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Ecocriticism and the Dilemmas of Postcolonial Modernity in Nigerian Urban Literature

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, Nigerian urban literature has employed ecological criticism as a methodological lens to reveal the environmental crises and power entanglements in the postcolonial modernization process. This paper analyzes several representative novels, highlighting how they expose the double expropriation of nature and life through colonial planning legacies and oil capitalism. By focusing on spaces such as slums, factories, and markets, these works examine the intersection of environmental degradation and societal power struggles. Additionally, the paper explores how marginalized groups reconstruct ecological ethics through creative practices. This narrative tradition not only challenges the rural-urban binary in ecocriticism but also offers new perspectives for thinking about non-hegemonic modernity in Global South cities.

Keywords

Nigerian literature; urban ecocriticism; postcolonial modernity; spatial politics; Global South.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, Nigerian English writers have consistently engaged with the political ecology of urban spaces through their literary works. In 1961, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* presented a critical view of urban sanitation through the protagonist's election speech. When Jagua campaigns for Uncle Taiwo, she describes crossing Lagos' "cheap market" sewers as an experience filled with "shameful filth," promising female voters to build "bigger and cleaner markets".[1] This scene foreshadows the long-standing focus of Nigerian literature on urban infrastructure issues. Three years later, Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* echoed similar ecological concerns, offering a dire warning about the environmental consequences of urban development. Through the eyes of Okolo, the protagonist, Okara describes how "human figures and tree shadows are devoured by the triad of gold, iron, and concrete" [2], an image that critiques the capitalistic violence that erodes natural landscapes. The author uses the metaphor of metals and construction materials to materialize the economic logic behind postcolonial urban development as a consuming spatial force.

In Festus Iyayi's 1979 novel *Violence*, this critique of urban power structures becomes even more radical. The novel portrays a doctor caught in the violence of political and economic struggles in a cholera-ridden slum. He asks, "Why, when an epidemic ravages, does the government insist on building hotels instead of hospitals?" [3]. This question not only highlights the grave injustice in the allocation of public health resources but also elevates the lack of infrastructure to a political and ethical challenge to the legitimacy of postcolonial states. By 1986, Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement* shifted focus to the remaking of urban ecology through the oil economy. The depiction of Port Harcourt during the second oil boom is striking: "Industrial zones, led by foreign engineers, hum day and night; noise, smoke, and mechanical vibrations have become the new urban laws"[4]. Through sensory writing, the author converts the

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industrial spaces controlled by multinational capital into a tangible oppressive experience for the body.

Following the era of military dictatorship, in 2002, Helon Habila, inspired by the events surrounding Ken Saro-Wiwa, wrote *Waiting for an Angel*, which reflects on the spatial politics of Lagos' slums. In a scene at a "low-rent housing discussion," when young people gather in "poor streets—these diseased, scabby neighborhoods that spread like plague across the city," the cramped physical space paradoxically contributes to the reproduction of resistance discourse.[5] This attention to the agency of marginal spaces is later continued in Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017), published 15 years later. The novel's depiction of Abuja's planned landscape draws a comparison with Chinua Achebe's description of Ikoyi as a "graveyard aesthetic"[6] —the "sterile green boulevards that actually form the covert theatre of power deals" [7]. Both writers deconstruct the symbiotic relationship between the façade of order and the inherent violence of colonial urban planning.

In these literary genealogies, markets, slums, and urban vegetation have emerged as potent symbols of resistance. In Habila's work, the baobab tree not only shelters the displaced but becomes a natural classroom for intellectual awakening; in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World* (2013), a dying cashew tree becomes a silent accuser of the ecological crisis. The impromptu performances by street artists in car parks, the collage-like construction of tin shacks in slums—all continuously dismantle the "myth of order"[8] embedded in colonial city planning. Just as local textiles and imported goods layer the market stalls, these spaces ultimately become a trauma archive of Nigeria's modernity and a site for cultural regeneration.

These examples span across eight Nigerian novels published over six decades and reflect the multifaceted nature of environmental discourse in urban texts: from tangible pollution and infrastructure paralysis to spatial alienation driven by capital, and structural violence arising from colonial city planning. These elements together constitute Michael Bennett and David Teague's theory of "urban nature,"[9] which emphasizes that urban ecology is not a counter-natural existence but a composite formed through the dialectical interrelations of capital, power, and non-human factors . This theoretical framework finds significant applicability in Nigerian literature: since Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954), the urban environment has been a critical rhetorical strategy for Nigerian writers to engage with social realities.[9]

Pioneering authors like Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa, in the early post-independence period, not only established a narrative paradigm for urban writing but also deeply participated in the formation of postcolonial urban culture.[10] These works can be seen as literary experiments in the generation of post-independence urban subjectivity, marking a paradigm shift from rural idylls to urban critique: from the 1950s to 1960s, writers like Achebe focused on the literary representation of village ethics, whereas "second-generation" authors beginning in the 1970s began systematic explorations of urban spaces. Wendy Griswold's research indicates that "by the 1970s, over half of Nigerian novels were set in urban environments," a trend that continued to rise in the 1980s.[11] In other words, while rural settings dominated literature in the 1950s and 1960s, urban backdrops began to emerge in the 1970s as critical narrative arenas. Despite a slight stagnation in the 1990s, this trend experienced a revival in the new millennium, with Nigerian novels of the 2010s presenting "multi-layered narrative spaces" marked by digital cities, diasporic communities, and ecological disasters.[12] The rise of Nollywood films, podcast novels, and other transmedia narratives has fundamentally changed the production and consumption mechanisms of urban texts.

While Nigerian urban literature has developed a unique narrative tradition, there remains a notable gap in research—an issue pointed out by ecocriticism scholars Cajetan Iheka and Stephanie Newell, who observed that while 21st-century African ecocriticism often uses Nigerian texts as exemplars, there is still a lack of systematic examination of urban literature and its ecological dimensions. Current scholarship still faces two major gaps: the first is the

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absence of a systematic examination of urban literature, and the second is the lack of a theoretical framework for addressing the ecological dimensions of urban texts. This does not imply that researchers have entirely overlooked this area. For instance, Chris Dunton creatively uses the thermodynamic concept of "entropy" (symbolizing disorder in systems) to explain the dialectical relationship between chaos and vitality in Lagos novels, pointing out that municipal disorder is a natural byproduct of neoliberal economic models.[13] Louise Green's study of the fantasy novel *David Mogo, Godhunter* breaks with tradition, proving that Lagos is not merely a geographical location but an autonomous ecological subject.[14] This paradigm shift is innovative in that it transforms the city from a static background into an active narrative participant. Similarly, research focusing on disaster narratives and water imagery, such as Douglas Kaze's analysis of flood imagery, highlights how floods break physical boundaries, metaphorically pointing to the collapse of post-colonial narrative to illustrate the destructive impact of urbanization on both human and ecological well-being, highlighting the intersections of economic exploitation, environmental degradation, and the urban experience.

As Nigerian cities continued to grow in the postcolonial period, the dynamics of urban space and its relationship to environmental justice became increasingly central to literary discourse. In the 1970s and 1980s, Nigerian urban novels began to increasingly reflect the contradictions of postcolonial modernity, especially in the wake of oil exploitation and the rapid expansion of urban centers like Lagos. Novels during this period depicted not only the material effects of urbanization but also the symbolic violence of modernity as it reshaped the landscape and marginalized local ecological knowledge.

In this context, the works of writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Helon Habila further explored the environmental cost of urbanization and industrialization. Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), for instance, critiques the ideological and cultural blindness that accompanies the rush toward "progress," highlighting how urban development often results in the erasure of indigenous ecological practices and the exploitation of natural resources.[15] Similarly, Achebe's later works, such as *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), depict the degradation of both the environment and human society in postcolonial Africa, where political corruption and environmental abuse are closely linked, as seen in the way oil extraction devastates both land and people.[16]

The oil boom of the 1970s and its aftermath in Nigeria introduced new layers of complexity to the ecological narrative in Nigerian urban literature. As the country's economy became increasingly dependent on oil, the socio-political and environmental implications of this dependency began to surface more prominently in literary works. Novels began to reflect the growing tensions between the government's desire for economic growth and the resulting ecological degradation in the Niger Delta and other oil-producing regions.

Authors like Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have brought attention to the ways in which environmental destruction intersects with the struggles of marginalized urban populations. In Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), the urban spaces of Lagos are portrayed as sites of both opportunity and decay. The novel critiques the contradictions inherent in the modern city, where wealth and corruption thrive amidst the crumbling infrastructure and environmental neglect. Adichie, in works like *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), reflects on the legacies of colonialism and the violent extraction of resources, underscoring how the scars of both war and oil-driven capitalism continue to haunt the nation's landscape and its people.

In addition to these critical examinations, Nigerian urban literature also highlights the resilience of marginalized communities in confronting ecological crises. Through stories of resistance, survival, and ecological reimagination, these works illustrate how urban populations—often living in overcrowded slums or on the margins of society—develop alternative ecological ethics in response to the violence they experience.[17] This focus on

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resistance emphasizes the agency of urban dwellers, particularly women and lower-class groups, who actively challenge the neglect and exploitation of both the environment and their own lives.

The recurring themes of ecological destruction, colonial legacy, and urban struggle are not confined to a particular period. Rather, they represent a long-standing tradition in Nigerian urban literature, which continues to evolve as new environmental challenges emerge. From the early critiques of colonial urban planning in the 1960s to the more contemporary explorations of the effects of oil capital and global economic forces, Nigerian literature provides a rich and nuanced commentary on the environmental consequences of postcolonial urbanization.

In the contemporary context, the rise of climate change, environmental degradation, and the encroachment of multinational interests have prompted new discussions in Nigerian literary circles. As Nigerian cities continue to face the impact of rapid urbanization, infrastructural neglect, and environmental destruction, literature remains a powerful tool for questioning the ethical implications of these processes. Through its depiction of the struggles of urban populations, Nigerian literature not only critiques the forces that drive environmental harm but also imagines new possibilities for ecological futures.

In conclusion, the engagement of Nigerian urban literature with political ecology since the 1960s has provided a critical lens through which to understand the complex relationship between urban development, environmental degradation, and societal inequality. These works challenge the dominant narratives of modernity by offering alternative visions of progress that center on ecological justice and the resilience of marginalized communities. Through the continued exploration of urban space and its ecological consequences, Nigerian literature contributes to a broader global conversation about the politics of environment and urbanization in the postcolonial world.

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ISSN: 2710-0170

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