



## The Poet as an Activist: An Eco-Critical Reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*

<sup>\*1</sup>Igirigba, R.C., & <sup>2</sup>Otokwala, A.J.

<sup>1</sup>Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

<sup>2</sup> Language Department Uniport International Secondary School, Nkpolu Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

\*Corresponding author email: [reginald.igirigba@iaue.edu.ng](mailto:reginald.igirigba@iaue.edu.ng)

### Abstract

This paper is entitled: "The Poet as an Activist: An Eco-critical reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*. It examines issues of environmental degradation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and other negative effects of oil exploration and environmental exploitation. It explores the roles of the poet to lead in the agitation to stop the pollution and other issues of serious concern in the region. To drive home the message, the paper uses eco criticism as the approach, as it has a direct bearing on the issues under review. The research finds that despite the huge economic value and contributions of the region, it has been underdeveloped and ravaging in poverty and restiveness as a result of negligence by the government and the multinationals. This paper seeks to address the contributions of poets, using Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* as a voice of agitation for a green and developed Niger Delta.

**Keywords:** Environment, Ecocritical, Ecocriticism, environmental, Niger Delta, activist, Ecoactivism.

### Introduction

Environmental concern is a key component of human agitation in all ages of man's existence. This is because man's existence and functionality is inextricably tied to his natural environment. Literary writers of all ages have penned down their keen interest on the need for environmental protection and sustainability for the present and future generations. Famous English Romanticists such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, William Blake, e.t.c believed and advocated for better treatment of nature in their works. In Nigeria, Niyi Osundare's masterpiece, "The earth is ours to Plough not to Plunder" emphasizes the idea that the earth is not something to be exploited or taken advantage of as humans do, but rather a precious resource that should be nurtured and protected. The use of the word "plough" in the poem suggests sense of cultivation and care, while "plunder" conveys a sense of greed and destruction. This is the case in the Niger Delta, a region laced with thousands of oil spills, human rights violations, environmental destruction and corruption.

Deliberating the genesis of the crisis in the region, *Ehighelua Ikhid* in his book, *Environmental Protection Law 1999*, puts it thus:

The current conflict in the Niger Delta first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups who feel they are being exploited, particularly the Ogoni and the Ijaw. Ethnic and political unrest continued throughout the 1990s despite the return to democracy and the election of the Obasanjo government (247).

In the same vein, *Koos Carlo & Pierskalla Jan* states the following as their findings on the cause of the conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: "Struggle for oil wealth and environmental harm over its impacts has fueled violence between ethnic groups causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups, Nigerian military and police forces, notably the Nigerian Mobile Police (888)".

The above scenario sparked off activism in the region –political, environmental and human right activists like Ken Saro-Wiwa, and many others wrote to protest against the impact of oil exploration on the aquatic lives, farmlands as well as neglect, insensibility and abandonment of the inhabitants by the government. Literary writers also

emerged leading the agitation amidst environmental issues threatening the existence of the people and the environment. Through their various forms of renditions, these writers seek to raise the awareness of the government and the public on the destruction of the environment through oil exploration and exploitation. This paper discusses Ibiwari Ikiriko as an activist- who used his poetry to advance the course of the region with the aim of a green and safe Niger Delta.

Ibiwari Ikiriko can be said to be an eco-poet. Eco-poets are lovers of natural, green environment safe for man's habitation. They champion the course of nature, reminding human beings of one of their basic responsibilities which is to protect the earth. This view is held by Engelhardt James in his paper "The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto". In the above paper, the researcher opined thus:

"Ecopoetry does share a space with science. One of the concerns of ecopoetry is non-human nature (it shares this concern with the critical apparatus it borrows from, ecocriticism). It certainly shares that concern with most of the world's history of poetry: How can we connect with non-human nature that seems so much more, so much larger than ourselves? How can we understand it?" (2)

A detailed description of ecopoetry is given by Blessing Ochuko and Dina Yerima asserts that:

Ecopoetry is a form of poetry that recognizes and questions our pronounced alienation from nature, and proposes means of reconnecting. To an eco-poet, nature is not seen as a separate entity, but an equal being to humans and their existence. Besides, it can be established that ecopoetry is seen as a subset of environmental poetry. However, environmental poetry only foregrounds the existence of a human-nature relationship and its significance while eco-poetry moves a step further by not only taking cognizance of this relationship and its related problems, but also works towards finding solutions to these existing problems, thereby affecting a change (244).

Another famous poet, Bryson Scott, views eco-poetry as "a nature poetry sub-category that maintains and moves beyond traditional romantic conventions in a way that more easily permits addressing the current nature-human relationship" (5). This relationship stems from human's use, misuse and abuse of nature. Therefore a poem is said to be eco-critical if propagates genuine

concern for man-nature relationship and also proffers solutions to the challenges arising from this relationship. This is the motivation for most of the Niger Delta poets such as Ibiwari Ikiriko, Tanure Ojaide, etc, who seek to use their poetry to advocate for the course of their people and the environment.

### Theoretical Framework (Eco-criticism)

Eco-poets use Eco-criticism as their approach to analyzing their poetic renditions and bring to bear their love for nature. Chirag Sutariya acknowledges that "Ecocriticism is a latest critical discipline which is distinctive amongst modern literary theory and cultural theories and established as a literary theory" (125). The term 'Ecocriticism' was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". It takes an interdisciplinary point of view by analyzing the works of authors, researchers and poets in the context of environmental issues and nature. Some ecocritics brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all ecocritics agree on the purpose, methodology, or scope of Ecocriticism (7).

Ecocriticism is a special discourse. It studies the connection between nature and literature. It explores the relationship between the environment and literature. The human being is an element of nature. Ecocriticism redefines our relationship with the environment and literature. It identifies roots of the problem of ecological crisis in the relationship of the society with nature and also the structure of the society inside. It is also connected with social and economic justice. This is because the loss of ecology has irreversible, inter-generational consequences. The protection of air, water, soil health, and diverseness ought to be primary environmental

imperatives. Environment impacts people's day nowadays lives. Quality of natural environment determines the standard of human life.

A lot of literary scholars have lent their voices to the definition of the term 'Ecocriticism'. Cheryll Glotfelty defines it in her *Introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader*:

What... is Ecocriticism? Simply, put, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as Feminist Criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious – perspective, and Marxist Criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xix).

According to Cheryl Glotfelty in *What is Ecocriticism?*, "Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound environmental implications"(xix).

In the same manner Simon Estok stipulates that "Ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections". More recently, in an article that extends Ecocriticism to William Shakespearean studies, Estok argues that Ecocriticism is more than "simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds".

Ecocriticism as a theory now enjoys universal appeal owing to its goal of vying for the proper use of the natural world in which we live. Just as most countries of the world have diverse environmental issues, the case of Niger Delta region is peculiar. Ikiriko rightly points out, "The oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta (7). Blessing Ochuko and Dina Yerima, in their article on "Towards Environmental Justice: An Ecopoetic Reading of Ikiriko and Otto's Poetry noted that, "In recent times, there is surge of African writings chiefly committed to preserving the earth (244). This is the thrust of Niyi Osundare's "Ours to Plough and not to Plunder". In this poem, Niyi opines that:

Our earth is ours to plough and not to plunder,  
Great green garden where all mortals must wander  
Each morn we come on bended knees  
To kiss its sod and plant our seeds

In this very first stanza, Osundare paints a picture of a lush and fertile earth, while emphasizing its beauty and abundance. The act of coming on "bended knees" portrays humility and reverence towards nature. The phrase "our earth is ours" is repeated throughout the poem re-enacting the idea that humans have a responsibility to take care of the earth. In a nut shell, this repetition also emphasizes the possessive nature of our relationship with the planet, reminding us that it is our collective duty to protect it.

Osundare presents a sharp contrast in the second stanza of the poem pointing out the plunderers of the earth:

But now we come with greedy eyes,  
With hands whose fingers are ten times ten,  
To snatch away what others have sown,  
To claim what others have grown

In these lines, Osundare employs metaphor to compare those who exploit the earth to greedy individuals with insatiable appetites. This metaphor also helps to convey the destructive nature of plundering the Earth's resources. This is the major concern of Niger Delta writers whose environment has been vandalized leaving the people traumatized and helpless.

### Poetic Activism and Eco-Activism

These are two related concepts but differ in application. In her essay on "The Power of Verse: Activism through poetry", Thea Voutiritsas opines that:

Poetry has found a unique role in the realm of activism, capable of weaving narratives that cuts through the noise and resonates with the depths of human emotion. When wielded well, poetry can be a portent tool for social change and a mirror reflecting the complexities of our shared human experience. Poetry also serves as vessel for the voices often marginalized or unheard. Activists can use verse to amplify the stories and struggles of communities that have been sidelined. By providing a platform for those voices, poetry becomes a vehicle for empathy, fostering understanding and inspiring action (86).

Thea Voutiritsas also cited Langston Hugh, prominent figure in Harlem Renaissance, who used his poetry to articulate the experiences of African Americans during a tumultuous period, giving voice to a generation that yearned for change. Metaphors, similes and allegories embedded in poetry enables activists to complex issues with nuances and depth. By painting vivid pictures with words, poets can evoke powerful emotions that drive individuals to question the status quo. The metaphoric language

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61 | Cite this article as:  
Igirigba, R.C., & Otokwala, A.J. (2024). The poet as an activist: An eco-critical reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*. *LALICO Journal of Languages, Literature, and Communication*, 3(1), 59-66.

employed in poetry allows for multiple interpretations, encouraging readers to engage critically with the subject matter and sparking conversations that transcends the poem itself.

Ecological activism (Eco-Activism) on the other hand, is an umbrella for various efforts of man towards environmental activism. It can take the form of poetry, drama or prose. This group of writers dedicates most of their masterpieces directly to addressing issues bordering on man-nature relationship. Most times, they write in form of protest against man's inhumanity to nature. A good example of these writers is Gerald Manly Hopkins in his poem "Binsey Poplars". In the poem, the poet presents his reactions to the situation of the destruction of a landscape. He mourns how humans can destroy the natural world, without realizing the implication of their actions. With the use of poetic figures, strong images and an overall feeling of anger and nostalgia, Hopkins portrays his love for the (aspen) trees and his grief at their destruction. He said in stanza 1:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
All felled, felled, are all felled;  
Of a fresh and following folded rank  
Not spared, not one

The second part of the poem, Hopkins directed his anger at humans for destroying what used to be "Sweet especial rural scene". He accused humans of being ignorant of the usefulness of the poplar trees in that environment:

O if we but knew what we do  
When we delve or hew  
Hack and rack the growing green  
Where we mean to mend her we end her  
When we delve and hew:

Throughout the poem, Hopkins uses words such as "quelled", "quenched", felled" "not spared" "hack and rack", "delve and hew" and "strokes of havoc" to protest against the felling of the trees making the once especial rural scene to be deserted.

Eco-activism is the hallmark of the poetic renditions of Ibiwari Ikiriko. As earlier stated, the concept refers to the use of literary pieces to project the course of nature. Just as the journalists use the media to reach to relevant authorities concerning issues of public, the political class uses campaign, manifestoes or even propaganda to achieve activism, the poet makes use of his poems to create awareness and agitate for environmental issues bordering him. The pen of the poet is mightier than a thousand swords. Ibiwari Ikiriko, having a firsthand experience of decades of environmental degradation of the Niger Delta region, decides to lead in the agitation to stop the pollution and other issues of serious concern in the region by using his poetry to draw the attention of the authority.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been in the news since decades of oil exploration and exploitation. The region is blessed with natural oil and gas which overtime became the main stay of the country's economy. Inadvertently, this supposed blessing turned out to be a sad one as a result of the devastating impact of oil exploration in the region which threatened the occupation of the denizens of the region – fishing and other aquatic creatures. Worse still, the attendant neglect of the people's predicament by Government at all levels and the hanky-panky game they often play with the multinational corporations have kept the people in the dark for these donkey years with attendant health issues. Ibiwari Ikiriko whose poems is the focus of this paper once said:

Take a look, dear reader, at the map of Nigeria and behold how the giant country sits, suppressing the Delta which serves it the functions of support and sustenance. As it is on the geographical expression, so it is in the political, social and economic expressions. As I write this, there is no...drinkable water to the population, but siphoning oil and gas to enrich other lands and lives. Upcountry, well, away from the smoke and stench of the oil wells, oil concessionaires of all sort wakes up millionaires on a daily basis. Down the Delta, in the fountain of oil and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood (6).

The above excerpt describes the plight of the Niger Delta people. According to Wisdom Nwoga, "It is estimated that that over 30 million people live in this region which is also regarded as one of the ten most important wetland

and coastal marine ecosystems. The region is rich with a diverse mosaic of ecological zones, five of which are the Mangrove Forest and Coastal Vegetation Zone, the Fresh Water Swamp Forest Zone, the Lowland Rain Forest Zone, the Derived Savannah Zone and the Montane Zone. The Niger Delta is also the location of enormous oil deposits, which have been extracted for decades by the government of Nigeria and Multinational Oil Companies". The Niger Delta is the highest marketer of fish and other sea foods in Nigeria due to the many creeks, rivers, seas and oceans in the region. The oil boom, first discovered at Olobiri in Bayelsa state, added to the economy value of the region but it is situationally ironical that the same region that feeds the entire country lacked the basic amenities, and its denizens suffering from environmental related illnesses. With the destruction of the ecosystem and the attendant hunger and starvation, many youths of the region resort to militancy as a way of survival. The Niger Delta Monitoring Group summarizes it thus "It is not surprising that efforts put together as palliatives often pale into insignificance. Could this be the reason for the increase in the misery index, the resurgence of militancy, compounded by frustration, alienation, marginalization, and

poverty in the region? Some critics believe that the situation has been taken advantage of, by the conflict entrepreneurs, all feasting on the honey pot of crude oil" (34).

The above degrading image of the Niger Delta gave rise to literary activism in the region. These literary activists include Ibiwari Ikiriko, Tanure Ojaide, Otto, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo and others. This paper titled, "The Poet as an Activist: an Eco critical reading of Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* examines issues of environmental degradation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and other negative effects of oil exploration and environmental exploitation. It explores the roles of the poet to lead in the agitation to stop the pollution and other issues of serious concern in the region.

Ibiwari Ikiriko's "*Oily Tears of the Delta*" is collection of eco-poetic renditions consisting of 30 poems, 27 of which directly discusses the issue of environmental degradation, years of neglect of the people and some poems dedicated to prominent activists and political juggernauts of the region. The collection is also used to celebrate their advocate for a green and safe Niger Delta such as Ken Saro Wiwa, e.t.c.

#### **Portrayal of Ibiwari Ikiriko as an Activist in *Oily Tears of the Delta***

Ibiwari Ikiriko firstly asserts, "The poems in *Oily Tears of the Delta* are a witness to the depredations of the Delta and a support for the claim of courage to halt the pillage" (7). The oil is said to be "tearful" rather than bringing good tidings to the people. The writer also points out that "The oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta." This assertion is the fundamental propellant making the poet an eco-poetic activist of the region. As an activist, he

choose to use his poem as a medium to make the voice of the peopled heard by the government of Nigeria and the Multinational Corporation exploring oil and gas in the region.

One of the agitations of Ibiwari Ikiriko is the gross neglect by the government of the day. He rightly observes that the government only pays lip service to the total well-being of the people in the region. Regime after regime, government comes with wonderful intervention programmes which hardly get to the targeted people. This is the thematic preoccupation of the poem, "The Fisherman's net" (*Oily Tears*, 27). First the poetic voice tells us the kind of net he uses for his fishing expedition "mended and remended". This suggests the ordeal he is subjected to for lack of money to get a new fishing net. Next, he points to the fact that the Government promised intervention net did not reach him as promised:

The government net distribution gestures,  
Massive in the media, token in real terms  
Never reached him. He only saw  
The fishing-port extension fisheries officers

The above stanza shows that the government of the day is only interested in broadcasting news of the intention to help people of the region but never did. This adds to the trauma of the fisherman. The fishing-port extension fisheries officers perhaps delivered the intervention nets to a few fishermen meanwhile they are boasting of revamping the livelihood of thousands of fishermen families. It is obvious that Ibiwari Ikiriko, being a fisherman himself had these experiences of neglect by the government by presenting the fisherman as hopeless and helpless. The repetition of the expressions "old net" and "mended and remended" emphasizes the ordeal of the poetic persona.

In the poem, "Oloibiri", Ibiwari Ikiriko blasts the government for being responsible for the level of underdevelopment in the region. Speaking through the voice of a Parliamentarian, the poet argued that the town "Oloibiri" supposed to be a premium city because oil exploration started in that community. He puts it thus:

Oloibiri streets  
Would have been tarred  
With gold if ours  
God's own country were.

Nigeria is boasts of being the giant of Africa economically. Ironically, the money gotten from Oloibiri is not used to develop it. The streets are still shabby, not tarred. The sight of this community falls short of the expectation of sensible person. In the poet's perception, it would have been an etipome of beauty "tarred with gold" but the reverse is the case as it remained in its primitivism. In the mind of the poet, there is an intrinsic comparison of the level of development of the Niger Delta region and other regions such as South West and the Northern part of the country. Through this poem, Ibiwari Ikiriko draws the attention of the authority to the overall development of the region.

The second part of the poem presents the reason why Oloibiri is still underdeveloped:

Instead the mineral  
Is tilled and used to lubricate sex  
And crime and biggity  
Everywhere else.

The poetic voice argued that the fund raised from oil exploration from Oloibiri is used for illicit affairs with women "to lubricate sex" instead of utilizing it to develop the community. This is the height of insensitivity of the government to the growth Niger Delta region. The government is

more interested in frivolities rather what will benefit the masses. Apart from suing the money for sexual escapades, the people in authority also resort to use the money to support and criminality in the region. What a shame! As an eco-poet, Ibiwari Ikiriko is using this poem to appeal for a change of mindset among the leaders of the region as well as the government to consider developing communities in the region.

In "The Palm and the crude" Ibiwari Ikiriko confirms the fact that the wealth of the country is gotten from the Niger Delta region. The poetic voice boasts of the season of palm and crude. The people enjoy the palm a lot. He says:

In the beginning  
Was the Palm  
And the Palm  
Was of us  
And the Palm  
Was by us  
And the Palm  
Was with us.

The above lines portray a sense of enjoyment as they savor the oil palm. The palm performs many functions. It "Oil our palms", "Balmed our joints", "Sweetened our insides" "And anointed our heads". However, the commencement of oil exploration brought about environmental degradation. This is a sharp contrast of the beginning when they enjoy the Palm. The poetic voice highlights the negative impacts of the coming of crude thus:

Then came the Crude  
And the Crude  
Wasted our waters  
Soiled our soils  
And lacerated our lot.

The speaker points out that the Crude "wasted our waters". This is water pollution. Water pollution is the worst nightmare of Niger Delta people because fishing is their predominant occupation. However, whenever there is oil spillage in the region, the waters are mostly affected and by extension, aquatic creatures such as fish, crabs, periwinkles', etc. Besides, oil spillage makes water unsafe for drinking and degrades the entire environment. As

a result of this “pillage”, the speaker remarks that the Crude oil “Soiled our soils”. This expression entails that the Crude did not bring anything good to the people rather than doom. This contrast what happen in the beginning when they enjoy Palm. With the aid of pun, repetition and Biblical allusion, the speaker showcases the extent of sorrow occasioned by the coming of oil exploration. The speaker laments that “Aborigines of the riverside are now bereft and stoic.

“Oily rivers” is another poem that portrayed Ikiriko as an eco-activist. In this poem, he presents his locality and the irony that engulf it. He said:

I come from  
the bottom of  
the Amalgam  
the base Delta,  
I am of  
the Oil Rivers,.  
where rivers are oily  
and can  
neither,  
quench my thirst  
nor anoint my head  
where things are made base,  
and beings become base  
leesed by  
powered policies  
crude as petroleum

First, the speaker says he is from the bottom of the Amalgam, down Delta. The Amalgam here alludes to the coming together of the Southern and Northern protectorate by Lord Luggard in 1914. It was done to form the country Nigeria. According to him, the Delta where he resides is where (important) things are made base, dishonourable or ignoble. In this same place human “beings” are reduced to nothing. This is a striking point of the agitation of Ibiwari Ikiriko. As a denizen of the region, he feels he has been made insignificant or even non-existent. The government, whose primary responsibility is to protect and secure the citizens, is not interested in his survival. In other words, he is suggesting the life of an average Niger Deltan does not matter to the government. This is because the “powered policies” of the government are not in any way favourable the growth and development of the people. According to the speaker, what matters to the government is “crude as petroleum”.

From the discussion so far, the reader can attest that the people of Niger Delta went through a lot of traumatic experiences occasioned by the despoilers’ activities. Consequently, he has chosen to be a voice for the voiceless that are rendered homeless and hopeless. The poet cannot afford to be quite in the midst of the overwhelming crisis devastating his home and people. In fact, the poet complains thus:

I am enmeshed in cares  
Like a cock in crude oil,  
Jugular glugged, glottis jaded  
Time crier belated

They have become the wretched of the earth (Fanon, 1967), with their pipes of oil getting others well-heeled and impoverishing them. The speaker continues his narrative:

Of their co-horts  
Whose steel action  
Turn to peace-proof people  
Those wet with honest sweat (Oil Tears, 15)

One of the notorious figures in the exploitation of the Niger Delta, the multinational companies who formed nocturnal collaboration with the government keep enriching themselves and denying the natives of their God-given natural resources. Thus, the locality is left thread-bare while the denizens are stripped of their peace and genuine labour.

In addition to the above poems used in this study, the use of personification in the titling of the collection, *Oily Tears of the Delta* humanizes the agony that Delta and its occupant's experiences. It is evident that the title of the collection also captures Ibiwari Ikiriko's thoughts, consequently, informing the contents of the poems. The Niger Delta region has been plagued by the destructive effects of oil spillage and pollution, so much that the environment and its inhabitants where the oil is sourced from are thrown into serious agonizing pains. For Ibiwari Ikiriko, using his poetic renditions to lead in the agitation to stop the pollution and other issues of serious concern in the region is the way out.

### Conclusion

The challenges posed by oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region are far from over. They are still raging as the landscape of the region suffers from gas flaring, water pollution; diseases such as cholera, lack of attention and care by the government and the multinational companies. The rise of human activists voicing out their concern for the plight of the region and the people, are quite genuine. Ibiwari Ikiriko, a writer from Rivers State, chooses to lead in the agitation of the right of his people through his poetry which centres on the oil motif. Ikiriko did his best to lead in the campaign for the halting of environmental exploitation and giving the people a sense of belonging.

### Suggestions

The following are the suggestions of the researcher after a careful study of the contributions of Ibiwari Ikiriko in the advocacy for a green and safe Niger Delta landscape.

1. More poets and writers of other genres should join in the agitation to "halting the pillage" in the Niger Delta region by dedicating their verses to the plight of the people.
2. Poets, dramatists and novelist should publish parts of the write-ups about the region on all forms of media. This way, the eco-activism in the Niger Delta region will enjoy more readerships.
3. Dramatists should enact and re-enact the dangers of living in polluted environment such as Niger Delta. Millions of deaths in the region are occasioned by waterborne diseases like cholera.
4. This is the view of Anthonia Ezeugo in her paper titled, "Drama Creativity and Solution to Human Problems: Niger Delta Crisis Resolution".

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