

# Niger Delta Literature as Echoes of Grand Dystopian

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore how Niger Delta literature points to oil companies as the real villains of their stories. This representation follows the tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism and a self designed model which offers a simple exploration of the acts of villainy of the oil companies in the texts and exposes the fact that these companies never lose or suffer any consequences. The paper adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology with the selected Niger Delta literary texts as the primary sources of data. This paper explores multinational oil companies as grand villains in selected Niger Delta literary texts. The paper reveals that popular texts in the region recreate the acts of villainy that these companies carry out in the region. It also reveals that the oil companies are immune to defeat and consequence. Thus, it recommends Niger Delta text scholars/authors fully embrace the dystopian and speculative genre to reach a wider audience. It also recommends that comparative studies of the global south suppression by corporations should be incorporated in African literary research. The paper concludes that Niger Delta literary texts represents the oil companies as the neo-colonial and economic forces that are directly responsible for the condition of the region through a form of the dystopian genre.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Niger Delta Literature, Grand Villain, Niger Delta

## **Introduction**

Niger Delta literature is a retelling of the historical experiences and present condition of the Niger Delta region. The primary aim of the sub-genre is to protest the degradation, pollution, marginalisation and oppression of the region through oil and politics. Writers of the region seem to have come to an undeclared agreement that the best way to garner international and national attention is through stark depiction of the region as a site of dystopia, ranging from political oppression, environmental destruction, violence, displacement, and tragic death of humans, flora and fauna. This peculiar corroborated presentation of the issues of the region domesticates the western-originated genre of dystopian literature.

Dystopia, then, is a genre of literature that Asit Panda states, “encapsulates vivid imaginations of grim, futuristic worlds characterised by oppressive regimes,

societal decay, and existential crises” (1079). It plays the medium of a future that is not at all possible but mirrors the present fears of a contemporary society. To Eqbal Farhan in his paper, dystopian literature presents a “humanitarian society characterised by devastation, illness, crime, poverty and repression, where the people in this society transform to beasts” (376).

Furthermore, dystopian literature, since its emergence, encompasses powerful texts that set it as a unique literary genre. One such is George Orwell's 1984, which, according to Vidisha Gupta, has been widely praised for its prophetic and insightful commentary on the nature of totalitarianism and the dangers of authoritarianism” (106). He asserts that the text goes beyond a critique of the political system and envisions an extremity that mirrors the end of human society as free.

Also, Gupta's assessment of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* rounds up the novel as a “compelling dystopia that vividly imagines a future in which women's rights are entirely circumscribed” (104). Such novels are expressly anti-utopian. According to Ruzbeh Babaei et al, dystopian literature in the West is the recognition of the “impossibility of utopian thinking as an unrealistic and impossible quest for an ideal future” (64). Peter Fitting argues that it is “explicitly or implicitly a defence of the status quo” (141). Consequently, scholars agree that dystopian literature is a Western genre that envisions the extreme versions of its contemporary societies, keeping the texts as a warning of the path a society takes. This paper argues that African literature can domesticate the dystopian trope or genre to suite its peculiar literary ecosystem the genre. This means that dystopian context in African prose does not have to imagine a futuristic world of depression, oppression and destruction but simply represent and recreate the present socio-political and environmental issues of their respective societies.

This wide assertion does not mean that Western-style dystopian narratives do not exist in African literature. It only points to a wider trend in African literature, especially since the African novel is an artistic tool for the representation and critique of contemporary issues. Works like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* and Amma Darko's *Faceless* do not need to create a Ghanaian society in the future to fully capture the degradation of the postcolonial Ghanaian society. They simply tell the story of their present society, and it is able to serve the same function of warning the society. Essentially, Zahra Saeed argues that Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country* is a dystopian literary text that does not need to create a futuristic Nigeria full of horror when the civil war is already that. She states that “Achebe, a key literary figure and political critic, presents Nigeria as a dystopian society plagued by corruption, civil war, and failed governance” (1527). Inarguably, Sola Afolayan mentions that “most modern African novels are given to the portrayal of dystopian elements in post-independence Africa” (6). This means that corruption which remains the bane of postcolonial African states leads its people to a constant state of struggle and disillusionment. Ousmane Ngom in asserts that the African dystopian

literature is a neo-colonial manifesto against the former colonial overlords who create horrific destruction in their wake. He comments on their ironic justification, which allows them to set up dictators, prop up terrorist organisations, and lengthen civil wars. Thus, African literature captures the aftermath of these decisions, and it automatically translates to dystopian text.

Clearly, Niger Delta literature part and parcel of African literature, and when it focuses on the dystopian genre, it also domesticates the genre. The question becomes, "What else can Niger Delta authors imagine that can happen to the region that is not happening already?" The degradation of the environment creates scenes of youths walking and surviving in a dystopian environment. Gas flares already imitate James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* futuristic skies. The actions of the military in the region already imitate the Peace Keepers in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (life imitates art and vice versa). In simple terms, Niger Delta dystopian narratives are the recreation of contemporary conditions of the region to protest and critique the state of the region.

Furthermore, Niger Delta literature, in its domestication of the dystopian genre, takes another detour from both the general African trope and Western staples, and that is in its true villains. Simply put, while general African and Western dystopias largely have the government as the grand villain, Niger Delta literature has the multinational oil companies as the grand villains of its stories. In the popular and classic examples above, George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the government is the grand villain. Even in more modern examples, this is the case. Despite the argument for blame on the Nigerian Federal Government and elders of local communities in the Niger Delta, it is the oil companies that are the true villains of every story. Additionally, while grand villains are destroyed (in more modern dystopian narratives), the grand villains in Niger Delta literary texts are never defeated. This is the unique aspect of the trope.

In essence, this paper focuses on how literature of the region is a protest movement but achieves this through a domesticated dystopian genre and then shows how Niger Delta texts show the oil companies as grand villains and how they subtly reveal that multinational oil prospectors never lose. This paper is subdivided into two major parts. The first part reiterates and strengthens the Niger Delta literature as a protest literature which transcends to a compilation of dystopian literature. The second part establishes the oil companies in their true representation.

### **Beyond Protest into Dystopian**

Environmental issues are critical problems or challenges that have diverse effects on the natural world. These issues are commonly due to human activities; however, natural processes are also a part of it. These issues can destroy whole ecosystems, flora and fauna, affect biodiversity and even destroy or harm human health and properties. In Nigeria's Niger Delta region, its environmental issues are a point of

reference and image as it persists and continues for decades with no end in sight. The summary of the region's environmental issues is the crude oil natural resource which is exploited by multinational companies. According to Aniefiok Ite et al, oil exploitation has “local detrimental and significant impacts on the atmosphere, soils and sediments, surface and groundwater, marine environment, biological diversity and sustainability of terrestrial ecosystems in the Niger Delta...discharges have caused environmental pollution, adverse human health effects, detrimental impact on regional economy, socio-economic problems and degradation of host communities in the 9 oil-producing states in the Niger Delta region” (78).

Stephen Ogbodo in his article, comments that “despite its huge asset to the Nigerian nation, this area is characterized by extreme poverty, serious dearth of serviceable infrastructure and environmental degradation occasioned by oil spillage and gas flaring” (18).

As established earlier, Niger Delta literature is essentially protest literature. Proving this, Ifowodo Ogaga in his comments on the simple definition of Niger Delta Literature as “literary creations by authors from Nigeria's Niger Delta”. He furthers that these authors are from the various and numerous ethnic communities in the region that suffer from environmental degradation, poverty and political and social instability. He notes that these problems are the sources of inspiration for the authors from the region. This is because they capture, recreate and represent these problems in literary form. In essence, he notes that “the literature of the Niger Delta... 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” (65). Additionally, Philip Aghoghovwia, in his article, comments on the issue of environmental degradation as expressed in Nnimmo Bassey's poem. Aghoghovwia notes that as an environmental activist, Nnimmo criticizes the United Nation's reliance on perpetrators of the environmental issues in the Niger Delta instead of the victims.

Furthermore, the writers of the region are activists, as Christopher Anyokwu states that Ojaide acts is an environmental activist. Enajite Ojaruega comments on Niger Delta Literature as a non-violent response to “the problems caused by humans' activities to the region's natural environment” (15). The work applauds the role of activists and advocates that the writers of the region play. In other words, “writers from the Niger Delta and elsewhere in Nigeria have been at the forefront of an intellectual form of eco-activism by using their written fiction, poetry, and plays to reflect the plight of this region has for some time now been at the centre of globalization and environmental issues” (16).

Consequently, the simple view of the Niger Delta from its literary narratives is one of dystopic proportions. Olumide Ogunrotimi et al comment on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow's* contemporary takes on Nigeria as a “dystopian society that shows no sign of letting up” (56). They comment that “From top to bottom, everyone seems infested with a venal corruptibility that resists amelioration; from the dictatorial

excesses of the military rulers, the deceitful ruthlessness of the oil companies, the devil-may-care attitudes of the militants, to the general lawlessness of the citizenry” (59). This means that even in the 21st century, African literature still captures the failure of the individual African country of the author, thus showing the extension of the dystopian cloud that Western texts imagine being further in the future.

Michael Montesano articulates the term 'negative dystopia' which he argues separates Niger Delta literature from the dystopia genre. While he agrees that Niger Delta narratives can hardly escape the term “dystopia” due to the “scale of environmental despoliation in the Niger Delta”, he argues against its acceptance as a part of Niger Delta literature. His work which seemingly moves away from this paper essentially foregrounds it. This is because his paper highlights the trope of presenting the present, not the future, as dystopia in African literature.

### **Representation of the Grand Villain**

A multinational company operating in the Niger Delta is made up of investors and a board that transcends national borders, and their interest is the top priority. African scholars agree that these companies are among the staples of the neo-colonial tendencies of Western governments and private citizens. As a result, the operations of these companies serve the interests of people that are higher than the Nigerian government: neo-colonialists who, through an institutionalised system of corruption and international meddling, are the main villains in the story of the Niger Delta. In texts like Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Forlorn Fate* and a host of Niger Delta prose, this argument takes centre stage. Consequently, these texts are considered dystopian texts which follow the Niger Delta literary trope.

In Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, the oil company the text refers to is the heart of the machinery of corruption in the region, and the power it possesses in the region is second to none. Amaibi's assessment of the activities of the oil company reflects this,

How about if Imperial oil stop gas flaring gas in Asiama? Why isn't Imperial Oil flaring gas in Venezuela or in Libya? Besides Mr. Granger, since 1984, general gas flaring is illegal but may be allowed for in certain oil fields for which a ministerial certificate must be issued. I asked Mr McCulloch, your predecessor if imperial oil has a ministerial certificate to flare gas in the Asiama Field. As I recall, he refused to give me an answer. (Garricks 15)

The above quotation introduces the concept of power, specifically oil powers that the oil companies wield over the people of the Niger Delta. The negative effects of gas flaring are a scientific and health fact, yet Asiama, one of the primary sites of the

novel, experiences gas flaring and the consequent health issues resulting from it. Amaibi points to the lack of a ministerial certificate for the company to flare gas in the kingdom, and the entire conversation is brushed aside. While the complicity of the Federal Government is a factor in creating the dystopian hellscape that is Asiamia, it is the oil company through capitalistic greed, bribery, lobbying and corruption that is the actual culprit. Notably, Amaibi becomes a target due to his activism and they plan to silence him.

Accordingly, they implicate him with a kidnapping charge, have him shot and thrown in a prison for a long while before taking him to court. The prison scenes of Amaibi prove this point, “Sah, de problem is government have interest in de pastor... Govement peoples, dey want us to be suffering the Pastor” (107). Kaniye's father also asserts to this when he states, “The government wants Amaibi out of the way... In this country, the government is the mafia” (Garricks 43). The question becomes, who is the puppeteer? Who marks Amaibi as a threat? The answer is glaring: the oil company whose operation creates wealth for the Nigerian government but primarily finances their shareholders. They operate in the shadows while the Nigerian Government is put at the forefront. This shadowy curtain of operation opens a slit as Garricks through Tubo and Wali. Wali spearheads the framing of Amaibi and the killing of Doughboy. In retrospect, the massacre of Asiamia, which shapes the lives of the four protagonists, all blame falls on the Federal Government and military, who avenge the killing of a soldier and storming of an oil facility by Asiamia protesters. While the narrative can easily be that of the Federal Government using calculated violence to protect its national interest, it is the Oil companies that sit at the centre of the controversy. The soldiers start living at and around the faculty after the massacre and the oil company gets their protection to continue their exploitation of oil and pollution of the land and waters of Asiamia without any fear of retaliation from the people. This system born of conquest exists until Amaibi begins to call them out ferociously, and silencing him becomes another option. But in all, it is the federal government that is put at the front, while the oil company pollutes Asiamia's rivers and lands and finances the oppression and suppression of the people.

In accordance with the second part of the model, this text proves it with the victory of Amaibi in his court case. Amaibi with overwhelming evidence, is acquitted and discharged, and the whole plan to eliminate him falls apart. This is the resolution that Garricks' readers rejoice about: the innocent man walks free which is a popular trope in literature. However, this paper views the whole resolution as a testament to the fact that there is no change to the status quo in the region. The oil company simply continues their activities after losing the case. Amaibi walks free, but it in no way solves the Niger Delta problem. The oil company is not taken to court even though there is now evidence of Wali admitting to framing Amaibi. They continue to exist in the larger picture, Asiamia continues to be a victim of gas flaring and oil pollution, and the people's condition continues to worsen. One victory: important

and represents hope, but the grand villain did not lose the war over the destruction of the lives of the people of the Niger Delta.

Habila's *Oil on Water* shows a darker side and dispenses its narrative currency on describing the effect of the oil companies on the environment and people of the Niger Delta. The text paints a dystopian setting:

Soon we were in a dense mangrove swamp; the water underneath us had turned foul and sulphurous; insects rose from the surface in swarms to settle in a mobile cloud above us, biting our arms faces and ears. The boy and the old man appeared to be oblivious to the insects; they kept their eyes narrowed, focused on burrowing the boat through the gnarled, hanging roots that grew out of the water like proboscis gaping for air. The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots. (Habila 8)

For ecocritical literary scholars, this is a popular excerpt from the text. It is everything that establishes the environmental decay and degradation via the operations of oil companies. Capitalism puts profit first, and the dystopic images of dead flora and fauna, birds and the pollution of the air is a result of villainy in the region. Habila adds that it is not just the environment but the humans as well that are victims in this dystopia;

The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said oil well no.2. 1999. 15,000 meters. the houses began not too far away from the derelict PLATFORM. We went from one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound, but they were all empty, with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, while overhead the roofs had big holes through which strong sunlight fell. (Habila 7)

The excerpt shows displacement and draws attention to what the oil companies are capable of in the areas they operate in the Niger Delta. Their actions and inactions lead to displacement, militancy and consequent violence and loss of means of livelihood.

The mission of Zaq and Rufus is to make contact with the kidnappers, and this quest carries them to a location that should not exist in any place on earth; that looks imagined but is a present reality in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The duo comes face to face with the occupying military, displaced villagers, militants, kidnappers, worshippers, and victims but they never face the true culprit. The people solely responsible for the oil-coated water, the dead fishes, birds, displaced humans and destroyed ecosystem.

Also, Rufus achieves his mission and leaves the countryside with his life intact but nothing changes. The countryside he leaves is still going to be the same. The Professor tells him, "Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water" (Habila221). Habila does this for Rufus but in text, nothing changes. The Professor tells him that "by this time tomorrow, one of the major oil depots will be burning. I can't tell you more than that, but I can tell you the war is just starting" (Habila221), but no victory is written into the text and this portrays the realism of the dystopic state of the Niger Delta.

In Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, the same situation plays out. The activity of the oil company creates a dystopic scene of suffering, poverty and environmental degradation:

I left them and ran to my mother's farm. It was the first time I saw what crude oil looked like. I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop when it would stop, how far it would spread. Then there was the smell. I can't describe it but it was strong – so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over, and retched so hard I became dizzy. It felt like everything had turned to black and was spinning around me. There was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it – viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep. I stayed there, in a daze, until someone shouted at me, "You no go comot for there? You dey look like say na beta tin! Come on, leave dat place!" (Agary 4)

The excerpt shows the closest Agary comes in representing the environmental degradation of the region due to oil exploitation. Her mother's farm is destroyed and this is a microscopic view of what happens to the region and many other untold victims. While Agary's story imbues other critical themes, the actions of the oil companies always exist in the background and this has a tremendous impact on the narrative depth of the text. What happens to Zilayefa's mother is the 'normal' in the region and nothing happens to the Oil Company that is responsible.

The Admiral, Zilayefa's older lover, makes a case for the oil company that falls apart under scrutiny:

We chatted about the way things were in Port Harcourt and debated Niger Delta issues, and I was shocked to hear his opinions regarding the oil companies. "Think about it my dear, a man comes to your

father's house. He has paid his rent to your father, and then, tomorrow, your brothers go to him to demand more money for rent. The man has an agreement with your father not with you. If you feel he is not paying enough rent, then go to your father to review the rental agreement... The government that should be enforcing the laws to protect us in the Niger Delta is putting our heads on the chopping block for the oil companies to finish the job (Agary 137)

The above excerpt tries to redirect restiveness and agitations toward the federal Government away from the oil companies. It is never them at the forefront but it is through their unethical and capitalists actions that the environment of the region is destroyed as well as the human causalities, and it is their ability to exploit the corrupt system of Nigerian governance that covers them. Essentially, a well-placed Niger Delta indigene defending the oil companies serves to insulate them from any retaliation and throughout Agary's text, this is the veil over the institutions.

Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* this same model is present. The protagonist is witness to the dystopian landscape that the oil companies, in this case Bell Oil, is directly responsible for,

The Niger Delta that the Activist returned to had changed so much from what it used to be, even as it remained the same landmass. It had been seriously scarred by Bell Oil Company whose emblem of a red-rimmed shell of yellow flames was seen all over the area. In the company's inordinate hunger for more barrels of oil to ship out to increase yearly record profits, the landscape was gradually turning into a wasteland. Residents of the oil-producing area had become helpless before the monstrous power of their overlords, the oil company and the military government. (Ojaide53)

The protagonist of the novel takes the reader on a tour of the region from what he sees and what happens around him. The images and scenes that the reader is introduced to are ones of horror and destruction. The above excerpt narrates the initial assessment of the protagonist of the region. As the narration progresses, he sees more shocking sights of villages where oil pipes, intentionally, pass through village centres, as well as ranging fires used as punishment for resisting the will of the oil companies. These clearly mark the oil companies as villains of the story.

However, the story takes an exception on the grand villainy model, and this is because the protagonist actually becomes the state governor and is incorruptible enough to change the system.

The Activist brought major changes to the state government. He had taken his office as a challenge. He restricted the government ministries and agencies in place before his election. He found them constrictive and introduced a system that he felt would make his rule

most effective. He created a Ministry of Environmental and Mineral Matters to deal with many of the problems of the Niger Delta. This was a ministry more than any other that the state needed to harness its natural resources and also to clean the polluted soil, water, and air and put out fires gas flares and oil blowouts. (Ojaide344)

This is the last paragraph of the novel and signals a fictional victory over the system that oppresses the people of his region. However, Bell Oil goes scot free. This is the point as the oil companies embed themselves into the very lifeline of the nation and their actions are essentially protected. There is no consequence for the action of Bell Oil despite the fact that they are the primary reason for the destruction of the region's ecosystem. From the moment the protagonist steps foot on the state and through all his experiences, he blames Bell Oil but when he becomes Governor, he only aims to clean up the mess. They go scot free.

### **Conclusion**

The paper asserts that the bulk of Niger Delta literature is a domestication of the dystopian genre. It claims that the dystopian genre as it concerns Niger Delta text (as well as similar African text) does not create a futuristic society to criticize present society as it appears to be the case in Western notion of dystopia, rather it simply recreates the present society and criticizes and protest it. This is so because the environmental and political situation in the region is enough to criticise without a futuristic setting. While this is possible, the body of Niger Delta text ignore the futuristic instead focusing on the presence. Furthermore, this paper shows another deviation from the dystopian norm and states that the grand villain of Niger Delta texts are not the government of Nigeria, rather it is the oil companies. Neo-colonial Nigeria's problems go beyond the country's leadership and focus primarily on the multinational corporations. In the case of the Niger Delta, these are the oil companies. Using a simple model that combines the act of villainy and the conceptualisation of 'never losing', the paper examines Chimeka Garricks' *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and highlights the oil companies as the villains of the stories who at the resolution still reigns supreme and suffers no consequences.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, it is firmly recommended here that scholars and authors of Niger Delta ecocritical works should fully embrace the dystopian genre towards enriching literary discourse and creating wider audience of readership, as well as contributing to vast canvass of African literary scholarship. Comparative studies on the global South's suppression, exploitation and subjugation by multinational oil corporations should be incorporated into African literary creativity and research.

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