

Original Paper

The Politics of the Novel in the Niger Delta: From Kaine Agary to Chimeka Garricks

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Abstract

*Politics is a vital aspect of Nigeria's development from 1960s to present. It is central in any discourse on the Niger Delta. Oil has been the bane of modern Nigerian politics; and a good number of the government's policies, programmes and interventions are interpreted as conscious move to access and control oil money. Since political power translates into automatic ownership of the oil and the soil that bears it, then the scramble for oil resources has opened a new vista in the Nigerian political calculations. This assumption is predicated upon the political dimension of some of the issues raised in the Niger Delta literature. Working within the context of ecocriticism and Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence, the study seeks to examine the treatment of political issues in the Niger Delta novels of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Chimeka Garricks *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, and how these issues affect developmental efforts in the region. The study concludes that political leadership can become a catalyst for national development and transformation when rightly steered.*

Keywords

politics, environment, degradation, resources

1. Introduction: The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region is one part of the world that is richly endowed with natural and human resources. It is well-known as the hub of crude oil exploration in Nigeria. It is an area where almost a hundred percent of Nigeria's crude oil is drawn from. The Niger Delta region is typically considered to be located within the nine coastal southern states, which include: all six states from the South-South geopolitical zone (Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Edo and Delta States), one state from the South-west geopolitical zone (Ondo State) and two states from the South-east geopolitical zone (Abia

and Imo States) (Hogan, p. 11).

Given Nigeria's position as one of Africa's top oil producers, with a partly explored huge gas potential, the "oil war" in the Niger Delta is of critical importance to Nigeria's economic growth and political stability. With the rising agitation for resource control or equitable resource sharing formula, huge environmental degradation and the unabated ecological injustice in the region, one is compelled to undertake a study of the dynamics and politics underpinning violent conflict in Nigeria's main oil-producing region.

For a decade or more, "oil war" has for strategic, economic and political reasons brought the Niger Delta to the brink of international energy and security concerns. The situation has assumed a worrisome and even life-threatening dimension, such that a critic was compelled to describe the region as the "predator's paradise" (Maduka, p. 79). Of course, this is an unhealthy portrayal, but in reality, the crisis in the region, with its political undertones had cast a dark shadow on the canvas of not just the Niger Delta region, but on the country in general.

No matter the hue of politics or political powers in Nigeria, it has spawned virtually the same crushing effects: political instability, socio-economic misery, environmental devastation, ecological dissonance and ethnic crisis. The problem is worse in the Niger Delta region, where the nation's wealth is deposited. The oppressive system in this region usually provokes incessant conflicts and political violence. For Eteng, the region faces a fundamental contradiction:

The fundamental contradiction is indeed most pronounced in the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta minority enclave from where the country's oil wealth is generated. This fact is well-known and highly acknowledged by the appropriating Nigerian state in power, the expropriating multinational oil companies and the expropriated oil-bearing communities (p. 4).

If the people of this region can have access to quality social amenities, good infrastructure, then no matter how much they are being expropriated, the fact for them is that they are enjoying the dividends and benefits of being called, oil-bearing communities; the fact for them will be that as long as everyone is happy, then the government and the multinational oil companies are good. But the reverse is the case. It is in response to this gap or disconnect, that the Niger Delta novel has demonstrated that art is a dynamic channel for interrogating the politics of ecological violence and socio-economic oppression taking place in the region. It is against this background that this paper is interested in examining the political warp in the Niger Delta novels of Kaine Agary, entitled, *Yellow-Yellow* and that of Chimeka Garricks, entitled, *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. Put in other words, whether we outline some of these issues from embezzlement and run the list down to insurgency, the woes of many African states, Nigeria in particular, is rooted in political ineptitude, political helplessness, indeed, a dysfunctional political structure or organisation. Following this, politics becomes the point of departure for any

meaningful discourse and the platform for proffering answers to many questions about the Niger Delta region.

2. What is Politics?

Politics is about acquiring power and influence, and exercising it. The Compact Dictionary of Political Science (2018 edition), defines politics as *a strife of interest masquerading as a contest of principles*. The Encarta Dictionary, (2009 edition), conceptualized politics as, the *theory and practice of government, especially the activities associated with governing, with obtaining legislative or executive power, or with forming and running organizations connected with government*. It is the conduct of public affairs for private advantage. Basically, politics was intended or designed to be the greatest science and service to mankind, but human greed has constrained politicians the world over, to approach politics with the faulty perspective of power grabbing and selfish use of it.

Politics can also be seen as a process of conflict management between opposing individuals or group. Those who are in control of the power apparatus, use it to control a system and also regulate the actions and decisions of others. French thinker Montesquieu defined politics as *the study of the formal institutions of the state executive, legislative and the adjudication of law*. For Harold Lasswell (1986), politics is defined as *who gets what, when and how?* Political power is attained through information dissemination and thought control. From the foregoing, Laswell's definition captures the social conditions in the Niger Delta and to an extent, corroborates our argument that politics is a major underpinning of the crisis in the Niger Delta region.

3. The Political Novel

Political novels are narratives, which speak on political happenings, or events, systems and theories. History has a record of the strength and possibilities of the political novel in shaping human civilisation and development. For instance, in Apartheid South Africa, fiction was influential in subverting that ugly system on the political rein of South Africa. Significant among those novelists were Alex La Guma, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Oswald Mtshali.

A political novel is that fiction which aligns itself with the political developments in a given society; an art-form that rallies against arbitrary modes of governance. Top on the list of Nigerian political novels are Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and others. It is interesting to note that many, if not all of the novels that are preoccupied with the Niger Delta environmental issues are inherently political. The reason is not far to seek: a major part of the Niger Delta challenges hasits source and solutions rooted in politics and governance. Political novels are indeed a significant and important genre of literature in that they are literary advocates for social and

political change across societies. This artistic synergy between literature and politics underscores the fact, as one would find in Michael Berube's locution, that "the novel is a potent tool in the reconstruction of society for human freedom and environmental wellbeing" (cited in Golding, p. 7).

4. The Novel in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta has been a victim of huge infrastructural neglect from successive government of Nigeria and from multinational oil corporations, which do oil exploration and related business endeavours there. The region has witnessed untold damage on her agrarian and other natural sources of livelihood, with no sincere programme geared towards remediation. Thus, the novel in the Niger Delta is a conscious attempt by some creative writers to interrogate those issues surrounding the environment, especially in the region, those issues that gave rise to what could be referred to as the Niger Delta literature or as our sub-heading calls it, "the novel in the Niger Delta". Thus, one can understand Maduka's position:

The tragic historical situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is gradually producing an enduring literature dramatizing the horrible condition of human life in the region; just as the trauma of the civil war generated The Civil War Literature and the denial of rights of women produced Women's Literature. Poets, novelists and playwrights, all decry the enormity of the environmental degradation of the region brought about by the insensitive exploration of the region's natural resources by oil companies (p. 79).

An examination of the two Niger Delta novels on which this study is hinged, would reveal that both narratives, bemoan the abject poverty inflicted on people by multinational oil companies and their cohorts in governmental circles or as Maduka would call them, "...malevolent forces in government and capitalist oil sector of the economy" (p. 79). Certainly, we can apprehend how the Niger Delta communities, through these novelists (Kaine Agary and Chimeka Garricks), "go about deciding what will count as facts" ((cited in Golding, p. 7). It is said that *he who wears the shoes, knows where it pinches*; as stakeholders, these two novelists, have engaged their awareness and skills in writing what they consider as the fact. It is in this light therefore that we can rightly situate Ngugi wa Thiongo's assertion that "every work of literature is a commitment to a special political ideology, and every writer is a writer in politics" (p. xii).

5. Political Issues in the Niger Delta Novel

Every true socio-political writer understands the need to possess an eagle's vision, which would enable him ferret out the social ills of his country and condemn them for the betterment of the people. In these two novels, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, there are three fundamental political issues raised in them. As we have mentioned earlier, a significant part of the

Niger Delta has its source and solutions in government and governance. But for the purpose of this study, we shall consider three political issues with respect to this discourse on the Niger Delta. They are: the agitation for resource control, environmental degradation and the problem of militancy. We shall consider them in this order.

- **The agitation for resource control/equitable sharing formula**

Many citizens of the Niger Delta may be forgiven for believing that if the mineral/oil deposits were found in some parts of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria rather than the minority ethnic areas, the derivation story may have been different. The pros and cons of this argument is that a credible and equitable revenue allocation formula represents a viable way of reducing the tension or agitations for resource control by the Niger Delta people. With the majority ethnic group at the seat of power in Nigeria, the politics of oil as it concerns the subject of resource control becomes a reflection of power relations between the majority and the minority.

The concept of resource control is quite ambiguous, but for the Niger Delta people, it is defined as the right by the Niger Delta people to manage the revenue accruing from oil and other natural resources in line with the tenets of true federalism (Adesopo, p. 279). The quest to manage the benefits of their ancestral soil by the Niger Delta people otherwise referred to as resource control as against the control from the federal government, is at the core of the politicking and agitations prevalent in the region. Clearly, it is a major political issue in the Niger Delta narrative. Chimeka Garricks, through the voice of one of his characters expressed this issue in *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*. As a character, Doye argued that his displeasure and militia position are influenced by the desire of his people, the Niger Delta people to manage their resources. He noted as he confronts a Yoruba character in the story:

My people have the oil, yet it is your people who have all the jobs in the oil companies.

Your people refuse to employ my people... (*Tomorrow*, p. 6).

Somewhere else in the novel, he repeated the same complaint which for him, is a justification for the agitation for resource control by the Niger Delta people:

Stop being a bloody fool. The Yorubas control all the juicy jobs in the oil industry, and they are the most openly biased tribe in this country. Our people are left with menial jobs. The stupid excuse is that we are not qualified. So, since I can't work as an engineer with my two-one, I'd rather be a militant than a cleaner (*Tomorrow*, p. 160).

Still on the agitation for the control of what is rightfully his, as a true son of the Niger Delta, Doye gives an invitation to the Niger Delta people to follow his example:

Look, the Niger Delta struggle is essentially a fight for oil, or the control and use of the resources from oil. No one fights for oil for purely philanthropic purposes. Yes, I have made some money from my fight. But there is an ideological angle to my fight. In taking what is

rightfully mine, I hope I inspire my people to stand up and take what is rightfully theirs
(*Tomorrow*, p. 324).

But where the Niger Delta people cannot get full resource control, they have demanded for equitable sharing formula. The government should not be a one-sided one, which favours only a majority group. While the Yoruba man gets a job in an oil company, the Niger Delta man should get same category of job if he is qualified as the Yoruba man.

- **Environmental degradation**

The African story has been richly represented through creative writings; and the Niger Delta experience is however, not excluded. Of the many challenges and concerns raised in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, environmental degradation is not just prominent, but has a worrisome political dimension to it. Owing to the morbid and gruesome brutality on the environment and by extension the economy of the Niger Delta region, the area is now dubbed, "the predator's paradise" (Maduka, p. 79). Successive government in Nigeria have done little or nothing to challenge the attitude of multinational oil corporations who carry out exploration activities leaving the environment of the region greatly polluted, abused and degraded. Exploration, exploitation and all that goes with drilling oil in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, have undoubtedly brought about the loss of many sources of livelihood, destroyed farmlands and contaminated aquatic lives for those in the business of fishing. Thus, Doye queries:

"All Mr. President does is shit in and drill oil from my river. Does he eat the rotten fish from Asiam River? Does his wife drink the contaminated water? Do his grandchildren play next to gas flares and pipelines?" (*Tomorrow*, p. 236).

As he decries this ecological imperialism, he (Doye) transitions from being an agitator to an activist. But what is *ecological imperialism*? Alfred Crosby (1986) refers to it as a form of colonialism aimed at damaging as well as exploiting the environment and ecology of colonised countries by European nationals and their conglomerates (p. 36). Of course, ecological imperialism is a manifestation of neo-colonialism, which should be resisted by any eco-friendly government or people. But sadly, these multinational oil companies in connivance with the corrupt government are partners in the destruction of the region's ecosystem. We can advance this argument judging from the indifference of indigenous political leaders—whether as local council chairmen, legislators or governors, towards enacting and enforcing laws that would restrain multinational oil corporations from practices that are inimical to environmental wellbeing. The situation is further made worse when these multinational oil corporations dissociate themselves from environmental issues like pipeline leakage, oil spills, gas flares and the likes, blaming them on sabotage. An example is in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*:

The community took the matter up with the oil company that owned the pipes, but they said they suspected sabotage by the youths and were not going to pay compensation for all the destruction that the burst pipes had caused. And so it was that in a single day, my mother

lost her main source of sustenance. However, I think she had lost that land a long time ago, because each season yielded less than the season before. Not unlike the way she and others in the village had gradually lost, year after year, the creations of the river to oil spills, acid rain, gas flares... (*Yellow-Yellow*, p. 4).

The shock expressed by this young girl as she witnessed the destruction of her mother's only source of livelihood, is representative of the agony, discontentment and communal woes of the people.

- **The problem of militancy**

Environmental issues in the Niger Delta have engendered a number of anti-social activities from various groups with different intents. These include militant/militia groups, criminal gangs and kidnappers serving the interests of some highly-placed political office holders. The situation has assumed a worrisome twist in recent times as these criminally-minded groups and their sponsors have opportunistically latched onto the crisis and insecurity in the region to advance their illegal activities, and enriching themselves through it. In *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, a group known as the Asiamas Freedom Army, headed by Doughboy, is at the centre of militancy and kidnapping of oil company workers. He boasts:

I was in control. I felt powerful...we are the Asiamas Freedom Army, I declared. I was rewarded with the gasp from the Imperial Oil boat. We, the AFA, were the most feared of all the ethnic militia in the Niger Delta. We were credited with oil bunkering, kidnapping and bombing of oil installations (*Tomorrow*, p. 4).

Some stakeholders in the region have observed that the problem of youth restiveness, manifesting prominently in militancy and kidnapping, is the outcome of the politics of marginalisation, the feeling of neglect and disillusionment and the indifference of the government towards the continued devastation of the region's ecosystem by multinational oil corporations. These are some of the factors that are fuelling youth restiveness in the region. Kaine Agary fictionalises the same problem in her *Yellow-Yellow*:

...and sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person, living in Port Harcourt or Lagos, speaking about how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others...These broadcasts drove the boys in my village to violence...some of them joined the boys from other villages to kidnap oil company executives or bar oil company workers from doing their work (*Yellow-Yellow*, p. 9).

The situation is quite complicated as the actions of these militants and the violence that characterize their activities have made it so much difficult to differentiate between the real freedom fighters and the criminal elements among them.

Another disturbing dimension of militancy in the region is the political partnership and support it enjoys from some persons in government. Tubo, a character in Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, hinted on the support a militant/hostage-taker like Doye enjoys from two political office holders:

...at first Doughboy knew what Chief Ikaki and Wali were up to and he didn't seem to mind.

Maybe he didn't know that they were getting more money than him for each hostage (p. 136).

For clarity, both Chief Ikaki and Wali are public servants, serving in separate government agencies; while Chief Ikaki serves as a special adviser in the Governor's cabinet, Wali works in the state's security service. Naturally, they should be patriots committed to protecting the integrity of the state and serving the interest of the community, but sadly, they are nothing but treacherous insiders or what Niyi Osundare calls "native executheives holding forth for alien wolves" (*The Eye of the Earth*, p. 46).

6. Conclusion

The Niger Delta struggle had a peaceful origin, but assumed violent dimension in the late 1990s. The trouble with it today is that it is driven by personal and opportunistic interests, rather than a collective one. However, this ugly dimension should not detract the urgent attention the region is calling for, nor should it be an excuse for the government and multinational interests to shy away from the reality that the region has suffered so much neglect, deprivation, oppression and environmental degradation following years of being short-changed within the context of Nigeria's unequal fiscal federalism.

No doubt, at the base of other political issues or issues with political undertone, is the strong feeling of injustice which the Niger Delta people have witnessed under the administration of successive Nigerian government. These issues, with their political roots, are prominent preoccupations in the literature of the Niger Delta. The truth however, is this: if the goals of environmental justice for the Niger Delta region must be actualized, then there must be a genuine sense of integrity in the pursuit of it; any action that does not include environmental wellbeing and the welfare of the people, would definitely fall short of the goals of environmental justice.

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