Othering Nature: A Critical Examination of the Representation of Environmental Marginalization in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*

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Abstract

The term "othering" has long been synonymous with the intricate needlepoint of human-to-human interactions within the literary domain. When literary scholars engage with the concept of "othering", they often delve into the multifaceted ways in which it is embodied and experienced by individuals; illuminating the profound psychological and social repercussions of alienation. However, scholarly inquiry has traditionally afforded limited attention to the phenomenon of environmental "othering" within a multitude of literary works, particularly within the rich and diverse landscape of African literature. The dynamics of marginalization and the intricate nuances of the human-nature relationship remain underexplored in contemporary African literary discourse. Consequently, this paper endeavours to scrutinize the modalities of nature's othering as articulated within African narratives, thereby charting a novel trajectory in ecocritical scholarship. The investigation will focus on the acclaimed novel The Fishermen (2015), employing a critical lens to illuminate how the text encapsulates environmental othering through the actions and utterances of its characters. This article will be confined to a thorough critical discourse analysis of Chigozie Obioma's The Fishermen,

elucidating the complexities of nature-othering manifested in the narrative. Moreover, it will deploy a thematic analysis to excavate the recurrent motifs and tropes that permeate the selected novel, thereby revealing the intricate interplay between the human experience and the natural world. Through this exploration, the paper aspires to contribute substantially to the field of ecocritical studies, fostering a richer understanding of the ethical implications of environmental othering in African literature.

Keywords: Othering, Marginalization, Nature, Environment, River

1.Introduction

Othering pertains to the intricate process of constructing or perceiving phenomena as fundamentally divergent from oneself. The concept often culminates in the social, economic, political, and environmental marginalization of those deemed ‘other’.

The term “othering” was seminally articulated by Gayatri Spivak in 1998. Spivak summarizes the segregation that colonial powers imposed upon their colonized subjects (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 9, 156). In the same line of thought, a postcolonial critic Lajos Brons elucidates that de Beauvoir undertakes the concept of the other as “a construction opposing,” which inherently facilitates the construction of the self (69). According to Brons, the concept of “othering” intricately involves the mechanisms through which dominant groups forge and sustain their power by instituting a sense of difference and inferiority between themselves and marginalized or subaltern populations.

Emerging studies reveal that not merely human beings, but also other living organisms, such as animals, are subjected to the dynamics of “othering” by human beings (Kathryn 10). When projected onto the natural world, othering encapsulates the tendency of individuals to conceptualize nature as ‘the other’. This means that nature is taken as a distinct and separate from human society and existence (Crang 62).

Within the domain of environmental literature, “othering” thus signifies the conscious act of human being distancing from the natural milieu (Mishra 168), thereby rationalizing the exploitation and degradation of nature by humankind (Crang 65).

Likewise, this paper argue that the implications of the notion of “othering” extend far beyond interpersonal relationships. It reaches into systemic structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice (Kang 115). For instance, in the realm of globalization, dominant cultures often impose themselves onto less powerful ones, leading to a homogenization of cultures and removal of local identities. The construction of the “other” in this context not only marginalizes diverse cultural practices and knowledge systems but also perpetuates economic exploitation (Kang 117). By framing certain cultures as inferior or ‘backward’, dominant groups justify economic interventions and exploitative practices that benefit them while undermining the capacity of marginalized “others” to define their own paths for development (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 12). This structural aspect of othering is crucial in understanding how power dynamics operate on a global scale. It therefore, challenges us to question the ethical implications of our interactions with nature.

Correspondingly, “othering” has a profound environmental repercussions, which is the paramount objective of this paper. The systematic distance created between humanity and nature promotes a worldview in which natural resources are seen as mere commodities. Nature is seen as ripe fruit ready for extraction and exploitation. This perspective positions the natural world as *the other*, engendering a sense of disconnection that can lead to environmental deprivation.

Vandana Shiva argues that seeing nature as *the other* not only marginalizes traditional ecological knowledge but also risks erasing the intricate relationships that bind human beings to their environments (23). The resulting disconnection fosters unsustainable practices that

disregard ecological balance, ultimately endangering the very ecosystems that support human life.

2. Overview of Environmental Othering

In showing how othering can be manifested in the nature, the notion of land and forest grabbing as a new form of "othering" the flora and fauna has been a topic of interest in recent geographical research. Feil and Fraga explore the emerging patterns and implications of epigenetic in the environment (97). Moreover, Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones also present the concept of land and forest grabbing as a new form of othering the natural milieu (237). These two studies provide an initial understanding of how the environment is being "othered" through new forms of appropriation by various investors. Chan et al. offer a different perspective by addressing the question of why nature should be protected and suggest rethinking values and the environment (1462 – 1465). However, this study provides insight into the conflicting views and values associated with the environment, shedding light on the complexities and challenges surrounding the appropriation and othering of nature.

In contrast to earlier discussions, Mayfield and Levin delve into the contrasting influences of competitive exclusion on the evolutionary organization of communities. Although their study does not explicitly tackle the notion of environmental marginalization, it prompts important inquiries regarding the ways in which human activities may shape the structure and composition of ecological communities (1085-93). Their findings prompt a more profound consideration of how human activities are linked to natural processes, ultimately shaping the complex web of life in different ecosystems. This insight is crucial for understanding the broader implications of environmental othering.

Chen et al. explore the complex interplay between environmental presence, human exposure, and toxicity, highlighting the hidden dangers associated with chemical pollutants (5438-53). Their analysis serves as a severe reminder of the subtle interplay between humanity

and the natural world, employing vivid imagery to evoke the profound impact of these contaminants on our ecosystem. Through a meticulous exploration of the pervasive nature of these hazards, the authors craft a compelling narrative that underscores the urgency of addressing these latent threats to public health and environmental integrity.

Despite these research insights, knowledge gaps persist that necessitate further literary inquiry. For instance, studies by Feil and Fraga (2012) and Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones (2012) elucidate environmental othering, yet further exploration of its scope and implications across diverse contexts is essential. Future literary research could also examine the socio-economic and political dimensions of nature's othering, as well as the perspectives of local and indigenous communities affected by such appropriations.

Additionally, investigations into the environmental occurrence and toxicity of chemical pollutants (Chen et al. 2016; Lowry et al. 2012; Bonmatin et al. 2014) underscore the need for ongoing research into their long-term ecological impacts.

Literary studies can examine how pollutants collectively affect ecosystems and biodiversity, framing these impacts within larger environmental issues like climate change and habitat destruction, as portrayed in literary works.

However, literary critics have explored the concept of "othering", predominantly in the context of human-human relationships, often neglecting human-nature interactions.

For instance, Tafadzwa Sithole (2017) examines xenophobic attacks among African individuals in South Africa as a manifestation of othering, highlighting the perception of "foreigners" as threats (153).

Recognizing that nature can also be subjected to "othering" is crucial for literary scholars aiming to investigate the myriad ways in which African literature addresses themes of environmental marginalization. The discourse surrounding the othering of the environment yields profound insights into the complex dynamics of human-nature relationships, revealing

a needlepoint woven with threads of conflict, neglect, and resilience. Yet, as we tread deeper into this territory, it becomes clear that more extensive research is imperative; grappling with these complex phenomena is vital for illuminating their ramifications for both environmental sustainability and social justice. Bridging the existing knowledge gaps and venturing into future research pathways will be crucial not only for enriching our understanding but also for guiding policies and practices that foster a more equitable and sustainable coexistence with the natural world. In this endeavour, literature stands as a powerful lens, illuminating the often-overlooked intersections between ecological realities and the human experience.

3. African Literature and The Environment

In African literature, the term "environment" encompasses diverse interpretations. It can refer solely to non-human entities—material objects surrounding humanity—while others extend it to include both human and non-human elements. In both oral and written traditions, concepts such as land and river symbolize this interconnectedness. For the purposes of this paper, the environment is specifically defined as "everything non-human material that surrounds humans."

This paper posits that African literature has, until now, largely overlooked the theme of 'othering the nature' in a substantive manner. However, it is essential to acknowledge that certain African literary critics have begun to delve into the realm of environmental literature within their bodies of work. In particular, a number of these critics have undertaken this exploration following their engagement with and critical analysis of renowned 'African Masterpiece Novels,' thereby uncovering and illuminating various environmental issues worthy of scholarly examination.

For instance, one must examine the natural environment's role in Umuofia's social, judicial, religious, and economic systems when reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe depicts the ominous forest of Umuofia as a site instilled with a mysterious and potent

spiritual essence, an entity with which the community grapples. A close and analytical examination of the portrayal of the forest in this narrative reveals an undeniable truth: the Umuofia forest is rendered marginal in various respects. The forest in Umuofia symbolizes potential danger and a site for societal transgressions, as exemplified by its role as the dumping ground for twin infants. This marginalization of nature reflects a process of othering. Notable works that explore similar themes include Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and René Maran's *Batouala*. This study seeks to investigate environmental othering in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*, contributing to the discourse on human-nature interactions.

4. About The Novel*: The Fishermen*

In Chigozie Obioma's evocative novel *The Fishermen* familial relationships is meticulously unravelled, revealing the duality of connection that exists within an African family. The narrative skilfully juxtaposes the tender nurturing inherent in parental concerns against the backdrop of their potential to birth anxiety and strife, illustrating how African families struggle with natural environment. Obioma's prose weaves a rich variety of interactions that extend beyond the household, illuminating how families engage with the broader community—often through a lens of marginalization that seeks to other the natural world. Through a mixture of distressing relationships that range from tender to tumultuous, the text explores volatile emotional exchanges, depicting the fragility of human bonds alongside the natural environment. Each character's experience in *The Fishermen* serves as a vessel for broader themes of belonging, identity, and alienation, underscoring the complexities of familial loyalty when faced with external pressures. Despite the oft-explosive nature of these interactions, Obioma affirms that the familial unit remains a bastion of support and resilience, reinforcing its vital role in the lives of individuals even as it contrasts sharply with the indifferent expanse of nature. Thus, *The Fishermen* emerges as a profound exploration of the

interplay between familial love and societal expectations, ultimately championing the enduring strength of African familial bonds in a world fraught with division and challenge.

5. Othering The Natural World: The Omi-Ala River

The Fishermen's tale has a certain amount of innocent, naive, and natural world sensitivity since it is told through the perspective of Ben, the youngest sibling in the family.

> "My brothers and I became fishermen in January of 1996 after our father moved out of Akure" (Obioma 18).

This illustrating how youngsters rebel against their father's relocation for work (to Yola) by going to the prohibited river and trying to fish. It appears from the narrator's remarks that the children were not allowed to visit the river in front of their fathers since it is strictly forbidden:

> "We knew our parents would severely punish us if they ever found out we were going to the river" (Obioma 19).

In this instance, Obioma disproves the idea that someone should be punished only for going to the river. However, the purpose of this study is to illustrate how this process is carried out in the text rather than to provide a suspenseful answer to the intriguing concerns of why people are othering nature.

In the shadow of the "evil river", danger lingers like a sinister mist, wrapping around the hearts of the villagers in Akure. Obioma skilfully crafts a narrative where the mere act of approaching the Omi-Ala River is a transgression worthy of scorn and punishment. Ben's resigned utterance, "The beating was severe" in page 32 echoes the chilling enforcement of law and order in a community deeply wary of this forbidden waterway. A parent's anguish spills forth six weeks after he departs Yola, only to discover that his children have brazenly sought solace by the river's edge.

Again, father's disbelief words when he speak to his wife about this case reflect a domestic routine towards the omi-Ala River gaze: "Good gracious! Adaku. Three weeks. With you under the same roof?" (33). This revelation ignites a fire within him, illustrative of the collective anger that surges among the townsfolk, who see the river not merely as a body of water but as a malevolent force that tempts the unwary.

Obioma's characters wield language with exquisite precision to express their disdain for the Omi-Ala River, transforming personal grievances into communal outrage. The narrator reveals the complex point of human emotions woven through their interactions and responses. Father's fury is palpable as he retreats to his room in silent tumult, "He went to his room in a rage; he did not wait for an answer" (33), showcasing the deep-rooted fear and frustration that the mere existence of the river inspires. This moment of frustration encapsulates the profound sense of betrayal felt by those who uphold the societal boundaries surrounding the enigmatic water, illuminating the multifaceted nature of environmental othering in a realm where nature is demonized and revered in equal measure.

6. Natural World and The Sense of Evilness

The Omi-Ala River stands as a potent symbol of evil, reflecting a profound shift in perception among the inhabitants of Akure. Once revered as a source of life and sustenance, this river has devolved into a sinister entity, regarded with fear and trepidation. As expressed by the narrator, Ben, and deeply felt by his brothers, the river is now a treacherous place, "….began to see it as an evil place" (18), and imposing ominous consequences on those who dare to approach it. Obioma introduces the river as a symbol of evilness which has deeply dismantled the social organization in Akure where its streams flounder and turn into an aquatic painting of which umbilical reference links the Agwu family with misfortune (Sene 227). Another assertion that "the Omi-Ala was a dreadful river" in page 18 unambiguously encapsulates the deadly reputation it has garnered among the Akure people.

In the lexicon of Merriam-Webster (2011), an “evil place” is characterized as a site irrevocably linked to disaster and misfortune. This conceptual framework echoes profoundly within the work of Nigerian author Chigozie Obioma, particularly through the potent simile employed in his depiction of the river as “an evil place” in page 18.

Here, the river is not merely a geographical feature but a locus of profound tragedy, embodying the distress and misfortune that haunt the lives of those who inhabit its vicinity. The poignant assertion of the mother, “That River is such a place of evil and horror” in page 229, serves as a metaphorical retelling of this narrative, further underscoring the river’s association with horror and malevolence. This interplay of language reveals a critical lens on environmental othering, as evidenced by the erratic behaviour exhibited by the residents of Akure—a manifestation of their struggle against the intrinsic chaos and foreboding that the river represents.

Thus, Obioma invites a deeper examination of the relational dynamics between individuals and their environments, urging readers to confront the tragic narratives that shape lived experiences in such perilous locales.

In examining the use of flashback techniques within the narrative, it becomes evident that the author employs these methods to effectively bridge past experiences with present realities, thereby enriching the reader’s understanding of the central themes. It is seen that initially the river was not an evil place, rather it was a god-like object to the people of Akure. Specifically, the narrator Ben provides an illustrative perspective, suggesting that in the early stages of the river’s existence as a resource, there was a prevalent sentiment of appreciation among the community:

> “But it was once a pure river that supplied the earliest settlers with fish and clean drinking water. It surrounded Akure and snaked through its length and breadth. Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people

> worshipped it. They erected shrines in its name and courted the intercession and guidance of Iyemoja, Osha, mermaids, and other spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies" (Obioma 18)

This acknowledgment of the river's contributions not only highlights the historical significance of the setting but also reflects a poignant contrast to contemporary perceptions of the river's value. By unfolding these layers of time, the text invites readers to engage in a reflective dialogue about the evolution of communal relationships with natural landscapes, as well as the implications of such changes on present-day interactions.

The claim that the early relationship between nature and the Akure human population was one of the highest degrees of affection and intimacy is best illustrated by the extract mentioned above. There was a god-human connection. The aforementioned passage demonstrates this: the Omi-Ala River was formerly revered by the Akure people who thought it to be a god.

Obioma artfully conjures the sacred essence of both god and river through a rich use of metaphorical imagery, inviting the reader to traverse the waters of belief and the shores of identity, where the divine and the earthly merge in harmonious unity. Thus, through this literary lens, we glimpse the heart of a culture that cherished its symbiotic relationship with the natural world, rendering it a sacred narrative of existence itself.

7. Natural World and The Symbolism of Death

In *The Fishermen*, death and curses serve as central themes of Omi-Ala, with misfortune framed as an overarching identity that makes the river increasingly difficult to access (Sene 226). A significant moment occurs when the children encounter Abulu, a mentally troubled individual whose foreboding prophecy foreshadows impending tragedy:

> "He said, Ikenna, you shall die at the hands of a fisherman" (24).

This statement, delivered in a cryptic and haunting manner, serves not only as a pivotal plot point but also as a lens through which the intricate interplay between human destiny and environmental influences can be explored.

Obioma meticulously crafts his narrative to offer a profound and thought-provoking examination of human existence, infused with rich symbolism and vivid imagery that accentuate the complex relationships between individuals and their surroundings. He relates nature to death in various ways. Similar to a revelation that symbolises a haunted location, the river turns out to be a source of existential despair. Its waters flow and activate a spirit whose life-ending power radiates into the environment, evoking intense feelings of fear and terror among the Akure people.

Furthermore, Obioma illustrates the phenomenon of environmental othering to its highest degree. The river, a central motif in the story, emerges not merely as a physical entity but rather as a symbol imbued with cultural significance. Some characters perceive both the river and its fishermen as cursed, reflecting deep-seated fears and superstitions that influence their understanding of destiny and community ties. In his analysis of the novel, Sene argues that Omi-Ala River has ceased to be a source of dreams; instead, it has become a river characterized by its fatal consequences and inaccuracies (227). With its corteges of evil forces, Omi-Ala River obeys a dynamic of impulses of death.

Through his artistic rendering of these characters and their interactions with the environment, Obioma engages the reader in a reflective dialogue about the intersections of fate, cultural identity, and ecological consciousness. The narrative thus transcends its immediate storyline, inviting an exploration of the broader implications of how such environmental narratives are constructed and perceived within a culturally rich framework. In this way, *The Fishermen* not only tells a story of familial strife but also interrogates the underlying cultural and environmental dynamics that inform the human experience.

In advancing the discourse on environmental othering, it is imperative to consider the nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of death as it intertwines with the Omi-Ala River in the literary composition of Obioma. The dearth of scholarly inquiry into the ramifications of environmental degradation on nonhuman entities illuminates the significance of Obioma's observations, particularly concerning the Akure people's intricate relationship with the river. His vivid and evocative descriptions grant a profound texture to our understanding, employing a rich textile of analogies that critique the destructive agency of humanity upon the natural world.

Within the narrative, the character of Ben serves as a conduit for this exploration, offering a first-hand account of the reality faced by the Omi-Ala. He perceptively articulates the degradation occurring at the river's banks, denoting an unsettling phenomenon wherein the Omi-Ala River is subjected to an excess of "fetish rituals" (Obioma 19) that serve to further alienate both the watercourse and those who partake in its desecration. Thus, through Obioma's lens, the Omi-Ala River transcends its geographical significance, becoming emblematic of broader themes of environmental alienation and the ethical implications inherent in the Akure people's relationship with their environment. This examination not only amplifies the existing discourse on ecological critique but also invites readers to grapple with the moral complexities that underpin human interactions with the natural world. The storyteller continues, saying:

> "This was supported by accounts of corpses, animal carcasses, and other ritualistic materials floating on the surface of the river or lying on its banks. Then early in 1995, the mutilated body of a woman was found in the river, her vital body parts dismembered" (Obioma 19).

By carrying out undesirable activities beside the river, Obioma may be telling the Akure people that they have already lost the river's beauty and now despise it. It is hopeless that hazardous chemicals are currently floating or resting on Omi-Ala banks, as Sandip Kumar

Mishra contends, “the present environmental crisis is a bi-product of human culture” (168). The river has turned into an opponent and an “other”, no longer a friend to the Akure people. Because Ben, the narrator of our text, states that, “when Abulu climbed the bridge, he immediately went close to the railing and, holding on to it, began urinating into the river”, (199), the despoliations carried out by each member of the Akure along the river also represent the form of othering. This study questions Obioma’s analogy that nature is no longer safe, which he examines by showing how insane people have become indifferent to the river. The river is now an “other” thing in this instance as a result of “othering”. Even dead bodies are dumped in it, demonstrating how marginalized it is. Diego Andreucci and Christos Zografos contend that “othering” is closely related to the creation of the current natural disaster (1), citing Naomi Klein (2016) in support of their claim.

8. Religion and Environmental Othering

The contemporary African secular perspective, often referred to as the enlightenment mentality, has emerged over the past few centuries. Advocates of this perspective initially viewed it as a means to free African individuals from reliance on the natural world, which they associated with superstition and the Christian church, by prioritizing reason, objectivity, and progress. This led to a self-serving desire to control and surpass the natural environment, manipulating it to meet human needs while largely ignoring the potential consequences and ethical concerns.

In this framework, humanity is viewed as distinct from the environment; traditional animistic beliefs that regarded nature as a sacred, living entity were replaced by a secular, mechanistic view that treats nature merely as a source of material resources devoid of life or spirit. This can be seen as the crisis of modernity, characterized by the failure to view nature as a manifestation of spirit, instead only valuing it for economic or technological purposes.

This has resulted in ecological ignorance and destructive behaviours. This is also well presented in the novel *The Fishermen.*

Obioma crafts a lively young narrator, Ben, whose youthful essence is artfully adorned with a vibrant lexicon that breathes life into the narrative. This narrator serves as a canal for the river's ancient truth, recounting a time before the shadow of religion fell upon it. Through the use of past tense, the narrator evokes a sense of wistfulness for the river's former sanctity, suggesting that it has lost its sacred status among the Akure people. Once revered, the river has now been tainted by the community's betrayal, viewed with suspicion and relegated to the periphery of their lives. With an earnest urgency, the narrator uncovers the reasons behind this 'othering', illuminating how the infringement of religion has reshaped perceptions, transforming a once-beloved Omi-Ala River into a source of fear and division that must be shunned at all costs:

> "This changed when the colonialists came from Europe and introduced the Bible, which then prized Omi-Ala's adherents from it, and the people, now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place. A cradle besmeared" (18)

The quotation exemplifies how religion functions as a significant factor in the construction of otherness concerning the Omi-Ala River within the Akure community. Historically, the Akure people held the river in high esteem, perceiving it as a deity prior to the intrusive influence of British colonialism, which instigated a shift in belief systems through the imposition of Christianity (Obioma 18). Under the doctrinal teachings of the Bible, the river was subsequently re-contextualized, acquiring connotations of stigma and being framed as a social adversary by the Christian populace. Obioma elucidates that this theological transformation illustrates a broader tendency whereby the rejection of the natural world is precipitated by religious ideologies—most notably, those derived from biblical narratives. Thus, the interplay between religious beliefs and environmental perception becomes evident,

highlighting how colonial religious frameworks can facilitate the marginalization of indigenous ecological understandings.

9. Environmental Othering Sustained by Government Actions

The government, it seems, plays a hand in the relentless othering of nature, a phenomenon possibly steeped in the vestiges of religious belief. The lunatic Abulu's haunting proclamation, "Haven't you heard? The government has banned people from coming here" (21) resonates with unsettling clarity. Through this, Obioma unveils yet another layer of a grim embroidery—how the very institutions forged by colonial hands, entwined with the doctrines of Christianity, emerge as principal architects of environmental discrimination within the Akure community. This theme finds echoes in the scholarship of Diego Andreucci and Christos Zografos, who assert that environmental othering can serve as a potent instrument of governance (2). Moreover, Obioma deepens this discourse by illustrating that even the most marginalized souls recognize the lurking perils of the Omi-Ala River. This awareness powerfully underscores the intricate interplay of religion and state, revealing how profoundly these forces shape perceptions of nature and community in their wake.

10. Human-Nature Interdependence

In the lush landscape painted by Obioma's prose, the river stands as a living entity, both revered and feared. The children, undeterred by warnings that echo like distant thunder, are drawn to its shimmering allure—a siren's call laced with promise and peril. Their unwavering faith in the river's embrace speaks to a profound interdependence that binds humanity to the natural world, a relationship not merely defined by caution but by an intrinsic longing to connect. Head Lesley's insight into human impact as an external force reminds us of the dynamics at play, yet Obioma delves deeper, illuminating the vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of this coexistence (837).

In *The Fishermen,* the river emerges not just as a backdrop but as a character in its own right, exciting with the hopes and dreams of the Akure people. The boys' fervent desire to gaze upon its flowing waters encapsulates a belief that transcends mere survival; it embodies a spiritual tie to the land that nurtures and sustains them. Through this lens, Obioma unveils a world where human and nature are not adversaries but partners, each shaping the other in a dance of life that celebrates the richness of their shared existence. The river, then, is more than a geographical feature; it is a testament to the layered relationships that define the Akure community's identity, a reflection of their heartbeats echoing in harmony with the natural rhythms of the earth. The storyteller states:

> "Yet we did not give it a thought until one of our neighbours—a petty trader who walked the town hawking fried groundnuts on a tray she carried on her head—caught us on the path to the river and reported us to Mother" (19).

Once more, it is demonstrated that the concept of the interaction between humans and nature is evident in Obioma's *The Fishermen*. Until their neighbour caught them and reported them to their mother, Ben and his brothers would not quit scaling the communal fence that keeps the Akure people from accessing the river. This implies that the children would not have been able to quit visiting the river if they had not been able to locate them and notify their parents.

Once more, this intricate interplay is vividly illuminated when the river is likened to an abandoned mother. In the novel, it is articulated that the river has been "long abandoned by the inhabitants of Akure town like a mother abandoned by her children" (Obioma 18), a poignant reflection of its terrifying transformation. The simile, "like a mother abandoned by her children," resonates deeply with one of this paper's central themes—how nature, too, faces marginalization, akin to how a child might forsake a mother. Through this deliberate invocation of literary craft; Obioma masterfully intertwines the destinies of the Akure people and the river,

imparting a fraught sentiment of neglect. His artistic vision cleverly highlights the painful realities of environmental othering, revealing the stark parallels between the plight of the Omi-Ala River and that of the forsaken maternal figure. In this nuanced portrayal, Obioma elevates the discourse on nature's relegation to that of the most intimate human relationships, compelling readers to confront the danger of abandonment in both the natural world and our own lives.

Onwudinjo et al. posit that the relationship between humanity and nature transcends the mere adoration an art lover feels towards a masterpiece; it penetrates deeper into the fabric of existence itself (514). He highlights the troubling tendency of human beings to marginalize nature, to treat it as an entity set apart from the self, despite the undeniable beauty that inspires admiration and even envy (516). This observation prompts a crucial distinction: while humans frequently revel in nature's splendor, such appreciation should not be an aloof admiration from a distance but rather a heartfelt engagement born of commitment and connection. The bond between humanity and the natural world ought to resemble the companionship shared between close friends, characterized by mutual respect and shared experiences, rather than the estranged dynamics of an enemy or an "other." In this light, the enduring presence of nature in human consciousness calls for a relationship steeped in involvement, where admiration blossoms into a profound kinship.

In his exploration of human interconnection, Obioma subtly critiques the behaviours of the Akure people and other regions of Africa, urging them to cease their environmental othering. This idea is further illuminated through his use of metaphor, as he draws comparisons, "Like many such rivers in Africa, Omi-Ala was once believed to be a god; people worshipped it" (18). This, not only evokes a vivid image of the Omi-Ala river as one among Africa's breath-taking waterways but also casts a shadow on the Akure people, suggesting they have strayed from the beauty and harmony embodied by their surroundings. The narrator's voice resonates

with melancholy, evoking a time when the river's landscapes were not just picturesque but conveyed a captivating allure, inviting reflection on what has been lost amidst the changing tides of culture and connection.

11. Conclusion

This paper concludes that Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* powerfully illustrates the process of environmental othering within African literature, particularly through the symbolic portrayal of the Omi-Ala River. The novel demonstrates how cultural, religious, and governmental forces collaborate to marginalize nature, transforming the once-revered river into a site of fear, pollution, and societal taboo. Obioma's narrative reveals a gradual deterioration of the human-nature relationship—once sacred and symbiotic—into one of estrangement and antagonism. This transformation is not merely environmental but deeply cultural and spiritual, rooted in colonial and religious shifts that redefined nature as profane or evil. Through the lens of ecocriticism, the study underscores how environmental degradation is both a literal and metaphorical process driven by human cultural practices, beliefs, and governance. Obioma's depiction of the river's decline—from a god-like figure to a receptacle of waste and fear—parallels the wider systemic "othering" of the environment in African societies influenced by colonial modernity and religious orthodoxy. Ultimately, the paper argues for a renewed literary and ethical engagement with nature in African literature, advocating for a reclamation of traditional ecological wisdom and a reimagining of human-nature interdependence. It calls on future scholarship to address the gaps in literary ecocriticism concerning environmental marginalization and to explore the transformative potential of literature in fostering sustainable environmental consciousness.

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