

TOXIC LANDSCAPES, NIGERIAN CINEMA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

One of the most pressing concerns facing Nigeria today is environmental degradation, with oil spills, deforestation, and pollution posing enormous threat to public health and the environment. Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood, serves as a reflection of the country's social and environmental realities. From corruption and poverty to politics, Nigerian cinema has tackled a wide range of thematic issues that shape the nation's identity. Through close readings of *Black November*, *Milkmaid*, *Shanty Town*, and *Gangs of Lagos*, this study shows how filmmakers convert contaminated environments into cinematic testimony and transform marginalised bodies into agents of insurgent visibility. Drawing on eclectic theories of Anthropocene, a subset of Ecocriticism, Capitalocene and Ecocinema, the study notes that Nigerian cinema functions as a counter-archive of slow violence. The paper argues that contemporary Nigerian cinema constructs what may be called toxic landscapes and insurgent scenes, aesthetic and narrative formations through which environmental violence, infrastructural abandonment, and ecological inequality are rendered visible and politically legible. Moving beyond a narrow petro-centric framework, the paper buttresses the fact that Nigerian films articulate a broad environmental justice discourse encompassing oil extraction, desertification, urban toxicity, rural displacement and cultural dispossession. These films challenge the normalisation of ecological harm and reframe landscape as a site of persistent struggle for environmental justice. While acknowledging the contradictions of commercial cinema, the paper notes that the Nigerian screen culture remains a crucial arena where environmental injustice is narrated, contested, and reimagined and environmental advocacy is sustained and conveyed to a larger audience across the world.

Keywords: Nigerian Films, Environmental Violence, Toxic Landscapes, Urban Toxicity

Introduction

The Nigerian movie industry which is popularly called Nollywood is known and celebrated for its prolific output and distinct narrative styles as well as the crucial roles it plays in shaping people's socio-cultural, political and environmental consciousness. It has become an integral part of the Nigerian culture and a powerful platform for reflecting the country's evolving environmental dynamics. This paper sets out to explore the nexus of these two forces: the vibrant Nollywood film industry and the global discourse on climate change and environmental sustainability. The choice of Nollywood as the focal point for this study is a conscious and intentional recognition of the industry's growing influence on global discourse in which climate change is at the forefront (Elinwa Onotina 2). This also shows a remarkable departure from the documentary films that are usually employed to showcase environmental challenges and climate change concerns (Okpadah Ogheneruro 3). The study is founded on the fact that ecology has become a major theme in African cinema today as evident in both contemporary feature films and documentary films (Iheka Cajetan 87). With an output arguably surpassing Hollywood and Bollywood in terms of quantity, and third in terms of revenue, Nollywood has risen to become the second largest film industry in the world. Its impact extends far beyond Nigerian borders, touching the lives of millions of viewers and inspiring film-makers all over the world (Uchenna Onuzulike 287). What sets Nollywood apart is its ability to resonate with local audiences by addressing issues deeply rooted in their daily life experiences in both English and indigenous languages. Besides, Nollywood films are cheaper, have wider appeal and coverage, and relatively easy to access by consumers given the fact that their marketing budgets and distribution channels both online and offline are quite minimal. This has made Nollywood films to become strong medium and veritable tools of advocacy in combating the various forms of climate change and environmental challenges confronting global ecosystems.

Environmental destruction in Nigeria is neither episodic nor accidental; it is structural, historical, and unevenly distributed. Oil extraction in the Niger Delta, desert encroachment, banditry and insurgency in the north, toxic urban infrastructures in Lagos, Onitsha, Port-Harcourt, etc. and coastal vulnerability together produce a geography of ecological precarity and marginalised voices and vulnerable communities. These crises rarely register as spectacular catastrophe. Instead, they manifest as incremental attrition,

poisoned soil, contaminated water, decreased productivity, respiratory illness, disappearing livelihoods, what Rob Nixon (2011) famously theorises as slow violence (2). Slow violence is temporally dispersed, often invisible, and therefore politically difficult to mobilise. Cinema intervenes in this perceptual gap. Nigerian filmmakers increasingly translate environmental harm into narrative and visual language, making slow violence legible through storytelling. These films operate as aesthetic infrastructures of attention. They compel spectators to witness ecological injustice that might otherwise remain abstract or bureaucratically obscured occasioned by political considerations and quest for economic domination.

This paper proposes two analytic concepts: toxic landscapes and insurgent scenes. Toxic landscapes refer to cinematic spaces saturated with contamination, abandonment, and infrastructural neglect. These are not neutral backdrops but active agents shaping narrative and subjectivity. Insurgent scenes are moments where characters refuse ecological erasure through protest, testimony, survival and adaptation strategies, or moral confrontation. Such scenes convert spectators into witnesses and position cinema as a political medium.

While earlier scholarship emphasised Niger Delta petro-politics, recent Nigerian cinema broadens the environmental frame to incorporate other equally crucial environmental and socio-political issues that beleague the polity. Films now depict desert ecologies, urban slums, and sacred waterfronts as sites of environmental injustice. These works demand an expanded understanding of environmental justice that includes gendered vulnerability, displacement, and cultural erasure. Nigerian cinema serves as a veritable archive of toxic modernity and a cultural record of how development produces abandonment.

Despite its global influence, wide coverage, appeal, and thematic diversity, Nollywood's engagement with pressing environmental issues like deforestation, pollution, corrupt institutional powers, toxic landscapes, insurgent scenes, climate change, environmental infraction and resource exploitation remains curiously understudied. Previous studies on cinematic representation of environment have concentrated largely on oil pollution in the Niger Delta using one or two films to capture the situation. Other studies have focused mainly on documentary films in the depiction of environmental challenges thereby limiting the coverage and the dissemination of its message as well as the reach of its advocacy. This paper examines Nollywood films' depictions of environmental and climate change issues and their complex socio-economic, cultural and political spillover

impacts in Nigeria, while exploring their potential for raising awareness, influencing perceptions, and inspiring sustainable practices for a healthy earth system. The specific objectives of the study are to identify and discuss dominant environmental themes, narrative strategies and visual effects used in Nollywood films; examine the social, cultural, and economic consequences of environmental hazards portrayed in Nollywood films; assess the integration of traditional ecological practices in Nollywood's environmental narratives, and investigate, collate and document data on Nollywood films and materials that have potentials to promote environmental advocacy, awareness and sustainable practices among viewers in Nigeria and across the globe for policymakers, stakeholders, government and non-governmental institutions.

Environmental Crisis and the Cinematic Imagination

In the past two decades, there has been a growing focus on ecomedia and recently ecocinema, especially in the area of documentary films as a cognitive tool for environmental awareness, emphasising cognition over emotional experience (Pat Brereton 25). Before then, ecocritical studies had relied mainly on traditional textual analysis. Major works in this regard have therefore focused largely on documentary films in calling global attention to environmental challenges, the need for sustainable environment and climate change concerns. The use of documentary films has not really facilitated the desired results needed for environmental sustainability because of their lack of wider audiences across various social and economic strata. Some scholars seem to neglect the roles fictional films as major components of ecocinema play in inspiring personal, collective and political action, fostering a shift in daily environmental choices (Willoquet-Maricondi 15).

This is considering the fact that fictional films which Nollywood represents, communicate with wider and larger audiences and influence audiences across social, economic, cultural and political strata than documentary films do. Beattie et al. argue that ecocinema creates deep eco-memories in viewers, influencing the survival of ecosystems (115). These memories seem necessary in shaping people's consciousness towards safeguarding the environment and reducing the global tension climate change issues have generated. Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism as the study of the interaction between literature and

the natural world highlights the interconnectedness of human civilisation with nature and the potential danger inherent in disconnection through unnecessary infractions (xix).

In the wake of intense global warming and erratic climatic situations, Ugwanyi (96) submits that many scholars have responded to the clarion call for the protection of the earth from human violation and activities. Despite the momentum gained by environmental studies in the West by ecocriticism scholars who concentrated on textual analysis like Slaymaker (2007), Nixon (2011) Caminero-Santangelo (2011), Rueckert (1996), Buell (2005) Crowley (2015) and Coupe (2000) who specifically asks the world to debate nature in order to defend nature (5) among others, there is a notable dearth of corresponding efforts from African academia. This gap, particularly in environmental film or cinema criticism in Nigeria, underscores the need for a comprehensive exploration of the environmental discourse in the humanities (Okpadah 1). Furthermore, Iheka (93) argues that ecology should remain a prominent theme in African cinema, especially in Nigeria, with contemporary films and documentaries highlighting environmental principles. However, he critiques the predominant focus on human-centric environmental justice, urging a more comprehensive consideration of the interconnectedness of human and non-human lives in African societies (Iheka 4).

Most studies on environmental representation in Nollywood films have a monothematic thrust and concentrate on one or two films from one region unlike this present study that focuses on various environmental concerns across the geopolitical regions of Nigeria highlighting their peculiarities, challenges, resultant risks or consequences. The emphasis on human life in African ecocritical studies may overlook the potential of literary texts to envision sustainability across species and ecosystems. For instance, while using films to represent violated environments, Audu (28) highlights the collective exploitation of scarce resources by communities and institutional powers, leading to environmental degradation and resultant dire consequences in Northern Nigeria. Joseph, et al. (125) attribute conflicts to struggles for scarce resources, illegal mining of solid mineral resources, oil exploration, corrupt institutional powers, abuse of political and environmental resources that have generated instability in the polity in Southern Nigeria as depicted in Nollywood films. Accordingly, Nwankwo et al. specifically address the escalating conflict between farming communities and herders, emphasising its implications for environmental sustainability in the Northern region of Nigeria (203). In order to underscore the importance of clean and sustainable environment, Elinwa (2) highlights the active role of the audience in

consuming media, particularly film contents, as they choose, react to, and contemplate cinematic messages. This validates the choice of this study in its argument that films, especially fictional films, have wider coverage than print texts.

According to Chris Tong (2013), African cinema as a postcolonial phenomenon, is engaging the complexities of African postcolonial identity (118). Nollywood, as a prominent cultural product, has addressed socio-political challenges, thus making significant contributions to conflict management and intervention (Udomisor & Sonuga 23). Also, Olajide (136) asserts that the environment is a complex concept encompassing natural systems and biological species, influencing human relationships with the environment. Also, Ebekue and Nwoye (2019), Adeduntan (2018), Okpadah (2022), and Olajide (2018) have all foregrounded environment in Nollywood films through monothematic focus thereby lacking encompassing approach in their studies. It is evident that while environmental themes permeate African narrative engagements, Nollywood's specific contributions in the area highlighting toxic landscapes and insurgent scenes aimed at environmental injustice and sustainable advocacy remain understudied, creating a critical gap in understanding the representation of environmental concerns and climate change in Nollywood given its wider and more influential coverage and reach globally. Nollywood films have been used largely to advocate for good governance, socio-political and economic sustainability, but a gap still remains in environmental justice given the Nigerian new realities of insecurity and institutional corruption. This gap hinders our grasp of Nollywood's potentials to shape environmental awareness and the films' potential insights into the complexities of environmental challenges in Nigeria and beyond.

The data for the study comprises a diverse selection of six Nollywood films. Each film is selected based on purposive sampling method to represent the distinct thematic proximities, the environmental challenges portrayed and peculiarities of specific geopolitical zones and periods in Nigeria. This is also done to ensure diversity in terms of genres, periods, thematic proximities and peculiar environmental challenges. The selected films are: *From the North*, *Milkmaid* (2020), *Gang of Lagos* (2023), and *Shanty Town* (2023). The scope of the data spans 2012 to 2023, the period of heightened climate change and greater attention to environmental justice by Nigerian people and government. These films were produced after the ratification by the Nigerian government of international agreements on the protection of the environment, for example, Kyoto Protocol and Paris

Agreement. The data is also selected to reflect diversity in environmental themes, issues and peculiarities across the geopolitical regions in Nigeria, ranging from deforestation, war, political crisis, banditry, insurgency, pollution, oil exploration, corrupt institutional powers, quest for economic dominance, climate change and environmental injustice, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of environmental representations and challenges in Nollywood films.

Considering its multidimensional nature, the paper adopts an eclectic approach by using Scott MacDonald's Ecocinema and Adam Trexler's Anthropogenic theories while Critical Content Analysis (CCA) methodology by Robert T. Craig aids the analytic structure. Within the context of environmental and climate change discourse, Anthropocene (Anthropogenic) which is human-induced or human-caused phenomena best serves the purpose of the research under the broader view of ecocriticism theory. It is therefore considered relevant in the context of how human activities impact on the environment. Critical Content Analysis is adopted with the aims to analyse and interpret how Nollywood movies depict environmental consequences within historical and contemporary. This is handled through examining the visual images, language, narrative structures, and thematic choices employed by the creators of the identified films. Ecocinema is a subfield of film studies that focuses on the representation of environmental themes and issues in cinema. The study therefore has an interdisciplinary approach that examines how films engage with ecological and environmental concerns. It shares strong similarities with ecocriticism which is a literary theory that focuses on the representation of the natural environment in literature. In the context of ecocinema, the analysis of movies that depict environmental problems, ecological relationships and human interactions is very vital to the overall understanding of environmental justice. It explores how cinematic techniques, narrative structures, visual images and language contribute to shape and reshape environmental discourse that pertain to cinema and films.

Environmental justice scholarship insists that ecological harm is inseparable from social inequality. Pollution and risk are disproportionately imposed on marginalised populations (Bullard 20). Nigerian cinema dramatises this asymmetry. Villages poisoned by oil spills, urban poor trapped in infrastructural decay, and women navigating militarised desert landscapes reveal the social stratification of ecological crisis. Petro-culture studies extend this analysis by treating oil not merely as a resource but as a cultural system (LeMenager 14; Szeman 17). Oil shapes imaginaries of modernity, prosperity, and national identity.

Nigerian petro-cinema exposes the paradox of petro-wealth alongside mass poverty. Yet contemporary films go beyond oil to depict what might be termed toxic modernity: a condition in which infrastructures of development generate new forms of dispossession.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necro-politics (2003) is instructive here. Toxic landscapes operate as zones where life is rendered precarious and expendable as we currently see in Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps scattered all over the country. Environmental injustice becomes a form of slow necro-politics, a governance regime that distributes death through ecological neglect, and life through political patronage and favouritism. This is evident in various quests for 'urban renewal'. For example, *Holy Ghost Bus Terminal* in Enugu has been blown away by the rain of the year thereby creating a more precarious scene. Nigerian cinema documents these zones in an attempt to refuse their invisibility. Cinema thus functions as what Jennifer Wenzel (2019) calls an "infrastructural aesthetic": an art form capable of revealing hidden systems. Nigerian filmmakers use film as creative media for exposing the infrastructures of extraction, abandonment, and violence that structure everyday life.

The texts and context of the work are predicated on the Niger Delta films that confront oil extraction. One of such is *Black November* which constructs a transnational narrative linking local suffering to global petro-dollar politics. The film alternates between Delta creeks and Western diplomatic spaces, while visualising the uneven geography of power. In the dialogue between Ebieri and Tamuni, it could be deduced that polluted waterways serve as visual evidence, while hostage drama functions as allegory for global complicity. The film's insurgent scenes are captured through courtroom confrontations, televised testimony, and militant spectacle. They transform ecological harm into moral accusation. Even critics who note melodramatic excess acknowledge the film's achievement in internationalising Niger Delta grievances. It produces what Nixon calls a "spectacularisation of slow violence", making gradual harm visible through cinematic crisis.ga

On the other hand, *Oloibiri* adopts a historical register. Returning to the first site of oil discovery, the film narrates decades of deferred promises. Rusting infrastructure becomes a monument of abandonment. The poisoned landscape operates as memory archive. Insurgency here is communal rather than spectacular: village assemblies and testimonies

articulate collective grievance. The film underscores the fact that environmental injustice is historical continuity, not isolated incident. Together, they establish a grammar of petro-cinema: contaminated water as index, damaged bodies as evidence, and memory as resistance. They convert landscape into a site of toxic politics.

AS the banters between Scar and Inem indicate, Shanty Town can be appropriated as a powerful environmental text disguised as a crime drama. Beneath its narrative of gang politics, survival, and urban violence lies a sustained meditation on ecological despoliation, abandonment and the environmental architecture of inequality. For Chief Fernandez, the series construct the slum not simply as social backdrop but as an ecological system, a toxic environment that shapes bodies, behaviour, and possibilities of life. Through this lens, *Shanty Town* becomes a study of urban environmental injustice, revealing how poverty is spatially organised through degraded landscapes.

The settlement at the centre of the series is filmed as an environment saturated with waste, congestion, heat, and infrastructural decay. Water is stagnant; pathways are muddy and narrow; buildings lean into each other as if collapsing under accumulated neglect. This visual density creates an atmosphere of suffocation. The environment is not a neutral scenery; it exerts pressure on every character.

Environmental justice scholarship argues that marginalised communities disproportionately inhabit polluted and unsafe spaces. The slum in *Shanty Town* exemplifies this distribution of risk. Toxicity seems to be normalised. Residents do not experience environmental degradation as crisis but as everyday condition. The film again visualises what Rob Nixon calls slow violence harm that accumulates gradually and becomes invisible through familiarity (34). The camera frequently lingers on material textures: rusted metal, plastic waste, murky water, exposed wiring. These details function as environmental evidence. They document a city that has externalised its waste onto its poorest citizens.

The most striking environmental theme in *Shanty Town* is abandonment. The state is present as forced police raids, political manipulation but absent as infrastructure. No sanitation systems, stable housing, or safe public spaces. This selective governance reveals what might be called ecological necro politics: a system that designates certain populations as disposable by denying them environmental safety. The slum becomes a zone of neglect. Its residents are expected to survive within toxicity. Their endurance

masks the violence of abandonment. The series exposes how environmental harm is produced not only by pollution but by political decisions about whose environments matter. This is intensified in the dialogue between Inem and Salewa.

Despite toxic conditions, the settlement is not portrayed as lifeless; it is a symbolisation of dense survival ecology. Informal economies transform waste into resource; water is shared, reused, rationed; spaces double as homes, markets, and shelters; the environment forces innovation. This is crucial: the film avoids depicting residents as passive victims; they are environmental strategists; they navigate scarcity with intelligence and creativity; survival becomes ecological literacy which is an intimate knowledge of how to live inside degradation without surrendering dignity; children play in polluted spaces; women manage domestic life amid infrastructural collapse while men negotiate territorial control over fragile ground. Every gesture absolutely reveals adaptation to environmental constraint.

Women in *Shanty Town* carry disproportionate ecological labour; they fetch water, maintain fragile homes, care for sick bodies affected by environmental stress even as the domestic sphere becomes an ecological frontline. Feminist environmental theory emphasises that environmental harm is gendered; the film visualises this reality without didactic exposition. Maternal figures embody resilience but also exhaustion. Their bodies absorb the cost of toxicity. Care becomes a form of environmental resistance, sustaining life where systems have withdrawn support.

The series communicates environmental pressure through sensory aesthetics. Lighting is often harsh and saturated, suggesting heat and confinement. Sound design emphasises crowd noise, generators, and distant sirens. There is little silence. The slum is acoustically overcrowded. This sensory density mirrors ecological compression. Too many bodies occupy too little safe space. The viewer experiences claustrophobia, which translates environmental injustice into effect. The series does not tell us the environment is oppressive; it makes us feel it.

One of the most provocative readings of *Shanty Town* is that violence emerges partly from environmental compression. Overcrowding, scarcity, and abandonment generate social volatility. Crime is not excused, but contextualised as ecological outcome. When environments deny stable livelihood, informal and illicit economies proliferate. The movie

suggests that the city produces its own underworld by refusing environmental equity. Toxic landscapes become incubators of desperation where social crimes fester.

The settlement reflects the larger city's contradictions. Lagos appears elsewhere in the series as modern, glittering, and aspirational. The slum exists in its shadow, absorbing waste and labour. Environmental injustice is revealed as structural: prosperity depends on invisible sacrifice zones. The series thus critiques developmental narratives that celebrate urban growth while ignoring ecological inequality. The slum is not outside the city; it is its hidden foundation. The settlement is not merely a setting; it is the central character, a toxic landscape that scripts human behaviour. Yet within this landscape, insurgent life persists. Residents refuse disappearance. Their survival constitutes quiet resistance to ecological abandonment. The movie ultimately asks a moral question: what does it mean for a society to tolerate environments where survival itself becomes labour? By forcing viewers to inhabit the slum's sensory world, *Shanty Town* turns entertainment into environmental witnessing.

Environmental injustice is not confined to rural extraction zones. *Shanty Town* situates ecological crisis within Lagos megacity. The slum emerges as an urban toxic landscape defined by overcrowding, waste, and infrastructural collapse breeding various forms of criminalities. Environmental neglect merges with political corruption. The film uses claustrophobic framing and saturated colours to evoke suffocation. Stagnant water and decaying structures become visual metaphors for systemic abandonment. Yet residents construct informal survival economies and strategies. Toxicity becomes paradoxically generative: from abandonment emerge precarious forms of life.

Insurgent scenes arise through collective resistance to exploitation. The urban poor refuse invisibility. Their struggle reframes environmental justice as a question of urban citizenship. The slum is not merely a degraded space; it is a contested political territory. African urban studies scholars note that megacities concentrate environmental risk (Simone 19). *Shanty Town* renders this concentration visible, insisting that environmental justice must include urban ecologies.

At first glance, *Gangs of Lagos* appears to be a stylised crime drama about political thuggery and generational violence. Yet read environmentally, the film is a meditation on urban ecology, sacred geography, and the slow extraction of community life by predatory development. The film constructs Lagos Island not merely as a social environment but as

a contested ecological zone, a space where land, water, memory, and bodies are continuously mined for profit and political control. Environmental themes operate quietly but persistently, revealing how violence in the film is inseparable from environmental dispossession. The city is not the background. It is the film's central organism.

The Lagos depicted in *Gangs of Lagos* is an extractive environment. Political elites treat neighbourhoods as resource fields: places from which labour, loyalty, and violence can be harvested. The same logic that governs natural resource extraction governs human communities. Youths are recruited, consumed, and discarded. The environment becomes a metaphor for depletion. The film repeatedly frames crowded streets and waterfront edges to show spatial pressure. There is no empty space. Every corner is a contested territory. Urban density is not simply demographic; it is ecological compression. Too many bodies are forced to compete for shrinking ground. This scarcity fuels gang conflict. In this sense, the city mirrors a mined landscape. Communities are stripped of stability the way soil is stripped of nutrients. The violence we see is environmental violence translated into social form.

One of the most striking features of the film is its attention to shrines, ritual spaces, and waterfront sacred sites. These locations anchor the community's historical relationship to land and water. They represent ecological memory, a reminder that the city existed before its commercialisation. When political forces instrumentalise these sacred spaces, the film suggests a deeper form of environmental injustice: cultural ecology is being destroyed. Sacred landscapes are not just religious sites; they are repositories of communal identity. Their corruption signals ecological and spiritual rupture. The camera treats these spaces with reverence. Lighting softens, sound quiets, and the pace slows. These moments contrast sharply with the chaotic urban scenes, emphasising the fragile survival of ecological memory within violent modernity.

Characters in the film are treated as extensions of the environment. Their bodies absorb the violence of space. Young men are recruited into gangs because the environment offers few alternatives. Their physical endurance becomes a resource extracted by political actors. The film suggests that ecological neglect produces human vulnerability. When education, infrastructure, and environmental safety are absent, bodies become the last

available currency. Violence is not random; it is structured by environmental deprivation. The city consumes its youth the way extractive industries consume land.

Crime in *Gangs of Lagos* is not merely a moral failure; it is an ecological logic. When environments restrict legitimate survival pathways, illicit economies flourish. The film portrays gang networks as alternative infrastructures filling the vacuum left by state abandonment. This does not justify violence, but reframes it. Criminal networks function as distorted social ecosystems. They provide belonging, protection, and income in a landscape that withholds these essentials. Environmental injustice thus produces political parallel worlds. Every conflict in the film is spatial. Characters in the film such as Ify, Obalala, Gift, and Kazeem fight over territory, access, and visibility. Control of space equals control of survival. The city becomes a chessboard where human lives are moved by invisible political hands. Urban theorists argue that modern cities organise inequality through zoning and displacement. The film visualises this process at street level. Certain neighbourhoods are designated as sacrifice zones, spaces where violence is expected and tolerated. These zones protect the illusion of order elsewhere.

Gangs of Lagos can be read as an environmental allegory of urban extraction. The film portrays a city that feeds on its margins, consuming communities while marketing itself as modern spectacle. Sacred spaces erode, waterfronts become battlegrounds, and bodies carry the burden of spatial injustice. Yet the film also archives resilience. It remembers that communities existed before their exploitation. By foregrounding sacred geography and environmental memory, the narrative insists that urban space is not empty terrain but living history. The city is both wound and witness. Through its stylised violence and sensory intensity, *Gangs of Lagos* forces viewers to inhabit an ecology of abandonment. It transforms crime drama into environmental testimony, revealing that the most dangerous weapon in the film is not the gun but the landscape itself.

Milkmaid is often discussed as a film about insurgency, trauma, and female resilience in Northern Nigeria. Yet beneath its political narrative lies a profound environmental story. The film is structured around landscape: arid terrain, fragile water access, and ecological scarcity shape every movement of the characters. Read environmentally, *Milkmaid* becomes a meditation on desert ecology and the gendered burden of survival in a seemingly collapsing environment. Violence in the film is not only ideological or military, it is also ecological. The desert is an active force that scripts vulnerability, migration, and

resistance. The film invites us to see environmental precarity not as background condition but as central narrative engine.

From its opening frames, the desert dominates the visual field. Wide shots emphasise emptiness, heat, and exposure. The horizon stretches endlessly, dwarfing human figures. This spatial imbalance establishes ecological hierarchy: the environment is larger than the characters' agency. Survival is negotiation with terrain. The desert in *Milkmaid* is not romantic wilderness. It is a working environment marked by scarcity. Dust, heat shimmer, and muted colour palettes communicate exhaustion; the landscape withholds abundance; every step across it is labour.

This environmental austerity mirrors what scholars describe as climate precarity: ecological systems stretched beyond sustainability. The film quietly suggests that insurgency thrives in such environments not only because of ideology but because ecological collapse destabilises social order. When land cannot support life, violence becomes an alternative economy.

Water functions as the film's central ecological symbol. Its absence is felt more strongly than its presence. Characters walk long distances for access. Containers are treated with reverence. The scarcity of water transforms it into moral currency: those who control water hold power. Scenes involving wells or shared water moments slow the narrative pace. The camera lingers, emphasising ritual and vulnerability. Water is never taken for granted; it is negotiated. This scarcity produces social tension and intimacy simultaneously. Communities gather around water sources, creating fragile solidarities. The film suggests that environmental injustice is often experienced through every day logistics, the distance to water, the weight carried on bodies, the fear of depletion. Ecological crisis is not abstract; it is physical strain.

Women such as Aisha and Zainab bear the heaviest environmental burden in *Milkmaid*. Their labour is inseparable from ecological management: fetching water, preserving food, maintaining domestic life under scarcity. The desert inscribes itself onto their bodies through fatigue and endurance. The film's protagonists embody what feminist environmental theory identifies as gendered ecological labour. Women become mediators between fragile environment and community survival. Their emotional resilience parallels their environmental resilience. Essentially, the film does not sentimentalise this strength;

it shows the cost. Environmental labour drains the body and compresses possibility. Female survival becomes quiet insurgency against ecological abandonment.

The militant violence depicted in the film and led by Dangana can be read as emerging from ecological vacuum. When environments fail to provide stability, extremist groups offer alternative structures of belonging and resource distribution. The film never states this explicitly, but the connection is visible: ecological scarcity creates social fracture. Young people displaced from land become susceptible to recruitment. The desert thus operates as recruitment landscape. Its emptiness is political; it produces vulnerability that armed movements exploit. This reading reframes insurgency as partly environmental phenomenon. Ideology travels along ecological fault lines.

Movement across the desert in *Milkmaid* is constant. Characters rarely remain rooted. Migration becomes survival strategy. The landscape pushes bodies into motion. Home is unstable. Environmental displacement is depicted not as sudden catastrophe but gradual erosion of inhabitable space. Communities fragment quietly. The film captures this through repetitive walking sequences, journeys that seem endless, circular, unresolved. The desert refuses permanence. It teaches impermanence.

The characters' bodies record ecological stress. Dehydration, exhaustion, trauma, the desert writes itself onto skin and movement. The film treats the human body as archive of environmental violence. Close-ups reveal cracked lips, dust-covered faces, slowed breathing. These images transform ecology into intimate experience. The desert is not distant scenery; it exists inside the body. This aesthetic choice collapses the boundary between landscape and flesh. Environmental harm becomes personal testimony. The sisters' memories of past safety function as ecological memory. They recall environments that felt stable, communities that felt rooted. These memories contrast sharply with the present instability. Loss is measured environmentally, fewer resources, less security, shrinking horizons. The film suggests that ecological loss is also cultural loss. When landscapes change, identities must renegotiate themselves. Memory becomes resistance against environmental erasure.

The desert witnesses everything. It absorbs violence without reacting. Its indifference contrasts with human anguish. This contrast produces existential tension: the environment does not moralise; it simply exists. Yet by filming it so attentively, the director transforms the desert into cinematic witness. The camera insists that the landscape matters, that it

participates in the narrative even when silent. *Milkmaid* is a film where the environment functions as hidden protagonist. The desert shapes every decision, every relationship, and every act of survival. Gendered labour, insurgency, migration, and trauma all emerge from ecological pressure. The film reframes violence as environmental condition. It suggests that to understand the characters' suffering, we must understand the landscape that contains them. Ecological scarcity is not background; it is destiny. By foregrounding desert ecology, *Milkmaid* expands Nigerian cinema's environmental vocabulary beyond oil and urban toxicity. It reveals a different crisis: the slow tightening grip of aridity, the politics of water, and the resilience required to live inside scarcity. The film ultimately asks a quiet but devastating question: what happens to humanity when the land itself begins to withdraw its generosity?

Conclusion

The paper examined Nollywood as a powerful cinematic archive of environmental inequality in contemporary Nigeria. Although differing in genre, tone, and geography, the works converge in their insistence that landscape is never neutral. The desert, the slum, and the waterfront are not passive settings but active political environments that shape bodies, identities, and possibilities of survival. Each film exposes how ecological pressure is distributed unevenly, revealing environmental injustice as a structural condition embedded in gender, class, and spatial governance. *Milkmaid* presents desert ecology as a theatre of slow violence, where scarcity reorganises social life and places disproportionate burdens on women's bodies. Environmental precarity becomes inseparable from gendered endurance. *Shanty Town* shifts the lens to urban toxicity, portraying the slum as a managed zone of abandonment where survival itself becomes labour. Here, environmental injustice is not only pollution but infrastructural neglect, a political decision about whose lives are worth protecting. *Gangs of Lagos* extends the argument into sacred urban geography, showing how commercialisation and political extraction erode communal landscapes, turning neighbourhoods into sacrifice zones for elite development. Across these films, environmental harm is not spectacular catastrophe but normalised attrition. The directors reject apocalyptic imagery in favour of everyday suffocation: heat, crowding, thirst, decay, and displacement. This aesthetic choice aligns with the lived reality of ecological crisis in much of the Global South, where environmental violence subsists through accumulation

rather than sudden rupture. The films therefore function as counter-spectacles, forcing viewers to recognise the ordinary texture of environmental suffering.

Equally significant is the persistence of insurgent life within these toxic landscapes. None of the films reduces its characters to victims. Instead, they foreground adaptive intelligence, communal solidarity, and fragile hope. Survival becomes a form of resistance. Women managing scarcity, youth negotiating hostile space, and communities preserving sacred memory all enact quiet refusals of erasure. These gestures suggest that environmental injustice does not extinguish agency; it reshapes it. Collectively, the films argue that ecological crisis in Nigeria is inseparable from political economy. Toxic landscapes are produced, not accidental. They are the material expression of governance choices, economic extraction, and historical neglect. By centring environment as narrative force, these works transform popular cinema into ecological testimony. They ask audiences to see landscape as archive, body as evidence, and survival as critique. In doing so, Nigerian cinema emerges as a crucial site of environmental witnessing, a medium that refuses to let degraded spaces remain invisible and insists that the fate of communities is written, first and always, in the condition of their land.

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