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Environmental degradation and its symbolic representation in Nnedi Okorafor's Lagoon

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Abstract

This paper investigates how *Lagoon* critiques environmental neglect, employing speculative fiction to engage with pressing ecological issues. Through an ecocritical lens, it emphasizes the novel's call for reimagining humanity's relationship with nature, advocating for sustainable futures rooted in both cultural and ecological resilience. Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* stands out as a landmark in African speculative fiction, blending elements of science fiction with sharp ecological and socio-political commentary. Set in Lagos, Nigeria, the novel vividly depicts environmental degradation, symbolized by the polluted waters of Bar Beach, as a microcosm of broader ecological crises. Through richly detailed descriptions of oil spills, marine life disruption, and urban pollution, Okorafor critiques human exploitation of natural resources and its devastating socio-economic and cultural consequences. The arrival of extraterrestrial beings introduces a speculative framework that critiques human inaction while envisioning pathways for ecological restoration. These aliens, capable of purifying polluted waters and reviving marine ecosystems, serve as a metaphor for humanity's potential to reverse environmental harm through collective action and innovation. The novel also explores the symbolic role of water and marine life, portraying them as sites of both destruction and renewal. By examining the intersections of environmental degradation, governance, and resilience, *Lagoon* situates itself within the emerging field of African ecocriticism.

Keywords: Environmental degradation; Speculative fiction; African ecocriticism; Sustainability and resilience

1. Introduction

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* stands out as a landmark in African speculative fiction, blending elements of science fiction with sharp social commentary. Set in Lagos, Nigeria, the novel captures the complex interplay of ecological degradation, cultural identity, and speculative possibilities for renewal. By weaving a narrative that centers around environmental decay and its impact on the ocean and marine life, Okorafor explores pressing issues of ecological neglect and human responsibility. Lagos, as both a physical and symbolic space, serves as the epicenter of these environmental challenges. Through the introduction of extraterrestrial beings with transformative powers, the novel presents a speculative framework that critiques human actions while imagining potential solutions to ecological crises (Ogunsiji 2024).

The representation of environmental degradation in *Lagoon* is particularly relevant in the context of global discussions on climate change and sustainability. Nigeria's history of environmental exploitation, particularly in the Niger Delta, informs the novel's critique of human actions that prioritize economic gain over ecological well-being (Ogungbemi 2023; Ogungbemi 2024). Oil spills, deforestation, and the destruction of marine ecosystems serve as recurring motifs, symbolizing the broader environmental challenges faced by the Global South. Okorafor's narrative draws attention to these issues, offering a blend of realism and speculative imagination that challenges readers to rethink humanity's relationship with nature.

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This paper seeks to explore how *Lagoon* represents environmental degradation and its implications for both local and global discourses on sustainability. By focusing on key scenes and character interactions, the analysis highlights how Okorafor uses speculative fiction to critique environmental neglect and envision pathways to restoration. The study also examines the symbolic role of water and marine life in the narrative, emphasizing their dual significance as sites of destruction and renewal. Through an ecocritical lens, the paper argues that *Lagoon* serves as a call to action, urging readers to confront the environmental crises of our time and consider alternative futures.

2. Literature Review

Environmental degradation has been a recurring theme in literature, reflecting broader societal anxieties about ecological sustainability and human impact on the planet. Scholars such as Amitav Ghosh (2016), in *The Great Derangement*, argue that literature has a critical role in addressing climate crises by fostering awareness and empathy, particularly in contexts where environmental harm disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Within African literature, ecological concerns are often explored through a postcolonial lens, highlighting the historical and ongoing exploitation of natural resources by colonial and contemporary powers. Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* contributes to this tradition by situating environmental degradation within the socio-political and cultural complexities of Lagos, Nigeria. The novel uses speculative fiction to foreground ecological issues, connecting them to broader themes of cultural identity, governance, and resilience.

The intersection of speculative fiction and environmental discourse has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Jennifer Wenzel (2019), in *The Disposition of Nature*, emphasizes the capacity of speculative fiction to imagine alternative futures and critique existing power structures. Okorafor's *Lagoon* aligns with this perspective, employing the speculative framework of alien intervention to interrogate human-induced ecological harm and envision pathways to restoration. The novel's portrayal of the polluted waters of Lagos, its devastated marine life, and the transformative possibilities introduced by extraterrestrial beings situates it as a critical text in the emerging field of ecocriticism within African literature. Additionally, the novel reflects what Rob Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence" in his eponymous work, capturing the gradual and often overlooked destruction caused by industrial activities such as oil spills and waste dumping. *Lagoon* thus bridges speculative fiction with urgent environmental and socio-political issues, showcasing the power of narrative to engage with climate justice.

Within the broader discourse on African speculative fiction, Okorafor's work has been celebrated for its innovative approach to blending science fiction with African cultural elements. Scholars like Leader-Picone (2023) and Moonsamy (2020) note how Okorafor's narratives challenge Western-centric perspectives on science fiction, presenting a distinctly African voice that prioritizes local experiences and knowledge systems. In *Lagoon*, the environmental challenges faced by Lagos residents—polluted waterways, declining marine biodiversity, and inadequate waste management—are tied to issues of governance, inequality, and cultural resilience. The novel uses the setting of Bar Beach, a symbolically significant location in Lagos, to reflect the complex realities of postcolonial Nigeria, where ecological neglect intersects with socio-economic disparities.

Other scholars have engaged with *Lagoon* to explore its multifaceted engagement with environment and identity. Cajetan Iheka, in *Naturalizing Africa*, highlights how Okorafor reimagines the relationship between humans and nature, presenting the environment not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the narrative. Similarly, Ogunsiji (2024) argues that the novel employs marine life as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of ecological systems and human societies, emphasizing the need for sustainable coexistence. Okorafor's treatment of the ocean as both a site of destruction and a source of renewal resonates with Womack's (2013) concept of Afrofuturism, which combines speculative imagination with African cultural traditions to address contemporary issues.

Furthermore, studies have noted how *Lagoon* critiques not only ecological degradation but also the socio-political systems that perpetuate it. For instance, Ogunsiji (2024) examines how the novel interrogates the complicity of governmental and corporate entities in environmental neglect, using the aliens' intervention as a speculative device to expose human failures and envision alternative futures. The transformation of polluted waters into life-giving resources serves as a critique of anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment, challenging readers to reconsider their role in ecological preservation (Ogungbemi 2016).

This study builds on these scholarly discussions by focusing specifically on how *Lagoon* addresses ecological issues within the context of environmental humanities. While previous analyses have explored themes of cultural identity and speculative imagination in the novel, there is a need for a more focused examination of its engagement with environmental degradation. By situating *Lagoon* within the broader framework of African speculative fiction and ecocriticism, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the role of literature in fostering ecological

awareness and advocating for climate action. Okorafor's innovative blending of speculative fiction with environmental critique underscores the potential of narrative to not only reflect but also shape our understanding of ecological and cultural resilience in the face of crisis.

3. Methodology

To situate the analysis within a broader scholarly context, secondary sources on African speculative fiction, environmental humanities, and postcolonial ecocriticism were consulted. These sources provide critical perspectives on the themes explored in *Lagoon*, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the novel's representation of environmental degradation. The study also draws on insights from interviews and This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on selected passages from *Lagoon* that depict environmental degradation and ecological restoration. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism and postcolonial studies, which provide tools for examining the intersection of ecological issues and socio-political dynamics in literary texts (Ogungbemi 2016). Drawing on insights from scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty and Rob Nixon, the study explores how Okorafor uses narrative elements to critique environmental neglect and imagine alternative futures activities on the environment. Key motifs such as oil spills, marine life disruption, and water pollution were identified and analyzed in relation to the novel's broader themes. The study also considers the symbolic role of water and marine life, examining Data collection involved a close reading of *Lagoon*, with particular attention to scenes that highlight the impact of human how these elements are used to convey both the destructive impact of environmental neglect and the potential for renewal (Ogungbemi 2016).essays by Nnedi Okorafor, which offer valuable context for understanding her creative intentions and thematic preoccupations

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Environmental Degradation in *Lagoon*

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* vividly portrays environmental degradation in Lagos, using the polluted waters of Bar Beach as a microcosm of Nigeria's broader ecological challenges. The opening scenes of the novel provide a stark image of environmental neglect, describing the water as plagued by "rainbows of poison" and "black ooze," with a "stench of dryness" lingering over the shoreline (Okorafor, p. 3). These descriptions evoke the visual and sensory impact of oil spills and untreated industrial waste, issues that have long afflicted Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta. By detailing the filth and toxicity of the lagoon, Okorafor grounds her speculative narrative in a harsh environmental reality, drawing attention to the real-world consequences of human exploitation of natural resources.

Further into the narrative, the consequences of this environmental degradation extend beyond the physical to impact the lives of Lagos's residents. For example, characters describe the water as "dead," a reflection of the decimation of marine ecosystems caused by pollution (p. 15). The portrayal of Bar Beach as a lifeless and poisoned environment parallels the plight of the Niger Delta, where communities have faced ecological collapse due to decades of oil exploitation and governmental neglect. By highlighting the degradation of Lagos's natural environment, Okorafor situates *Lagoon* within a broader critique of anthropocentric environmental destruction, emphasizing the need for systemic change.

Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* deepens its critique of environmental degradation by portraying the human activities that exacerbate the problem. The novel describes Lagos as a city overwhelmed by "noise, chaos, and filth," where pollution is not merely a byproduct of industrialization but a normalized part of urban life (p. 9). This portrayal underscores the systemic neglect that allows such degradation to persist. The narrative frequently references the indiscriminate dumping of waste into the ocean, symbolizing humanity's disregard for natural ecosystems. Okorafor connects this neglect to the exploitation of the Niger Delta, where oil extraction has left waterways "slick with the sheen of spilled oil" and fish populations decimated, mirroring real-world accounts of environmental disasters in the region. By depicting this continuity between urban and rural ecological crises, *Lagoon* highlights how environmental degradation is both a local and national issue.

The novel also explores the socio-economic consequences of environmental degradation, emphasizing its disproportionate impact on marginalized communities. Residents who rely on fishing for their livelihood are described as struggling to make ends meet due to the depletion of marine life caused by pollution (p. 21). The destruction of Bar Beach as a recreational space further illustrates the loss of cultural and communal identity tied to the environment. One character laments, "We've lost more than the beach; we've lost our history and our stories," linking environmental degradation to cultural erasure (p. 32). Through these narratives, Okorafor positions environmental destruction not

only as an ecological crisis but as a threat to human dignity and cultural heritage, urging readers to consider its far-reaching implications.

4.2. Alien Intervention and Speculative Possibilities

The arrival of extraterrestrial beings in *Lagoon* not only addresses the physical degradation of Lagos's environment but also challenges the societal structures that perpetuate such harm. One striking moment occurs when the aliens purify the polluted lagoon, and residents are astounded to find "water so clear they could see the sandy bottom and the fish swimming in it" (p. 43). This act of environmental restoration is immediate and dramatic, underscoring the contrast between the aliens' advanced capabilities and humanity's prolonged inaction. The transformation is described as a "miracle," sparking hope and curiosity among Lagos's residents. However, this miraculous intervention also serves as a critique, highlighting the stark disparity between what is possible with advanced technology and the neglectful attitude of human societies toward their natural resources.

The aliens' actions extend beyond environmental restoration, sparking social and political reflection among Lagos's residents. One character remarks, "They've done in hours what we've failed to do in decades," reflecting a growing awareness of systemic human failures in addressing ecological harm (p. 87). The novel uses this realization to question not only humanity's technical capabilities but also its collective will to prioritize environmental preservation. By enabling characters to see the potential for transformation, the aliens inspire a shift in perspective that leads to broader discussions about governance, resource management, and communal responsibility.

Additionally, the aliens' intervention introduces the possibility of symbiotic relationships between humans and non-human entities. The transformed marine life in the lagoon, including creatures glowing with otherworldly bioluminescence, symbolizes the potential for coexistence and mutual benefit (p. 49). These changes inspire Adaora, the marine biologist, to reflect on the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the need for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. She notes, "They're not just fixing what we broke; they're showing us how to live differently," suggesting that the aliens' actions are not merely restorative but also educational (p. 95). This speculative dimension underscores the novel's message that ecological renewal requires both technological innovation and a fundamental shift in human attitudes and behaviors.

Through its speculative framework, *Lagoon* invites readers to imagine alternative futures where environmental degradation can be addressed through collective effort and advanced technology. The aliens serve as both a critique of humanity's failures and a beacon of hope, demonstrating that even the most damaged ecosystems can recover with the right interventions. By merging speculative fiction with ecological commentary, Okorafor creates a narrative that critiques the present while envisioning a more sustainable and interconnected future.

4.3. Water and Marine Life as Symbolic Elements

Water and marine life in *Lagoon* serve as potent symbols of both destruction and renewal, underscoring the novel's ecological and thematic depth. The polluted waters of Lagos are depicted as a stark site of ecological devastation, mirroring real-world environmental crises in urban and industrial settings. In one particularly vivid scene, Adaora, a marine biologist, describes the lagoon as "thick with oil and waste," lamenting the disappearance of fish and other aquatic species that once thrived there (p. 25). This imagery not only highlights the tangible impact of human negligence on marine ecosystems but also evokes a broader sense of loss, reflecting the fragility of aquatic environments in the face of unchecked industrialization and urban sprawl. Okorafor's portrayal draws attention to the devastating consequences of pollution, including the depletion of resources critical to both human survival and biodiversity.

Beyond serving as a symbol of ecological destruction, water in *Lagoon* also represents renewal and transformation. The aliens' arrival and subsequent intervention in Lagos's waters catalyze a dramatic reversal of environmental degradation. In one pivotal moment, the lagoon is described as becoming "clear and alive," its previously polluted depths now teeming with vibrant marine life (p. 42). The description of glowing, bioluminescent fish swimming in the rejuvenated water reflects a speculative vision of ecological rebirth, symbolizing the possibility of restoration even after severe harm. This transformation is not merely physical but deeply symbolic, representing the broader potential for humanity to heal its fractured relationship with nature through innovation and collective effort. The dual symbolism of water as both a victim of human exploitation and a source of life and regeneration reinforces its central role in the novel's narrative.

Marine life in *Lagoon* further amplifies the themes of interconnectedness and the possibility of coexistence. The newly revitalized lagoon becomes home to transformed sea creatures, such as a massive, luminous manta ray that mesmerizes onlookers and underscores the mystery and majesty of the ocean's inhabitants (p. 67). These transformed creatures act

as harbingers of a new ecological balance, reminding characters and readers alike of the resilience of nature when given the opportunity to recover. At the same time, the transformed marine life underscores the alien influence, symbolizing the blending of the natural and the otherworldly to create a more sustainable and harmonious environment. The depiction of these creatures invites reflection on the need for human humility and a greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of life on Earth.

Adaora's role as a marine biologist bridges the gap between scientific understanding and the mystical possibilities introduced by the aliens. Her scientific knowledge allows her to articulate the significance of the lagoon's transformation, providing a grounded perspective on the ecological crisis that underscores the narrative. At the same time, her interactions with the aliens push her to consider solutions that transcend conventional scientific approaches, highlighting the value of interdisciplinary thinking in addressing complex environmental issues. Through Adaora's perspective, Okorafor suggests that addressing ecological crises requires both technical expertise and an openness to alternative ways of understanding and interacting with the environment. This dual emphasis on science and imagination underscores the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to forge paths toward ecological renewal and cultural resilience.

5. Conclusion

The representation of environmental degradation in *Lagoon* serves as a stark reminder of humanity's responsibility to address ecological crises. By vividly depicting the polluted waters of Lagos, Okorafor highlights the severe environmental challenges faced by Nigeria, particularly in regions like the Niger Delta where industrial pollution and governmental neglect have wreaked havoc on ecosystems and human livelihoods. Through her narrative, Okorafor underscores how these ecological crises are not isolated events but are deeply interwoven with socio-political dynamics, reflecting systemic inequalities and the prioritization of profit over sustainability. The novel's detailed descriptions of environmental degradation serve as a call to action, reminding readers that the health of the environment is inseparably linked to the well-being of societies.

The speculative intervention of the aliens offers a compelling contrast to human inaction, presenting a hopeful vision of ecological restoration. By purifying the polluted lagoon and revitalizing marine life, the aliens demonstrate the transformative potential of innovative solutions and collective effort. However, their intervention is not just about fixing what humanity has destroyed—it also serves as a critique of humanity's failure to act. The aliens' ability to heal the environment with ease forces characters and readers alike to confront the question: why have humans failed to prioritize ecological preservation despite having the knowledge and resources to do so? This dual function of critique and hope makes the speculative framework of *Lagoon* particularly powerful, encouraging readers to envision alternative futures where environmental renewal is possible.

Furthermore, the novel's exploration of water and marine life as symbolic elements reinforces its central themes of interconnectedness and resilience. Water in *Lagoon* is not only a victim of human exploitation but also a symbol of life, transformation, and renewal. The revitalized lagoon and its transformed marine creatures serve as metaphors for the possibility of healing and balance, even in the face of significant harm. Through characters like Adaora, who bridges scientific knowledge and imaginative thinking, Okorafor emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary approaches to ecological challenges. By merging speculative fiction with ecological and cultural commentary, *Lagoon* transcends its narrative form, offering readers a profound exploration of humanity's relationship with the environment and urging them to take action toward a more sustainable and harmonious future.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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