

## Environmental Sustainability, Security, and the Politics of Ecological Violence in Nnimmo Bassey's Eco-Poetry

<sup>1</sup> Valentine Chimenem Owzorodu,

Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Port Harcourt.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5928-9556>

<sup>2</sup> Mary B. Aiyetoro

Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State.

corresponding email: [valentine.owzorodu@portharcourtpoly.edu.ng](mailto:valentine.owzorodu@portharcourtpoly.edu.ng)

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**Abstract:** *This study interrogates the ecological crisis in Nigeria's Niger Delta through an interdisciplinary synthesis of postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental security discourse, foregrounding the intricate nexus between environmental sustainability and national security. Drawing on a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual analysis, the paper examines selected poems from Nnimmo Bassey's We Thought It Was Oil, but It Was Blood and I Will Not Dance to Your Beat. It argues that Bassey's eco-poetry transcends conventional environmental protest to function as a critical discourse that reconfigures ecological degradation as a form of structural and securitised violence. Central to this analysis is the symbolic triad of earth, oil, and blood, which encodes the entanglement of ecological devastation, economic exploitation, and human insecurity within the Niger Delta. The study further demonstrates how Bassey's poetic imagination exposes the paradox of petro-capitalism, wherein resource abundance engenders poverty, militarisation, and socio-political instability. In sum, the paper contends that eco-poetry constitutes an epistemic and political intervention that advocates sustainable resource governance, ecological restoration, and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals as prerequisites for peace and stability, in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** environmental security discourse, environmental sustainability, national security, environmental justice, Niger Delta eco-poetry, postcolonial ecocriticism

## INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis in Nigeria's Niger Delta exemplifies the complex interconnection between environmental degradation, developmental deficits, and security fragilities in extractive

economies. Crude oil, which ostensibly should function as a vector of economic transformation, has instead engendered what scholars conceptualise as the “paradox of plenty”—a structural condition in which resource abundance precipitates ecological devastation, entrenched poverty, and protracted conflict (Karl, 1997; Obi, 2010). The Niger Delta trajectory thus foregrounds the deleterious effects of extractive capitalism, demonstrating how it destabilises ecological systems, erodes institutional governance, and catalyses insurgent formations. This convergence has attracted sustained scholarly engagement within environmental humanities and security studies, where analytical frameworks such as “environmental security,” “ecological justice,” and “sustainable development” are deployed to theorise the multidimensional consequences of environmental despoliation (Barnett, 2001; Floyd, 2019).

At the global level, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute an integrated normative architecture for addressing these intersecting challenges, particularly SDGs 13 (climate action), 15 (life on land), and 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). In the Nigerian context, however, the operationalisation of these goals remains severely constrained by the persistence of oil-induced pollution, routine gas flaring, and systemic governance failures that exacerbate socio-economic precarity and insecurity (Owhorodu & Gomba, 2022). The ecological trauma of the Niger Delta has not only disrupted traditional livelihoods but has also intensified militancy, incentivised illicit economies such as oil bunkering, and provoked coercive state responses (Ukeje, 2011). Consequently, environmental degradation is reconfigured as both a developmental pathology and a security imperative. Scholars further contend that the region has evolved into one of the most militarised zones in Nigeria, where state-centric security interventions disproportionately privilege force over ecological remediation, thereby reproducing grievances and entrenching cyclical violence (Courson, 2009; Francis et al., 2011; Ukeje, 2011).

Within this epistemic and material context, literature, and poetry in particular, constitutes a critical discursive site for interrogating and reimagining resource politics. Postcolonial ecocriticism provides a robust theoretical lens for analysing how cultural texts mediate the dialectics between environment, power, and human survival. In the Niger Delta, eco-poetry has emerged as a form of testimonial discourse, resistance praxis, and counter-historiography, foregrounding both human and nonhuman casualties of petro-capitalist exploitation (Ede, 2012; Caminero-Santangelo, 2014). Notwithstanding extant scholarship on its aesthetic configurations, linguistic textures, and resistance ethos, insufficient critical attention has been devoted to its articulation of the sustainability–security nexus.

This paper therefore situates Nnimmo Bassey’s *We Thought It Was Oil, but It Was Blood* and *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* within the intersecting frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism and security studies. It contends that Bassey’s poetic corpus transcends conventional environmental protest to foreground the intrinsic linkage between sustainability and security in the Nigerian context. Through the recurrent semiotic interplay of oil and blood, Bassey problematises the ambivalence of petro-resources as simultaneously life-sustaining and necropolitical, thereby re-

inscribing ecological degradation as a national security threat with far-reaching implications for peacebuilding, governance, and sustainable development. In advancing this argument, the paper demonstrates that eco-poetry functions not merely as an archive of environmental ruination but as a normative manifesto advocating ecological justice, ethical resource governance, and the substantive realisation of the SDGs within fragile and conflict-prone states.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary analytic paradigm, examines the connection between ecological degradation and the historical continuities of imperial domination. The framework posits that environmental crises in the Global South are neither incidental nor purely ecological phenomena; rather, they are structurally embedded within the *longue durée* of colonial extraction and its contemporary reconfigurations under neo-colonial capitalism. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) contend, the material and epistemic legacies of empire continue to mediate human–environment relations, rendering ecological degradation inseparable from histories of imperial exploitation and global capitalist expansion. This theoretical orientation is particularly apposite to the Niger Delta, where petro-capitalist extraction reproduces patterns of dispossession, socio-economic marginalisation, and political subalternisation rooted in both colonial and neo-colonial resource governance regimes.

A defining conceptual contribution within this framework is “slow violence,” which designates forms of environmental harm that are incremental, temporally protracted, and often imperceptible within conventional regimes of visibility. Manifestations such as recurrent oil spills, routine gas flaring, and pervasive toxic contamination exemplify this insidious modality of violence, whose cumulative effects systematically erode ecological integrity and human livelihoods (Nixon, 2011). By foregrounding such attritional processes, postcolonial ecocriticism facilitates a re-reading of environmental degradation as a form of structural violence, implicating both transnational corporations and the postcolonial state in regimes of ecological precarity. Within this conceptual matrix, *We Thought It Was Oil, but It Was Blood* and *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* are situated as cultural texts that encode the imbrication of environmental devastation with imperial histories, neo-colonial accumulation, and state complicity.

This study also draws complementary insights from environmental security discourse. This dual-theoretical configuration enables a multi-scalar analysis that connects literary representation to systemic concerns of sustainable development, human security, and state stability. Environmental security, in this regard, extends the analytical scope by reframing ecological degradation as a threat multiplier that exacerbates socio-political tensions and undermines governance structures. The integration of these frameworks thus produces an interdisciplinary hermeneutic capable of capturing both the symbolic and material dimensions of ecological crisis. This interpretive strategy enables the transposition of literary analysis into broader policy-relevant discourses, positioning eco-poetry as a critical epistemic resource for engaging questions of sustainability, conflict, and

resource governance in ecologically vulnerable and politically fragile contexts such as the Niger Delta.

### **A Brief Review of Existing Literature**

Nnimmo Bassey's poetic imagination has attracted sustained critical attention as a seminal indictment of environmental injustice in the Niger Delta. Existing scholarship consistently foregrounds its ecological thematics, resistance aesthetics, and the poet's strategic deployment of imagery and language to register both the material and psychological consequences of petro-exploitation. Notwithstanding this rich body of work, critical engagement has remained largely circumscribed within descriptive, stylistic, and protest-oriented paradigms, with limited interrogation of their implications for the sustainability–security nexus. We shall begin with brief reviews of critical works on *We Thought it was Oil, but it was Blood* (henceforth, *We Thought...*).

Aliyu (2011) identifies the collection's primary function as ecological consciousness-raising, noting Bassey's reliance on dense figurative structures—metaphors of decay, contamination, and toxicity—to encode environmental destruction and psychic dislocation, while simultaneously articulating a revolutionary poetics of resistance against state and corporate complicity. In a similar vein, Onuoha and Michael (2022) conceptualise the poems as “poetic reportage,” a form of aestheticised documentation that memorialises ecological devastation while amplifying global awareness of the socio-economic consequences of oil capitalism. Ojaruega (2022) further embeds the collection within Anthropocene and globalisation discourses, emphasising its articulation of the Niger Delta crisis as part of a planetary ecological condition.

Stylistic and discourse-oriented analyses further consolidate the scholarly landscape. Yeibo and Ethe's (2020) transitivity analysis reveals the predominance of material and mental processes, reinforcing the collection's activist orientation and its call for tangible socio-political action. From a linguistic-pragmatic perspective, Maledo and Kadiri (2020) demonstrate how implicatures of protest are encoded within conversational maxims, revealing the subtle mechanics of resistance embedded in the text. Meanwhile, Anasiudu (2022) foregrounds the semiotic and linguistic architecture of the poems, demonstrating how Bassey's aesthetic strategies mediate socio-political realities, particularly ecological despoliation and minority marginalisation.

Other critical interventions engage the philosophical and thematic dimensions of the collection. Ejiodu (2016) interrogates the anthropocentric bias in Niger Delta eco-poetry, arguing that while environmental degradation is central, emphasis often privileges human suffering over the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, albeit conceding Bassey's gestures towards anti-anthropocentric ecological ethics. Ekpe (2021), by contrast, highlights the interplay between nationhood and ecological consciousness, positioning the poetry as a vehicle for socio-political reorientation and environmental awareness, while Keghtor (2023) underscores its role in deepening understandings of ecological interconnectedness through an ecocritical lens.

The militant and revolutionary tonality of Bassey's poetry has also been widely noted. Adebisi-Adelabu and Oyetunji (2021) read the collection as structurally and ideologically aligned with the resistance praxis of Niger Delta militancy. Similarly, Abba and Onyemachi (2020) theorise the notion of eco-alienation, arguing that the poetry exposes the paradox of oil wealth by depicting the estrangement of communities from their ecological lifeworlds and the normalisation of death within contaminated environments. Van Opijnen (2021), in turn, emphasises the affective and mobilising capacities of Niger Delta poetry, highlighting its ability to bridge geographical distance, expose systemic inequalities, and galvanise transnational solidarity for environmental justice. Nyimeobari (2022) situates Bassey's imagery within broader circuits of environmental racism, neocolonial extraction, and global capitalism, framing Niger Delta poetry as an insurgent eco-poetics that resists erasure and functions as an alternative historiography.

Regarding *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (henceforth, *I Will Not...*), the study by Ohwawhorua and Orhero (2019) foregrounds eco-activism. Their analysis is anchored in the exposure of ecological injustice and the ethical imperative of environmental stewardship. While the paper is significant for its emphasis on literary radicalism and mobilisation against ecological despoliation, its analytical framework remains predominantly within the moral-activist paradigm. It does not extend to interrogating how ecological degradation intersects with broader structural questions such as economic sustainability, human security, or state stability.

Similarly, the intervention by Adebisi-Adelabu and Oyetunji (2021) adopts a Marxist hermeneutic to examine resistance aesthetics in Bassey's poetry. Their reading illuminates the revolutionary temper, class antagonisms, and anti-capitalist rhetoric embedded in the poems. However, the study is largely preoccupied with ideological contestation and the poetics of dissent. It frames environmental degradation primarily as an outcome of exploitative capitalist structures without sufficiently theorising its implications for sustainable development trajectories or its destabilising effects on national security architectures.

In a related but distinct trajectory, Odia (2020) advances the concept of ecotopianism as a corrective to the perceived pessimism of earlier ecocritical poetry. By shifting attention from threnodic lamentation to regenerative imaginaries, the study underscores the prescriptive and futurist dimensions of eco-poetry. Nonetheless, while this ecotopian framework gestures towards sustainability through its emphasis on environmental reclamation and renewal, it remains largely metaphorical and normative.

Agofure (2016) provides a broader ecocritical mapping of Bassey's poetry, in which she situates environmental degradation within the matrix of postcolonial exploitation and elite complicity. The study is particularly valuable for its articulation of the link between ecological damage, socio-economic marginalisation, and the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta. However, despite this implicit recognition of security implications, the thesis does not systematically theorise national

security as an analytical category. Its engagement remains largely descriptive and thematic rather than conceptual and interdisciplinary.

The present study, therefore, addresses the aforementioned gap by advancing an integrative, transdisciplinary framework that reconceptualises Bassey's poetic imagination as a site where environmental degradation, developmental deficits, and security fragilities converge. By situating eco-poetry within the discourse of sustainable development, the research moves beyond metaphorical eco-consciousness to interrogate issues of resource governance, intergenerational equity, and ecological resilience. In this sense, the study contributes to the theoretical reconfiguration of Nigerian eco-poetry from a primarily protest-oriented or utopian literary form into a strategic epistemic resource for understanding the environment-development-security nexus.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis, employing the method of close reading to interrogate selected poems in *We Thought...* and *I Will Not...*. Close reading, as a critical practice, enables a detailed examination of linguistic patterns, imagery, symbolism, and thematic structures in order to uncover deeper ideological and socio-political meanings embedded in literary texts. The selection of poems for analysis is guided by their thematic relevance to environmental degradation, violence, and socio-political disruption, particularly those that foreground the motifs of oil and blood. These motifs are treated as symbolic entry points for examining how ecological crises are reimagined within a security framework.

### Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability, as a constitutive dimension of sustainable development, requires brief conceptual clarification in order to properly situate this study's critical engagement with Nnimmo Bassey's poetry. The concept of sustainable development gained global prominence with the publication of *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report), which defines it as development that meets present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet theirs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This definition foregrounds the principle of intergenerational equity, which has since become central to sustainability discourse. Contemporary scientific consensus further warns that unsustainable anthropogenic activities are accelerating ecological collapse, threatening biodiversity and human survival (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Ripple et al., 2017; Trisos et al., 2020). Consequently, sustainable development is now conceptualised as an integrative paradigm that harmonises economic viability, ecological integrity, and social equity within a long-term developmental framework (Yohe et al., 2007).

Within this paradigm, sustainability functions as a normative and regulatory framework guiding development trajectories towards ecological balance and socio-economic resilience. It is underpinned by principles of intergenerational, interspecies, and intra-generational justice, which demand that resource utilisation be both equitable and ecologically responsible (Barrow, 2006;

Strange & Bayley, 2008). As Ozili (2022) observes, sustainability operates as the driving logic that coordinates development processes, ensuring that growth does not occur at the expense of environmental stability or human well-being.

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Agenda 2030 further institutionalises this integrative approach, providing a global governance framework that links environmental stewardship with socio-economic development and political stability. Particularly relevant to this study are SDGs 13, 15, and 16, which emphasise climate action, ecosystem preservation, and the strengthening of just institutions, respectively. These goals underscore the recognition that environmental degradation is not merely an ecological concern but a multidimensional challenge with implications for development and security.

Environmental sustainability, as a specific subset of this broader framework, focuses on the maintenance of ecological systems, biodiversity, and resource productivity over time (Ghallab, 2020). It entails the deployment of policies and practices aimed at mitigating environmental degradation, conserving natural resources, and facilitating transitions to sustainable modes of production and consumption (Tennakoon et al., 2024). In this regard, environmental sustainability is a precondition for human survival and systemic stability, particularly in extractive economies and ecologically vulnerable and politically fragile contexts such as the Niger Delta, which is the foundation of Bassey's creative afflatus.

### **Eco-poetry, Climate Change, and Global Solidarity**

In poems such as *We Thought...*, Bassey mobilises a climate imaginary in which fossil fuel extraction is directly implicated in atmospheric destabilisation, ecological dislocation, and forced migration. Gas flaring, for instance, is represented as an act of rendering the planet uninhabitable, collapsing distinctions between earth, sky, and sea into a single zone of environmental precarity: "Now the sky is ablaze / Where will the people go?" ("Gas flares" p. 48). The deliberate introduction of pollutants into ecosystems signals a form of environmental externalisation that exceeds conventional pollution discourse, inscribing slow violence into everyday existence. In "Climatic Climax," the disjunction "dis-united the day from the night" (p. 22) signals a cosmological rupture, evoking an ontological disorder, whereby temporal and natural rhythms are destabilised by extractive excesses.

Within Bassey's eco-theological frame, the crisis is further articulated through a biblical hermeneutics of stewardship in the poem "The united niger delta oil co." The earth is construed as divinely ordered for proportional consumption, yet this equilibrium is violated by multinational petroleum regimes—"Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC, Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil"—whose extractive operations effectively balkanise ecological space (p. 22). This constitutes what may be theorised as corporate cartographic violence, in which territorial and aquatic commons are fragmented into concessionary zones of exploitation. The metaphor "The tapster tapped the palms

to death” (p. 23) crystallises this logic of over-extraction, suggesting a collapse of regenerative capacity under unregulated industrial throughput.

Climate change is explicitly framed as a structure of distributive injustice, revealing the asymmetry between profit and precarity: “If climate change means death to me but business to you / I will expose your greed” (“I will not dance to your beat” p. 11). Climate crisis is repositioned as a consequence of fossil capitalism, rather than an abstract atmospheric anomaly. The insistence that hydrocarbons remain “in the soil,” coal “in the hole,” and tar sands “in the land” (“I will not dance to your beat” p. 11) articulates a radical ecological ethic, rejecting both extraction and technocratic mitigation strategies such as carbon offsetting and geoengineering, which are dismissed as forms of sustainability simulacra. The image of “long swords” stabbing “future fetuses” (“Watchman, how long is your day?” p. 15) renders visible the deferred casualties of extractive economies, while acid rain imagery collapses the boundary between scientific fact and apocalyptic imagination, reinforcing the materiality of climate harm.

Significantly, Bassey extends ecological critique into a transnational ethics of recognition and solidarity. Environmental degradation is framed as a global condition rather than a localised anomaly, thereby inviting what can be termed affective globalisation of ecological suffering. According to Khalil et al. (2011), environmental protection is both a national issue as well as an international issue. By linking Niger Delta sites such as Oloibiri, Ogoni, and Yenagoa with Latin American petro-zones like Winamorena and Orinoco, in the poem “Winamorena”, Bassey’s poetry constructs a comparative geography of extractivist trauma. This aligns with eco-political theories of translocal environmental justice (Porada et al., 2024), where shared vulnerability becomes the basis for solidaristic mobilisation. The call to “link those hands across the seas” and “block these ducts with our collective fists” (“Facial marks” p. 54) functions as a performative injunction toward ecological coalition-building across geopolitical boundaries.

### **Capturing National Insecurity with Oil, Blood, and Earth Motifs**

According to Owzorodu (2018), the deployment of symbols in literary texts foregrounds the inseparability of aesthetic form and ideological content, positioning imagery as a critical medium through which meaning is produced and contested. In *We Thought...* and *I Will Not...*, imagery and symbolism function as discursive and affective instruments for articulating the interconnection between environmental degradation, economic exploitation, and human insecurity. The recurring motifs of earth, oil, and blood coalesce into a symbolic triad that encodes what may be described as a securitised ecological consciousness, wherein ecological violence is simultaneously rendered as socio-political instability. Through dense metaphorisation, visceral personification, biblical allusion, and accumulative repetition, the poems dismantle the developmentalist myth of oil as progress and reconstitute it as a vector of ecological collapse and national insecurity.

The earth in both collections is consistently configured as a sentient, violated body. In *We Thought...*, the assertion that the earth “bleeds” (p. 16) so that oil may flow transforms extraction into an act of corporeal violence, fusing geological process with human injury. The imagery of “a thousand explosions in the belly of the earth” and the metaphor of the “earth’s sickbed” (p. 16) further medicalise and portray extraction as a form of invasive assault, positioning the environment as a patient subjected to relentless violation. Similarly, *I Will Not...* constructs the landscape as ecologically mutilated terrain, where “mud plains and denuded mangroves” signify depletion, and “putrid effluents” trapped in “concrete jaws” evoke suffocation and forced containment (p. 20). The poet’s diction (“entombed,” “dammed,” “jaws”) (p. 20) operates within a semantic field of violence, aligning industrial intervention with predatory domination. Crucially, the earth is not merely passive; its “revolt” against “man’s mega schemes” (p. 20) signifies ecological agency and backlash, suggesting that environmental collapse is a reaction to systemic exploitation. In this sense, environmental degradation is framed as a precursor to instability, as ecological breakdown generates conditions of displacement, scarcity, conflict, and insecurity.

The motif of oil, conventionally associated with wealth, modernity, and development, undergoes a radical semiotic inversion in both texts. The transformation of oil into “blood oil,” as theorised by Asuni (2009) in relation to conflict commodities, finds resonance in the Niger Delta, where petro-violence fuels militancy, displacement, and economic sabotage. In *We Thought...*, the declarative line “We thought it was oil, but it was blood” functions as a discursive rupture, collapsing economic value into human cost and exposing petro-capitalism as inherently violent. Oil rigs are reimagined as “evil, horrible, gallows” (p. 14), invoking the imagery of execution and institutionalised death, thereby recasting extraction as a system of structural violence sanctioned by state and corporate power. The imagery of “red-hot guns” and “bright red pools,” alongside the lament “First it was the Ogonis / Today it is Ijaws / Who will be slain the next day?” (p. 14), situates the region as a theatre of violence, where ecological exploitation precipitates armed conflict and state repression. The historical execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni activists further underscores this dynamic, marking the convergence of environmental activism and state violence (Caminero-Santangelo 2014; Oworodu, 2023). Moreover, the prophetic resonance of an adage in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, “But let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes” (p. 27), suggests that ecological injustice is not spatially confined but capable of diffusing across regions, as evidenced by parallels with banditry and illegal mining in other parts of Nigeria (Jimoh, 2020; Salati et al., 2022; Associated Press, 2024; Ogbonnaya, 2020; Ujah et al., 2025).

In *I Will Not...*, oil is implicated in discursive manipulation, where ecological destruction is masked through euphemistic language. The refusal to “dance” in the face of mislabelled plantations and “false solutions” such as “carbon offsetting” (p. 11) exposes the ideological mechanisms through which extractive capitalism legitimises itself. The imagery of gas flares as “infernal dragon tongues” (p. 54) amplifies this critique, transforming industrial infrastructure into apocalyptic agents that poison the atmosphere and destabilise ecological balance. Thus, oil

becomes a metonym for petro-violence and insecurity. The frequent spillage of crude oil across terrestrial and aquatic ecologies in the Niger Delta and elsewhere renders soils infertile and aquatic systems toxic, producing what may be described as a regime of ecological disablement in which both biodiversity and human lifeworlds are systematically degraded (Nwilo & Badejo, 2005; Bello & Nwaeke, 2023). Within this context, the health crisis is structurally induced, as epidemiological studies increasingly correlate hydrocarbon pollution with heightened morbidity and mortality in affected communities (Seiyaboh & Izah, 2017; Alimi & Gibson, 2022; Elijah, 2022). Bassey's eco-poetics thus becomes a diagnostic as well as an affective register of environmental violence.

The symbol of blood operates as the most affectively charged element within this triadic structure, signifying not only death but also memory, testimony, and resistance. In *We Thought...*, blood replaces oil as the dominant visual register, making violence and insecurity hyper-visible and inescapable. The prophetic assertion that "the blood will speak" (p. 15) reconfigures spilled blood as a testimonial archive that resists erasure and indicts systems of exploitation. The parallelism between swelling "accounts" and rising "blood tides" (p. 23) establishes a direct correlation between capital accumulation and human suffering, thereby exposing the moral economy of extraction. In *I Will Not...*, blood imagery manifests through corporeal exhaustion—"I sweat blood and weep dry-eyed" (p. 53)—signalling a threshold of trauma where grief becomes internalised and somatised. Blood, in this context, becomes a medium of historical continuity, linking generations through shared suffering and ensuring that ecological injustice remains inscribed within collective memory.

Biblical allusion further deepens this symbolic architecture by situating ecological crisis within a cosmological and moral framework. The reworking of Edenic imagery in *We Thought...*—serpent, temptation, and the loss of primordial order—recasts oil extraction as a second Fall, driven by greed and unchecked desire. The disruption of cosmic balance, as seen in the flares that "dis-united the day from the night" (p. 22) signifies a breakdown not only of ecological systems but of temporal and moral order itself. Similarly, references to "fireballs of sulfur" (p. 15) and apocalyptic imagery in *I Will Not...* evoke biblical destruction narratives, framing ecological collapse as both consequence and judgement, albeit one produced by human agency. These allusions elevate the ecological crisis from a localised issue to a universal moral catastrophe.

The analytical significance of these motifs lies in their systemic interdependence. Oil flows only when the earth bleeds; blood is spilled where oil is extracted; the earth convulses under the pressure of petro-industrial intrusion. This symbolic convergence collapses the distinction between environmental and human harm, insisting that ecological degradation is inherently a form of social and political violence. The poems thus construct a unified semiotic field in which environmental destruction, economic exploitation, and human insecurity are mutually constitutive.

### **The Politics of Environmental Sustainability**

The eco-poetic articulation of sustainability in *We Thought... and I Will Not...* cannot be disentangled from the political economy of resource extraction in Nigeria. Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is not merely an ecological anomaly but the outcome of state–corporate collusion, where governmental institutions and security apparatuses operate in alignment with multinational oil interests. This structural complicity generates a condition in which environmental harm is normalised, accountability is circumvented, and affected communities are subjected to both ecological dispossession and coercive repression. As Bello and Olukolajo (2016) observe, compensation regimes remain grossly inadequate, while regulatory enforcement is weak or selectively applied. Bassey encodes this nexus of power and violence in the imagery: “We see their Shells / Behind military shields / Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs / Drilling our souls” (*We Thought...* p. 14), where extractive infrastructure is shielded by militarised force, thereby fusing economic exploitation with state violence.

The Niger Delta has consequently evolved into a highly securitised ecological zone, often described as one of the most militarised regions in Nigeria (Ukeje, 2011). State responses to environmental agitation exemplified by military operations such as Odi (1999) and Restore Hope (2003–2013) privilege coercion over remediation, producing cycles of violence that exacerbate rather than resolve ecological grievances (Oluwadare and Oyeboade, 2013). Despite this militarisation, there is a conspicuous absence of sustained environmental rehabilitation or socio-economic transformation, leaving affected populations in a condition Bassey metaphorically renders as the “living dead” (*We Thought...* p. 24). This disconnect underscores a broader crisis of governance failure, where resource revenues do not translate into developmental outcomes. Indeed, despite the allocation of over ₦4.7 trillion to key oil-producing states between 2010 and 2015, systemic corruption and mismanagement resulted in negligible infrastructural and human development (Adeosun et al., 2016). The paradox of a resource-rich yet impoverished region, captured in the notion of “poverty in plenty,” is thus both a political and ecological crisis (Udoh, 2011).

Within this framework, Bassey’s poetry reconfigures oil not as a symbol of prosperity but as an index of unsustainable extraction and systemic violence. The paradoxical formulation—“Oil makes life stop / Because / The oil only flows / When the earth bleeds” (*We Thought...* p. 16)—encapsulates the structural contradiction of petro-capitalism, where economic accumulation is predicated on ecological destruction. Sustainability, in this context, emerges not as a technocratic goal but as a political imperative requiring transparency, accountability, and equitable resource governance. Without these, oil wealth functions as a curse, perpetuating cycles of environmental degradation, socio-economic marginalisation, and insecurity.

### **Ecopoetry as a Nexus of Sustainability and Security**

Bassey's eco-poetic vision articulates a critical convergence between ecological sustainability and national security, positioning the Niger Delta crisis within a broader discourse of environmental risk governance, resource conflict, and ecological statecraft. The refrain, "The oil only flows / When the earth bleeds" (*We Thought...* p. 16), functions as a condensed ecological thesis, foregrounding the inextricable link between extractivist economies and environmental degradation. Oil becomes a symptom of environmental violence, where ecological injury is structurally embedded in the very logic of production. The image of "bleeding earth" encapsulates a bio-political ecology in which environmental collapse directly translates into social instability, livelihood erosion, and securitisation pressures.

In "Oil is thicker?", Bassey deploys metonymic inversion to interrogate the ethics of resource prioritisation. By reworking the idiom "blood is thicker than water," the poem establishes a triadic symbolic economy in which blood signifies human life and kinship, water signifies ecological sustenance, and oil signifies commodified wealth. The rhetorical question "Is oil thicker / Than blood ...?" (*We Thought...* p. 47) thus stages a moral-political crisis of value, interrogating whether extractive accumulation should supersede ecological continuity and intergenerational survival. This constitutes a form of ecological ethics interrogation, where sustainability is positioned as a precondition for both human security and environmental integrity.

The poet's vision aligns with contemporary sustainability theory, which emphasises risk prevention, resilience planning, and intergenerational equity. His eco-poetics, therefore, calls for anticipatory governance which embraces opportunities, avoids hazards, mitigates problems, and prepares for unavoidable difficulties, thereby framing environmental stewardship as a form of security architecture. This logic is further reinforced through ontological dependency structures: "Without / The land / Our lives / Where is the life?" (*We Thought...* p. 61). The fragmentary syntax underscores ecological interdependence, suggesting that human security is contingent upon ecosystem stability. Through analogical reasoning, the poet mobilises cosmological and relational metaphors—the moon's dependence on the sun, aquatic life's dependence on water, and gender complementarity—to construct what may be termed a relational ecology of sustainability.

From a security studies perspective, where the focus is on the reduction or removal of threats to what individuals or societies value (Williams, 2008), the Niger Delta emerges as a paradigmatic case of environmental insecurity, where unsustainable extraction generates feedback loops of poverty, conflict, militancy, and infrastructural decay. Gas flaring, polluted streams, and acid rain constitute the material infrastructure of insecurity, producing conditions of chronic vulnerability and forced displacement. Dalby (2008) has also noted that these issues ought to be monitored by security experts so that they do not spill over to stable regions. Conversely, sustainable development—anchored in ecological protection, distributive justice, and participatory governance—operates as a stabilising mechanism, reinforcing both human and environmental security. In this sense, Bassey's poetry transcends protest aesthetics to function as an eco-security

manifesto, asserting that ecological integrity is foundational to national cohesion and peacebuilding.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Nnimmo Bassey's eco-poetry constitutes a profound intervention in the discourse on environmental sustainability and national security, particularly in the Niger Delta. Through the analytical lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, complemented by insights from environmental security, the paper has established that ecological degradation in the region is not incidental but structurally embedded within the historical and contemporary logics of petro-capitalist extraction, state complicity, and global economic asymmetries. The analysis of the recurring motifs of earth, oil, and blood reveals a tightly interwoven symbolic system that collapses the distinction between environmental harm and human suffering and articulates a securitised ecological consciousness, wherein environmental degradation is reframed as a catalyst for conflict, displacement, and systemic insecurity. In this sense, Bassey's work foregrounds the inadequacy of conventional security paradigms that prioritise militarised responses while neglecting the ecological foundations of stability.

Furthermore, the study has shown that Bassey's eco-poetics advances a critique of the paradox of plenty, exposing how resource wealth, rather than fostering development, generates conditions of deprivation, governance failure, and violence. By situating the Niger Delta within a global network of extractivist economies, the poetry underscores the transnational dimensions of ecological injustice, thereby calling for a reconfiguration of both local and global approaches to sustainability. The articulation of global solidarity within the poems reinforces the necessity of collective action in addressing climate change and environmental degradation as shared planetary concerns. Finally, this study affirms that eco-poetry functions as a vital nexus between literary representation and policy-relevant discourse. The inseparability of environmental sustainability and national security, as articulated in the poems, underscores the urgent need for integrated governance frameworks that address ecological degradation as a central component of peacebuilding and development.

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