AFRO-ECOFEMINIST NARRATIVES: WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO OIL EXPLOITATION IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract
Despite growing scholarship on ecofeminism and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, limited attention has been paid to how women's lived experiences and oral testimonies, read alongside literary narratives, generate ecological knowledge and contribute to environmental justice. This study uses Afro-ecofeminism as its analytical framework and adopts a phenomenologically informed hermeneutic reading of Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow, Tanure Ojaide's The Activist, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun, Bayelsa State. Through thematic and comparative narrative analysis, it examines how ecological degradation is lived, remembered, narrated, and resisted. The findings articulate that women's oral accounts and literary representations document ecological violence, preserve Indigenous ecological knowledge, and challenge extractive capitalism, patriarchal governance, and colonial legacies. The paper positions storytelling as an Afro-ecofeminist environmental praxis through which embodied experience becomes ecological knowledge and through which community-centred, gender-responsive pathways to environmental justice are imagined.
Keywords: Afro-ecofeminism; Environmental Justice; Feminist Political Ecology; Environmental Humanities; Black Ecologies; Niger Delta

Introduction

Afro-ecofeminism links ecological degradation to gendered, colonial, and capitalist relations of power while centring African Indigenous knowledge, communal ethics, and women's environmental experience (Tamale, 2020; Juma, 2025; Randriamaro, 2024). Rather than treating women only as victims of environmental harm, it recognises them as producers of ecological knowledge and agents of environmental resistance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta, where oil extraction has disrupted livelihoods, cultural relations with land and water, and community authority over natural resources.

Recent literary studies have sharpened gendered ecocritical readings of the Niger Delta. Okolie and Ukwueze (2023), for example, centre women's precarious position and agency in *Yellow-Yellow*, while Nwoga (2026) examines maternal imagery in Niger Delta eco-poetry. Such studies remain primarily textual. Less attention has been paid to what emerges when literary representations are read alongside women's oral testimonies as complementary, but not identical, forms of ecological knowledge. This study addresses that gap by bringing fiction into dialogue with lived accounts from an oil-impacted community.

Accordingly, this study reads Kaine Agary's (2010) *Yellow-Yellow*, Tanure Ojaide's (2016) *The Activist*, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun, Bayelsa State, through an Afro-ecofeminist and phenomenologically informed framework. The oral testimonies are drawn from focus-group discussions reported by Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025); they are therefore treated as mediated lived accounts rather than as primary interviews conducted for this study.

The study is guided by one central research question: How do literary representations and women's oral testimonies, read through an Afro-ecofeminist lens, contribute to understandings of environmental justice in the Niger Delta? The paper first outlines Afro-ecofeminism and the extractive history of the Niger Delta, then reads *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun testimonies comparatively. It concludes the analysis with a phenomenological critique of embodied, place-based experience before considering storytelling as a pathway to environmental justice.

Afro-Ecofeminism as an Analytical Framework

Afro-ecofeminism centres African Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and gendered experience in analysing the relationship between environmental justice, gender equity, and the decolonisation of ecological thought (Juma, 2025). As an African-centred strand of ecofeminist thought, Afro-ecofeminism situates environmental injustice within intersecting histories of colonialism, extractive capitalism, patriarchy, and Indigenous dispossession. Tamale (2020) treats Afro-ecofeminism as part of a decolonial feminist project that reclaims African knowledge, communal ethics, and social relations from colonial epistemic hierarchies. Environmental degradation is therefore read not simply as ecological decline but as a political and historical process that simultaneously exploits natural resources and marginalises communities (Malik et al., 2026).

Randriamaro (2024) further places African ecofeminisms within struggles against neoliberal extractivism and "green colonialism," while Juma (2025) emphasises relational and eco-spiritual dimensions of African ecological ethics. These approaches reject the idea that women are naturally connected to nature, recognising instead that their environmental knowledge is shaped by their social and material experiences. This framework is especially useful in the Niger Delta, where women's everyday relations with land, water, subsistence, and community expose the gendered consequences of ecological destruction while also preserving knowledge of environmental change. Environmental justice therefore encompasses not only the repair of ecological harm but also cultural continuity, gender equity, recognition of marginalised knowledge, and meaningful community participation (Schlosberg, 2007; Whyte, 2011).

This study uses Afro-ecofeminism to interpret *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun as distinct but dialoguing forms of environmental narration. The framework makes it possible to compare literary representation with lived testimony without collapsing one into the other.

Niger Delta: Oil Exploration and Environmental Exploitation

The Niger Delta is one of the world's major oil-producing regions and one of its most environmentally damaged wetlands. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, contaminated waterways, and loss of agricultural land have disrupted ecosystems and resource-based livelihoods, producing persistent environmental and socio-economic inequalities (Azaiki, 2003; Asuni, 2009). Farming, fishing, and other natural-resource-based livelihoods historically sustained local economies and Indigenous ecological knowledge. Colonial resource extraction and post-independence centralisation of petroleum ownership progressively alienated host communities from land and resources (Aniefiok et al., 2013; Asuni, 2009). Oil wealth has consequently coexisted with pollution, poverty, and political marginalisation in producing communities (Bodo, 2019).

Women are particularly affected because many livelihoods and household responsibilities depend on farming, fishing, and access to water (Lele, 2023; Odoemene, 2011). Pollution threatens both economic survival and ecological knowledge embedded in these practices (Nwankwo, 2023). These

burdens make oil exploitation simultaneously ecological, social, and gendered (Jike, 2004; Odoemene, 2011). From an Afro-ecofeminist perspective, these experiences are not only accounts of victimisation. They also reveal situated ecological knowledge and forms of resistance. This historical context frames the comparative readings of *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun testimonies that follow.

Afro-Ecofeminist Readings of Literary Environmental Narratives

Yellow-Yellow: Storytelling as Ecological Resistance

Kaine Agary's (2010) *Yellow-Yellow* presents environmental injustice as a lived condition in which ecological destruction, gender inequality, and socio-economic exclusion reinforce one another. Through Zilayefa, polluted land and waterways are connected to constrained livelihoods, mobility, identity, and future possibilities. Environmental violence thus extends beyond damaged landscapes to the social worlds built around them.

The novel also exposes structural inequalities in Nigeria's oil economy. Oil wealth is extracted from the Niger Delta while local communities remain excluded through inadequate infrastructure, education, and access to opportunity. Zilayefa's observation that scholarship opportunities existed but were practically inaccessible because no one in her community knew how to obtain them illustrates how environmental injustice is reproduced through institutional neglect and unequal access to information (Agary, 2010). The point is significant for an Afro-ecofeminist reading: extraction produces not only ecological loss but unequal life chances (Omuta, 2013), particularly for young women whose futures are shaped by the same political economy that degrades their environment (Acey, 2016).

Agary also presents the female body as a site where ecological and patriarchal violence converge. Zilayefa's experiences of sexual exploitation, exclusion, and identity conflict parallel the commodification of the Niger Delta, revealing how extractive and patriarchal logics can operate together (Randriamaro, 2024). This parallel should not be read as an essentialist equation of women with nature. Rather, it exposes how bodies, land, and labour can be rendered available for use by unequal systems of power. The novel therefore connects intimate vulnerability to the wider political economy of oil without reducing Zilayefa to a symbol of the environment.

Beyond documenting suffering, *Yellow-Yellow* turns memory and everyday survival into ecological witnessing. Zilayefa's narrated experience preserves environmental change as social memory and makes visible the forms of knowledge generated through living with degradation. In this sense, storytelling becomes both testimony and resistance (Tamale, 2020).

The Activist: Environmental Justice as Collective Resistance

Tanure Ojaide's (2006) *The Activist* locates ecological degradation within the interconnected structures of oil extraction, political corruption, and the marginalisation of Niger Delta communities. Unlike *Yellow-Yellow*'s (2010) intimate focus on Zilayefa, the novel adopts a broader collective register, representing resistance through community mobilisation, intellectual and student activism, grassroots action, and women's environmental organising. Ebi Emasheyi, an educated woman and wife of the Activist, emerges as an important female figure in this resistance, participating in women's responses to the environmental and social crises affecting the Niger Delta. Ojaide's depiction of disappearing rivers, declining fisheries, and the loss of traditional food sources signals not only material damage but also the erosion of cultural memory and ecological knowledge

built through long interaction with the environment (Ojaide, 2006; Randriamaro, 2024). This wider social scale complements Agary's embodied perspective by showing that environmental injustice is experienced both personally and institutionally.

The novel critiques collusion among corporations, political elites, and state institutions while showing how host communities are excluded from decisions over resources extracted from ancestral lands. Characters such as Chief Goodluck Ede and military officials embody a political order in which environmental costs are displaced onto local communities while benefits accumulate elsewhere (Ojaide, 2006). Chief Ishaka's insistence that those who depend on the rivers are best placed to protect them foregrounds the political exclusion of local ecological knowledge. From an Afro-ecofeminist perspective, environmental governance is therefore also a struggle over whose knowledge counts, who participates in decision-making, and whose relationship to place is treated as legitimate (Juma, 2025). Violence against women during conflicts over oil resources in the novel further reveals how ecological degradation, militarisation, and patriarchal violence can converge within extractive economies (Tamale, 2020; Randriamaro, 2024).

Afro-Ecofeminist Analysis of Oral Testimonies

Oral testimonies from Gbaraun provide a more immediate account of how oil exploration and recurrent spills enter women's livelihoods, health, and cultural life. In focus-group discussions reported by Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025), women describe contaminated fishing nets, unsafe waterways, dead fish, disappearing crayfish, and declining crops such as ogbono and plantain. Ama's account of oil coating fishing nets and making navigation and fishing increasingly difficult turns “pollution” from an abstract environmental phenomenon into an interruption of everyday labour and food security (Ecofem Tales, 2025). These accounts show how ecological damage undermines productive and reproductive labour while eroding knowledge tied to fishing, farming, and household subsistence (Ecofem Tales, 2025; Juma, 2025).

The testimonies also describe cultural, spiritual, and health-related loss. Pollution has damaged sacred river sites associated with the Woyin festival and Egbesu tradition, while contaminated water is linked by participants to disease and child mortality (Ecofem Tales, 2025; Ifeka, 2006; Courson & Odijie, 2020). Examined with Juma's (2025) relational eco-spiritual ethics, these accounts show that ecological destruction can also erode cultural identity and Indigenous systems of environmental responsibility.

These testimonies position women as witnesses, knowledge producers, and agents of environmental resistance. Their narratives function as living ecological archives, preserving and transmitting community-based ecological knowledge across generations (Agboola et al., 2023). They also resonate with Black ecologies, which recognise Black communities as producers of ecological knowledge rather than merely as sites of environmental vulnerability (Bruno, 2024). Storytelling can therefore function as a decolonial practice through which communities preserve ecological knowledge, contest dispossession, and articulate alternative relationships with their environments.

A Phenomenological Critique: Embodied Experience, Place, and Decolonial Ecofeminism

A phenomenological reading shifts attention from environmental degradation as an external condition to how it is lived through bodies, routines, memory, and place. In *Yellow-Yellow* (Agary, 2010), Zilayefa's experiences are shaped by polluted landscapes and gendered social relations; in *The Activist* (Ojaide, 2016), ecological loss is expressed through disrupted rivers, livelihoods, and communal life. The Gbaraun testimonies (Ecofem Tales, 2025) concretise this lived dimension by

showing how pollution renders fishing, farming, navigation, drinking water, ritual practice, and care difficult or unsafe. This emphasis on situated experience aligns with Akoleowo's (2025) argument that African feminist phenomenology must begin from women's place-specific experiences. Oyěwùmí's (1997) critique of the uncritical application of Western gender categories to African societies further supports a decolonial approach that takes local social and epistemic contexts seriously, while Tamale (2020), Randriamaro (2024), and Juma (2025) challenge epistemic hierarchies and foreground relational, eco-spiritual meanings of land and water. These perspectives reveal that ecological harm disrupts embodied relationships, cultural memory, and everyday life.

A key phenomenological tension concerns scale and voice. *Yellow-Yellow* (Agary, 2010), presents environmental precarity through the intimate trajectory of a young woman, whereas *The Activist* (Ojaide, 2016), adopts a broader collective and institutional register that includes women's organised environmental activism, and the Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025) report condenses several women's voices in focus-group testimony. These differences demonstrate how narrative form shapes what becomes perceptible as environmental experience. While fiction can connect individual suffering to wider structures and imaginaries, it also selects and aestheticises experience in contrast, testimony foregrounds shared concerns but may minimise disagreement or experiences that fall outside dominant themes (Bruno, 2024). A decolonial approach therefore avoids treating African women's experiences as homogeneous and instead attends to the diverse social, cultural, and ecological contexts through which their experiences and knowledge are produced (Nyabola, 2024; Tamale, 2024).

Phenomenological interpretation requires methodological reflexivity, particularly when the researcher works across different forms of representation and does not have direct access to lived experience (Clancy, 2013; Ash, 2025). This consideration is especially important in an African research context, where knowledge is shaped by culturally situated practices, oral traditions, communal relationships, and histories of colonialism and unequal power relations (Wiredu, 1996; Hountondji, 1997; Chilisa, 2012). The oral testimonies in this study were produced through focus groups conducted by a non-governmental organisation, whereas the novels are literary representations shaped by individual authors. The comparison is therefore interpretive rather than exhaustive. Its value lies in tracing convergences and differences across narrative forms: fiction renders environmental structures, meanings, and imaginaries visible, while testimony anchors the analysis in reported experience. In this sense, a decolonial Afro-ecofeminist phenomenology asks not only what environmental damage occurs, but how it is experienced, whose knowledge is recognised, whose voices are heard, and how affected communities understand, resist, and pursue ecological repair.

Literary Narratives and Women's Oral Testimonies as a Pathway to Environmental Justice

Yellow-Yellow, The Activist, and the Gbaraun testimonies demonstrate that environmental narratives can function as ecological archives and forms of political knowledge. They are capable of preserving memories of polluted rivers, degraded farmland, disrupted fisheries, and cultural loss while challenging accounts of oil extraction that reduce development to revenue and infrastructure. In the oral testimonies especially, women emerge as custodians and interpreters of environmental change rather than passive victims (Tamale, 2020; Juma, 2025).

Storytelling also exposes the political structures that produce environmental injustice. Across fiction and testimony, ecological harm is connected to colonial legacies, state-corporate power, patriarchal governance, and the exclusion of communities from decisions over land and resources

(Randriamaro, 2024; Mensah, 2024). Accounts of polluted sacred rivers further show that environmental injustice includes cultural and spiritual dispossession, making ecological damage simultaneously material and epistemic (Kanu, 2023; Juma, 2025).

Environmental justice therefore requires more than remediation of polluted ecosystems. The narratives examined here point toward accountability, ecological restoration, recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledge, and meaningful community participation. Their contribution is not that fiction and testimony are interchangeable, but that their dialogue can reveal how environmental harm is lived, remembered, interpreted, and resisted across different narrative forms (Bruno, 2024).

Conclusion

This study argues that literary representations and women's oral testimonies can be read together as complementary Afro-ecofeminist forms of environmental knowledge. Across *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun accounts, ecological degradation is inseparable from gendered marginalisation, cultural dispossession, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge. Storytelling preserves ecological memory, contests extractive models of development, and makes visible community claims to participation and repair. At the same time, a phenomenologically informed reading cautions against treating fiction or secondary testimonies as transparent access to experience. Their value lies in the embodied, place-based meanings they disclose and in the political questions they raise about whose knowledge counts. Environmental justice in the Niger Delta therefore requires ecological restoration together with recognition of Indigenous knowledge, women's lived experience, and community authority in environmental decision-making.

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