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**DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LITERARY CANON OF PROTEST AND ACTIVISM: A CRITICAL SURVEY OF NIGER DELTA LITERATURE**

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts a critical survey of the development of the canon of literature of protest and activism in Nigeria. Protest and activism have been the overall thematic vision underpinning the production of a wealth of creative works that use the Niger Delta as its area study in Nigeria. The paper is not concerned about the historical development but more about the corpus of thematic concerns that have developed into the umbrella literary canon of protest and activism targeted at the liberation of the Niger Delta region from the evils of corruption and environmental neglect.

*Key words: Literary canon, protest literature, activism, Niger Delta Literature*

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**Introduction**

The ideas of protest and activism have always been engendered by the prevalence of bad governance, general inequalities in the social, economic and political spheres of the human society. It is often the case that a marginalised people would always protest against marginalisation and lack of equity in the allocation of commonwealth amongst the people. In literature and literary history, the phenomenon of social and or political injustices against a race or an ethnic extraction in many society have been linked to the development of a canon of literary experience that seek to identify, reject, and seek redress against perceived injustice. Irrespective of the argument of whether this literary canon have been mostly propagandist or not, the fact that it utilizes literary strategies that protest injustice is sufficient to brand it protest literature.

This paper attempts a critical survey of the development of the canon of literature of protest and activism in Nigeria. Protest and activism have been the overall thematic vision underpinning the production of a wealth of creative works that use the Niger Delta as its area study in Nigeria. The paper is not concerned about the historical development but more about the corpus of thematic concerns that have developed into the umbrella literary canon of protest and activism targeted at the liberation of the Niger Delta region from the evils of corruption and environmental neglect.

For over two decades now, an aspect of the Nigerian literary production has focused on the crisis cocooning the Niger Delta region of the country. The immediate reason for this development is the multifarious socioeconomic and environmental problems facing the region whose natural wealth accounts for about 90% of Nigeria’s total income. According to Joy M. Etiowo:

Oil from the region is said to have been the bedrock of building and transformation of Nigeria’s former and present capitals- Lagos and Abuja respectively. The wealth of the nation, at both individual and collective levels, is traceable to the economic fortunes of oil in the Niger Delta (134).

While certain other regions of the country and individuals have benefited enormously from the proceeds of oil exploration, the people of the Niger Delta have least benefited from the wealth of their natural environment. It is not fiction that environmental degradation, neglect, unemployment, corruption, violence and poverty have been the narratives underscoring the social, political, and economic experiences of the people.Although the situation has attracted both national and international attention, there is little to show that the once tranquil natural environment would witness any significant development soon.

Geographically, the Niger Delta region covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometres and is considered the largest wetlands in Africa but the wetland area is made up of 36,000 square kilometres of marshland, creeks, tributaries and lagoons, and is teeming with fish and wildlife resources, with a lot of biodiversity and a miscellany of flora and fauna (Agbiboa & Maiangwa 110). The Niger Delta is a convenient nomenclature of nine geographically contiguous states that was adopted for easy resource allocation and distribution. These states are Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River, Abia, Imo, Ondo and AkwaIbom. In addition, a kaleidoscope of ethnic nationalities which include, the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ikwere, AndoniEfik, Ibibio, Kalabari, Okrika, together with parts of the Yoruba and Igbo inhabit this region (Odoemene 124). More importantly, Nigeria’s billion barrels of oil reserves and natural gas is found in the region and consequently, the region accounts for over eighty percent of Nigeria’s Gross Domestic Product (Afinotan & Ojakorotu 191).

Oil was first discovered in 1956, in Oloibiri area in the Niger Delta region by Shell Petroleum Development Company, after about half a century of exploration. Nigeria consequent upon the discovery of oil joined the oil producing nations in 1958 because oil was found in large quantity for commercial activities while about 1500 barrels of oil was being produced daily (Ebegbulem et al 280). However, before the discovery of oil and its commercial production, the region was a pristine environment that supported subsistent resources for the mostly settled populations. Agricultural and aquatic farming such as medicinal herbs and barks, fish and shrimps, crabs and clams, wood for energy and shelter, as well as a stable soil habitat for wildlife were the hallmark of the region. Indeed, the Niger Delta region, before oil exploration accounted for a large percentage of Nigeria’s commercial fisheries industry due to abundant water resources.

Since the beginning of oil activities the region has been characterized by the destruction of vegetation, farmlands, and human settlements, causing a downturn in the narrative of the Niger Delta. Severe environmental hazards associated with oil activities have included destruction of aquatic life, noise pollution and seismographic blasting that affects buildings, fence walls, bridges and roads. It is pathetic that while all of these continue there has been little attempt to rectify or compensate the damages done to the environment, health and social wellbeing of the people. Where compensation is paid at all, political and traditional rulers in the various settlements in connivance with oil companies manipulate the people and funds meant for environmental and social development. Regrettably too, unethical oil drilling pollutes the water with flora and fauna destroyed through toxic wastes. Also in the process of oil refining, several chemicals and pollutants such as hydrogen sulphide, oil and grease, ammonia and toxic heavy metals are discharged into the environment. The common experience of destruction of environmentally sensitive regions such as the lowlands, wetlands, fish ponds and farmlands are the regular occurrences. In addition to these, oil spillage caused by blow-outs, equipment failure, corrosion, operational error, and pipeline vandalization that often lead to land degradation and loss of soil fertility have become part of the crisis suffered by the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. Apart from all of these translating into diseases and hunger, there have been no provisions for hospitals.

Afinotan and Ojakorotu have also observed that gas flaring, in particular, has caused an increase in heat and made the area prone to acid rain formation, climate change, depletion of floral periodicity, pulmonary disease epidemic and other environmental problems (194). The oil companies have to some extent made environmental protection advances but their main defence against “corporate irresponsibility” in the Delta region has been to attribute the problems to sabotage. This is arguably true but is seen from a different perspective by the activists in the region. To them, oil exploration has turned their once pristine environment to a death zone. They demand justice and a fair share of the oil revenue (Ebiede 42).

It is against this backdrop that writers in the Nigerian literary scene have had to direct their focus on the challenges facing the people of the Niger Delta. The playwrights have not been left out in this campaign as drama has been used not just as a tool but as a ready platform to examine and redirect that which has hitherto been left unchallenged.

**Building the Canon of Protest and Activism**

Corruption, environmental degradation and its activism have recently been at the crux of Niger Delta literature, appearing in various shades. Beyond the Niger Delta literature, however, corruption and general environmental degradation have been of national literary concern to writers. Chinua Achebe avers that corruption in Nigeria has gone beyond the alarming stage to the fatal stage (47). Achebe’s strong exception to this issue is taking up and further examined in UzoNwamara’s*Dance of the Delta*.Similarly, Ifeanyichukwu and Yeseibo reflect the situation of the Niger Delta region, identifying corruption as the pivot to militancy and youth restiveness in the region. Greedy, corrupt and ambitious politicians, chiefs and leaders oppress the people who have placed their trust and confidence in them. Not only that, it is depicted that corrupt leaders mislead and employ youths into terrorizing the community. Ifeanyichukwu and Yeseibo posit that:

The issue of youth restiveness in Nigeria, inferring from the playwright is masterminded by some corrupt politicians who benefit in the wake of conflicts in their respective jurisdictions… they indulge in the act of kidnapping, assassination, looting, rape, armed robbery, incessant killings, and other malicious activities that create pain and agony to the people (112).

Following this trend Ogezi’s *Under a Darkling Sky* demonstrates that the kings, chiefs and politico-economic elite are the worst enemies of the people. Oyeh posits: “they are in league with other people against their own people.” They betray their own people in their insatiable quest for wealth and power. The struggle of the well-meaning masses is rendered useless (176). Jologho Umoko’s *Scent of Crude Oil* exposes how bad leadership and ethnic injustice results to waste of human resources and social degeneration. He depicts a gang of criminals who are intelligent graduates that resort to militancy. The Niger delta experience is that of enemies within, not only without and have become a house divided (Oyeh 175).

J.P Clark’s *Wives Revolt* brings a gendered perspective to how oil politics berates unity and progress of communities in the Niger Delta. The people have been marginalized and made vulnerable to the ills of corruption. It is so bad that even wives turned their backs against husbands because of compensation money. As in the *Wives Revolt*, conflict is also caused by compensation money in EsiabaIrobi’s *Hangmen also Die*. Prevalent here, is the politics to corrupt, destabilize and control by the Nigerian Government. For Ojeh, the Nigerian government and the oil companies use the policy of divide and rule to keep the Niger Delta communities in perpetual poverty. The chiefs in these communities are used to cause disharmony and destabilization (175).

Julius-Adeoye Rantimi, studying Ahmed Yerima’s plays in “The Drama of Ahmed Yerima. Studies in Nigerian Theatre”, asserts that Yerima chastises the militants that heighten the Niger Delta crisis through his play *Hard Ground*. Through this play, he embarks on a tour of Nigeria at the expense of the Federal government as he exposes their ills (18). Chenenye Amonyeze in reading the same *Hard Ground*, posits that it explores youth restiveness, militancy, oil bunkering, hostage taking, the dangers of god-fatherism and political patronage (37). In *Little Drops*, Yerima tells the stories of war and terrorism in the Niger Delta from women’s perspective. When men start a war with baseless ideologies, the women are left to feel the consequences as mothers and wives to the perpetrators and casualties of the war as well as being victims of rape.

Accordingly, Jeremiah M. Samuel in his essay “The Niger Delta Violence, Women and Ecofeminism” sees Yerima’s *Little Drops* and Tess Onwueme’s *Then She Said it* as representations of the sufferings in the Niger Delta. Samuel approaches the texts through eco-feminism to reveal how women suffer double oppression in the Niger Delta crisis through various levels of violence: economic, psychological, and sexual violence (80). All these came about as a result of the fact that the government and their multinational cohorts pillage resources and deny the people of their means of livelihood. In Yerima’s and Onwueme’s plays, women lose their children or husbands to war, some are raped by soldiers, militants and even relations, and some prostitute because there is no worthy means of livelihood. For Samuel, violence is intricate to nature’s devastations and women are closest to nature. Thus, Samuel suggests that the philosophy of ecofeminism if applied would make the bitterness and opposition to subside as the agitation has gone beyond environmental degradation to resource control (83). However, UwemAffiah avers that Onwueme’s play, *Then She Said it*, is not limited to women’s concerns alone but explores issues germane to the oil politics in Nigeria. For Affiah, Onwueme interrogates the issues of oppression, inequality, poverty, corruption, injustice and inequitable distribution of the common wealth in Nigeria. Through this play, Onwueme is said to have created awareness on the need for oppressed citizens to rise, protest and take actions to bring about change in society (Affiah 270-280).

The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, a prominent writer and human rights advocate in the context of the struggle against environmental degradation and dehumanization in Ogoniland, inspired writers in the region to express their angers against the common predicaments of their people. An insightful reading of the poetry works of the Niger Delta reflects their consciousness of the immediate physical environment. This can be seen through the interaction between humanity and nature in Gabriel Okara’s*The Fisherman’s Invocation*, Clark Bejederemo’s*A Reed in the Tide*, and Ojaide’s*Labyrinths of the Niger*. The imageries and symbols in these collections are drawn from the Niger Delta locale. In J.P Clark’s “Night Rain”, one sees the typical Niger Delta through the vivid imagery of the effect of rainfall and the people’s struggle to survive.

Recently, the experiences emanating from the Niger Delta have also inspired a corpus of poetic awareness to the damage done to the region. This generation of poetry is characterized by nostalgic reflections on lost beauty and natural wealth due to the discovery of oil. According to OyeniyiOkunoye, “the present consciousness is that of deep hurt and irreparable loss” (3).Ojaide, as quoted by Okunoye laments the tragic loss of the bond they once had with the environment:

My roots run deep into the Delta area. Its traditions, folklore, flora and fauna no doubt enriched my Children of Iroko and Labyrinths of the Delta. This area of constant rains, where we children taught we saw fish fall from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same. By the 1960’s the rivers had been dredged to take in pontoons or even ships to enter our backyard. Shell-BP had started to pollute the rivers and streams, and farmlands with oil and flaring gas. Forests had been cleared by poachers and others to feed the African Timber Company in Sapele, streams and mashes dried up… (3)

Okunoye asserts that overtime; the Niger Delta indigenes have viewed themselves as the “other” within Nigeria. This is apparent in how they draw attention to their location which has been marginalized (2). Contrastingly, Oyeh asseverates that the Niger delta discourse has been turned to “we/they”, “self/other” and unfortunately, the government is a principal part of the other (174). Although there seems to be a conflict in the positioning of the Niger Delta people in Okunoye and Oyeh’s views, the basic fact is that there has been a side-lining and marginalization and the Niger Delta indigenes are the victims; hence the rise of many resistance movements and activism in the Niger Delta literature.UzoechiNwagbara in “Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide’s*Delta Blues* …” affirms that Ojaide’s activist approach, finds expression in using poetry for resistance. Indeed, all of Ojaide’s literary works are sensitive to ecocriticism and environmentalism. Thus, Nwagbara further notes that even Ojaide’s novel*The Activist* takes an ecocritical bearing- a contemporary novel about oil politics in the Niger Delta region and environmental predation by the political class in partnership with the multinational oil corporations (21).

Following in Nwagbara’s observation we note that NiyiOsundare’s poem “Ode to a Falling Tree” in *Songs of the Season* laments man’s mindless destruction of nature as he strives after modernization. Ayinoula and Eugenie in “Poetry and the Niger Delta Environment…” posit that although man thoughtlessly destroys good and useful things of his environment, the global trend today is the outcry for the preservation of the natural environment and the importance of literature is obvious (10). Norbert E. Eze appraising Mbajiorgu’s*Wake Up Everyone* in “Drama and the Politics of Climate Change…” condemns the nonchalance of the government towards addressing the issues of climate change as raised in the play. *Wake Up Everyone* explores the subject of climate change and clearly shows how it is a patent human experience in Nigeria. It also illustrates its causes, effects and solutions (148). Eze observes that:

Greg Mbajiorgu’s play seeks to move us beyond capitalist consumerism, beyond the rhetoric of environmentalism masked by neoliberal politics, to that concrete and pragmatic context where urgent and meaningful steps must be taken to redeem our world from the ravaging effects of technology (148).

Man has done more harm than good to the environment and the damage that has been done must be corrected with alacrity before it becomes too late.

Meanwhile Charles C. Feghabo studying six prose works of the Niger Delta; Ken Saro-Wiwa’s*A Month and a Day* (memoir), Isidore Okpewho’s *Tide*, Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*, Vincent Egbuson’s*Love My Planet*, Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* and Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*, establishes how literary writers link eco-activism to the erosion of self. He employs alienation to view the images of degraded eco-system, internal division, and presentation of the people as victims as well as protagonists. Through eco-activism, he views eco-terrorism and non-violent eco-campaign. Thus for Feghabo, the six texts employ pathos to capture the feeling of alienation of the Niger Delta people through awful representations of the wretched environment because of the activities of multinational oil companies. Solomon A. Edebor in an eco-critical reading of Habila’s*Oil on Water* avers that Habila calls attention to the gloomy effects of environmental pollution on man and his environment and rouses the reader to take responsibility. In Edebor’s observation, Habila foregrounds the beauty of nature especially in its pristine state, displacement of people due to oil activities, poverty, sicknesses, oil bunkering and pipeline vandalism, militancy, social consequences like broken homes and marriages, hopelessness, loss of moral piety among others. However, Edebor asserts that Habila does not out rightly condemn the activities of militants in the novel. Instead, it appears he endorses any action that can make the government and its allied multinational companies ponder on the consequences of their activities, irrespective of the action’s moral consequence (48). This similar protest and activism is found in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow*, which captures the hardships and predicaments of the people in the Niger Delta and its catastrophic effects. Agary, in the words of the female protagonist of the novel, Zilayefa “… one of the crude oil pipes that ran through my village, broke and spilled over several hectares of land, my mother’s farmland included” (Agary 3). To this, Nonyelum C. Mba espouses that the oil discovered in the Niger Delta is more of a curse than a blessing because of the sufferings of the people of the Niger Delta.

**Conclusion**

The concerns highlighted so far in this paper shows that brilliant studies have been carried out by various researchers and creative writers to develop the literature of the Niger Delta. These studies and literary texts as so far reviewed range from the evils of the Nigerian leaders in aggravating youth restiveness and violence in the Niger Delta by empowering the youths to form gangs, to the league of traditional rulers and kings with the government and oil multinationals in pillaging resources. Corruption and greed of the leaders have also been explored in all the creative genres while the marginalization of the people due to inequitable distribution of wealth and avarice of those in authority have been adjudged the thematic basis of the poems, plays, and novels written by both Niger Delta and non-Niger Delta born writers. Environmental devastations and degradation have been analysed from various views, including the feminist perspectives. How women are closest to nature and the consequences of the Niger Delta crisis on them. The loss of purity of the environment due to oil exploratory activities has also been reflected upon. However, the relationships between the nefarious behaviours and corrupt tendencies of leadership in the Niger Delta and the despoliation of the ecological system have been accounted for to strongly develop a literary canon protest and activism. A strong link exists between the corruption of the political elites in cahoots with the oil companies and the resultant degradation of the environment that continues unabated.

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