*A thousand explosions in the belly of the earth
Bleeding rigs, bursting pipes
This oil flows
From the earth's sickbed
(Bassey, 2002, p.16)*

Of particular mention in the poem is the nature of damage to the air quality in Ogoniland such that humans cannot even breathe, as we see in the poem, "When the Earth Bleeds" in the line "But in Ogoni land, we can't even breathe" (Bassey, 2002, p. 16). We see this also in the poem, "Gas flares", where the earth is depicted as being gassed, and the gas goes up in an explosion, igniting flames, "the earth gassed/ now the sky is ablaze/ now the sea is ablaze/popping/ a million explosions/ a shower of soot" (Bassey, 2002, p.

48). What gets the sky ablaze is the gas flaring which reduces oxygen quality in the atmosphere. The poem "Did you?" also captures this reality as evident in the oil processing activity of the South African Oil Company Engen Petronas.

*These waves ... this breeze
Sucked into your lungs
From whence cometh they?
Are you the breath of life?
Or the wheeze of death
From the deadly oven
Of Engen Petronas? (Bassey, 2002, p.17)*

The persona in the poem, "Did you?" raises pertinent concern on the effect of bad air on the human lungs. This scenario by semantic analogy also speaks to the present ecological crises prevalent in Port Harcourt, called soot, due to illegal refineries in Port Harcourt known as "crude oil bunkering". Such illegal bunkering is captured in the poem "Climatic climax" as "men murdering the weather" (Bassey, 2002, p.19). Bassey also offers a remedial strategy synonymous with what Iheka (2018) calls strategic anthropomorphism-ways human's intentional actions which ensue a sustainable ecology or environmental remediation (p. 14). This is a form of proximity aesthetics that engenders strategic ecological management. We see it in the poem "When the earth bleeds"

*Do we just sit?
Wail and mope?
Let's unite
With our fists
Let's bandage the earth
(Bassey, 2002, p. 17)*

From the poem above, the clausal group, "Let's bandage the earth" in the poem suggests the need for ecological remediation. This is accentuated by the lexical item, "bandage", a covering for injury or wound to protect the wound. In the context of the poem, this wound is inflicted upon the earth by human activities such as oil exploration. Significantly, the process of bandaging the earth is a call to responsibility; instead of sitting and wailing in complain over the sad state of nature in the Niger Delta.

The consequence of human complacency is that nature fights back. In the poem "Oceanic march" we see instances of nature or the ecology fighting back. Also, the poem, "This rising tide" (Bassey, 2002, p. 20), captures nature rising in resistance against the dumping of refuse on water bodies, against the gas flaring which is described as "the flares from the nozzles of evil" (Bassey, 2002, p. 20). The dumping of refuse, and industrial waste, cause the ocean to scream in lamentation "can't I refuse/the poison" (Bassey, 2002, p. 20). The deployment of the first-person pronoun, I, imbues and animates nature with a voice of its own. This foregrounds the place of nature in human relations with the ecology, where the ecology is imbued with anthropomorphism which allows it to speak up against its marginal status as a subaltern demanding for its voice to be heard.

Another significant insight we can draw from the structure of the poem is how it foregrounds a thematic back and forth movement. In the structural sequences of the poems this back and forth motion indicates the present moment and the past...for instance the structure "this rising tide" speaks of the present phenomenon, but importantly, it also points to an event in the past that initiated it. This also foregrounds causality, that is, causes and effect. For instance, the present ecological, political and social crisis captured in the poem points to a level of neglect by both the government, the international oil exploration companies, and the Niger Delta people.

As a reader makes a foray into the narrative paths of the poetry collection, the reader is confronted by the poem "In United Niger Delta Oil Co.", which pictures the earth, and the oil extracting processes on the earth as being in a relation, similar to that of the tapster and the palm. The analogy is focal as it underscores the oil extracting processes in the Niger Delta as killing the earth just as "the tapster tapped the palms to death" (Bassey, 2002, p. 23). The death here signifies the violence perpetrated on the Niger Delta ecology through oil spillage. This is adumbrated in the line "the butterfly points accusing antennas at the ponds of their spills" (Bassey, 2002, p. 23), and "Yesterday we saw

a mountain of butterfly dead" (Bassey, 2002, p. 24). The economic benefits of butterflies as plant pollinating agents cannot be overemphasized, albeit, in such conditions of oil spills, such members of the ecological community cannot survive, hence their death. And we should see their death in terms of signaling crop failure and food scarcity.

Bassey takes his reader further into a dystopic state of the ecology engendered by human activity as demonstrated in, "We have one earth". This is also demonstrated in "We have one earth" where the persona scream, "I scream for a drop of water a drop of water/An unpolluted air, a leaf for my pate a task for my biceps" (Bassey, 2002, p. 25). The scream for a drop of water does not necessarily imply the absence of water, what it also possibly suggests that the available water(s) is/are polluted, they are deeply contaminated for drinking, hence the contradiction in terms manifesting as the desire for even a cup of water, in a region surrounded by water. It also speaks of the state of the air, since the water cycle has evaporation as part of its processes. And in a cautionary remark, humanity is warned to desist from those actions furthering the destruction of nature, because

*If the chattering birds
Must not run out of breath
Men must give nature a break
And for a moment cease their jabber
To allow the weaver bird chatter songs of
life Long postponed
(Bassey, 2002, p. 26)*

In the foregoing, there is a tone of urgency and call for ecological consciousness towards deep and social ecology. This consciousness should translate into a responsible ecological relationship with nature. In the poem "We have one earth", man is cautioned against the culture of denial, disconnect, and indifference towards nature which has led to, "departed mahoganies long snatched" (Bassey 2002, p.25). "We have one earth" also puts a clarion call for real commitment away from rhetorics towards tackling the deplorable state of nature, "We must be ready to face/Taking a stand to keep apace/... we have one earth; we are all in one place! (Bassey 2002, p. 25). This

thus infuses a question of ethics into the debate and discourse on ecology and human relation, since human activities such as consumption constitute the main source of ecological degradation. The poem “We have one earth” further captures the long-term consequence of human neglect on the ecology, due to the unabated sourcing of human food and material from an already depleted earth reserve.

In a moment of global debates
We overran the questions of consumption
On the scrawny mugs of po-ver-tea
...I scream for a drop of water a drop of water
An unpolluted air. A leaf for my pate a task for my biceps
Answers don't come for voices long dead
(Bassey, 2002, p. 25)

Apart from the subtle apocalyptic vision the poems offer, they also point to the origin of the crisis which is the geologic transformation in the Niger Delta engendered by human despoliation.

Social Meaning in *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood: Towards an Environmental Poetics*

The aesthetics of ecological despoliation of the Niger Delta portrayed in *We Thought It Was Oil* foregrounds several social meanings and real-life experiences of the region. It also spurs critical debates and robust conversations on the full impact of oil exploration and when it began as evident in an observation below:

It would be misleading to conclude that the environmental problems caused by oil started in 1956. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Oil exploration activities started to have an impact on the Niger Delta vegetation even before a well was drilled or oil produced, and the footprint left by seismic surveys over 50 years can still be seen . . . Seismic lines may make the interior of some wetland areas more accessible, potentially leading to further degradation. (Iheka, 2018, p. 90)

We Thought it Was Oil also indicts the perpetrators of environmental violence on the Niger Delta which include: the Nigerian government and the multinational oil corporations operating in the Niger Delta with Oil Mining Licences (OML) in collaboration with the Nigeria government. This is succinctly captured in one of the poems “The United Niger Delta Oil Co.”, for “[...] so it was that Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil, and similar entities agreed...Shared and divided the land and the sea” (Bassey, 2002, p. 22) and “Rejoicing with the junta with the spoils of war” (p.24).

The “junta” speaks of the Nigerian military, the spoils of war speak of the petrodollars from the crude oil sales, got through the despoliation of both people and land in the Niger Delta. Importantly, the foregoing does not exonerate the Niger Delta militants, oil bunkers and the passive actions of the Niger Delta people through the careless disposal of waste, plastic containers.

The foregoing situation is aggravated as the Nigerian government's failure to engender an atmosphere of trust which would have helped facilitate the process of ethical engagement with the host communities where the oil wells are domiciled in the Niger Delta. This is because the previous dealings of the Nigerian government with the Niger Delta people particular on the Ogoni clean-up was not truly honest. The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa is a testament to this fact. Bassey in his poetic imagination depicts the Nigerian government using shape “metaphor” a “banana” as we can see in the line “indeed those who occupy/the stately houses of power/ are truly like bananas/how many bananas are straight” (Bassey 2002, p. 64).

Those who occupy the “stately houses” through military might also unleash biopower and violence on the Niger Delta host communities whenever the people of the host communities make demands through the instrument of protest over the negligence wrought on their community, and the alienation of the people from the wealth from their region by making demand for an all-inclusive government and resource control.

Bassey's portrayal of the prolonged despoliation of the ecology through oil extraction and bunkering activities in the Niger Delta crystalize as air pollution. Bassey (2002) describes this pollution as, "Hellish flares [which] melt gasping throats" (p. 24) caused by the explosion in oil facilities. For example:

one such incident in 2006" observed by "the UNEP team . . . during aerial reconnaissance of Ogoniland. A massive fire was raging at the Yorla 13 oil well and continued burning for over a month. Such fire causes damage to the vegetation immediately around the well site and can produce partly burned hydrocarbons that may be carried for considerable distances before falling on farmland or housing. (Iheka, 2018, p.112)

Two important metaphors which foreground the social meaning we can draw from the title of the poem are the lexical items: "Oil" and "Blood". They appear as reoccurring semiology. This is what Gomba (2016) refers to as the oil motif in the Niger Delta discourse. The metaphor of oil serves as a semantic schema and icon which points to the violence wrought on the Niger Delta region. In a denotative sense, "Oil" speaks of crude oil, a product that constitutes the mainstay of the Nigerian economy and the purpose of the business of the extractive industries in that region. Connotatively, it also speaks of the wealth it brings, and the petro-politics of International Oil Corporations (the Big Oil).

The lexical item "Blood" is deployed as a metaphor for life, of the experiences of the individuals who inhabit the cosmic universe fabricated in Bassey's aesthetic imagination. The metaphorical schema of the word "blood", construes has by semantic extension, ordinates such as nonhuman lives, and the abiotic components that support such lives on earth, such as air, water, land, vegetation. Hence, in this paper, Bassey's social activism conveyed in the poem is read as all-encompassing. It serves as an outcry to the violence on human lives and as an aesthetic commitment towards consciousness-raising

on the violence perpetrated on all non-human forms of ecological life as victims.

The violence on human life is an indirect consequence of ecological damage as a result of oil prospecting, exploration, refining, and neglect. The economy of the region depends on nature's providence of crude oil, fish, wood, and many more. Importantly, billions of Dollars have accrued from crude oil revenue, yet the environment is left unattended. Hence, the damage due to neglect of the region engendered environmentalism of the poor, and a heinous form of poverty as shown below

What could and should have been for the Niger Delta's oil minorities the beginnings of great promise augured instead a poisonous future. Who could have dreamed in 1958 that four decades and \$600 billion of oil revenues later, some 90 million Nigerians would be surviving on less than a dollar a day? And that Nigeria would rank below Haiti and Congo on the United Nations Human Development Index, a composite gauge of life expectancy, education, and income? Even those figures don't capture the plight of the Ogoni and the delta's forty other oil micro-minorities: their environment has become so despoiled that supplementing that daily dollar with untainted crops and fish has become untenable. (Nixon, 2011, p. 106)

Two forms of social activism have been deployed in the Niger Delta as a way of response, beginning from Okara till the emergence of the Niger Delta region. There is violent militancy and literary activism. Both violent and literary activism took a new turn after the arrest of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Federal Government of Nigeria and the plight of the people of the Niger Delta region gained international notoriety. Unfortunately, Saro-Wiwa was hanged to death, with nine other Ogoni in 1995. From that moment, discourse on the Niger delta assumed an intellectual and radical twist with the Kaiama declaration while Ogoniland becomes a flashpoint for the discussions.

The reasons for activism in the Niger delta can be summarized in three points (1) economic deprivation, (2) ecological despoliation and (3) political alienation of the Niger Delta geopolitical space. The murder by hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa aggravated the situation and ushered in another phase of tension, arrest of Nnimmo Bassey and others as evident below:

Human rights violations related to oil exploration and production in the Niger delta continued after 1995. Internationally known environmental activists such as Nnimmo Bassey and Isaak Osuoka were arrested. Many people have been killed. Major multinational oil companies, not only Shell but also Chevron, Agip and Elf, are involved in those violations because they sometimes ask for the intervention of the police and the military. (Martinez-Alier, 2002, p. 103)

Interestingly, critical appraisal of the situation in the Niger Delta focuses on the violence in the region. Yet, there is a need to look beyond the violence and search for the cause underneath it. For if the violence is the painting, there must indeed be a canvass. In this paper, we see this canvass as the inharmonious and confused type of modernity infused upon the people. This modernity disconnects the people from their environmental resources and can be traced to the industrial revolution in 18th century Europe which balkanised the region and incorporated it into Nigeria.

While this modernity occasioned the replacement of slave human labour with machines in the Niger Delta and moved the economy from palm oil to crude oil, it thrives on the idea of predatory capitalism. Our position in this essay is not to undermine or take for granted the foreign direct investment in the region or discourage sincere programmes for economic growth such as the NLNG projects in Bonny in Rivers State but to ask real questions which will help this region move beyond self-destruction.

Another social meaning construed in Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil...* is the shared connection between the oil-related ecological

despoliation in the Niger Delta region with the oil explosion into the San Jacinto River in 1994 captured in the poem, "Polluted Throats". The oil pipeline which got busted causing the explosion belonged to Colonial Pipeline Company. The explosion poured burning Oil into the San Jacinto River in Texas, United States of America. According to a correspondent Dittrick (1994): the fumes and smoke from the burning was destructive "sending at least 50 people to a hospital with respiratory problems caused by breathing the fumes." (n.p).

The poem "Polluted Throats" recounts this historical experience and describes the fumes generated from the burning fuel in metaphorical terms such as "pregnant clouds/furious, howling like dogs/breaks into thunderous detonations" (Bassey, 2002).

By semantic extension, the experiences of the Niger Delta people echo the sad and avoidable ecological realities in other regions of the world, Bhopal in India, and the plight of the Waoroani people of Ecuador to protect their land and its ecosystem from oil exploration activities. According to Anderson (2019), the Waorani people won a historic ruling in Ecuadorian court protecting half a million acres of their territory in the Amazon from being earmarked for oil drilling.

At the centre of Bassey's eco-activism is the need to place nature on the agenda of human consciousness. This is achieved through contrast and allusion as seen in the poem "Nija Project" a pictorial depiction of environmental pollution to the air in the Niger Delta and in "Your laughter" and "Winamorena" where he extolled the landscape of important places, such as Caracas in Venezuela and Taylor Creek, Stub Creek, Manam, Nun, Qua Iboe, Winamorena. These sites share a commonality in terms of the activities of Oil extracting industries and ecological despoliation. From the poem, "Nija Project" the poetic vision of Bassey begins to shift to political issues bordering Nigeria, even though

The issue of politics is reflected in "Glass blocks and bricks"; "Lion-hearted" a poem written in honour of Gavin Williams, and

"Excuse me". "The Poem "Remember Wesley" focuses on religion, particularly the Christian faith. It is from "Tidbinbila" Poems (or Do Green Grins) that the ecological concerns in the collection resurfaced again. The poem "Shuffle" continues the cry for ecological awareness as it points to the challenges of climate change.

*Rampaging waves
Lap up water-locked land
And watery shores
Polar ice melt down polar waves
Knocking in Atlantis
And those outside
Noah's ark...and
I learn
The meaning of
Climate change (Bassey, 2002, p.45)*

The poem, "Oil is thicker?" engages connotations to speak of the binaries between oil and blood. It calls out to the perpetrators of violence in the region, and the position concerning the values they placed on the two commodities, Oil and Water:

*Blood is thicker
Than water
To you who sucks my hopes
Is oil thicker
Than blood? (Bassey, 2002, p. 47)*

Of particular interest to us is the linguistic structure, "to you who sucks my hope". This structure shows the interconnectedness in ecological order and sustainability. As the environment and ecosystem are damaged...the capacity of the earth to sustain life diminishes. This is a deliberate act, engendered by human consumption of earth resources which impoverishes the earth. In this instance, human extraction of fossil fuel such as oil is what is at stake and this may engender ecological crises in the long run with great damage to the vegetation. This is what is implied in the poem "Zoungbodji" as "our ecological debt" (Bassey 2002, p. 59). Some of the outcomes include the destruction of aquatic life where whales have become endangered species because of the dumping of waste product generated by humans into oceans as demonstrated in another line in

"Zoungbodji" the line "A peep into the dark bowels of the galleys &/ Weed entangles bellies of the whale" (Bassey 2002, p. 59).

The poem, "Without the sun" in the collection is an ode to nature and the symbiotic relationship, multispecies interconnectedness which should guide ecological relations instead of privileging humans alone. It shows the relationship between, sun/moon, woman/man, sea/fish, land/lives (Bassey, 2002, p. 61). This should engender harmony. From section six of the poetry collection, the focus centres on non-oil ecological pollutants like cigarette smoking which is described as "a drag of life" (Bassey, 2002, p. 68), in "A dream of tycoons", producers of such substance are construed using descriptive adjectives like "these merchants of death" (Bassey, 2002, p. 69), and despite the warning that "tobacco is dangerous to your health/tobacco can kill" in the poem "Zoungbodji", (Bassey, 2002, p. 70) humans indulge in it. The lines show suggest that while tobacco has great health implications on man, tobacco also poses a threat to the atmosphere and climate in the long run. In the poem "Hot Air", a cigarette is depicted as "rocket launchers/ splinter grenades" (Bassey, 2002, p. 71).

Nnimmo Bassey and Social Activism

Nnimmo Bassey is a Nigerian. He was born on the 11th of June 1958. He is a human rights activist. He served on the Board of Directors of Nigeria's Civil Liberties Organization. In 1993, he co-founded a Nigerian (Non-governmental organization) NGO known as Environmental Rights Action (Friends of the Earth Nigeria) through which he advocates, mobilizes, educates and organizes environmental discussions and awareness campaigns.

One of the enduring values of Bassey's poetry is its capacity to serve as a tool for social activism. Aghoghovwia (2014) observes that such "activism focuses on social and environmental justice about oil extraction, and exposes the monumental damage done to local communities" (p.61). Specifically addressing the Niger Delta situation (Gomba, 2016, p. 141). Bassey's social activism also deals with what is described as the fate of humans who

depends on the damaged ecology (see Egya, 2012). And poetry only serves as one of the tools for this purpose.

Even as the Director, Environmental Rights Action (ERA) and Friends of the Earth, Nigeria, Nnimmo Bassey is worried about the spate of corruption which makes it difficult for the Nigerian government to say anything about the situation. In an interview, Bassey notes that

[...]the oil industry in Nigeria is deeply immersed in corruption. The oil industry and those in power are tied together in what I will like to term unholy wedlock. Corruption cuts both ways and because the corruption is coming from both sides when the oil companies commit murder, our government can hardly say anything about it. (Ivwurie, 2004)

The irony of the situation in the aesthetic imagination portrayed in the poem is that while communities are very glad to welcome the presence of modern infrastructures which should signal economic progress, instead, ecological violence becomes the order of the day. The outcome is the dance of freedom, which herald the discovery of oil as captured in the poem, *We Thought We It Was Oil*, in the lines, "The other day/We danced in the street/Joy in our hearts/ We thoughts we were free" (Bassey 2002, p. 13) is short-lived. The prosperity which the discovery of oil should bring becomes a spiral of wanton destruction of the environment in that region manifesting as pollution of farmlands, rivers and waterways (Udumukwu 2019, p. 23).

The situation of the Niger Delta region which Bassey's poem captures places the region on the map as a priority centre. Such societies are characterized by human-induced environmental crises which is "the most pressing contemporary issue of all time" (Glottfelty, 1996, p. xv). The environmental condition in the Niger Delta has great implications for the world at large since it is a centre for crude oil energy source and fossil "energy demand are the primary forces causing large quantities of harmful pollutants and greenhouse gases to be emitted into the atmosphere, resulting in serious human health

and environmental consequences (Molina, 2010, xi). Sadly, "... innumerable talks, conferences and seminars seem to have failed abysmally to proffer hope for environmental sustainability in the near future" (Sunday et. al, 2013, p. 67).

Conclusion

This study has examined the aesthetic imagination and the social meaning in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood*. The study calls attention to the paucity of research on the organic form of the poem, realised through stanzas, structures, and the linguistic configuration such as deixis, metaphorical schemas. The analysis shows that place deixis and metaphors are important linguistic designs Bassey deploys in construing his aesthetic imagination, particularly the social realities of the Niger Delta region such as the contentious issue of environmental justice, ecological despoliation, minority rights, and agitation whenever resource control is mentioned.

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