

**THE STRUGGLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN NIGERIA IN REMI  
RAJI'S *WEBS OF REMEMBRANCE* AND ODIA OFEIMUN'S *LONDON LETTER*  
AND OTHER POEMS**

**BY**

**Aisosa Sonia EDOKPOLOR (MISS)**

**ART2004454**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE**

**FACULTY OF ARTS**

**UNIVERSITY OF BENIN**

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**Aisosa sonia EDOKPOLOR (MISS)**

**MAT. NO. ART2004454**

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## CERTIFICATION

I certify that this study was carried out by Aisosa sonia EDOKPOLOR (MISS) in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City, under my supervision.

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DR. IDAEVBOR BELLO

(Project Supervisor)

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DATE

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to God, to my parents and my hubby for his guidance and protection throughout my stay in the University of Benin.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My profound gratitude goes to God who gave me the strength to get to this stage of my life.

To myself thank you for being brave, resilient, and strong. Thank you for chasing your dreams and making them a reality, for believing in me, even when it seemed like the odds were against me. For pushing forward, even when the wait seemed endless. For staying focused and committed to my goals, even when it felt like giving up.

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**ABSTRACT**

The study explores how two great collections of poems, *Webs of Remembrance* by Raji and *Odia Ofeimun London Letter*, gives voice to communities affected by environmental destruction. The research would explore how these poets highlights the ongoing economic and ecological violence against indigenous communities and the poets role in advocating for environmental rights and justice. Raji's work documents the environmental degradation in Nigeria and Benue, critiquing the corporate and governmental policies that harm the local ecosystem. while Ofeimun's poems addresses the daily struggle lagosians faces due to environmental hazard. Through a comparative analysis, the study will show how literature serves as a powerful Indigenous medium for environmental advocacy, social critique and cultural preservation in the Nigerian context.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Purpose of Study

The purpose of study is to examine how environmental advocacy and social critique are reflected in Remi Raji *Webs of Remembrance* and Odia Ofeimun *London Letter and other poems*. It also aims to examine the struggles and violence faced by Nigerian communities and how literature serves as a powerful means to advocate for environmental and social justice in Nigeria.

#### 1.1 Scope of Study

The scope of the study is to focus on environmental degradation and the role of poets in advocating for improvement concerning environmental issues as depicted in Raji's "*Webs of Remembrance*" and Ofeimun "*London Letter*".

#### 1.2 Methodology

This study will take a qualitative research approach mostly depending on literary analysis of primary texts which are Remi Raji's "*Webs of Remembrance*" (hence *webs*) and Odia Ofeimun's "*London Letter and other poems*" (hence *London Letter*) comparative study of both poets works. The primary source of material includes a close reading of both collections of poems, Academic journals and other online materials.

### 1.3 Background of the poets

Odia Ofeimun, born on March 16, 1950, in Irukepene-Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria, is a prominent figure in Nigerian literature, known for his poetry, political essays, and cultural critiques. His background and works provide a rich field for academic study, particularly in the context of post-colonial Nigerian literature and socio-political activism. Ofeimun's early life was marked by hardship and resilience. He dropped out of high school and worked various jobs, including working as a factory laborer and a petrol attendant, before eventually earning his GCE and attending the University of Ibadan. His early life was also marked by diverse experiences, including working as a news reporter, factory laborer, and civil servant. He later pursued Political Science at the University of Ibadan, where his poetry gained recognition, winning first prize in the University Competition of 1975. His academic journey continued with a Commonwealth fellowship at Oxford University. He has authored over 40 works. Ofeimun's activism is a significant aspect of his career. He is considered a key figure in the second generation of Nigerian poets. His ability to merge art with activism has made him a vital voice in Nigerian literature, advocating for social change through his poetic and political writings. Odia Ofeimun's legacy lies in his powerful poetry, his unwavering commitment to social justice, and his significant contributions to Nigerian literature and politics. His work continues to inspire and challenge readers, making him one of the most important voices in contemporary Nigerian literature.

Remi Raji, the pen name of Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, is a Nigerian English-language poet who was born in 1961. His academic career has taken him to prestigious institutions worldwide as a visiting professor and Salzburg Fellow, including Cambridge University, multiple University of California campuses, the University of Cape Town, and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. His scholarly work appears in notable publications such as *Research in African Literatures* and *African Literature Today*, and he has performed poetry readings across three continents. Throughout his career, Raji has published several poetry collections, beginning with "*Webs of Remembrance*" in 2001, followed by "*Shuttlesongs America*" (2003), "*Lovesong for My Wasteland*" (2005), "*Gather My Blood Rivers of Song*" (2009), and "*Sea of My Mind*" (2013). His literary influence extends internationally, with his works translated into eight European languages. His achievements include serving as Stockholm's Guest Writer in 2005 and receiving the Alexander von Humboldt scholarship at Humboldt University in Berlin. Within Nigeria's literary community, Raji has held numerous leadership positions. He began as the Publicity Secretary for the Association of Nigerian Authors' (ANA) Oyo State chapter in 1989, later becoming Vice-Chair in 1997 and Chairman from 1998 to 2000. He edited the ANA Review in 2000 and was elected as the organization's 11th President in 2011. His involvement with PEN International included serving as the Nigerian PEN Centre's National Coordinator and later Secretary until 2010, during which time he organized workshops and meetings across Africa and Europe. In 2003, he made

history as PAN's first Coordinating Secretary, elected at a meeting in Mexico City. At the University of Ibadan, Raji has distinguished himself as a Professor of English and African Literatures and Creative Writing. His administrative career reached new heights with his appointment as Head of the English Department in 2011, followed by his election as Dean of the Faculty of Arts the subsequent year.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

The theory used for this research is ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that examines the relationship between literature and the environment. It is an interdisciplinary field that is also known as environmental criticism, green cultural studies, and ecopoetics. Ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary study of the connections between literature and the environment. It draws on contributions from natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists and historians in examining the differences between nature and its cultural construction. It is a literary and cultural theory developed in the 1970s to investigate the relationship between literature, culture, and the natural environment. It is an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary study, environmental issues, and ecological principles. It is an approach that examines how people interact with their surroundings. ecocriticism aims to improve ecological understanding among readers, raise environmental awareness, and promote environmental stewardship. The field has developed through three distinct phases: The initial wave focused primarily on nature writing and maintained a clear separation

between humanity and the natural world. The second wave expanded its scope by incorporating urban environments into its analysis. The current third wave synthesizes elements from both previous approaches while working to expand beyond its Anglo-American origins. The field is formally organized through the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which maintains academic discourse through its journal and holds conferences every two years.

### **1.5 Review of Related Scholarship**

The main purpose of this review is to analyze how literary text represents environmental struggles, specifically focusing on the works of Ochia Ofeimun and Remi Raji to provide comprehensive academic insights.

The study of environmental justice in Nigerian literature represents a complex, multilayered scholarly endeavor that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. By integrating literary criticism, postcolonial theory, environmental sociology, and indigenous knowledge systems, scholars have developed nuanced approaches to understanding the profound ecological and social challenges confronting Nigeria's environmental landscape.

The scholarly investigation of environmental justice in Nigerian literature emerges from a critical intersection of postcolonial theory and environmental humanities. Fundamental to this approach is the recognition that environmental destruction is not merely an

ecological issue, but a profound manifestation of historical power structures, colonial legacies, and systemic marginalization.

Pioneering scholars like Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ogaga Okuyade have been instrumental in developing a postcolonial eco-critical framework. Their work fundamentally challenges the extractive economic models inherited from colonial powers, demonstrating how environmental degradation is intimately linked to historical processes of exploitation. The postcolonial eco-critical approach reveals that: Environmental destruction is a continuation of colonial violence, Ecological harm is deeply interconnected with social and political marginalization, Literary texts serve as critical sites of resistance and documentation

Literary scholars like Isidore Okpewho and Biodun Jeyifo have conceptualized literature as a crucial repository of ecological memory. Their work demonstrates how literary texts Preserve indigenous environmental knowledge, Document ecological trauma, Provide narrative strategies of resistance.

Scholars such as Adeniyi Asiyebi have pioneered integrative approaches that combine sociological analysis with literary critique. This methodology Explores structural causes of environmental destruction, Documents community responses to ecological challenges, Provides comprehensive understanding of environmental experiences.

The concept of "slow violence," introduced by scholars like Rob Nixon, has been particularly influential. This theoretical framework helps explain: Gradual invisible forms of environmental destruction, Long-term ecological and social impacts, Mechanisms of environmental marginalization, Despite significant scholarly contributions, the field faces ongoing challenges: Methodological complexities in interdisciplinary research, Difficulties in documenting nuanced ecological experiences, Balancing theoretical frameworks with empirical research

The scholarly exploration of environmental justice in Nigerian literature represents a dynamic and evolving field of study. By integrating multiple perspectives – postcolonial theory, feminist scholarship, environmental sociology, and indigenous knowledge systems – researchers have developed profound insights into the complex relationships between literature, environment, and social justice. These scholarly approaches do more than analyze texts; they serve as critical interventions that: Document environmental struggles, Challenge dominant narratives, provide platforms for marginalized voices, Contribute to broader conversations about ecological justice. The study of environmental justice in Nigerian literature continues to be a vital scholarly pursuit, offering crucial insights into the intricate relationships between ecological destruction, social marginalization, and literary resistance.

## 1.6 Thesis Statement

Through their collections of poems "*Webs of Remembrance*" and "*London Letter and Other Poems*", Remi Raji and Odia Ofeimun employ powerful poetic techniques to document environmental degradation in Nigeria, challenge systemic exploitation of natural resources, and advocate for environmental justice, demonstrating how Nigerian poetry serves as both witness and resistance to ecological oppression while proposing paths toward environmental restoration and social transformation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

#### 2.0 INTRODUCTION:

The issue of environmental degradation in Nigeria is addressed and examined in Remi Raji's "Webs " and Ofeimun's "*London Letter*". They approach the theme from different perspectives and context, This analysis examines how each poet engages with environmental concerns whiles highlighting their unique contributions to Africa environmental literature. Raji approaches direct portrayal of oil industry's environmental damage while Ofeimun's connects local damage to international power structure.Both poets addresses the loss of natural resources and the need for environmental justice. together they demonstrate how African poetry can address both immediate local concerns and environmental justice issues.

#### 2.1 Social Justice and Human rights

The goal of social justice is to build an equitable society that safeguards the rights of everyone and ensures fair distribution of resources and opportunities across all social groups. Environmental degradation often affects vulnerable and marginalized populations, creating a clear social justice dimension. Lower-income communities often bear the heaviest burden of pollution, toxic waste sites, and industrial contaminations. Theack of resources to relocate or adapt to environmental changes usually leaves those affected by

these environmental damage in a very devastating state. Raji approaches social justice concerns by examining community displacement and marginalized and economic exploitation of social resources.

In Raji's "Webs" the poem "Bound to Remember"(pg...16) laments the destruction of the Niger Benua rivers. Through powerful repetition and imagery. It expresses deep grief and anger over situation the communities affected are subjected to. The opening line establishes that these once vibrant rivers are now dead, "no water runs where the Niger flows/ no fish swims where the Benue berths". This devastation become to metaphor for broader environmental and social injustice. The speaker's grief is "long like the rivers" which hints at the physical and emotional extent of the damage and the lasting impact of the loss. The poem build intensity at the speaker vows to remember and seek vengeance " I will remember the bomb-game goon/ I will remember his landmines of lies/ I will remember the oasis of blood" and the phrase " I will be like God vengeance of truth" the speaker pledges to be like "thunder in the kidney of liars" and this suggests judgement against those responsible (the government). The speaker uses the imagery of "tadpole head", "necklace of the albatross", " landmines of lies" to create a picture of destruction and deceit. In the final stanza the speaker uses "rodents", "reptiles in new skin" and "bats" to represent corrupt institutions, who continue to continue to profit from destruction while adapting new forms and disguises. The phrase "anus of the tribe/ dressed naked like prostitutes" expresses contempt for the hypocritical persons. The poem ends with the

speaker "grieved beyond forgetting" telling the readers that the wounds created by these exploitation and devastations are too deep to heal and injustice must be remembered and confronted rather than forgiven or forgotten.

Similarly in Ofeimun's collection a poem titled "'Demolition Day" presents a powerful and poignant exploration of themes related to social justice, human rights, and ecocriticism. The central figure in the poem is a woman who is facing the demolition of her community, with vivid imagery of her "kneeling, cane-shaft on her tongue" and "trembling against the drone of bulldozers." This portrayal immediately establishes a sense of the individual's vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of larger forces beyond their control. The social justice themes emerge through the references to marginalized groups, such as the "forgotten of Lagos" and the "homeless of Maroko." These details situate the woman's plight within a broader context of systemic inequality and the displacement of vulnerable populations. The poem highlights how development and "progress" often come at the expense of the less fortunate, who are relegated to the fringes of society. The woman's pleading with the "Lord" to "look her way" suggests a denial of basic dignity and agency. Her "mist-eyed anguish" conveys the emotional toll of this violation of her rights and autonomy. Additionally, the references to "the law-mighty epaulettes" and "the snarl of antlers and implacable mortars" evoke a sense of oppressive authorities and institutions that trample on the rights of individuals and communities.

The woman is described as a "dry leaf against iron hoofs / among the forgotten of Lagos," evoking a connection between the destruction of the natural world and the displacement of human communities. The mention of "her world of cardboard and decayed zinc" further highlights the hazard and unsustainable living conditions thrust upon the marginalized communities.

The poem seems to lament the loss of these spaces where "grass may grow forever" and "cattle may be ranched," positioning the woman's struggle as intrinsically linked to the preservation of the natural environment. Overall, the poem "Demolition Day" effectively weaves together themes of social justice, human rights, and ecocriticism. It gives voice to the experiences of marginalized individuals and communities who are disproportionately impacted by the forces of progress and development, while also highlighting the interconnected nature of human and environmental well-being. Through its vivid imagery and emotive language, the poem demands that we confront the urgent social and ecological challenges facing our world.

## **2.2 Cultural identity and loss**

Cultural loss and identity is a personal and complex topic that explores how individuals and communities experience and respond to the transformation of their cultural heritage. This issue is particularly significant in the context of globalization, migration, colonization, and rapid social change. Ofeimun's and Raji's collection of

poems delve into a nuanced nature of how people understand and relate to their cultural heritage. In Raji's "*Webs*" he Uses the poem "*Farewell to the myth II*" to examine several economic elements such as land and resources exploitation. the poem references the exploitation of the land and natural resources belonging to the "Olokun" people. He uses the phrase " watch them burn the helpless air " and "you grew grace as reets of rot" to suggest the depredation of the environment, and also the imagery of "rainbow of fires" and " vultures spitting ugliness across the land" which conveys a sense of environmental devastation and breakdown. The strong cultural reference to specific ethnic groups and their relationship to the land/resources indicates how environmental changes can disrupt cultural continuity and identity. The poem connects environmental issues to the marginalization and oppression of particular communities, highlighting how environmental damage disadvantaged populations. Certain elements like the direct address to "Olokun" and reference to cultural traditions, suggests a desire to assert cultural/ecological sovereignty and resist external forces.in this context the themes of cultural identity and Environmental degradation become deeply intertwined. the poem engages in an eco-critical exploration of how dominant power structures exploit and destroy the natural world with devastating consequences for indigenous and marginalized communities.

### 2.3 Governmental neglect

Nigeria faces significant environmental challenges particularly in the Niger delta regions, which has been severely impacted by decades of oil exploitation and environmental degradation, writers like Ochia Ofeimun and Remi Raji has been particularly vocal about environmental issues. The works of Remi Raji often address ecological destruction and environmental injustice, highlighting the issue of oil pollution, the Niger delta regions has been experiencing the poem "Bound to Remember"(pg...16). Raji's "Webs" powerfully convey the theme of environmental neglect in Nigeria. The speaker uses repetition to convey a sense of profound environmental destruction, suggesting the drying up of major waterways and the loss of aquatic life as seen in the phrase "No water runs where Niger flows/ no fish swims where Benue berths". The references to the "tadpole head", "the necklace of the albatross", and "the bomb-game goon" further evoke the damage done to various wildlife and ecosystems. The poem also touches on the human cost and social impact of this environmental crisis, with phrases like "the oasis of blood" and the "tribe being dressed but naked like prostitutes" alluding to the suffering and marginalization of local communities. The speaker's strong emotions of grief, anger, and desire for vengeance reflect the deep psychological toll of the environmental neglect. The repeated use of "I will remember" suggests an effort to preserve the memory of the environmental destruction and its effects, acting as a form of witness and resistance against forgetting. The poem powerfully conveys the multifaceted

nature of the environmental crisis in Nigeria, capturing both the ecological devastation as well as the profound human and social consequences. It serves as a lament and a call to action, urging readers to remember and confront the ongoing environmental neglect.

Odia Ofeimun on the other hand takes a more direct approach, often writing explicitly about environmental challenges and their social implications. His works provide a critical examination of the political and economic systems that enable environmental neglect. In his collection *"London Letter"* the poem "Eko-my city by the lagoon" (pg...8-10) talks about the lack of infrastructure and public service by making reference to "pot-holed streets weighted with garbage" and "nameless waters and cement jungles"(pg...8). This neglect disproportionately impacts the poor and marginalized communities in the city. The poem criticizes "kleptocrates", "swamplords" and "reformers who deform"(pg ...9), indicating widespread government corruption and mismanagement. Corrupt government bodies allow predatory exploitation of the city's residents as seen in "hollowness of traffic","scuffing bukaterias and doddering Brazils"(pg...8), and "sinus haggle of daily marketeers". The poem also talks about marginalization and oppression by making reference to "logic of an army of occupation" and "illogic of hemp smoke in surreal overdrive" (pg...10) suggesting an oppressive military presence and crackdown. this creates an atmosphere of control and violence rather than of care and civic investment. Ofeimun examines the neglect of marginalized population through the focus on the city's "begger colonies","salty houses of power" and

"squabbling boardrooms"(pg..10) to indicate a failure to serve and support the most vulnerable residents. The "envy of women less beloved" further suggests that government neglect the needs of women and other marginalized groups. overall the poem paints a bleak picture of a city failed by its governing authorities, who are more concerned with personal enrichment, oppression and the interest of elites rather than providing basic public goods and services. This governmental neglect perpetuates and the social, economic and environmental crisis in Nigeria.

#### **2.4 Political struggle and resistance**

The Niger Delta Movement and corporate movement: The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa in the 1990s, marked a pivotal moment in Nigeria's environmental justice struggle. Their peaceful resistance against Shell's operations highlighted the devastating impact of oil extraction on local communities. Saro-Wiwa's execution by the military government in 1995 became a symbol of the brutal response to environmental activism. Oil spills have contaminated drinking water and farmland, Gas flaring continues to release toxic chemicals into the air, Mangrove forests and fishing grounds have been destroyed and Communities face forced displacement from their ancestral lands.

The poem "Bound to Remember" in Raji's "Webs" reflects the impacts of environmental devastation and political corruption in Nigeria, particularly focusing on

the Niger Benue region. The title "Bound to Remember" establishes memory as both a burden and form of resistance. The speaker commits to bearing witness to environmental and political injustices, refusing to allow them to be forgotten and erased. The recurring lines "no water runs where the Niger flows" "no fish swims where the Benue berths" serves as a haunting refrain that directly addresses the environmental destruction of Nigeria's major rivers. These lines powerfully illustrate how industrial exploitation has turned life-giving water into zones of death and devastation. Raji uses imagery of corruption and betrayal. "tadpole head" and "necklace of the albatross" references symbols of deformity and burden. The phrase "rodents" and line 24 "reptiles in the new skins" metaphors for corrupt politicians and leaders. "Bats flying above the flood" suggests those (government) who profit from the disaster. The vivid metaphor in line 12 "landmines of lies" speaker's determination to expose and fight against injustice can be seen in line 5 and 6, "I will be like God vengeance of truth" " I will be thunder in the kidneys of liars". The above quote shows that the speaker adopts a prophetic defiant voice.

The poem documents environmental crimes through powerful phrases like "oasis of blood", suggesting how resources extraction has turned sanctuaries into sites of violence. The repetition of "my spirit is greed, "my grief is long like the rivers" in line 3 and 16 connects personal pain to environmental devastation the question "how will I forget the pain/when I remember the knife and see the scar?" In line 17 & 18 speaks about the lasting trauma inflicted on communities. The crossing line about seeing "the anus if the

tribe ", "dressed but naked like prostitutes" and being "grieved beyond forgetting " delivers a scathing critique of those who have sold out their people and resources ,while empazing the speakers role as an eternal witness to these crimes. The poem serves as both lamentation and protest, documenting environmental destruction while also serving a tool of resistance through it's refusal to forget or remain silent. It is particularly relevant to the Niger delta struggles,where environmental devastation has gone hand in hand with political oppression and exploitation.

In another poem titled "the mutineer's song" in Remi Raji's collection weaves environmental destruction into its political critique for instance in line 10 "bullets bloom In the belly of the earth" suggests both violence and environmental exploitation. the speaker's defiance and resistance is emphasized through repeated declaration " I shall not flee", "I shall not hide", "I shall not dance", "I shall not fret", "I will not die". The poem connects environmental and political justice together. the imagery used in the poem suggests that environmental destruction is inseparable from political violence. The poem ends by returning to "let the skies cry in crimson rage I shall not flee" thereby forcing the speaker's unchanging resolve despite all threats and violence. The poem serves as a manifesto of resistance against both political oppression and environmental destruction. Its particularly relevant to Nigeria context, where military coups have historically been intertwined with resource exploitation and environment degradation, especially in regions like Niger delta. The mutineer's voice grows stronger throughout the poem,transferring

from witnessing destruction to prophesying the downfall of oppressors suggesting that resistance itself is a form of victory.

## **2.5 The complex relationship between citizens and their nations**

The relationship between citizens and their Nations is fundamentally multifaceted, characterized by layers of emotional, political, cultural and personal interactions that defy simple categorization. This complexity emerges from several dimensions which may include emotional attachment and identity, political participation and power dynamics, cultural negotiations, economic interdependence, psychological dimensions, ethical responsibilities and lots more. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond binary narratives of pure loyalty or pure criticism and embracing a more nuanced, empathetic perspective that acknowledges the profound human experience of national belonging.

Ofeimun's poem "lagoon" highlights the emotional and psychological dimensions of the citizen-nation dynamics. In "lagoon" the speaker's relationship with the nation is mediated through the natural landscape. The line "I let the lagoon speak for my memory" suggests that natural feature holds a deeper truth belonging than political boundaries. This is reinforced when the speaker wants "to scoff at the lines drawn on water to divide the earth" .this serves as a direct critique to artificial national borders.

Another poem in Ofiemun collection makes reference to the theme is the poem titled *"self portrait of a logosian"* it presents a more definite critique of state power. In line 1 the transformation of "old maroko" through the "slim clereance act" and the images of space being "all-fenced with dobberman" in line 27 paints a picture of a surveillance state that contains it's citizens movement and freedoms. The poems demonstrates strong eco-critical concerns through their treatment of human environment relationships. the transformation of "maroko" reflects the displacement of communities in the name of development. While the "sum clearance act" represents how environmental policies often disproportionately affect marginalized communities, the contrast between "seething swamps" and "futurist architecture" in "self portrait of a Lagosians" highlights the tension between development and preservation. Both poems suggest that modernization often comes at the cost of environmental destruction. The poet makes several pointed commentaries about environmental justice such as colonial and post-colonial impact of the modernization. The transformation of "maroko" reflects the displacement of communities in the name of development. The phrase "listening from the depth of formless songs" in the poem "lagoon" suggests alternative ways of understanding environmental impact. The poem gives voice to both human and natural victims of environmental injustice. The poems strongly advocate for a more refined understanding of citizenship one that recognize both human and environmental rights and acknowledge how they're interconnected in the struggle for justice in the contemporary Nigeria . This

speaks to broader global conversations about environmental justice, urban development and the role of natural spaces in preserving cultural memory and identity.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

The comparative analysis of Remi Raji's "*Webs of Remembrance*" and Odia Ofeimun's "*London Letter*" shows how contemporary African poets engage with environmental degradation through multiple separate lenses. Throughout this chapter, we have seen how both poets approach environmental issues while weaving together themes of social justice, cultural identity, governmental neglect, and political resistance.



## CHAPTER THREE

### URBAN TRANSFORMATION

#### 3.0 Introduction

Nigerian cities are growing faster than most other African countries. The urban population has grown dramatically with major cities like Lagos, Abuja and port Harcourt experiencing expansion. many Nigerian cities have extensive slum areas with limited access to basic services like water, electricity and sanitation, transportation, waste management and urban planning struggle to keep pace with population growth. poets like Odia Ofeimun and Remi Raji brought their pen as an instrument of criticism against various key challenges faced by Nigerians.

#### 3.1 Power and Powerlessness

The intersection of power and powerlessness in Nigeria's environmental context reveals a complex narrative of ecological destruction and systematic oppression. ecocriticism offers a critical lens through which we can examine these complex relationships, highlighting how power structures fundamentally shape environmental experience and consequences. in the Niger delta regions, companies like shell have exercised tremendous power through oil extraction, resulting in massive environmental devastation. indigenous communities despite being the most directly impacted, remains powerless to prevent or adequately respond to ecological destruction. for instance in

Raji's "Webs" the poem titled "Bound to Remember" opens with the devastating observation about the Niger Benue rivers pointing to severe environmental degradation of these vital waterways as highlighted in "no water runs where the Niger flows/no fish swims where the Benue berths" (pg.....16). the absence of water and fish speaks to the destruction of natural ecosystem. The speaker takes a strong stance against powerlessness through declaration of remembrance and the refusal to forget in the phrase "I will remember the tadpole head", "i will not forgive i will not forget"(pg...16) this represents a form of resistance for environmental destruction. The poem uses powerful metaphor like "landmines of lies" and "oasis of blood" to convey the severity of environmental damage and its impact on communities.the grief expressed throughout the poem connects personal, cultural and environmental loss, showing how environmental degradation affects not just the landscape but also cultural identity and community well-being .

Similarly in Ofeimun's "*London Letter*" the poem "The self portrait of a lagosian" also highlights power dynamics at play, it explores the complex dynamics of power and powerlessness in the face of urban transformation and environmental change in nigeria. The poem begins by making reference to the "the seething swamps" being overcome by "Futurist architecture" describing the tension between natural environments and urban development. powerlessness is evident In how they can only watch their community transform from wetlands to concrete structures. The mention of the "slum clearance act" in line 2 (pg.....6) is particularly significant as it represents institutional power being

exercised. The mention of "old maroko" and "new maroko" hints forced displacement and urban renewal that often disregards the needs and attachment of local residents. The poem goes on to describe a transformed landscape in line 26 " all fenced with dobberman" and "daunting wall too high / even the sea breeze" representing how urban development often leads to increased securement and segregation where power is expressed through physical barriers and surveillance. The speaker's powerlessness is reflected in their reliance on memory of what existed before and this is shown through the " what have you forgotten or did not want to remember" suggesting both voluntary and involuntary forgetting. This goes on to show how powerlessness extends to the ability to preserve one's connection to a place. The transformation from a community where "hawker's songs wake mornings" to one where life is "too serious" shows the shift from social power structures. The poem presents a complex portrait of how environmental and urban changes in Lagos reflects and reinforce power dynamics where individuals often find themselves powerless against larger institutions and economical forces reshaping their environment.

### **3.2 Nigeria urban Experience**

Nigeria's urban Experience is dominated by its rapidly growing cities with Lagos being it's largest and most prominent. Lagos represents both the ingenuity and challenges of Nigeria urbanization. The poem "Eko-my city by the lagoon" (pg....8-10) in Ofeimun's "*London Letter*" captures the predicaments and challenges of urban life in Nigeria

particularly focusing on Lagos. The poem points different aspect of Nigeria urban experiences, economic and cultural institutions in Nigerian urban spaces. the reference to "molue of the heart" (pg....9) (molue being a Lagos public bus) connects the speaker to every urban commercial activities and mass transit system used by the working class. The poem criticizes how capitalism shapes urban relations. The phrase "the rude habits of the profit motives", "palm salaries" (pg.....9) makes references to salaried workers, contrasting them with informal traders, showing the division between formal and informal economies. The repetition of "profit motives" emphasizes on how it dominates urban life and creates social hierarcies. The poems show how urban dwellers measure time by pay periods suggesting financial risk. The imagery of "seedy backyards and mounting desires" in line 63 & 64 shows how poverty creates both physical and psychological constraints. By extension it represents Nigerian urban centers as spaces of contradiction, where hope and despair, wealth and poverty, tradition and modernity coexist. The line "grammer of searching that is it's own finding" (pg...10) shows that urban dwellers must constantly navigate and remake their environment while creating meaning from chaos. The poem effectively captures the struggle and resilience that characterizes urban life, while also offering a critique of political and economic systems that shapes urban experiences.

Similarly the poem "Elergy of towncries" (pg...39) in Raji's "Webs" presents an impressive commentary on the nigerian urban experience through cultural loss and

modernization. The reputed phrase " and the transformation of town criers (old traditional means of passing information) into silent figures represents the death of indigenous communication systems. The line 15 and 16 "cacophonies of car-hornes" and "diatribes of celluloid violence" describes how urban noise and modern media are drowning out traditional voices. The list of incomplete figures ( horses without saddles,cities, without gongs) represents how urbanization has stripped traditional roles of their essence. The very act of writing an elegy serves as remembrance and resistance and the repeated calling "yee pa ri pa" through the poem suggests some resilience. The poem captures nigeria urban experience as one of profound cultural transformation where modernization and urbanization has led traditional systems and values to shambles.

### **3.3 Displacement and Development**

The Niger delta region provides the most stark example of these intersecting challenges. Considering the ogoni people's situation in 1993, they were forced to confront shell's operation that had devastated their traditional fishing and farming lands. The pollution was so severe that in 2011 UNEP found hydrocarbon contamination in the water wells at 1000 safe levels. This wasn't just environmental damage, it represented the systematic displacement of an entire way of life. The scale of displacement is devastating between 1978 and 2001 alone, there was approximately 6,817 oil spills recorded in Niger delta affecting over 10 million people across 80 communities. Many of these communities experienced what expert call "environmental refuges". people were forced

out of their ancestral land not by direct eviction, but by the gradual destruction of their environment, making their traditional livelihood impossible. The government has often prioritized development metrics over environmental justice for instance in Raji's "webs" the poem "Bound to Remember"(pg...16) powerfully captures the devastating impact of industrial exploitation and development in Nigeria rivers and communities. The repeated phrase "no water flows where the Niger flows/no water fish swims where the Benue berths"(pg....16) directly speaks of how industrial development has destroyed natural ecosystem. these lines both suggest physical displacement (of water and fish) and the displacement of traditional livelihood that depended on these rivers. The imagery of barren rivers powerfully symbolizes how development has emptied these one-life-giving waterways. The speaker's insistence on remembering "I will not forgive, I will not forget" positions memory as a form of resistance against destructive development, it also emphasizes the importance of bearing witness to environmental and social destruction. This remembrance becomes a way of fighting the erasure of both environment and community. The poem connects personal grief with environmental destruction. In line 3 "my spirit is grieved" and the imagery of "knife and scar" suggests both physical and psychological wounds from displacement. The speaker's grief is described as "long like rivers" connecting personal pain to geographic features.

Similarly, the poem "Demolition Day"(pg...5) in Ofeimun's *"London Letter"* depicts the violent inspection of displacement and development in an urban Nigeria context

mainly focusing on the human cost of urban progress. The title "Demolition Day" immediately establishes the theme of forced removal. the settings moves between Lagos and maroko, referencing real historical displacement in Nigeria. The "demolition squad" and "bulldozers" represents the mechanical agents of displacement. The poem highlights the development aftermath through the stark contrast between what is destroyed and what replaces it through the phrases in line 26-30 "grass may grow forever" "cattle may be ranches" "limousines brace" "flashy skyscrapers". These images suggest development that serves the wealthy while displacing the poor. The woman (who faces the harsh treatment and aftermath of this development in the poem) represents the human cost of development, her personal suffering contrasts with industrial indifference, she's placed among the "forgotten Lagos" which describes systematic marginalization. The poem effectively criticizes how urban development in Nigeria has often meant the violent displacement of poor communities. with religious appeals falling on deaf ears and human suffering being ignored in favour of greedy governmental institutions. The woman's experience describes the larger political and social issue at play.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

Urban transformation is a complex and dynamic process characterized by rapid significant challenges through Ofeimun's and Raji's poems we see the challenges and ongoing efforts to improve urban infrastructures and living conditions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

The research examines the consequences of environmental and urban development in Nigeria and how Remi Raji's and Ofeimun's collection of poems uses their work as a means of advocacy. The issue of environmental degradation has been a long time drag and various measures has been put into place in order to encourage and improve the focus on these devastating situations.

Chapter one states the purpose of the study, scope of the study, the methodology and the theory used during this research. The chapter also focuses on the background of the both poets whose collection is being used in the research, review of scholarship and thesis statement.

Chapter two demonstrates how both poets effectively use different approaches to address environmental concerns while connecting them to broader social, political, and cultural issues in contemporary Africa.

Chapter three examines focuses on three key themes: power dynamics, urban experience, and displacement caused by development. The poets criticizes how power structures shape environmental degradation, particularly in the Niger Delta where oil extraction has devastated indigenous communities.

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