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Symbolism and the Preservation of Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark

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Abstract

Studies on Niger Delta poetry have largely focused on issues such as environmental degradation, exploitation, identity, and socio-political resistance. Despite this focus, limited attention has been given to the role of literary devices such as symbolism in preserving cultural memory and indigenous values. The study adopts Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory, particularly Stuart Hall's concepts of cultural identity and representation, as complementary theoretical frameworks. It uses qualitative textual analysis to examine the meanings and functions of recurring symbols in selected poems. The analysis shows that universal symbols such as rivers, water, trees, land, birds, sun, seeds, and fire extend beyond their literal meanings to represent broader human experiences and ideas. More specifically, in the selected poems, these symbols help preserve memories of the past, reinforce cultural identity, and sustain indigenous cultural traditions. The study also finds that they connect universal human experiences and the relationship between people and nature with the specific experiences of the Niger Delta. These symbols

therefore link broader human concerns with the cultural experiences of the Niger Delta and reflect the resilience of its indigenous cultural heritage. The study concludes that universal symbols serve as important carriers of cultural memory and help preserve the continuity of indigenous cultural traditions across generations.

Keywords: Archetypal Criticism, Cultural Continuity, Cultural Memory, Poetry, postcolonial Theory, Symbolism.

Introduction

Symbolism is one of the major literary techniques through which writers communicate meanings beyond the literal level of language. It expresses ideas, emotions, and experiences through objects, images, actions, and other forms that suggest deeper meanings. Charles Chadwick defines symbolism as "any mode of expression which, instead of referring to something directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else" (12). Jean Campbell Cooper describes it as "an instrument of knowledge and the most ancient and fundamental method of expression, one which reveals aspects of reality which escape other modes of expression" (1). Symbolism, therefore, serves not only as an aesthetic device but also as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural experiences, beliefs, and values.

Universal or traditional symbols are important because their meanings extend beyond individual texts and cultural boundaries. Alison Booth and Kelly Mays describe traditional symbols as those whose meanings have become widely accepted because "they have been in use by many people for a long time" (209). Peter Newmark distinguishes universal symbols from cultural and individual symbols, noting that their meanings are generally recognised across societies (9–10). Cooper views traditional symbolism as an international language that extends beyond ordinary communication (7). Erich Fromm argues that universal symbols arise from experiences shared by all human beings, making them

common across cultures and historical periods (6). Such symbols can therefore communicate experiences that resonate with readers from different cultural backgrounds.

Although Niger Delta Literature reflects the region's social, cultural and environmental realities, its symbolic language also addresses broader human concerns. Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark employ symbols to represent cultural memory, identity, environmental consciousness, continuity, and survival. These symbols also help preserve and transmit indigenous experiences, beliefs, and traditions. Studies on symbolism in Niger Delta poetry have examined its ecological, political, and cultural dimensions. Charles Patrick and Kennett Efeh show how symbols in *Delta Blues and Home Songs* function as instruments of ecological and political critique (20). Abdurraheem Hamzah examines animal symbolism in Ojaide's poetry and argues that predators and prey represent political brutality (22). Philip Aghoghovwia shows how imagery in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry represents environmental degradation and the petro-environmental realities of the Niger Delta (66, 75). Although these studies have enriched scholarship on symbolism, limited attention has been given to universal symbols and their relationship with cultural memory, particularly in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark.

This study addresses this gap by examining how universal symbols preserve cultural memory and indigenous cultural values in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark. It draws on Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory to show how these symbols carry cultural memory, reinforce cultural identity, and connect Niger Delta experiences with broader human concerns.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Niger Delta poetry has examined symbolism, imagery, and other figurative devices in relation to environmental degradation, exploitation, oppression, cultural identity, and

resistance. Although these studies have enriched the understanding of Niger Delta Literature, limited attention has been given to the universal significance of symbols and their role in preserving cultural memory. Patrick and Kenneth examine symbolic representations in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, focusing on symbols such as the cobra, hyena, elephant, iroko, and cockroach. They argue that these symbols expose political and ecological problems in the Niger Delta and associate some of them with figures such as General Sani Abacha and Ken Saro Wiwa (20). Their study therefore focuses mainly on the historical and political meanings of the symbols rather than their wider human significance.

Reuben Akano examines the poetry of Gabriel Okara, J. P. Clark Bekederemo, and Tanure Ojaide, with particular attention to nature imagery. The study identifies flora, fauna, waters, water spirits, and oil as important features of the poets' representation of the Niger Delta environment (170). Although these elements are recognised as symbols, they are treated mainly as culturally specific representations. Their wider significance as universal symbols and their connection with cultural memory receive little attention.

Hamzah examines animal symbolism in Ojaide's poetry and shows how predators and prey represent political oppression, exploitation, and abuse of power in postcolonial Nigeria (22). The study presents these animals mainly as satirical symbols of corrupt leadership and social injustice. It does not, however, consider their archetypal meanings or their possible role in preserving cultural memory. Macauly Mowarin and Ikupa examine symbolism in the poetry of J. P. Clark and Tanure Ojaide, focusing on the relationship between symbolic expression and the socio-cultural realities of the Niger Delta. They show that natural and environmental symbols represent the experiences of the people and critique social, political, and ecological conditions. Their study

establishes the importance of symbolism in Niger Delta poetry but gives limited attention to the universal meanings of recurring symbols and their role in preserving memory.

Aghoghovwia examines imagery in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry and argues that images such as "blood," "gallows," "black holes," and "slaughtered on the slab" represent environmental destruction in the Niger Delta (66). The study also shows that Bassey's poetry offers a wider critique of petro modernity (75). However, it does not examine how recurring images such as blood, death, and darkness function as universal symbols that express shared human experiences and preserve cultural memory. Kayode Niyi Afolayan focuses on the social and political concerns in J. P. Clark's poetry and shows how the poet uses poetry to respond to political and social realities. While the study highlights Clark's social engagement, it gives limited attention to the symbolic structures through which these concerns are expressed. It therefore does not examine how his recurring symbols preserve cultural memory or connect Niger Delta experiences with broader human concerns.

These studies show that symbolism has received considerable attention in Niger Delta poetry. However, most have interpreted symbols mainly within specific cultural, political, environmental, or historical contexts. Limited attention has been given to their universal significance and their role in preserving cultural memory. Studies on Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark in particular have not sufficiently examined how recurring universal symbols preserve memory, reinforce cultural identity, and connect Niger Delta experiences with broader human concerns. This study addresses this gap by examining universal symbols in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark.

Theoretical Conceptions

This study adopts Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory, particularly Stuart Hall's postulations on cultural identity and

representation, as complementary frameworks for examining universal symbols and cultural memory in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark. Archetypal Criticism provides the primary framework for interpreting the universal significance of recurring symbols, while Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity, situates these symbols within the historical and cultural realities of the Niger Delta.

Archetypal Criticism originates from Carl Jung's concept of archetypes as primordial psychic patterns inherited across generations (57). Abrams explains that archetypal criticism is concerned with recurrent symbolic images, character types, themes, and narrative patterns that possess collective significance (13). Northrop Frye argues that literary works are structured around conventional myths and metaphors preserved across cultures (99), while Charles Bressler observes that archetypal criticism identifies recurring images rooted in the collective unconscious, enabling them to transcend individual cultures and historical periods (139–40). Maud Bodkin maintains that universal symbols evoke primary emotions shared by humanity (3), and Joseph Campbell argues that archetypal images endure because they express recurring patterns of human existence (31). Archetypal Criticism is therefore particularly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for examining how recurring natural and cultural symbols in Okara and Clark's poetry preserve cultural memory and connect the experiences of the Niger Delta with broader human concerns.

Postcolonial Theory complements this perspective by showing the historical and cultural conditions within which these universal symbols acquire specific significance. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall presents cultural identity as a product of history, culture, and representation rather than as a fixed and unchanging essence. He identifies one conception of cultural identity as rooted in shared historical experiences and cultural

codes that provide a people with common frames of reference and meaning (223). This conception is relevant to the present study because the recurring symbols in Okara and Clark's poetry draw upon shared cultural experiences and indigenous relationships with the natural environment, making them carriers of memory. Their representation of rivers, water, trees, land, birds, seeds, the sun, and fire can therefore be examined as part of a wider process of remembering and representing cultural experiences.

Hall argues that cultural identity is a matter of both "being" and "becoming" because it has history but it is also continually transformed by history, culture, and power (225). He further explains that identities are shaped by the ways people are positioned within, and position themselves through, narratives of the past (225). This perspective is particularly useful to this study because the poetry of Okara and Clark does not merely reproduce an unchanging cultural past. Rather, the poets re-present inherited cultural meanings within changing historical circumstances. Their use of traditional and natural symbols therefore allows aspects of the cultural past to remain relevant while being interpreted within the experiences of the present.

Hall's discussion of the relationship between cultural identity and memory further strengthens this study. He observes that the past continues to speak to the present, but that our relationship with the past is constructed through "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (225). Cultural identity, in this sense, is produced through processes of identification within history and culture rather than existing as a permanent essence outside them (225). This understanding provides a useful basis for examining poetry as a form of cultural representation through which memories, values, beliefs, and relationships inherited from the past can be retained and reinterpreted. The symbols examined in this study are therefore understood as carriers of cultural memory, connecting the present with aspects of the indigenous past.

Hall also emphasizes the role of representation in the formation of cultural identity. He argues that identity is constituted "within representation" and that cultural representations can enable people to recognize different parts and histories of themselves and construct the points of identification that become their cultural identities (236). This is particularly relevant to the poetry of Okara and Clark because their use of recurring symbols provides representations through which aspects of Niger Delta cultural experience can be recalled and communicated. The symbols do not merely describe the physical environment, they also represent cultural memories, values, and ways of understanding the world.

In Okara and Clark's poetry, universal symbols can therefore be understood at both universal and culturally specific levels. Their archetypal meanings connect the poems with broader human experiences, while their representation within the Niger Delta context connects them with particular histories, memories, and indigenous values. Postcolonial Theory, through Hall's concept of cultural identity, thus enables the study to examine how the representation of these symbols participates in the preservation and continuity of indigenous cultural identity. The integration of Archetypal Criticism and Hall's postcolonial concept of cultural identity therefore provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Okara and Clark's symbols operate simultaneously at the level of universal human experience and culturally specific memory. The framework consequently supports the argument that symbolism functions not only as an aesthetic device but also as a means of retaining cultural memory and affirming indigenous identity within changing historical and cultural circumstances.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. The primary data comprise eight purposively selected poems by Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark. The selected poems are Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun", "The Invocation", "Introit" and "The Dreamer",

and J. P. Clark's "Song", "Two Seedlings", "Agbor Dancer", and "New Year". The poems were purposively selected based on their recurrent use of universal symbols associated with cultural memory, cultural renewal, cultural survival, and indigenous cultural values. Data were collected through close textual analysis of the selected poems. The analysis is guided by Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory, particularly Stuart Hall's concepts of cultural identity and representation.

Universal Symbols and the Preservation of Cultural Memory

Universal symbols occupy a central position in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark as repositories of cultural memory, preserving the history, identity, and worldview of the Niger Delta. Although symbols such as rivers, trees, sun, and seeds possess meanings that transcend cultural boundaries, they acquire distinctive significance within the Niger Delta, where the natural environment shapes communal consciousness. Rather than serving as decorative devices, these recurring symbols embody inherited knowledge, ancestral experiences, and indigenous values. Viewed archetypally, they evoke patterns of experience common to humanity, while from a postcolonial perspective, they preserve cultural knowledge threatened by colonial disruption.

Okara's "The Call of the River Nun" offers one of the clearest illustrations of how universal symbols preserve cultural memory. Throughout the poem, the River Nun is transformed from a physical watercourse into a living presence that embodies origin, identity, remembrance, and continuity. The speaker's repeated desire to return to the river establishes it as a symbolic homeland whose significance extends beyond geography:

I want to view your face
Again and feel your cold
Embrace; or at your brim
To set myself and
Inhale your breath; or

Like the trees, to watch
My mirrored self unfold
And span my days with
Song from the lips of dawn.
I hear your lapping call!
I hear it coming through;
Invoking the ghost of a child
Listening, where river birds hail
Your silver-surfaced flow. (5–18)

The poem establishes an intimate relationship between the speaker and the river. The speaker desires to "view," "feel," "inhale," and rediscover himself through it, suggesting memory is experienced through multiple senses. The repeated personification, "your face," "your cold embrace," and "your breath," attributes human qualities to the river, allowing it to assume the role of an elder or maternal presence. The River Nun thus becomes an archetypal source of life and an indigenous space in which communal identity has been transmitted across generations. The image of "the ghost of a child" symbolizes the enduring presence of childhood experiences that continue to shape adult consciousness, suggesting early experiences remain embedded within individual consciousness and the surrounding landscape. The auditory imagery, "I hear your lapping call!/I hear it coming through," emphasizes the river actively summons the speaker back to his origins, while "river birds" reinforce the impression that the natural environment participates collectively in preserving memory. "The Call of the River Nun" demonstrates that the River Nun functions as a living repository of ancestral knowledge and historical continuity.

Clark approaches the preservation of cultural memory from a different perspective in "Song," locating memory within human relationships and shared communal experiences:

I CAN LOOK the sun in the face
But the friends that I have lost
I dare not look at any. Yet I have held

Them all in my arms, shared with them
The same bath and bed, often
Devouring the same dish, drunk as soon
On tea as on wine, at that time
When but to think of an ill, made
By God or man, was to find
The cure prophet and physician. (1–10)

The poem opens with a striking paradox. The speaker can "look the sun in the face" yet cannot face the memory of departed friends. The sun functions as a universal symbol of permanence and endurance, and by contrasting the sun's permanence with painful recollection, Clark reveals human life is fragile. The phrase "I dare not look" suggests remembering requires courage, yet the dead continue to exist through remembrance. Clark deepens this through domestic images, "shared... / The same bath and bed" and "devouring the same dish," transforming everyday activities into representations of communal solidarity rooted in trust. The shared meal functions as a universal symbol of fellowship, while the juxtaposition of "tea" and "wine" encompasses both ordinary and extraordinary moments of communal life.

The final lines, "When but to think of an ill, made / By God or man, was to find / The cure prophet and physician," recall a period when every affliction appeared curable through communal wisdom. The "prophet" and "physician" become symbols of spiritual and physical restoration, evoking a cultural order in which communal knowledge enabled society to confront adversity. The poem's emphasis on communal relationships affirms indigenous African conceptions of collective identity marginalized by colonial modernity's individualism. The act of remembering becomes an act of cultural preservation.

Clark extends his exploration in "Two Seedlings," where cultural continuity appears threatened by displacement:

Two seedlings upon the River Floss:

One overblown, hungry and wild,
The other a child
Early-soured, full of resource
To rear again ancestral crest
Sunk in the wake of blunder
O two seeds by whirlwater
Torn adrift their mother's breast!
Fate will have old curses fulfilled. (1–9)

Seedlings universally symbolize birth, renewal, and hope, yet here they are "upon the River Floss," suggesting instability. One seedling appears "overblown, hungry and wild," while the other remains "early-soured, full of resource," different responses to the same displacement. The phrase "to rear again ancestral crest" implies cultural memory is regenerative, requiring conscious effort to survive. The "ancestral crest" symbolizes inherited identity, now "sunk in the wake of blunder," an ambiguous term encompassing colonial intrusion, political failure, and environmental degradation.

Water acquires a complex meaning through the "whirlwater," becoming turbulent and destructive rather than nurturing. The image of seedlings "torn adrift their mother's breast" constitutes the poem's most powerful symbol. The mother's breast signifies nurture and origin; separation symbolizes disruption of cultural transmission. Yet the mother's breast remains remembered, becoming the invisible bond connecting displaced generations to their origins. The closing declaration, "Fate will have old curses fulfilled," initially appears pessimistic. However, the persistent desire "to rear again ancestral crest" demonstrates that cultural identity survives in the face of adversity. Through archetypes, the child, mother, water, seed, and journey, Clark articulates fundamental human experiences of birth, dependence, growth, separation, and renewal. The uprooted seedlings symbolize communities threatened by colonial domination, yet Clark refuses to portray culture as destroyed; the aspiration to restore the

"ancestral crest" affirms that indigenous identity remains recoverable.

"The Call of the River Nun," "Song," and "Two Seedlings" reveal complementary dimensions of cultural memory. Okara locates memory within the relationship between people and the ancestral landscape, while Clark demonstrates that memory survives through communal relationships and the struggle to preserve identity amid displacement. Although the poets employ different universal symbols, they arrive at a shared vision of culture as a living inheritance sustained by remembrance. Their poetry affirms that universal symbols do not merely represent the past; they actively preserve, transmit, and renew the collective memory through which the cultural identity of the Niger Delta continues to endure.

Universal Symbols and Cultural Renewal

While universal symbols preserve cultural memory, they also project the possibility of cultural renewal. Okara develops this vision of renewal in **"The Invocation"** and **"Introit,"** where creation, recovery, and regeneration are presented as interconnected processes. In "The Invocation," creation becomes a central metaphor for cultural regeneration. The poem unfolds through a ritualistic sequence of repeated invocations that brings together the symbols of the sun, moon, earth, womb, the "Back," and the "Front":

See the sun in my hands
I see
See the Gods in the sun
I see
See the Back in my hands
I see
See the Front in my hands
I see (1–8).

The repetitive structure evokes the rhythm of ritual performance and reinforces the sense of recognition. The recurring affirmation

"I see" suggests an awakening to realities that must be recognised before renewal can occur. The sun, traditionally associated with life, light, and creative energy, is placed "in my hands," transforming it from a distant cosmic force into something entrusted to human agency. Renewal therefore requires active participation rather than passive expectation. The "Back" and the "Front" operate as complementary symbols: the "Back" signifies origins, ancestry, and inherited traditions, while the "Front" represents continuity and the future. Their coexistence implies that progress does not require the abandonment of cultural origins. The womb and earth extend this symbolism by presenting identity as something capable of formation and regeneration. The description of the "living shape" of the earth suggests that cultural life remains embedded in the material and ancestral environment from which the community derives its identity.

Okara develops this relationship between the past and the future further in **"Introit,"** where renewal is represented as the difficult task of retrieving what history has concealed or forgotten. The poem begins with a symbolic search:

> Cast your net to the rightside
> Nothing?
> Nothing
> Cast it to the leftside
> Nothing?
> Nothing
> Then cast it to the back of the canoe (1–7).

The repeated command to cast the net, followed by "Nothing," establishes renewal as a process demanding patience and persistence. The net becomes an instrument of retrieval, while the river provides the space in which cultural memory is symbolically searched for and recovered. The instruction to "draw gently and carefully" further suggests that cultural restoration requires sustained and sensitive engagement with inherited traditions rather than an abrupt attempt to recreate the past. The canoe also implies

movement and communal journey, reinforcing the idea that cultural recovery is a process rather than a single event.

The poem reaches its symbolic climax in the relationship between the "Back" and the "Front":

> The Front grows from the Back
> Like buds from a tree stump.
> Do buds sprout from dead stumps? (32–34).

The image of the "Back" represents the cultural past from which the "Front," or future, develops. The comparison with "buds from a tree stump" strengthens the symbolism of regeneration. Although a tree stump appears to represent destruction and lifelessness, the emergence of new buds demonstrates that the capacity for life may remain beneath apparent death. Cultural traditions may similarly survive historical disruption and generate new forms of identity. This idea is reinforced through the image of water: "There's water at the back / Of your Back gushing from a womb."

Water resumes its archetypal association with life, fertility, and renewal, while its connection with the womb suggests that the resources necessary for regeneration remain embedded within cultural memory. The references to floodwaters exposing "skeletons and dead wood" also acknowledge historical loss and destruction, suggesting that genuine renewal requires an awareness of what has been damaged or lost rather than its erasure.

J. P. Clark presents a complementary vision of cultural renewal in "Agbor Dancer," where regeneration is expressed through the relationship between the human body, nature, and ancestral tradition. The dancer is described through images that connect physical vitality with cultural inheritance:

> Down lineal veins to ancestral core
> Opening out in her supple tan
> Limbs like fresh foliage in the sun (3–5).

The expression "ancestral core" establishes the dancer as connected to inherited cultural traditions, while the comparison of her limbs to "fresh foliage" introduces the universal symbolism of

growth, vitality, and regeneration. The natural imagery does not merely beautify the dancer; it connects her physical movement to the continuity of communal and ancestral life. The poem further develops this relationship through the forest: "To meet the green clouds of the forest" (10). The forest functions as a symbol of origin, tradition, communal life, and ancestral continuity. The dancer's movement towards it can therefore be understood as a symbolic movement towards cultural roots. Rather than presenting tradition as static, Clark represents it as something organic and capable of continued growth. The imagery of fresh foliage reinforces this idea because leaves emerge from an established natural system while simultaneously representing new life. In this way, the poem connects cultural identity with the regenerative processes of the natural world.

Together, Okara's "The Invocation" and "Introit" and Clark's "Agbor Dancer" present complementary visions of cultural renewal. Okara emphasizes creation, fertility, recovery, and the movement from the "Back" towards the "Front," while Clark emphasizes ancestral rootedness, growth, and regeneration through natural imagery. The universal symbols: sun, moon, womb, earth, water, forest, and foliage transform the particular experience of cultural disruption in the Niger Delta into a broader human concern with survival, continuity, and renewal. The poems therefore suggest that the future of a culture is not secured through the abandonment of its past but through the creative revitalization of the enduring values and memories preserved within indigenous tradition.

Universal Symbols, Cultural Survival, and Hope

Beyond preserving cultural memory and envisioning cultural renewal, Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark employ universal symbols to affirm the enduring possibility of cultural survival. This vision is most explicitly demonstrated in "The Dreamer:"

And now the dreamer, with machete,
Word-sharpened, is clearing the forest

Of its macro-stench and venality
To sow the seed that would send its roots,
Unshaken by wind or storm, to its expected greatness. (62–66)

The "dreamer" functions as a universal symbol of vision and the possibility of realities not yet achieved. The "word-sharpened" machete links language itself with cultural regeneration, suggesting that poetry prepares the ground for renewal. The forest, representing fertility and generative power, is described as filled with "macro-stench and venality," indicating that moral decay threatens cultural foundations. The dreamer's clearing of the forest symbolizes the removal of corruption rather than the destruction of nature. The seed represents potential, continuity, and rebirth, suggesting that the future depends upon preserving values capable of generating long-term growth. Also, the roots symbolize origin, stability, and ancestry, emphasizing the idea that enduring growth depends upon secure foundations in indigenous values. The concluding reference to "wind or storm" introduces adversity, yet the roots remain "unshaken," suggesting that authentic cultural renewal possesses sufficient depth to withstand future crises. Hope arises not because adversity disappears but because regenerated culture develops resilience. From a postcolonial perspective, these symbols articulate the determination of the Niger Delta to reclaim its moral and cultural vitality despite histories of exploitation.

Clark develops a related vision of cultural survival in "New Year," emphasizing endurance in the face of forces that cannot be controlled. The poem draws its imagery from the annual flooding of the Niger Delta:

Another flood is finished to a fall
Finished, finished with a roar and rush
And you and I two reeds on the bank
Go dipping hungry blades in her wash
Full fine sands rear up (how high
Each day!) like manatees out on spree

And even the water lettuce
From upland go hand in hand to the sea
But you and I two reeds swaying on. (1–9)

The repetition of "Finished, finished" conveys exhaustion, emphasizing the cyclical nature of hardship. Floods possess a dual symbolic significance, representing destruction while also signifying purification and renewal. Against this overwhelming force, Clark introduces the image of "two reeds on the bank." The reed combines apparent fragility with remarkable endurance. Unlike the tree that confronts the storm through rigid resistance, the reed survives because it bends with the movement of wind and water. Its flexibility becomes its greatest strength. The repeated image of the reeds "swaying on" suggests that although communities may be shaken by upheavals, they need not lose the cultural values that define their existence. Water, although associated with destruction, simultaneously provides nourishment, reinforcing the ambivalent symbolism of nature. The shifting sands and drifting "water lettuce" suggest constant transformation, yet amidst these conditions, the reeds remain rooted. The concluding image contains no triumphant declaration of victory; instead, its quiet persistence conveys a more profound understanding of resilience. Survival is measured not by the absence of suffering but by the refusal to disappear despite repeated challenges. Here, the poem speaks to communities confronted by political neglect and ecological degradation, presenting these challenges as revealing the remarkable resilience embedded within indigenous communal life.

Therefore, Okara's "The Dreamer" and Clark's "New Year" provide complementary visions of cultural survival and hope. Okara emphasizes survival through active regeneration, employing the symbols of the forest, seed, and roots to demonstrate that lasting renewal depends upon restoring cultural foundations. Clark emphasizes endurance through adaptation, presenting the flood and reeds as symbols of a community that survives because it remains

flexible without abandoning its identity. Despite these different strategies, both poets conclude that the cultural heritage of the Niger Delta possesses an enduring resilience. Their universal symbols affirm that hope is sustained through the preservation of collective memory, the renewal of indigenous values, and the capacity of culture to adapt while remaining true to its origins.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of universal symbols in preserving cultural memory in the poetry of Gabriel Okara and J. P. Clark. Adopting Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory, the study demonstrates that recurring symbols such as rivers, water, trees, reeds, forests, roots, seeds, and sun extend beyond their literal meanings to preserve indigenous cultural values and collective memory in the Niger Delta. Although these symbols possess universal significance, the poets redefine them through the historical, cultural, and environmental experiences of the region.

The findings reveal that universal symbols perform three major functions in the selected poems. They preserve cultural memory by sustaining indigenous knowledge, ancestral traditions, and communal identity. They promote cultural renewal by presenting regeneration as a return to enduring values. They affirm cultural survival by expressing resilience, continuity, and hope despite the challenges confronting the Niger Delta. Nature thus functions as a repository of memory through which the past remains connected to the present and the future.

The study further establishes that the symbolism in Okara and Clark's poetry extends beyond environmental protest to preserve cultural consciousness, reinforce indigenous identity, and affirm the resilience of the Niger Delta people. The integration of Archetypal Criticism and Postcolonial Theory demonstrates that universal symbols simultaneously communicate shared human experiences and culturally specific histories. This study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that universal symbols are

fundamental to the preservation of cultural memory and the continuity of indigenous heritage in Niger Delta poetry.

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