



Niger Delta Literature: Emerging Thematic Preoccupations in Nigerian Literature

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Abstract— *The Nigeria Delta region has long been a hotbed of literary activity, producing writers of international repute such as Tanure Ojaide, Chris Aban and Ken Saro-Wiwa. However, in recent years, there has been an emergence of new voices from the region, which is bringing to the fore new thematic preoccupations that reflect the changing socio-political realities of the region. Thus, the paper provides an overview of the emerging thematic preoccupations in Nigeria Delta literature, drawing from a range of contemporary literary works from the region. The paper identifies three key themes that are increasingly becoming central to the discourse of Nigeria Delta literature: environmental degradation, political corruption, and youth restiveness. The first theme, environmental degradation, reflects the devastating impact of oil exploration and exploitation on the Niger Delta region. The second theme, political corruption, is a recurring motif in Nigeria Delta literature. The third theme, youth restiveness, reflects the increasing frustration and anger of young people in the Niger Delta region. Overall, this paper argues that the emerging thematic preoccupations in Nigeria Delta literature reflect the changing socio-political realities of the region. By engaging with these themes, Nigeria Delta writers are providing powerful critiques of the problems facing the region, as well as offering new visions for a more just and equitable future.*

Keywords— *environmental degradation, Niger Delta Literature, thematic preoccupations, oil*

I. INTRODUCTION

The lively and ever-evolving corpus of writing known as Niger Delta literature captures the political, social, and cultural aspects of Nigeria's Niger Delta. The writing is beginning to be recognized on a global scale as a significant voice in Nigerian literature. The thematic focus on the locals' experiences is what distinguishes Niger Delta writing from other genres. With reference to some of the works of eminent Niger Delta writers, this paper will examine the new thematic preoccupations in Niger Delta writing. The fight for environmental justice is one of the main themes of Niger Delta literature. Over five decades of oil exploration and production in the area have severely degraded the landscape and polluted the air. Tanure Ojaide, Chris Abani, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, among other authors, have written pieces that emphasize the terrible effects that oil prospecting has had on the local ecology and population. In "The

Activist," by Ojaide (1991), the main character, a young activist, defends the rights of the people in his village against the unethical business practices of international oil firms. Similar to Black in "The Virgin of Flames," the main character of Abani's 2007 novel is haunted by the environmental destruction brought on by the Niger Delta oil sector.

The fight for political independence and self-determination is a major theme in Niger Delta literature. Longtime political and economic marginalization of Niger Delta residents by successive Nigerian administrations has caused a general feeling of despair and disillusionment among the local populace. The authors of "Where Vultures Feast," Ike Okonta and Oronto (2002), examine the political history of the Niger Delta, while exposing the manner in which the Nigerian state has taken advantage of and ignored the area. The ambitions of the locals for autonomy and self-

determination are also explored in the novel. Additionally, emerging themes in Niger Delta writing are gender and sexuality. Writers like Yeibo (2017), Azuah (2010), and Unigwe (2009) examine gender and sexuality issues in the context of the Niger Delta in their own works. The poems in Yeibo's "Of Waters and the Wild" explore the lives of women in the area, stressing their challenges and aspirations. The book "Edible Bones" by Azuah examines a lesbian woman's experiences in the Niger Delta while noting the difficulties she encounters in a culture that is primarily hostile to homosexuality.

The use of language in Niger Delta literature is one of its significant features. Many writers in the area use "rotten English," a pidgin language that combines elements of English with regional slang and dialects. This language option depicts the multilingual Niger Delta region, where English, pidgin, and many regional tongues are spoken. Authors like Ken Saro-Wiwa have been able to reach a larger audience while simultaneously preserving the distinctive linguistic legacy of the area by utilizing "rotten English" in their works. Literature from the Niger Delta has had a big influence on Nigerian literature as a whole. The advent of authors from the area has aided in diversifying Nigeria's literary scene and upending the predominance of authors from the wealthier sections of the nation. Themes from Niger Delta literature have also struck a chord with readers in Nigeria and beyond, bringing attention to the social, economic, and political difficulties marginalized populations confront all over Nigeria. Niger Delta literature has recently attracted more attention nationally as well as internationally. There have been numerous conferences and workshops devoted to the study of Niger Delta literature, and researchers have started to investigate the topics and strategies employed by writers from the area. It is conceivable that the skilled writers in the area will produce even more avant-garde and thought-provoking pieces as the sector expands and changes.

Additionally, significant themes in Niger Delta literature are memory and identity. Years of colonization and exploitation have destroyed the region's rich cultural legacy. In their writing, authors like Okara (1964), Saro-Wiwa (1985), and Ojaide (1991) tackle problems of memory and identity, underlining the significance of maintaining and honoring the Niger Delta's cultural history. In "The Voice," by Okara, the narrator muses on the value of oral tradition in conserving cultural legacy. The protagonist of Saro-Wiwa's "Sozaboy," a teenage Niger Delta resident, tries to balance his cultural legacy with the demands of modernity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literary creations by authors from Nigeria's Niger Delta are referred to as Niger Delta literature. The Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, and Ogoni people are among the many ethnic groups who consider this region home. Environmental deterioration, poverty, and political instability have long been problems in the Niger Delta area. These problems have served as motivation for writers to create works that capture regional realities. This review of the literature looks at the newly emerging concerns in Niger Delta literature. Since writers from the area started using their writing to address the social, political, and environmental challenges affecting their communities, the literature of the Nigerian Niger Delta region has been drawing more attention. The literature of the Niger Delta, according to Ifowodo, a poet and scholar from Nigeria, is "distinct from other forms of Nigerian literature in its preoccupation with the degradation of the environment, the exploitation of oil resources, the struggle for social justice, and the quest for identity and cultural authenticity" (Ifowodo, 2004). The rich oral culture of the Niger Delta, which includes music, dance, and storytelling, can be linked to the origins of Niger Delta literature. Writing emerged as the primary method for preserving history and culture when the area was colonized by European nations before eventually becoming a part of Nigeria. Gabriel Okara, whose poetry draws on the oral traditions of the Ijaw people and explored issues of identity, culture, and tradition, was the first Nigerian author to concentrate heavily on the Niger Delta (Oyebade, 2010).

Other writers from the area have arisen since Okara's ground-breaking work, covering a variety of themes and approaches. Themes like governmental corruption, social injustice, and the fight for human rights were tackled in Saro-Wiwa's works, such as his novel "Sozaboy" and his play "Basi and Company." (Gikandi, 1999). The rich tradition of the Niger Delta's literary heritage has recently been tapped by a new generation of authors who are exploring fresh themes and literary genres. These authors include Kaine Agary, whose novel, *Yellow Yellow*, examines the sexual experiences and social discrimination of women in the region, Tanure Ojaide, whose poetry examines the effects of oil exploration on the environment and the people of the Niger Delta, and Ebi Yeibo, whose poetry examines themes of marginalization and social justice. Overall, the complex social, political, and environmental issues that the people of the region face are reflected in the rising theme preoccupations in Niger Delta literature. By giving voice to these challenges, Niger Delta literature plays an important role in shaping the discourse around these issues and promoting social change.

Historical Overview:

The oral tradition of the local population is where the literature of the Niger Delta got its start. Before writing was invented, the Niger Delta's inhabitants used music, dance, and storytelling to share their culture and traditions. Writing evolved to become a preeminent tool for preserving history and culture with the advent of colonization. The Niger Delta was first described in writing by European explorers and missionaries who chronicled their interactions with the locals and the area. Gabriel Okara, a Nigerian poet and novelist, who released his debut collection of poems, was the first to write extensively about the Niger Delta. "The Fisherman's Invocation" was written in 1978. Okara's works, drew inspiration from the oral tradition of the Ijaw people, explored the themes of identity, culture, and tradition. Since then, several other writers have emerged, drawing inspiration from the rich cultural heritage of the Niger Delta.

Discussions on Emerging Thematic Preoccupations:

Environmental Degradation

Environmental destruction is one of the most prevalent themes in Niger Delta literature. Nigeria's oil and gas industry, which has significantly harmed the environment, is located in the Niger Delta. Oil spills, gas flare-ups, and other operations have contaminated the land, water, and air, causing ecosystems to be destroyed and local inhabitants to lose their means of subsistence. The repercussions of environmental degradation have been extensively covered by writers. For instance, "Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English" by Ken Saro-Wiwa (1985) examines how oil drilling affects the Niger Delta's ecosystem and the local population. Similar to this, Helon Habila's 2010 book *Oil on Water* is a fictional story of the hunt for an oil executive's kidnapped wife in the Niger Delta. The novel describes how the oil industry has destroyed the ecosystem and how conflicts over resources have led to bloodshed in the area. Writers have raised awareness of the environmental and social impacts of the Niger Delta's oil industry through their works.

Social Justice and Human Rights

The themes of social justice and human rights are also prevalent in Niger Delta literature. The Niger Delta region has long been neglected by the Nigerian government, and its residents suffer from poverty, a lack of basic infrastructure, and other problems. The literature created by Niger Delta writers reflects the region's yearning for social justice and human rights as a result. A nonfiction account of his arrest by the Nigerian government for his activity on behalf of the Ogoni people is found in Ken Saro-Wiwa's "A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary" (1995). The incarceration conditions he was subjected to and the fight

for Ogoni's justice, are also covered in the novel. Similar to this, Tanure Ojaide's 2006 book "The Activist" is a fictionalized portrayal of the life of a Niger Delta activist. The struggle for social justice in the area is one of the subjects covered in the novel, along with political corruption and violations of human rights.

Identity and Belonging

In the literature of the Niger Delta, themes of identity and belonging are also prevalent. There are many different ethnic groups in the area, and each has its own distinct cultural traditions and practices. This diversity is reflected in the literature written by authors from the Niger Delta, with many of their works delving into the intricacies of identification and belonging there. The 1976 novel "The Last Duty" by Isidore Okpewho, which explores themes of identity and belonging in the Niger Delta, serves as one illustration of this. The novel centers on a young man who struggles to reconcile his allegiance to his people with his desire to fit in with Nigerian culture as a whole. Similar themes of identity and belonging are explored in Gabriel Okara's "The Voice" (1964) through the use of imagery and symbolism.

Gender and Feminism

Emerging themes in Niger Delta literature include feminism and gender. Numerous difficulties have been faced by women in the Niger Delta, such as poverty, discrimination, and gender-based violence. Women have started to demand gender equality in the area and have increased their activity over the past few years. The literature written by authors from the Niger Delta reflects this. The 2011 novel *Edible Bones* by Unoma Azuah, which examines issues of gender, sexuality, and identity in the Niger Delta, serves as an illustration of this. In a world that is hostile to difference, the young woman in the novel tries to understand her sexuality and identity. Azuah draws attention to the struggles and experiences of queer women in the Niger Delta through her work.

Post colonialism and Identity Politics

Identity politics and postcolonialism are other themes that appear in Niger Delta literature. The complex history of colonialism and resistance in the area has influenced the way its inhabitants see themselves. The legacy of colonialism and the struggle for identity and independence have both been highlighted by Niger Delta writers as they have addressed these subjects in their writing. For instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1989 book *On a Darkling Plain* is a compilation of articles and speeches that explore colonialism, identity, and resistance in Nigeria. The book chronicles Saro-Wiwa's activism and his battle for the rights of the Niger Delta's Ogoni people. Similar to this, Tanure Ojaide's 2003 publication "Poetry, Performance, and Art:

Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People" examines these songs. The book investigates how these songs contribute to the formation of community and identity in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Frameworks and Nigeria Delta Literature

The rising thematic preoccupations in Niger Delta literature have been examined using a variety of scholarly frameworks. One of the most well-known, focuses on how literature responds to and reflects the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and it is called a postcolonial theory. Literature, according to postcolonial theorists, may be a potent tool for upending established narratives and fostering social change. Ecocriticism theory is another one, which emphasizes the connection between literature and the environment. Ecologists contend that literature can foster environmental activism and environmental consciousness by illuminating the ways in which people interact with the natural world, Okoye, (2013)

Feminist theory which emphasises how gender impacts our experiences and our social and political institutions is the third theoretical framework that has been used to analyse Niger Delta literature. Literature, according to feminist theorists, may be a potent weapon for advancing gender equality and challenging patriarchal conventions. The article "Oil, Hegemony, and the Language of Resistance in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*" by Chukwuma Okoye is an illustration of how postcolonial theory has been used to analyze Niger Delta literature. In this article, Okoye makes the case that Saro-Wiwa's novel subversively uses the English language to undermine colonialism's hegemonic authority and encourage resistance to foreign businesses' exploitation of the Niger Delta.

The novel "The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: An Ecocritical Perspective" by Christopher Anyokwu is an illustration of how ecocriticism is applied to the analysis of Niger Delta literature. Anyokwu (2015) makes the case in this article that Ojaide's poetry encourages environmental action and awareness since it depicts the disastrous effects of oil development on the ecosystem and the Niger Delta's inhabitants. A cultural study, which concentrates on the connections between culture and society, is another theoretical framework that has been applied to the analysis of Niger Delta literature. Literature, according to cultural studies experts, can be an effective instrument for comprehending the intricate interactions between culture, society, and power. The article "The Politics of Space in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*" by Simon Akindes is an illustration of how cultural studies have been used to analyze literature from the Niger Delta. Akindes (2002) makes the case in this piece that Saro-Wiwa and Sofola use literary representations of

space to subvert prevailing cultural and political narratives and advance social change.

Trauma theory, which focuses on the psychological effects of traumatic experiences, has also been used to analyze Niger Delta literature. According to trauma theorists, literature can be an effective instrument for examining how trauma affects people individually and collectively, as well as for fostering healing and social justice. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's article, "Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Uzo Njoku's *The Forest Dames and Other Stories*, serves as an illustration of how trauma theory is applied to the study of Niger Delta literature. This article by Azodo (2012) makes the case that Njoku's tales address the psychological effects of violence and displacement on the Niger Delta's residents and that through examining memory and identity, they foster healing and resilience.

Globalization theory, which focuses on how local cultures and societies are shaped by regional economic and cultural dynamics, has also been used to analyze Niger Delta literature. Globalization theorists contend that literature may be an effective tool for fostering cultural variety and resistance as well as for comprehending the intricate connections between local and global cultures. The article "Globalisation and the Struggle for Identity in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide" by Emmanuel Oritsejafor serves as an illustration of how globalization theory is used in the study of Niger Delta literature. According to Oritsejafor (2010), Ojaide's poetry encourages cultural resistance and the assertion of regional identity while also illustrating how globalization has affected the people of the Niger Delta. The article "African Women in Diaspora: The Novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe" by Adaku T. Ankumah is a last illustration of the application of feminist theory to the analysis of Niger Delta literature. Ankumah (2013) contends in this article that by giving voice to the experiences of African women and examining the effects of migration on their lives, the novels of Adichie and Unigwe challenge patriarchal conventions and advance gender equality.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Niger Delta literature is an important voice in Nigerian literature that is gaining recognition worldwide. The literature is characterized by a thematic preoccupation that revolves around the experiences of the people of the region. Environmental justice, political autonomy, gender and sexuality, and memory and identity are emerging as important themes in Niger Delta literature. Through their works, Niger Delta writers are highlighting the challenges faced by the people of the region, while also celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the Niger Delta. Niger Delta

literature is an important and dynamic field that reflects the diverse cultural, social, and political realities of life in the Niger Delta. Through their works, authors from the region have brought attention to issues such as environmental degradation, political marginalization, and cultural identity, challenging readers to think critically about the challenges faced by marginalized communities across Nigeria and beyond. As the field continues to evolve, it is likely that we will see even more innovative and powerful works from the talented writers of the Niger Delta. The literature reflects the complex realities of the region, including environmental degradation, social justice and human rights, identity and belonging, gender and feminism, postcolonialism, and identity politics. Through their works, Niger Delta writers have brought attention to these issues and have contributed to a better understanding of the region and its people. As the region continues to grapple with these challenges, these themes will likely continue to be explored in the literature produced by Niger Delta writers.

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