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NARRATING SOCIAL DECAY: SATIRE AND ECOLOGY IN AYO AKINFE'S *FUELLING THE DELTA FIRES*

Abiye Opuamah

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

2017

Abstract

This research report conducts a critical examination of Ayo Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* by paying attention to the writer's use of satire to highlight social problems such as corruption, deception and exploitation in Nigeria. The focus is on how Akinfe's novel represents exploitation, waste, and excess that have become normative in a country on the brink of collapse. The work also seeks to identify and critique how Akinfe employs satire to interrogate the syndrome of the 'big-man' in Nigeria, showing how their actions contribute to social decay and violence.

The research will also examine issues of ecology in the Niger Delta. Ecology has often been construed as a Western ideology that has little resonance within the framework of the African novel. However, this work, tries to show that as the scholarship on ecological humanities has evolved over the years, African alternatives which take account of the unique challenges of the continent have also being developed. Akinfe draws from these proposed models of ecology to focus attention on the ecological issues that are a direct outcome of the exploration of oil in the Niger Delta and by so doing, brings attention to the transgressions of government and multinational corporations who go to great lengths to extract oil in the region. Applying ecocritical examples suggested by scholars like Anthony Vital, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and others, the research report demonstrates how literature has been used as a medium to expose greed that facilitates ecological degradations and how the culture of consumerism affect the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

.....

Abiye Opuamah

------- Day of ----- 2017

Dedication

In memory of my late Father

Henry Tamuno Opuamah.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"All satire is blind to the forces liberated by decay. Which is why total decay has absorbed the forces of satire."

- Theodor Adorno

1.1 Background

On Sunday the 15th of January 1956, a group of British, German and Dutch Engineers who worked for Shell Darcy (later known as Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited SPDC after BP interests were nationalised by the Government), finally stumbled upon surface rock and soil types, that indicated the presence of oil in the small town of Oloibiri, located in Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. (Walker/BBC News)

Chief Sunday Inengite a resident of the town who was barely nineteen years old at the time of the discovery pointed out that it was more of a joyous occasion for the prospectors than it was for the town's inhabitants who until the sighting had thought that the prospectors were on the lookout for palm oil. Inengite declares that "It wasn't until we saw what they called the oil - the black stuff - that we knew they were after something different." (Walker/BBC News)

It was an occasion that called for celebration and Inengite goes on to add that the explorers organised a party at their house-boat and invited everyone from the village to see samples of the oil they had been looking for. "You can imagine the jubilation, after all, they had been

looking for oil in commercial quantities for years…They made us be happy and clap like fools, dance as if we were trained monkeys." (Walker BBC News)

That discovery of oil unleashed a spate of suffering on the indigenes of the Niger Delta that has lasted for over six decades. Corruption and greed became permanent features in Nigeria's socio-political environment and engendered discontentment in communities in the Niger Delta. Shell and the Nigerian government wasted no time as they began to extract oil in commercial quantities and by 1970 the oil industry had become responsible for about ninety-five percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings of which Shell was the major contributor.

Shell's extraction of oil degraded the region's environment and decimated the fauna and flora. As oil was extracted, the spills and waste from extraction began to affect wildlife and therefore, impacted the sources of livelihood of the local communities. Perhaps more perilous than the destruction of the eco-system for the inhabitants of the Niger Delta, was the refusal of Shell and the Federal government to keep to their promises of establishing basic infrastructure and amenities like electricity, roads, schools hospitals and potable water for the residents of the region.

Oil suddenly became the most sought after commodity in Nigeria. Other sources of revenue which had previously sustained the new state of Nigeria were summarily abandoned for the pursuit of the gains that came with the extraction of oil. Greed and avarice from politicians and government officials alike began to engender what Cyril Obi and Siri Ass Rustad (2) describe as feelings of exclusion, dispossession and disappointment that manifested into agitation for local autonomy and resource control in the Niger Delta region.

In 1960 Nigeria obtained independence from the British, an occasion which was celebrated with much fanfare. However, this soon gave way to widespread disenchantment, cynicism and apathy. Matthew Hassan Kukah points out that at independence what was once the white man's burden became the white man's haven (15). Kukah references Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' in which Kipling encourages the American government (which had conquered the Philippines in 1902) not to neglect its imperial responsibilities to the people within the empire it had just conquered. For Kukah therefore, what used to be the white man's burden of building Nigeria, had now fallen squarely on the shoulders of the Nigerians themselves. No longer did the white man have to worry about the task of nation building in an atmosphere of discontent.

Nigeria's new political elite who were charged with the responsibility of building the new nation, instead went on a looting spree that plundered the nation's resources and impoverished the citizens. Politicians in the three major parties which had been formed to contest for upcoming elections in anticipation of elections after independence was granted put their personal and ethnic interests ahead of national unity and plunged the country into a far more chaotic state than it had been under British rule.

To contextualise the chaotic descent and how the upsurge of oil as the country's primary revenue generator exacerbated the levels of corruption in the country and impoverished the people of the Niger Delta, it is worthwhile to render a brief history of Nigeria just before and after independence.

Nigeria, an artificial creation by the British Colonial regime who amalgamated various indigenous tribes and brought them together as one country, finally got its independence in

1960 but became a fully-fledged republic in 1963. To enable the rule over such a large geographical mass with ease, the British broke the country up into three geo-political regions that consisted of the major ethnic tribes which were the Hausa's in the North, the Yoruba's in the West and the Igbos in the East. The various smaller indigenous tribes that inhabited the mid-western, south-eastern and southern parts of the country came to be referred to as minorities.

As it became increasingly apparent that Independence was to be achieved, political groups which had been formed to represent the interests of their individual regions began to morph into parties that took a more active role in a central legislature (or Federal Parliament) that was designed by the British to have Africans participate in the deliberations of their own affairs. The National People's Congress (NPC) led by Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, which had gained control of the central legislature with a total of 148 seats by 1960 went into a coalition with the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) (later renamed to "National Council of Nigerian Citizens") and formed a government that was tasked to design a new constitution for Nigeria. The NCNC, a party that represented the interests of the Igbos in the East, was led by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. The Action Group (AG), a predominantly Yoruba Party led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo became the main opposition party in parliament.

Saddled with the responsibility of addressing the problems of ethnic and regional dissonance within the three major political parties, the National People's Congress (NPC) led government went to work immediately on developing a Federal constitution designed to bring some unity and move the country forward. The succeeding years however, witnessed an unprecedented display of corruption, political violence and in-fighting especially within

the Action Group. A lack of leadership, an acrimonious struggle for resource control and a general disregard for law and order from the leadership of the political parties generated scenes of unrest that eventually led to the first military coup in Nigeria on the 15th of January 1966 in which the Prime Minister of the Federation Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and several notable politicians particularly from the Northern part of the country were murdered. The new Head of State, General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi promised reforms and through consultative exercises began to address the fears of the North who regarded him with suspicion seeing as he was from the same Igbo tribe as the coup plotters who had been imprisoned and were awaiting trial.

It is important to note that while the political upheaval continued in the capital and western region, the minority tribes were also agitating for control of their own resources and although oil which had been discovered in commercial quantities just ten years earlier (in 1956) had not assumed the kind of economic importance it did at a later stage, control of their resources and an opportunity for self-determination from the hegemony of the major ethnic groups was always a paramount concern for the minority tribes.

Major Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, a Niger Delta pioneer activist against the exploration of oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta areas, had assembled a small unit of fighters to take arms against the Federal government in what became known as the 'Twelve Day Revolution'. Boro as he was fondly called by the people of the Niger Delta, was aggrieved by the injustice meted out to the Niger Delta people whose oil benefitted only the federal government and the Igbos who were in control of the region at the time. He was eventually overwhelmed by a superior Nigerian Army force and incarcerated along with a few of his fellow mutineers.

Meanwhile, back at the country's capital, Head of State, General Ironsi's attempt to establish a unitary constitution and in effect consolidate power at the centre began to breed suspicions in the North and in just six months of being in power, he was summarily executed in a countercoup by a disgruntled group of soldiers from the North of the country.

The aftermath of that countercoup ushered in a period of violence and prosecution in the North as people particularly of Igbo extraction became victims to mass killings carried out by Northerners. Colonel Yakubu Gowon who had been inaugurated as the new Head of State, seemed powerless to stop the carnage in the North as the Ibos fled in numbers back to their homelands in the East. Angered by the perceived injustice to his people, and piqued by the fact that Gowon had gone ahead to create states and in effect broke the Igbo dominance in the East, governor of the Eastern region, Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu unilaterally declared independence from Nigeria on the 30th of May 1967. Diplomatic efforts to settle the differences between Ojukwu and Gowon in June 1967 failed and on the 6th of July that same year, war broke out between the rest of Nigeria and the new 'Biafra' nation.

Several commentaries on the Nigerian civil war have indicated that while oil was not the primary cause of the war, it definitely played a crucial role in its eventual outcome. Michael Ross however, thinks that oil certainly played a crucial role in triggering Colonel Ojukwu's decision to go to war. Ross notes that while the war itself was primarily motivated by tensions between the Ibos and the North, the realisation that oil which had only been discovered a few years ago had become available in commercial quantities influenced Colonel Ojukwu's decision to authorize "his government to collect all oil revenues that originated in the state, instead of allowing them to pass to the federal government. The

federal government reacted . . . shortly after Ojukwu proclaimed the independence of Biafra" (12).

Ken Saro-Wiwa, in *On a Darkling Plain*, avers that when it became clear that whoever had control of the oil in the Niger Delta, could influence how the war would end, both sides began to make concerted efforts to occupy the rich Niger Delta oil reserves (35). Oil revenue became an issue after Ojukwu besieged Shell-BP and demanded royalties. The Nigerian government in retaliation placed a shipping embargo on the territory and were forced to alter their strategy to attack far earlier than had originally been intended. In the end, the Nigerian forces overpowered and re-claimed the oil fields and therefore, were able to negotiate with superpowers like Britain and Russia for arms that gave them immediate advantage in the war. By the 15th of January 1970, Biafra had been defeated and Colonel Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast where he remained in exile for a little over two decades.

As the country reeled from the betrayal of the new political elite in the 1960's, Nigerian writers began to look for means to respond to the ambivalence and uncertainty that had gripped the nation by reflecting and chronicling the pains and frustrations of the people through their writings. Writing satiric pieces became one outlet among others that was employed to reflect upon the numerous socio-political problems that afflicted the country and writers like Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, T.M Aluko, J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka began to engage the state by incorporating themes and characters in their works that mirrored and indeed parodied the ills of a society that was moving towards anarchy.

Achebe, for example, assumes a prophetic role in his novel *A Man of the People* as he satirizes a political system that is replete with corruption. Chief Nanga MP, Honourable Minister for Culture, is corrupt through and through, rising from the position of Primary School teacher to back-bencher, and finally to the seat of power which he uses to line his own pocket. Nanga is a typical example of the kind of politician that is given to extravagance. According to Odili, the narrator in the novel:

> The first thing critics tell you about our ministers' official residences is that each has seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, one for every day of the week. All I can say is that on that night there was no room in my mind for criticism. I was simply hypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned to me. When I lay down in the double bed that seemed to ride on a cushion of air, and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture anew from the lying down position and looked beyond the door to the gleaming bathroom and the towels as large as a *lappa.* I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one forever (36-37).

Achebe points out in an article titled 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" that it is the writer's duty "to explore in depth the human condition" (8). He goes on to add that, "Within six years of independence, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth… this was the situation in which I wrote *A Man of the People*" (cited in Agho 1995: 27-28).

The imperative for satire for Achebe and his fellow writers, was not only to underscore the failings of a corrupt administration but also to ridicule and challenge the crippling bureaucracy that was prevalent in government institutions. Satire in its simplest form is a literary device that ridicules the vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings of individuals and society in general with a view to inducing an improvement. While it is intended to be humorous, satire actually seeks to employ wit as a tool to constructively criticize and draw attention to societal failings. Satire is at its best when it incorporates components like parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and double entendre.

As the political landscape of the country changed, so did the issues affecting the general populace. The relentless degradation of the Niger Delta's flora and fauna and the manner in which man has mistreated the environment has over the last three decades given Nigerian writers a platform to experiment and include environmental themes which affect communities that Aldo Leopold refers to as 'biotic'. In his book A *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold talks about a symbiotic relationship between man and the land in which he resides. He advocates for harmony between man and nature stressing the importance of preserving and renewing the ecosystem and warns of the inevitability of destruction should the human race not start taking care of its environment. There is definitely a need to be ecologically responsible and harvest from the soil to accommodate our needs but it does become ecologically irresponsible when humans neglect to "preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." [1](224-225)

[1] Biotic communities generally refer to different populations groups that reside in a particular location. These groups are known to interact with each other in various ways and depend on each other for survival. A symbiotic relationship exists between the groups as they depend on each other in many ways for survival. Man is dependent on the animals and plants within his immediate environment for food while plants depend on man's emission of carbon dioxide for survival.

For Nigerian writers, literature, became an appropriate medium for re-enacting the experiences Nigerians confront on a daily basis. Part of the project for that re-enactment of social experience, has involved writers demonstrating through their works that there is a connection between corruption and the destruction of the environment. Once a literary work incorporates any thematic representation of the environment and how human beings relate to that environment, it can be viewed as a work that lends itself to an ecocritical reading.

This description of ecocriticism may seem a bit tenuous especially when one considers that the subject has grown and become all-inclusive since its early origins as a discipline primarily concerned with pastoral reflections in works of literature. So what then is ecocriticism? Ecocriticism in its earliest form, started off as a reading/critique that concerns itself with the nature of the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It has however, in the past decade seen a shift from ―nature writing for nature sake to one that incorporates social and political issues.

What constitutes or qualifies as 'nature and natural environment' has been a topic of debate among ecocritics. There are however, a few schools of thought that have attempted to define nature since the study of ecology became a form of literary criticism. American Transcendentalists saw nature as something to deify and therefore equated it to God. Transcendentalism developed during the 1820s and 1830s in the eastern United States as a reaction to a society that they believed had become increasingly conformist. Writing about nature for the Transcendentalists, was important because it allowed them to dissociate themselves from a society that could taint what they perceived as man's inherent purity and goodness.

Another school of thought saw nature as a victim of man's greed, therefore, literature should be used as a tool to emphasize damage on the environment caused by human activities. A third school of thought described nature as the wilderness - a place devoid of human beings at a physical and metaphorical level. According to this group, the wilderness is the only sanctuary where humans can discover their true selves. Perhaps the most convincing argument on nature comes from the likes of Lawrence Buell, Dana Phillips and Serpil Oppermann who see nature as inclusive of everything around human beings. These ecocritics aver that the understanding of nature should go beyond the paradigms offered by early ecocritics to include man-made environments.

What is important however in the context of this paper, is that nature writing has continued to evolve since its early pastoral beginnings and Nigerian writers are already taking advantage of the changing landscape of ecological writing but there have been calls by some ecocritics for an African ecocritical paradigm that takes cognizance of the continent's peculiar issues like poverty, the politics of exploitation and under-development.

Graham Huggan and Anthony Vital argue for an African brand of ecocriticism. Huggan, in particular, points to the unreliability of ecocriticism if it does not integrate the wants of the real world. He picks out Judith Wright's poetry as an example of an ecological work that merges social concerns and environmentalism and also recognises Ken Saro-Wiwa's struggle for environmental justice for the Ogoni people of the Niger delta (701-733). Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* (2009) brings together the Interconnectedness between nature and the inhabitants of communities where oil has been extracted and also interrogates the misery of Nigeria's Niger Delta through the lens of ecocriticism.

Over the last decade, there has been a large number of writing on the Niger Delta. Critics and scholars alike have written about everything from oil pollution to environmental degradation and from the extrajudicial killing of human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa to the vagaries of insurgency and government involvement in the politics of the region. The literary landscape however, has been anything but fecund and despite the fact that literature arguably thrives in the midst of strife, there hasn't been much literary productivity to boast about in the region.

Ayo Akinfe's novel *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is one of a handful of literary texts that delve into the politics of oil and its associated complexities in the Niger Delta.

The novel highlights the dynamic quadruple relationship between the Federal and State governments, the multinational oil companies, and the militant groups, which began to emerge around 2005. Multinational oil companies are believed to be in a symbiotic relationship with the Federal and State governments. These companies allegedly pay the Federal and State government large sums of money to acquire lands in the regions where they expect to prospect for oil and in return are purportedly guaranteed protection against the complaints and agitations of the local communities whose indigenous lands have been degraded by activities such as gas flaring, waste dumping and oil spillage. To add to this, armed militants in the region who had taken to destroying oil installations and kidnapping oil workers, are often in cahoots with government officials and have been known to give in to illicit patronage doled out by corrupt politicians, and government security forces.

Fuelling the Delta Fires is an action adventure tale that tells a story of exploitation, greed and deceit in the Niger Delta. Set in a fictional Western Ijaw State, the story draws from real events that highlight the misery and dereliction that is prevalent in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. Written from a third person narrative point of view, the

novel takes a detailed look at the phenomenon of the Nigerian 'big-man' who has benefitted from a corrupt system and is determined to perpetuate himself in power. The plot revolves around Chief Tom-George, an unscrupulous politician and governor of Western Ijaw State. With ambitions to be governor of his state, the Chief decides to employ the services of Mene Bene - a local thug and leader of the largest militant youth group in the region - the Niger Delta Liberation Movement (NDLM). Bene becomes Tom-George's instrument for intimidating political opponents and threatening communities that refuse to back the Chief's National Umbrella Party. After winning the election and having been sworn in as governor, the Chief decides to discard the services of the youth militant leader – a move that triggers a crisis.

Having lost their major source of revenue, the NDLM resorts to taking expatriates hostage from the local premises of multinational oil companies to sustain their operations. The monies generated from kidnapping help the fledgling group evolve into a much bigger and more structured machinery that soon become too large for Chief Tom-George to control. Clashes with the Nigerian Army become inevitable and although Bene consequently gets arrested, what is left of his group soon fractures and mushrooms into smaller units that continue to exploit the kidnapping strategy under the guise of fighting for the people of the Niger Delta.

Ayo Akinfe's project is informed by a desire to narrate a story that is still current within the context of Nigerian politics. For him, the Niger Delta dilemma is a conundrum created by corporate interests in the form of multinational companies aided by the National and State governments. To make *Fuelling the Delta Fires*, a novel that is convincing and wills the reader to suspend disbelief, Akinfe adopts a historical approach to fiction writing that allows

him to dig deep into the recent history of the Niger Delta struggle for autonomy and render a story that is realistic and yet imaginative in its style. Having said that, *Fuelling the Delta Fires* does not provide a balanced narrative that equally berates all the major players that have contributed to the catastrophe that is the Niger Delta. Akinfe almost seems to idolize the militants whose actions as we shall see in the novel are no different from the multinationals and government officials. He therefore misses an important opportunity to probe beyond the reasons of grievance and examine a greed model that has also been cited by commentators like Paul Collier as possible influences for militants to take up arms in places like the Niger Delta.

1.2 Ayo Akinfe: A Brief Background

Ayo Akinfe, was born in Salford, Manchester. He however, spent his formative years in Nigeria where he attended the Federal Government College Kaduna and later obtained a BA degree in history from the University of Ibadan. On his return to the United Kingdom in 1990, Akinfe worked as a journalist and enrolled as a post-graduate student in journalism at the University of Westminster in London. (Narayan, Vikram/Bookbuzzr)

The years he spent in Nigeria left an impression on Akinfe, who witnessed how the economy of the country was affected by corruption perpetrated by politicians and civil servants alike. *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is Akinfe's first novel and the author concedes that the motivating factor for writing the novel is to highlight the history of Africa – a past which he believes has been incorrectly peddled by the West. (Narayan, Vikram/Bookbuzzr) Perhaps more than any other fictional account on the Niger Delta, *Fuelling the Delta Fires,* renders a vivid account

of social neglect, poverty, violence, political intrigues and environmental degradation that the region is confronted with in modern day Nigeria. Akinfe manages to narrate a story that is recognisable as true to life.

1.3 Literature Review of selected works on the Niger Delta

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) flirts with the same thematic concerns as Akinfe's and perhaps describes the neglect and devastation of the wetlands better but is probably less evocative as a story that deals with corruption and militancy and how these vices have served to impoverish the people of the Niger Delta. The story details the exploits of an ambitious young journalist and his mentor who travel down the tributaries of the Delta in search of a female British hostage.

Habila paints a story that is vivid and filled with intrigue as journalists, rebel leaders, bunkerers, oil magnates and soldiers representing the government get caught up in a web of lies, and deceit. The novel exposes the huge sociological chasm between Nigeria's rich and poor and illuminates the perils faced by journalists who cover the region. Zaq, a middle-aged man who once had a promising career as a journalist, encapsulates the essence of the novel when he points out to another journalist that the violent, heart-breaking moments in a society represent a journalist's life and experiences in general: "That's how history is made, and it's our job to witness it." (66) *Oil on Water* is optimistic about the Niger Delta's future as it predicts an innovative social formation to emerge from the chaos of the present. The novel maintains that a tenuous peace between all groups will come to fruition and should offer the basis for this new dawn.

The novel's concern with the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta makes it a candidate for an ecological study as it describes the mangroves and vegetation in such colourful details as to make the reader almost see the scenes in his mind's eye. Habila writes: "The water took on different forms as we glided on it. Sometimes it was an old jute rope, frayed and wobbly and breaking into jagged, feathery ends, the freshwater abruptly replaced by a thick marshy tract of mangrove." (37) It is worthwhile to note that Habila not only paints a picturesque setting of the Niger Delta but also manages to reveal the anguish caused by drilling as he juxtaposes the lush vegetation to the rich and fertile environment that once existed.

Damien Dsoul's novel *The Rabbit's Man* (2011) navigates the complex terrain that is the Niger Delta and Nigeria in general. Written in the tradition of a modern day thriller, *The Rabbit's Man* recounts the story of Kingsley Azobi, a onetime gang banger and gun-runner in his university days. Reformed and determined to put his past behind him, Kingsley marries, has two children and becomes a somewhat successful real estate agent.

His past, however, comes back to haunt him after a huge debt incurred from a deal places him at the mercy of his old gang, who have now transmuted into a violent militant group in need of a gun-runner with the extraordinary skills that Kingsley possesses. It's a request that goes against his new found beliefs but with debtors lurking, an inquisitive detective on his trail and the British M16 (led by Lionel Parrish) looking to use him as a focal point for their own agenda, Kingsley is suddenly finds himself in a difficult situation and the decision he makes could have serious implications for his life and that of his family.

The plot is fast paced with lots of action and the writer does a great job of holding the reader's attention with various twists and turns as the novel progresses but the language and

typographical errors (for the meticulous reader) can be distracting. Aside from the fact that it has all the attributes of a thriller and portrays the Niger Delta as a volatile region, the novel speaks very little about the Nigerian political space or the ecology of the region.

1.4 Satire: Criticising societal ills

There is hardly a definition of satire that is regarded as generally accepted but Bulton Moody's description of satire, seems like a good place to start. Moody sees satire as "any form or piece of writing which is deliberately and humorously critical in intention" (208). Meyer Howard Abrams sees satire as "The literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it, an attitude of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides, that is, it uses laughter as a weapon and against a butt existing outside the work itself" (167).

Thrall et al see the trope of satire as "a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodelling" (436).

The writer of satire creates fictional characters that represent real people or situations to expose and condemn their corruption as well as prick consciences and attempt to reform society. In writing satire however, the writer is expected to articulate his/her art with a degree of distinction and nuance that John Dryden, refers to as "The fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place" (cited in Darah, 2005: 22-23). Ngugi wa Thiong'o also notes that, "Satire takes for its province a whole society, and

for its purpose, criticism. The satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's failings. He corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter." (55)

As early as the 7th century B.C.E., satirical works were already having profound effects on people. The Greek poet Archilochus reportedly shamed an entire family into suicide! He and other Greek authors like Aristophanes helped build the foundations for all of Western comedy. Much of what was produced during that period harshly but humorously critiqued society and even certain individuals.

Their criticisms would've been considered as satire today if that name had existed then. The term 'satire' comes to us from the Latin *satura*, most likely because Latin authors are responsible for adapting the earlier Greek form of the genre into what we're more familiar with today. In fact, many satires are still categorized as 'Horatian' or 'Juvenalian' to this day by their resemblances to works of these Roman poets writing in the 1st centuries B.C.E. and C.E., respectively. Those resembling the works of Horace are known to be learned and witty, often using subtly sarcastic wordplay even at the author's own expense. Those who imitate Juvenal, on the other hand, are typically considered openly harsh in their mockery and ridicule, occasionally even downright dark. (Wimmer/Study.com)

Satire in Nigeria in the post-independence era has been engendered by the persistent problem of elusive and sustainable political leadership. Writers as part of the Nigerian society are not immune to the chaos, endemic corruption and social decay that have become common in their immediate milieu and have therefore attacked the perceived source of the problem. Social decay here is looked at through the prism of corrosion or decomposition of not only

the basic facilities of a state like roads, bridges, and hospitals but also as a degenerative condition where crime, prostitution, alcoholism and perhaps more pertinently corruption, permeates all levels of society and the public sphere.

Sarah E. Simmons reveals in her examination of Eighteenth century France that social decadence is a situation where "On all sides social structures collapse. So far have the people forgotten the value of association that all literary societies, academies of science, schools, seminaries, colleges, even those of the Sorbonne, are suppressed. This presents a state of disintegration-a perfect picture of social decay" (63). In Nigeria, as social structures disintegrated, the figure of the "The "big-man" became ubiquitous in almost every segment of the Nigerian society.

The "big-man" in political science would refer to a dictator whose autocratic rule is unchallenged by anyone in the country. In literature however, the big-man' is seen as self-serving, greedy, corrupt, and Machiavellian. More often than not, he is a politician that is generally given to excess, a bourgeois character who is interested in amassing and flaunting his wealth. Exploiting people to gain power through disruptive means is a strategy that he sometimes employs.

Through the lens of satire, Nigerian writers have managed to portray the "big-man" as a social construct whose penchant for gluttony effectively detaches him from the realities of suffering around him. The employment of the grotesque to lampoon political figures as well as the African big-man' is not new to the African literary space. James Ogude's *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation* takes an in-depth appraisal of the figure of the 'big-man' and his penchant for overindulgence. He employs Jean-Francois Bayart's

phrase ‘politics of the belly to analyse Kenyan politicians and articulates why Ngugi continues to portray them as grotesque. According to Ogude, Ngugi’s subjection of the Kenyan politician to ridicule is part of a strategy to sensitize Kenyans into debunking the myth that protruding bellies equates to success (44-67).

Nigerian literature has evolved over the years and satire has increasingly been employed by writers, becoming a significant topic in literary criticism. There is now a greater expectancy for literary works to be more overt and unequivocal about societal ills. Charles Nnolim, in his critique of some of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writing, points out that “satire in the hands of the novelist could be a very potent weapon especially when the staple elements of the novel are not forced to the background” (160).

Satire serves as a crucial and fundamental tool in this research report to illuminate Akinfe’s criticisms of certain aspects of the Nigerian society and uncovers how these traits underscore the ills that have contributed to Nigeria’s present state of social decay. The figure of the grotesque, and superfluity are central thematic, figurative, and recognised features of many postcolonial African works and Akinfe’s is no different. How he manages to document, and critique this often recurrent figure in African literature will be scrutinised. The research report will also attempt to articulate and highlight the literary devices that Akinfe has employed to underpin his satiric intent and in effect, convey a story of corruption and greed.

1.5 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism articulates the various ways in which the relationship that exists between people and the environment is explored. It investigates the relation between humans and the natural

world in literature, the way in which environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment, and attitudes towards nature are presented and analysed, and how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. (Habeeb and Habeeb, 27-28).

Ecocriticism examines the representations of nature in literary works and tries to make sense of the interconnectedness between human beings and their immediate environment. It is an emerging method of literary criticism that became popular a little over two decades ago after Cheryll Glotfelty's seminal work was published in 1996. Lawrence Buell in his own work titled, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, reflects on ecocriticism as a ''study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.'' (430) Primarily, ecocriticism, started off as a study that was concerned about the supremacy of nature and its bioregions. Over the years however, its scope has broadened beyond an exclusive study of nature to include man-made environments as well.

William Rueckert was the first person who used the term ecocriticism. Rueckert published an essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978 but it was Cheryll Glotfelty, a celebrated scholar in the field of ecocriticism, who resuscitated the term in a 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Coeur d'Alene). According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). She goes on to declare that, for the ecocritic, readdressing human awareness to a contemplation of its place in an endangered world is of absolute importance and therefore the writer who intends to pursue a work on ecology should bear in mind that the representation of nature in the work is critical. Does the physical setting of the work play

an important role in its plot? Are the values expressed in the work consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? (xviii).

Glotefelty's recommendation to look for representations of nature in a work of literature lends itself to the rather fundamental interrogation of nature itself. What does Glotfelty mean when she talks about nature? Ecocritics are not quite agreed if nature is best epitomised by a space devoid of humanity from a physical and metaphorical point of view or if it is simply ubiquitous. Nonetheless, it does present an interesting problem that has spurned several definitions that Serpil Oppermann decries in an article titled "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice". Oppermann suggests that although a wide number of ecocritics have postulated on the subject and provided numerous definitions, there is unfortunately, no "guiding strategy of interpretation, and no monolithic theory to support it." She goes on to add that:

> Almost none of the definitions of ecocriticism signals a move towards a field defining theoretical method, nor provide a viable model of interpretation. The only discernible pattern among ecocritical definitions is their focus on the importance of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; they also share the common aim to synthesize literary criticism with the natural sciences, and literary studies with the environmental philosophies. In fact, as most of the ecocritics have repeatedly stated, ecocriticism seems to resist a single definition and thus remains, in Buell's description, a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives. (105)

Estok is another critic who sees ecocriticism as more than "simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature. For him, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function–thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise–of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds" (16-17).

This research report also proposes a reading of Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* by putting it through a critical analysis of the concept of excess and tying it to the inequalities and discrimination that typify cultures where greed and domestic exploitation is prevalent. How are the notions of indulgence, excess and waste, treated as themes in the novel? This enquiry will be informed by a close reading of texts that examine how African writers articulate the rising trend of the continent's big-man' syndrome.

Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* directly explores the relationships that exist between the inhabitants of communities where oil has been extracted. It considers how these people have been directly affected by the pollution from the extraction of oil. A close reading of the various references to pollution of the rivers, degradation of the environment, and the total loss of biodiversity and destruction of habitats compels an eco-theoretical approach to the novel.

It also reveals Akinfe's awareness of and attention to the region's natural environment. The research report also focuses on how various characters describe (and scene descriptions depict) the natural world around them and the ways in which those descriptions can serve to shift our interpretation and understanding of the Niger Delta. Akinfe's employment of recognisable landscapes and factual information in *Fuelling the Delta Fires,* suggests that he

is keen to show how the destruction of the natural world affects the psyches of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

The purpose of this chapter is to first provide some historical background of the Niger Delta which forms the basis of the novel's setting and in effect, sets the tone for a discussion of satire, corruption, superfluity, violence and ecology.

The second chapter which is titled "Belly Politics: Corruption, Superfluity and Violence in the Niger Delta" considers the materialism of corrupt figures and their predilection for superfluity. The preference for excess is becoming a recurrent trait in fictional works that pay attention to the attributes of the African big-man. The character has been put through a series of analysis by African writers and Akinfe draws upon some of the same strategies used by writers before him to portray the African 'Big-man' as covetous, greedy and a catalyst for instability. In the Niger Delta in particular, Akinfe depicts the big-man in his novel as a catalyst for violence who stands to benefit from chaos and goes to great lengths to cling on to power.

Chapter three "Environmental Disequilibrium and Polluted Landscape in *Fuelling the Delta Fires.*", details Akinfe's treatment of nature in the novel and how he reveals the link between the communities in Niger Delta their environment. The chapter will also show how *Fuelling the Delta Fires* points to corruption, neglect and greed as reasons for the devastation of the landscape in the Niger Delta. The final chapter brings together the threads that run across the previous chapters and ties whatever loose ends there are in the preceding chapters as well as make summations on arguments offered.

CHAPTER TWO

Belly Politics: Corruption, Superfluity and Violence in the Niger Delta.

"Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life, is a monster for which the corruption of society forever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret."

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

Writers more often than not immerse themselves in projects that articulate the diverse forms of occurrences within their immediate societies. For the Nigerian writer, reflecting the Nigerian experience has to be priority, especially, in a post-independence era in which the continent finds itself struggling to grapple with the realities of subjugation, hunger, oppression, anarchy, chaos, corruption and internecine conflicts. Writing in his seminal work titled *This House has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis,* Karl Maier reflects on the Nigerian socio-political environment and points to it as one that is "suffering from a sort of national psychosis. Political and military leaders were corrupt, crime was seen by many as a legitimate avenue for advancement, and people in search of solutions were turning inwards to ethnic prejudice and religious bigotry." (Maier, 2000: xviii)

Maier goes on to expand on the paradox of a country that is rich in human resources and potential and yet crippled by a predilection for power and ostentation. He declares that in Nigeria, "There is a complete split between power and moral right, and unless you have power, you have nothing. Everyone is seeking instant gratification" (xviii). While Maier's emphasis in the book may have been about Nigeria, it is worthwhile to note that his

observation is nonetheless applicable to most countries in Africa whose post-independence woes mirror Nigeria's unfortunate trajectory.

In this chapter, I argue that in presenting characters who engage in dishonest practices Akinfe places corruption at the centre of Nigeria's downward economic spiral and that superfluity, violence, and greed contribute to a general feeling of dissonance that has come to symbolise the mood in the Niger Delta for the last five decades after the discovery of oil. Corruption as it is unequivocally rendered in Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires,* calls attention to a society where the empowerment of public officials who have scant interest in the development of the country has impoverished the Niger Delta region. Paying particular attention to the concept of greed or belly politics as Jean Francois Bayart describes it,[2] I also investigate in this chapter how Akinfe connects the politics of the big-man to the crisis in Nigeria and particularly the Niger Delta.

As has been pointed out in the introductory chapter, Nigeria has struggled with the process of development since her independence in 1960. The massive revenue derived from oil exploration has not trickled down to the ordinary citizen due to poor governance and public

[2] Bayart's book is an examination of an array of issues on politics especially as they relate to African societies. The book describes a selection of political problems that Bayart sees as hindering progress in Africa. In a bid to counter Western ideologies that view Africans as primitive, barbaric and savage, Bayart's seminal work titled *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly,* proposes theories that seek to explain the workings of African states. He contends that while colonial experience helped shaped the development of sub-Saharan Africa, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the continent lacked any history prior to contact with the West. The book largely takes an in-depth look at African politics and specifically details the relationship between clientelism, corruption and power. *The Politics of the Belly* also underscores the penchant for greed that drives the accumulation of wealth by African politicians at the expense of the people they serve. Bayart sees the elite of the modern African state as a clique that has entrenched an 'incubator' ideology designed to keep others from access to the resources of the state. Cronyism and nepotism are also identified by Bayart as deep-seated attributes of the African political experience and therefore benefactors of state resources are more often than not likely to use their political status to not only advance family members into key positions in government but are also expected to employ their acquired wealth into co-opting supporters as a means to attaining more power and wealth. The more supporters' one has as a wealthy patron, the more he or she is likely to cling on to power.

corruption. V.T. Jike paints a bleak picture of the Nigerian situation, particularly, that of the Niger Delta as an area that accounts for over 90% of Nigeria's oil revenue but has been afflicted by underdevelopment. For decades oil has been at the centre of a series of violent conflicts between ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, the Government and the oil companies that operate in the region. Oil has placed the region in what is commonly referred to as a hot spot in the map of the world. Corruption at the highest levels of government has ensured that the Niger Delta degenerates into what the late Ken Saro-Wiwa describes as a 'wasteland'. Revenues accrued from the exploration of oil not only became drivers for corruption and political power but also created extraordinary wealth for the leaders of the states in the Niger Delta who ferreted money allocated for developments into their own pockets.

Jike extends the argument that the diversion of resources allocated to the Niger Delta region to build skyscrapers and overhead bridges in Lagos and Abuja has deprived the people of the region access to basic amenities like roads, clean water, electricity and health care which has culminated in deaths from preventable and curable diseases (686-701). Corruption on a massive scale began to engender a feeling of general apathy and disillusionment and before too long, violence erupted as disaffected youths began to protest against the intolerable conditions in which they found themselves.

These socio-political instabilities like what has become customary in the Niger Delta, demand at the very least that the writer not only inquire about the wishes of the people within his immediate setting but also act in response to it. The landscape for writing in Africa has however, steadily become perilous for the writer as governments become more repressive in their attempts to censure criticism that is deemed to be disparaging of their authority.

Famous playwright and poet, Wole Soyinka had been arrested in 1967, shortly before the start of the Nigerian civil war for meeting with the Biafran leader and writing an article where he appealed for cease-fire. The military government at the time viewed the article with suspicion and accused the writer of conspiring with the Biafra rebels. He was consequently held as a political prisoner for 22 months until 1969. Perhaps the most renowned example of the perils writers face in Nigeria is the extra-judicial killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa who having been imprisoned for incitement and murder was sentenced to death by a specially convened tribunal and summarily executed along with nine others by military personnel on the 10th of November 1995. Confronted with such an atmosphere of suppression, innovation in language, themes, setting and style become necessary tools for the African writer to articulate his/her condemnation of governance and political figures who run the administrations in Africa.

Satire became a medium for African writers and in particular, Nigerian writers to expose and criticise the harsh and intimidating social and political realities which confront their society. It served as a useful tool for writers to not only draw attention to the transgressions of politicians and public office holders but has also facilitated the advancement of solutions to a number of societal ills that afflict the country. Literary texts are key yardsticks for observing and interrogating the workings of politics in a country and most Nigerian writers have had to deploy wit, innuendo, satire and sometimes allegory to show their disdain for a political class that has proven to be inept at governance. Ayo Akinfe joins a plethora of contemporary Nigerian writers and poets like Chimamanda Adiche, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Chinweizu, Femi Fatoba, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Obiora Udechukwu, and Ogaga Ifowodo, who have used their works to highlight the problematic nature of leadership

in Nigeria and lampoon the predilection for superfluity, malaise and corruption through their works.

In *Fuelling the Delta Fires*, Akinfe introduces us to Chief Tom-George, the main character of the novel and we are immediately confronted by the material splendour that adorns his living room. It is the kind of grandeur that Akinfe points to as symbols of wealth among politicians and public officials in the country. Chief Tom-George ruminates on his recent success and scoffs at a reporter on television who is trumpeting a stock phrase used by government officials to give the impression that appointments in Nigeria are based on merit. The Chief however, knows better and admits to himself that "In Nigeria, who you know is the primary determinant of whether you get a government appointment or not…. He had a good idea of when to be tough, when to turn a blind eye to corruption, when to tolerate bunkering, and when to offer juicy contracts to those who mattered. Beneficiaries of his largesse included former ministers, traditional rulers, and members of the families of existing ministers" (3-5).

Akinfe takes the reader into the world of opulence that characterizes the utopian lifestyle of the average Nigerian 'big-man'. As the chief admires his expansive property he casts "his eye over the expansive living room again and felt a sense of achievement. He recollected that it had been four years since he built this house. He then proceeded to furnish it with leather sofas, all specifically imported from Scandinavia" (3-5). Akinfe's description of the sitting room is calculated as it is intended to reveal the symbolic images of extravagance and callousness that he suggests has become commonplace for the Nigerian politician. In fact, the

overindulgence in gaudy decorations as has been described above could also be regarded as kitschy[3].

The choice of importing ornaments from abroad in Nigeria seems to accord a status symbol of wealth and importance that politicians crave. In Akinfe's opinion therefore, the decoration of Chief Tom-George's residence with imported goods from Scandinavia suggests that the Chief has yielded to a custom that endorses corruption in government circles which adds to the problems in Nigeria. For Akinfe therefore, Chief Tom-George's kitschiness reflects a society where excess and extravagance seem to have become the norm.

There is a sense in reading Akinfe's work that wealth attained through corrupt means is flaunted without consideration for the millions of people who live in poverty. The more wealth one exhibits (as we see with Chief Tom-George), in a country like Nigeria, the more you are revered as a big-man and people elevate you to a status that they aspire to attain. It is no surprise then that Chief Tom- George spares no expense to be wasteful in the building and decorating of his house:

> In less than two years, the house had been completed and furnished, and the chief was proud of the fact that he left his ministerial quarters to a befitting home. Set on a two-acre ground, it was an expansive two-storey building with ten bedrooms, two reception rooms, a large underground garage, a swimming

[3] The word kitsch has obviously evolved over the years from a pejorative term used to describe art that is tacky, excessively garish and in poor taste to one that is less dismissive today. For most parts, it denotes an entirely new artistic enterprise which incorporates art or music that pays very little or no attention to taste. The word "kitsch" probably originated in Germany or Austria in the 19th century and by the 20th century, it had come to be loosely associated with entertainment that was inexpensive and produced in large quantities. In an essay titled *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, published in 1939, Clement Greenberg panned kitsch as something of an abomination to liberal and avant-garde art because it essentially pandered to the masses. While kitsch seems to have shed its negative connotations over the years, the use of the term in this paper will represent its original delineation as art and ornament that are ostentatious and exaggerated.

> pool, a servant quarters for the staff, and a tree-dotted driveway. All the carpets and curtains were purple, and all the walls of the main rooms and hallways were painted cream. All the floors in the hallways were made of terrazzo and the doors were made of specially imported pine with uniform security locks. (4)

Why this desire for uniformity one might ask? The impulse for the kind of uniformity that Akinfe has described in the passage above seems to be motivated by a desire to show a standing above one's peers but it also draws attention to the extent the big-man will go to establish an aura that will command loyalty and respect.

For the Nigerian big-man, displaying wealth is acutely imperative because it demonstrates a quality that every big-man covets: *personal power*[4]. That craving however for personal power and extravagant lifestyle comes at a cost. Wealth sometimes generates respect but in a country where the majority of people live in abject poverty, it could also breed envy and anger. Akinfe's account below of Tom-George's determinations to shield himself from the prying eyes of his immediate community members and the unwanted advances of burglars despite the high level security employed corresponds with the analysis that wealth does not guarantee safety. Chief Tom-George's means to protect himself is enabled by "A ten-foot high wall with barbed wire placed along the top surrounded the premises and at 10.00 every night, an elaborate alarm system was turned on. So far, it had provided adequate security, as it had scarred off two potential burglars" (4)

[4] Personal power as it is used here would refer to the kind of influence and authority a person has over his or her followers. What determines the power is the kind of influence the person has over people who look up to and follow him/her because of the power he/she wields in his/her personal capacity rather than what is conferred on him/her due to a position he/she occupies. The Nigerian Big Man yearns for this kind of power and believes that squandering his ill-gotten wealth on material acquisitions validates his personal power.

Fuelling the Delta Fires reveals the grand scale of extravagance in a country where poverty is widespread and also emphasises the huge gulf between the rich and the poor. It is the vulgarity that one associates with the nouveau riche. For Akinfe, Chief Tom-George's spending is flagrant and ostentatious but what makes it particularly ironic is the fact that the Chief seemed unaware of how out of touch he had become with the people he planned to govern if he won the elections. Akinfe presents in Chief Tom-George a character who is determined to succeed at all costs, spares no expense to get what he wants, not morally compelled to be generous and is not afraid to seek for help even it means having to partner with his foes to accomplish his personal goals.

Satire is more often used obliquely to criticise but what Akinfe manages to do so well in *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is to attack by relying on factual and recognisable personalities and settings that satirizes the big-man's indifference to the poverty that some of his actions may have caused. Nowhere in the novel are those examples of indifference and disparity between the poor and rich more evident than when the Chief embarks on a trip to Zungeru. Reclining comfortably in the back seat of an executive car that had been specifically hired for him, Chief Tom-George noticed the squalor. "Sitting on the steps of the mosque only a few metres away from his window were filthy beggars with their bowls, the destitute dressed in rags and pleading for alms, and victims of all sorts of ailments including leprosy, polio, river blindness, and small pox" (16).

The stark contrast between Chief Tom-George's air-conditioned enclosure within the car and the surroundings of Zungeru aptly illustrates the disparity between the rich and the poor but it is the indifference he displays to the realities of the poor around him that the novel depicts as more disconcerting. As a man who prides himself on being a chief and therefore noble, it

comes as a surprise that he spurns the opportunity to ameliorate the sufferings of the poor by offering some alms as the car drove through the streets of Zungeru. He is instead preoccupied with the prospect of the acquisition of more power that his meeting in Zungeru was certain to deliver. One could also argue however, that Chief Tom-George handing alms to the poor, would have offered little or no fundamental change to the conditions in which the poor find themselves, if anything, it would simply have served as a token gesture to ease the Chief's conscience.

Ayo Akinfe suggests in *Fuelling the Delta Fires* that big-men will stop at nothing to acquire power because they are aware of the unparalleled benefits that a position in government presents and Chief Tom-George seems to be extremely aware of this as he ponders on the country's power dynamics and advantages that running for office could give. He considers that "In Nigeria, being a governor not only confers a lot of power and authority on you, it also automatically makes you a kingmaker when it comes to decision-making at the centre. More alluringly, state governors had the biggest budgets of any office holders apart from the president" (16). Akinfe gives further details in the novel about the mentality of officials within the corridors of authority in Nigeria. He implies in the novel that the mentality for public officials in the country is to grab at all cost as the acquisition of more money confers power.

In tapping into the concept of the big-man in Nigeria, Akinfe goes beyond just using satire as a medium to report or criticize the situation in Nigeria and indeed the Niger Delta. He draws attention to the ridiculous, fantastical and grotesque features of the powerful. Parodying the grotesque body is a part of satire and that Bakhtin addresses in his critique of François Rabelais' work. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body:

> is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life […]. Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and world are overcome (317).

Akinfe describes the grotesque body of Chief Tom-George as "… a man of average build, standing at about five feet ten inches, with the traditional bulging stomach … carried himself in the lumbered fashion… had two wives and eight children, depicting what his people regarded as success…" (2). The hyperbolization of the body is an important paradigm in Bakhtin's work and by presenting a description of bulging stomachs, lumbering gaits and a fondness for polygamy, Akinfe uses his novel to parody the Nigerian big-man's parameters of success. He portrays Chief Tom-George as big-man who flouts conventions and becomes so intoxicated with power that his actions of largesse come across as obscene. It is this obscenity of extravagance that Akinfe describes in several pages of the novel. Chief Tom-George repeatedly displays this fondness to be excessive as he hands bags of money to political cronies and when he spends lavishly on parties. It is however, when he pays to

incite violence against his political opponents that we get an insight into what can be described as a desperate mindset.

Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad in *Oil and insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the complex politics of petroviolence* attest that Violence in the Niger Delta is primarily an outcome of the tensions between the oil companies and the exploited ethnic groups where oil is extracted (1-14). *Fuelling the Delta Fires* however, makes the argument that greed and the ostentatious lifestyles of big-men who benefit from the proceeds of the oil has exacerbated the grievances of the people of the region.

Inhabitants of the Niger Delta get to see how funds allocated towards the development of their regions are being misappropriated and have sometimes been known to react by staging pockets of insurrections that have always been suppressed by government forces but the real violence goes beyond those marginal skirmishes organized as a means of expression by the communities. *Fuelling the Delta Fires* seems to be indicating that the real violence is however, prompted by greedy politicians who distribute arms through covert benefaction networks and thus advertently and inadvertently instigate violent insurgences that have become a recurrent experience in the Niger Delta.

In the novel, Chief Tom-George sets the stage for violence as soon as his mind is made up about his aspirations to become governor of Western Ijaw State by summoning the militants to his residence and empowering them to provide 'security and escort services' (39). The expression 'security and escort services' becomes clear in succeeding paragraphs as the militants go on a rampage by silencing the Chief's political opponents which later as the story unfolds leads to the ensuing instability in the state. The type of instability described in

the novel has been hypothesized as one that emanates from regions where there is an abundance of resources that economists describe as a 'resource curse', a term first used by Richard Auty in 1993 to refer to a paradox of plenty where resource rich countries show slower economic growth and become economically worse-off than countries with far more limited resources. Auty goes on to put forward the argument that in addition to slow economic growth, an over-reliance on abundant resources seems to have the tendency to create a political climate where violent conflicts between factions fighting for a share of the gains from the resources is commonplace. (2-5).

Paul Collier opines that while violence and armed conflicts may in some cases be driven by grievance and a real desire to change economic conditions, rebels or insurgents, more often than not exploit the situation because of their greed. Collier points out that looting is the primary incentive for rebel leaders and their followers because they believe they can 'do well out of war' and cite grievances to rationalize their behavior (91-111). The grievance and greed model is a strategy that Mene Bene and his followers employ in *Fuelling the Delta Fires* after Chief Tom-George jettisons them once he achieves his ambitions of becoming Governor of Western Ijaw State. Faced with the prospect of a mutiny within the group as their income dwindled, the rebels soon resort to kidnapping and terrorizing the state with arms acquired under the patronage of Chief Tom-George.

Bayart's hypothesis on the 'politics of the belly' as it relates to African politics clearly resonates with Akinfe and the author makes no secret of his desire to expose the divisive and corrupt practices of politicians that is the focus of *Fuelling the Delta Fires*. Akinfe's portrayal of those in or at the cusp of power, is unapologetic as he attacks the hegemony of the 'big-man' and exposes him as a parasite whose primary aim is to enrich himself through

various means of exploitation and corrupt practices. Lynn M. Thomas describes Bayart's postulation on the politics of the belly as one that:

> points to the propensity of politicians to hoard and greedily consume resources in things and people. In addition to highlighting the significance of idioms of eating and the belly to African conceptions of power, Bayart's analysis insists on the importance of vertical relationships - those between social unequals such as...patrons or clients - to understand African political history (3-4).

In *Fuelling the Delta Fires* Akinfe's big-man as typified by Chief Tom-George sees power as first and foremost and is not afraid to go to great lengths to preserve a status quo that had been bestowed on him. On a trip to see the 'General' for guidance about his political aspiration, Chief Tom-George is ushered into a palatial lounge described as a special waiting room that has the chief dumbfounded. It is described as an enormous room where:

> The arranging of the furniture was so symmetrical that the room looked like a force of nature put it together. Six blue three-seater leather sofas lined each of the four walls, there was a chrome standing lamp in each corner of the room and each of the four floor-to-ceiling windows was adorned with a blue window blind. There were four glass coffee tables in between each of the sofas and there was a huge one about twice the size of the others in the middle of the room. A plasma television was attached to the wall at the far end of the room, and next to it was a hi-fi stereo system, whose body and speaker were as flat as the wall on which they rested. (24)

Akinfe's motive here is to show the display of opulence when it is placed in contrast to the abject poverty that the Chief had witnessed on the streets on his way to the General's palace: "Despite having produced a sizeable number of military generals who had become extremely wealthy as a result of being in government, including two heads of state, Zungeru remained an underdeveloped, dusty city dominated by tin-roofed buildings, untarred roads, and thousands of petite small-scale traders. Its dusty streets were packed with hawkers and roadside kiosks, and on his way from the airport, Chief Tom-George was pestered by countless children trying to sell him all sorts of good." (15)

What becomes evident as luxury and poverty are contrasted in the novel, is that Akinfe is keenly aware of the fact that that there is a demand on him as a writer to draw the reader's attention to the scale of inequalities that exist in society. For Akinfe, corruption has become so endemic that no sector of the society is completely spared from it. Achebe in an article titled "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" alludes to the fact that Nigerians are inherently corrupt when he points out that:

> Anyone who has given any thought to our society must be concerned by the brazen materialism one sees all around. I have heard people blame it on Europe. That is utter rubbish. In fact, the Nigerian society I know best - the Ibo society - has always been materialistic…All the four titles in my village were taken-not given- and each one had its price. (12)

Achebe's observation may well hold true and it is clear that Akinfe and other contemporary writers subscribe to the same notion of corruption as connoting a general decay and moral laxity in the society; but Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascol Daloz seem to hold a different view

and have problematized the concept of corruption. Chabal and Daloz maintain that the concept of corruption as it is understood in Africa today, needs to be interrogated. They suggest that the concept is indeed a Western dogma that has now been appropriated by Africans. Corruption as defined in the West "refers either to the blatant absence of respect for given procedures or to a process of deliquescence – in other words, a self-evidently reprehensible deviation from a politically legitimate state of affairs" (95).

So if corruption is defined here in a manner that assumes that Western societies are the norm, how then should it be expressed within a non-Western society? On the back of that inquiry Chabal and Daloz therefore ask the following questions: "How does one define corruption? By what standards does one assess the extent and the significance of the phenomenon? When and why is a practice considered deviant in Europe perceived similarly elsewhere?" They also contend that in Africa, "the real business of politics is conducted informally and most stealthily outside the official realm. Within such a political 'order', in which there is little meaningful institutionalization, the notion of corruption as habitually defined in Western polities is of little significance" (95).

One could easily get drawn into the various debates around the concept of corruption but it is imperative to understand that both authors agree that corruption as an expression has proved to be inconclusive despite numerous interpretations, therefore my position as it relates to this research report will identify corruption as the abuse of delegated power for personal advancement especially within a political domain where policies, resources, rules of procedures and institutions are manipulated and abused by decision makers to support their wealth, status and power. It is this abuse of power and the greed that fuels it, that Akinfe is depicts in *Fuelling the Delta Fires.* In satirizing the average Nigerian 'big-man's' preference

to be corrupt, Akinfe, renders a character in Chief Tom-George who reinforces assumptions about the rich and politically connected in Nigeria.

Akinfe derides the peculiarities of the big-man by resorting to satire as a means to caution Nigerians about the ills of greed. Chief Tom-George's aspirations are effectively defeated in the end after his corrupt practices are discovered and he is forced to withdraw his candidacy for presidency. Nahem Yousaf in critiquing Chinua Achebe's works, talks about satire as being "exaggerated in order to act as a chilling warning of what might ensue." (60).

Akinfe's portrayal of greed and corruption in the novel, is so realistic that even the characters are recognizable to a reader who is aware of the socio-political realities in the country. The liberating effect of the kind of satire that Akinfe has employed in the novel is contingent on referentiality. Satire should never be entirely invented and the victims or characters depicted should more often than not be identifiable figures.

Chief Tom-George's portrayal in the novel parallels the story of former Rivers State Governor, Chief Peter Odili who during his tenure as governor of the state, is alleged to have colluded with youth gangs to terrorise his rivals and create an atmosphere of fear in the state. Just like Chief Tom-George in the novel, Chief Peter Odili announced in November 2006 that he had plans to stand as a presidential candidate under the banner of the ruling PDP in the 2007 election. His ambitions much like the novel's main character came to an end after he bowed out a day before the presidential primaries held on 16 December 2006, Odili

stepped down from the contest, allowing fellow governor Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to be installed as the party's flag bearer.[5]

In *Fuelling the Delta Fires*, Akinfe establishes that corruption exists beyond the shores of the country and implicates Chief Tom-George as a man who is insensitive to the austere conditions back in his country when he travels abroad. A brief visit to the United States to 'check out the way oil installations in the Gulf of Mexico supplied gas to electricity providers" opens an opportunity for the Chief to continue on a squandering spree that has become an all too familiar occurrence when politicians travel.

After having arrived at the United States, a party is organized by the Nigerian Ambassador to welcome Chief Tom-George. As expected, it was lavish and no expense was spared to make the Chief and his wife 'comfortable' during their stay in America. What becomes patently evident during this trip is the manner in which power is wielded and performed by politicians and government officials not just inside the country, but also outside as well. It is power that is sometimes performed in such an underhand and subtle manner that it becomes banal and unwittingly adopted by citizens within and outside the country.

During the same trip, Chief Tom-George is driven to Austin in Texas where he checks into the Four Seasons Hotel. Akinfe describes the wanton display of excess and performance of power to show that superfluity occurs outside the shores of the country. The markers of excess "a $2,000 a-night presidential suite that came with a private Jacuzzi, a masseur, six daily papers and a bottle of champagne with dinner" (188) or "a twelve-car motorcade …

[5] There are several articles on Chief Peter Odili's tenure as governor of Rivers State. Perhaps the most compelling is a case study of Rivers State which details the political unrest and violence during the governor's reign. The article can be found in the following site https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/nigeria1007/9.htm

made up of two limousines, four Mercedes, three Volvos, and three BMW's. The Nigerian ambassador travelled in the other limousine, which rode directly behind the governor and his wife." (188) are highlighted by Akinfe to demonstrate that self-indulgence and waste had become so ordinary for the big-man that he sees it as an expectation even when he is not in Nigeria.

It is valuable to note that several instances in the novel that depict corrupt practices gives weight to the suggestion that corruption may be common in Nigeria and as a writer, Akinfe is interested in keeping a keen eye on what is happening within his society and therefore is obligated to describe the world as it appears to him. After all, as Jean Paul Sartre points out: "The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it" (Sartre, 1948).

Akinfe's preoccupation with the excesses of politicians and the story of the Niger Delta came to fore during his undergraduate days at the University of Ibadan where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. According to him, "I saw the kind of horrors, poverty, an unfair trading environment, under-development, corruption and mismanagement brings on African countries… Seeing people scavenge on rubbish dumps for instance made one realize that things simply have to change." (Women Confidentials) His invented world in the novel is thus a reflection of the events he witnessed as a young man living in a country that was failing to live up to its potential. It was also an opportunity for him to relate some of problems that affected the Niger Delta. For Akinfe, Nigeria had become a State that, as Ohai and Alasike points out, is:

> perhaps the best known example of the African paradox. It is a country which has struggled with the development process over the last 53 years of her independence. As the 6th largest producer of oil in the world, it has earned more than half a trillion dollars in oil export since the discovery…Unfortunately, the massive revenue from oil has been a source of enormous sorrow to citizens due to poor government by our political elite over the many decades. The poor governance or its more virulent manifestation, public corruption, is of course the fundamental reason for Nigeria's poor economic performance despite our globally acknowledged economic potentials to have become not just one of the largest economies of the world, but in fact, one of those great countries. (19)

To narrate the draining effects of corruption in a country where the abuse of the law is common, Akinfe has had to be cunning in his employment of language and choice of tropes. While he has at certain points in the novel opted to condemn recognisable figures overtly, he has also cleverly used satire as a veiled form of criticism to dramatize the disorder in Nigeria and the Niger Delta.

Satire not only provides a cushion for self-preservation for Akinfe but it also serves as a vehicle for the author to ridicule the materialistic militants who the author suggests are really no different from the very same politicians they purport to fight against despite their revolutionary ideologies. To ward off potential opponents in an upcoming election, Chief Tom- George decides to invite the NDLM militants to his house for a meeting which will see the militants provide 'security and escort services' for the Chief. On the day of the meeting, the militants were said to have strode into the Chief's compound in a "two car convoy made

up of dark blue sport utility vehicles with blacked-out windows. Tires screeched and the smell of rubber rent the air as the reckless driving of the youths made their entry more dramatic than it needed to be" (37).

It isn't just the exaggerated entry into the Chief's compound that had Akinfe concerned. It was also the powerful signifiers of excess that the clothes worn by the militants denoted. Here is Akinfe's portrayal of militant leader Mene Bene's apparel for the meeting: "He wore matching black Chelsea boots, carried a walking stick, and had a black fedora on his head… two golden rings he wore on his right hand and the long chain around his neck" (38).

Satire functions as the driving forces behind Akinfe's novel and is a potent weapon for him to convey the story. Western Ijaw State, the novel's setting as well as the Niger Delta Liberation Movement (NDLM) are satirical substitutes for Nigeria's Niger Delta region and the real militant group that refer to themselves as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). One of the most compelling employment of satire in the novel is in the depiction of the unnamed military general described in the novel as an:

> evil genius who once ruled the country. Nicknamed Pele because of the way he could dribble and outfox his opponents, the general lived in Zungeru… His twenty-bedroom mansion was reputed to be the largest political party headquarters in Africa; people came from all over Nigeria and gathered there on a daily basis to discuss politics. Rumour had it that it was at the Zungeru mansion that Nigeria's elite decided on who gets what office and which government contract goes to whom. (12)

Akinfe's Pele is none other than former Nigerian president Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida who ruled Nigeria from August 27, 1985, to August 27, 1993. Babangida is considered to be one of the most corrupt leaders that the country had ever seen. His critics call him Maradona for his mastery of Nigeria's political landscape. Now retired and ensconced in his palatial mansion in Minna, Niger State, Babangida is still credited as a power-broker who continues to pull political strings from within the recesses of his home.

In keeping with his characterization in the novel, Akinfe description of Pele bears a resemblance to former president of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida. While, he was in office, Babangida was referred to as Maradona (a prominent football player just like Pele in the novel). We see in the novel that that Chief Tom-George travels to Zungeru, a town in Nigeria's Niger State to seek advice from Pele who is referred to as a 'genius' and retired general. Babangida, incidentally, is also referred to as a genius by Nigerians and upon retirement went back to live in his palatial residence at Minna in Niger State. Perhaps the most telling comparison between Akinfe's Pele and the real life Babangida, is revealed in the description of Zungeru in the first passage of Chapter two in the novel "Despite having produced a sizable number of military generals who had become extremely wealthy as a result of being in government, including two heads of state, Zungeru remained an underdeveloped dusty city…" (15) As has been mentioned, Babangida lives in Niger State, one of the least developed states in Nigeria that has produced a substantial amount of generals. As the novel alludes, Zungeru had produced two heads of state much like Niger State which had also produced Ibrahim Babangida and Alhaji Abdulsalam Abubakar who ruled Nigeria as head of state between 1998 and 1999.

Fuelling the Delta Fires intimates that violence witnessed in the Niger Delta is brought about by the abuse of power as politicians go to great lengths to preserve themselves in public offices. Akinfe illustrates this in the novel by recounting Chief Tom-George's efforts as he readies himself for a gubernatorial position. Tom-George travels to Zungeru where he is advised by 'Pele' the General to recruit the militants as part of a thug unit to do his dirty work. Akinfe through various descriptions of neglect, poverty, and anguish is able to portray Western Ijaw State and indeed the Niger Delta as a damaged place where politicians are only in politics for self-enrichment. There is a sense that he is keen to use his narrative as an agency to give context to the political issues in the Niger Delta as well as show the debilitating effects of corruption.

In this chapter, the point has been made that narratives such as Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* are important because they serve as compelling reminders of the tragedies that are likely to occur in a country replete with natural resources. It has also been established in the novel that a paradox of plenty naturally stunts development and creates conditions where corruption thrives. Akinfe makes it clear in the novel that corruption in Nigeria, a country considered as one of the largest oil producers in the world has become so endemic that its effect is felt in practically every sector. As speaker after speaker recount tales of ethnic bias and privation in various organised conferences that are highlighted in the novel, it becomes clear that the consequences of corruption are more evident in the Niger Delta than any other region in the country. Akinfe points to the greed that has enabled the degradation of the environment leaving the citizens massively impoverished. We see instances of a polluted ecosystem that has affected the livelihoods of the inhabitants of Western Ijaw State and how insurgency is engendered when people feel that they have run out of options.

By recounting the story of the Niger Delta, Ayo Akinfe interrogates and presents a story of greed, violence, corruption, and environmental degradation as factors that have contributed to the underdevelopment of the region. To write a story in a political climate that censures criticism, Akinfe has been compelled to resort to the subtleties of innuendos and ambiguity. Perhaps more pertinently, he has produced an evocative story that illuminates the consequences of corruption, extravagance, bad governance and greed.

CHAPTER THREE

Environmental Disequilibrium and Polluted Landscape in Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires.*

"Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed."

— Mahatma Gandhi

Ayo Akinfe's *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is one of a few novels about the Niger Delta that re-counts the plight of a region affected by environmental degradation that has lasted for a little over five decades. Persistent conflicts in the Niger Delta have threatened to derail a tremulous bond that exists between the divergent ethnic groups in Nigeria. At the centre of that tussle is the abundance of crude oil that marks Nigeria as one of the largest oil producers in the world and sets the stage for domestic conflicts, violence, political intrigues and a clamour for minority rights in the region.

Located strategically along the Gulf of Guinea, the Niger Delta has an abundance of natural minerals and in particular oil wealth. But with these resources comes the attendant issues of exploitation, marginalisation and misery that continue to plague the region, years after oil was first discovered. The prospecting for oil has brought about environmental degradation and exploitation by Multi-National Corporations and widespread corruption from successive administrations. So devastated has the condition of the Niger Delta been that Ike Oronta and Oronto Douglas, declare that "Peace was banished the moment the first dynamite was exploded by Shell workers in Oloibiri village in search of oil.

The situation became more precarious by the day, and the Niger Delta was the only part of Nigeria where a special a military occupation force, set up by the federal government in 1994, and which had Shell's support at the time, took over the lives of the people, killing, maiming, and raping thousands" (xi)

In this chapter therefore, I explore Akinfe's treatment of nature in the novel and how he has been able to demonstrate that there is a critical connection between the communities in Niger Delta and their immediate environment. More importantly, the key argument in this chapter is to demonstrate how *Fuelling the Delta Fires* points to corruption, neglect and greed as the fundamental reasons for the devastation of the landscape in the Niger Delta.

Tanure Ojaide describes the appalling conditions of the region best as he explains why it should become an attractive theme for creative writing and criticism by pointing out that:

> …multinational oil corporations have done massive environmental damage through oil spills, blowouts, gas flares and other forms of ecological despoliation. While oil exploration and exploitation are meant to bring wealth to the region, this has not happened in the Niger Delta, which remains not just one of the poorest parts of Nigeria but also of the entire world… little of the oil wealth filters to the local communities whose traditional occupations of farming and fishing are destroyed. The health hazards are enormous and go unchecked, such as methane and other chemicals that poison the people from the air they breathe, the land they farm, and the water they drink. Even chemicals used by the oil companies to service their equipment, percolate from wells and bore holes, while the rivers are clogged with crude oil in

> unchecked spills and blowouts. This is one of the contexts in which ecocriticism is set in Africa. (vi-vii)

It is also against this backdrop of ecological disorder and the desolation of the social conditions of the people of the Niger Delta that Ayo Akinfe wrote *Fuelling the Delta Fires*. As has been outlined in my introductory chapter, ecocriticism examines the interconnectedness between the human race and its physical environment and basically underscores how one shapes the other. Literature therefore serves as a veritable outlet for the writer to articulate this relationship between man and his immediate environment.

Ecocriticism began to gain some influence around 1989 in a Western Literature Association meeting held in Loeur d' Alene. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the attendees of the meeting advocated for the word to be used to describe or replace what had hitherto been referred to as 'nature writing'. Eleven years earlier, William Rueckert in an essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* had first used the word to bring attention to the subject of ecology and how it should be applied to literature but it was Glotfelty's interpretation of the concept in her seminal work titled *The Ecocriticism Reader* that came to distinguish 'nature writing' as a proper genre. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies." (xviii)

Glotfelty's call for an earth-centered approach to literary studies would have seemed appropriate two decades ago but in a world that is rapidly changing, ecocriticism needed to

go beyond the preoccupation of conducting an analysis of nature in literary texts to addressing issues that are more encompassing in scope. It therefore became obligatory for ecocriticism as an approach to evolve and embrace varieties of issues that included race, gender and class. Michael Cohen contends that "by definition, ecological literary criticism must be engaged. It wants to know but also wants to do. Ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions, in the same way that feminist criticism was able to do only a few decades ago." (1092-1093)

Since it first came to prominence, ecocriticism has been distinguished by three major waves that emerged over the last three decades. The first wave of ecocriticism entrenched a philosophy that tended to look at nature and humans as separate and therefore advanced a perspective that advocated for the environment to be protected from the ravages of human culture. By the late 1990s however, ecocritics began to re-evaluate that stance and as Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Ambuster put it "the time had come for ecocritics to review the field critically and ask what directions it might best take in the future." (1)

The second wave of ecocriticism therefore decided to pay attention not only to how nature is portrayed in literary texts but also began to incorporate human concerns as well as the challenges of urbanization as a consequence of modernisation. Human beings came to be regarded within the scope of ecocriticism as integral to any discussion of nature and therefore equally central. Kovacik puts it succinctly, by describing this wave as one that goes beyond just the study of man's ever changing environment to one that demanded the ecocritic to "become engaged in various directions, such as issues of minority, nature preservation, sustainable living, environmental justice, etc." (58)

This second wave also witnessed the start of two major developments in the ecocritical evolution. Ecofeminism and environmental justice became issues that gained considerable ground. Ecofeminists argued and drew attention to the similarities between the exploitation of nature and the domination women faced in what is largely a patriarchal world. For them, women, much like the environment, were compelled to contend with overt exploitation and subjugation and it was therefore necessary for solutions to be put in place to combat obstacles that stood in the way of their existence.

The concept of environmental justice means different things to different people or communities and is grounded more often than not in place, time, and perspective. From a Niger Delta perspective therefore, environmental justice first came to people's attentions after an environmental social movement was first initiated and a Bill of Rights issued to the Federal government of Nigeria in 1990 by the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta.

Frustrated by years of neglect and consequent suffering from the after effects of pollution that came with the exploration of oil in Ogoni land, Ken Saro-Wiwa led a delegation of Ogoni Chiefs to submit what became known as the Ogoni Bill of Rights to the Federal Government of Nigeria. The Bill documents a twenty-point demand that was broken down into four key areas; environmental, political, economic and social emancipation for the Ogoni people. For the Ogoni's, it was fundamentally important that the Federal government granted them greater autonomy, access and control of the resources entrenched in their land.

The submission of that Bill of Rights was to unfold a chain of events that would culminate in the extra-judicial killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa. It is important to note that Ken Saro-Wiwa was

not tried in a normal court of law but was rather sentenced in a tribunal convened by a military regime that denied his lawyers a chance to make submissions on his behalf.

Environmental justice, although a second wave phenomenon, has never been more relevant than it is today especially in communities like the Niger Delta where oil and gas exploratory activities of multinational companies backed by government have arguably decimated the ecosystem and reduced the powerless inhabitants of the communities where oil has been extracted to a life of suffering and misery.

Shortly after the year 2000, a third wave was developed to include a more global outlook which examines the impacts of ecological practices that not only affect the environment but also pays particular attention to how literature incorporates a diversity of voices on a global scale to create an understanding of the environmental conditions and experiences of various cultural communities globally.

The third wave was confirmation to the African writer that environmental writing should rather focus on internal African ecological dynamics. Obiechina asserts that the African's traditional world view has always been central to the way the African sees nature and that has always shown in the novels written by many African writers.

For Obiechina, the African and indeed the African novelist, has what he describes as 'a mystical and yet utilitarian outlook on nature'. So it is not out of place for example, to read about lush landscapes, picturesque vegetation or cascading waterfalls but what is and has been essentially important to the African with respect to nature, has been the supernatural manifestations attached to these objects. So a particular stream is not just unique because of its natural splendor but significant for its inviolability because it operates as a habitat for "a

communal deity or a local spirit identifiable with the destiny of the community". Nature for the African, is not just regarded as the 'other' as obtains in the urbanized West but seen as an integral part of the African's world order. (42)

Obiechina's argument about the African and nature is echoed by William Slaymaker who pronounces that African writers and critics have indeed been conscious of the importance of the environment in their writings but have hardly gone beyond what he considers to be the elemental stages of nature writing. So while Obiechina and company could point to references of nature in the works of African writers, Slaymaker supposes that little if anything has been done by African writers to further the concept of ecocriticism or environmental literature by way of thematising landscape, space, and conservationism in their books and films. According to him:

> the African echo of global green approaches to literature and literary criticism has been faint. There is no lack of writing in Africa that might fall under the rubric of nature writing … Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues, and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims and that also function as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. A review of any number of bibliographies, literary histories, and anthologies of black African literature and criticism in the past several decades will bear out this intense interest in the local recapture of a violated nature. But there is no rush by African literary and cultural critics to adopt ecocriticism or the literature of the environment

> as they are promulgated from many of the world's metropolitan centers. For some black African critics, ecolit and ecocrit are another attempt to "white out" black Africa by coloring it green … Black African writers take nature seriously in their creative and academic writing, but many have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism. (129-144)

By subjecting African ecological writings to the same standards that characterised the embryonic phases of ecocriticism in the West, Slaymaker fails to take account of the unique sociological conditions and cultural idiosyncrasies that inform the African writer's choice of subject matter and therefore fails to recognise that the African writer, rather than emphasise landscapes, 'pastoral reminisces' or the 'local recapture of a violated nature' would instead focus on what Byron Caminero-Santangelo describes as the "social implications of environmental change, and the relationships between representations of nature and power" (698-707).

The preoccupation for the African writer and critic, seems to be far more intricate than Slaymaker comprehends. Beyond the natural suspicion of a handed down Western hegemonic discourse, African writers seem to be more interested in how the debates on the environment is closely aligned to politics and how the people who are directly affected by political decisions find ways to navigate past the unbearable conditions in which they find themselves. Writers particularly from regions where the impacts of environmental degradation have affected the livelihoods of the people are also far more interested in addressing the plight of communities who are struggling to resist the incremental effects of what Richard Nixon defines as slow violence.

Nixon in his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* discusses the effects of calamities and environmental problems that are slow, enduring and occur over a period of time. He pronounces that slow violence is incremental and escapes our attention because it is usually not in our direct line of sight or because we have become blasé to its consequences. He goes on to warn against the delayed effects of slow violence should writers not be vocal about it. In his own words, Nixon says slow violence is one "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility." (2). Writers therefore need to concentrate on recounting stories that bring environmental issues to the fore and how those issues affect the poor so that a change can be ultimately be effected.

Anthony Vital, takes the issue of writing and African ecocriticism a step further by calling for the development of an approach that involves a debate around what Africans should assign as significant about nature. (87-106). According to Vital:

> Ecocriticism, if it is to pose African questions and find African answers, will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concern for social life and its natural environment. It will need, too, to work from an understanding of the complexity of African pasts, taking into account the variety in African responses to currents of modernity that reached Africa from Europe initially, but that now influence Africa from multiple centers, European, American, and now Asian, in the present form of the globalizing economy. (87-106)

Vital goes on to add in another article on the subject that for ecocriticism to be distinctly African, it needed to "incorporate available natural and social scientific scholarship" that reflects and at the same time advances the proper structures of African literary discourse. Vital goes on to add that within that literary discourse, an understanding of the ecological placements of African cities and their relations to the 'rural worlds' must be demonstrated. (Vital 2015: 217).

Ayo Akinfe's fictional endeavour follows in the trajectory of this kind of advice from Vital, Nixon and Slovic. *Fuelling the Delta Fires* gives voice to myriad issues that affects the Niger Delta region. The novel essentially deals with the consequences of the obsessive pursuit for power and underscores how excessive greed (politics of the belly) are linked to the pollution and destruction of the landscape.

Akinfe consciously weaves the subject of nature into his text and various descriptions of the environment in the work seems suggests that he is keen to highlight the negative effects of oil exploration. He connects the sufferings of the people of the region to not only the thoughtlessness of the oil companies in their hazardous activities but also lays the blame on the ethnocentric policies of the Nigerian government. The restive situation in the Western Ijaw State (the Niger Delta) is first brought to our attention in the novel, when the Niger Delta Liberation Movement (NDLM) decides to hold its first national conference in the coastal town of Bonny. Rebel leader Mene Bene is unequivocal in his appraisal of the state of affairs in the region as he articulates the injustices faced by the people of the region. He addresses the participants:

> My brothers, I have invited you here to discuss the plight of the Ijaw. Unless you are blind, you will realise that in Nigeria, the Ijaw man is not considered an equal. He is not considered a contemporary, a colleague, a mate, or a friend but a subordinate. Other Nigerians trample on us as if we are maggots, and all the evidence shows that for the last forty years, we have been the foot mat of this country. We are the goose that lays the golden egg, yet we have the worst nest in the swamp. Other Nigerian kids swim in swimming pools, but ours ***swim in polluted waters***[6]. They have bridges, we have wooden planks; they have roads, we have weed covered streams; they have electricity, we have bush lamps… Across Ijawland today, nobody can continue the fishing boat making, net making, or farming activities of our forefathers. Polluted waters, desecrated land, and gas-poisoned air have made sure that we have been left destitute like leprous beggars. (53-54)

Bene's protracted monologue captures Akinfe's reflections of the stark realities faced by the people of the Niger Delta and encapsulates the anger that can be engendered when greed and pursuit for material acquisition is placed above the mandate of government to equitably provide for its citizens. Historically, Nigeria's minority tribes have always agitated for a greater percentage of revenue allocation but their demands have always been summarily rebuffed or cursorily appeased. Across the years, developmental boards to look into the needs of the region were created but never quite met the mandates set for them as the people in the region continued to live in abject poverty.

[6] My emphasis.

Mene Bene's speech draws attention to how government's neglect and collusion with the oil companies has marginalised the people of the Niger Delta and shows how that relationship has engendered the spate of violence that he captures in the novel. In *Fuelling the Delta Fires,* Akinfe manages to tell a story that emphasises the difficulties associated with environmental destruction by revealing that an assault on the ecosystem creates an atmosphere that facilitates revolt. Akinfe, through Tarila's response to his jailers reveals that when people's livelihoods are directly impacted, they may see violence as the only means to express their frustrations. He points to Tarila who succumbs to vigilantism after the primary source of his community's sustenance is destroyed by oil exploration. He tells his captors that:

> his natural instincts were not those of a rebel. He explained that he had had no choice but to sign up to the NDLM cause. He said his father and grandfather had both been fishermen, and when discharged from the navy, he had hoped to follow in his family tradition. When he got back to his village some twenty kilometres outside Warri, he found out that all the rivers, streams and canals were polluted with oil slicks. All the aquatic life was dead, and there was no prospect of any revival from what he had seen. Tarila said that when he went back to the famous "Base" fishing ground where his family had an allotment, all he found were rusting canoes, dried-out nets, and children foraging among the debris looking for scrap metal to sell. (104)

Through Tarila's narrative, Akinfe attempts to use vivid imagery to illuminate the collective experiences of the people of Western Ijaw State and indeed the Niger Delta. Imagery therefore, becomes a trope for Akinfe to employ as an ecological gauge to reveal the

profusion of abuse and neglect that continues to trail a society on the margins of an environmental crisis. Akinfe has fictionalised the actual experiences of people in the Niger Delta to emphasise the challenging effects that a devastated environment has brought upon the people of the Niger Delta and how a ravaged ecosystem as Tarila describes above leads to what Rob Nixon has described as 'slow violence'.

The predicament of the region is further captured by Jike who gives a nuanced view of the situation by stating that excessive exploration and seismic activities have increased soil toxicity, adversely affecting crop yields. He goes on to add that the quality and size of staple crops like cassava, yam and plantain have been so negatively impacted by the activities of oil exploration that they have become unsafe for consumption. Aquatic life has hardly fared better as has wildlife. The negative effect of oil exploration activities has seen a forced migration of wildlife as a wide range of apes, especially monkeys that were highly visible and ubiquitous within the Niger-Delta coastal towns before the advent of oil exploration have now diminished significantly. (686-701)

The privation that ensues in the aftermath of oil extraction as Jike has illustrated creates resistance and although I have pointed out in an earlier paragraph that it has elicited violent reprisals from disgruntled youths within the society as has been exemplified in *Fuelling the Delta Fires,* the resultant effect it has had on writers in particular, needs to be considered. In his analysis of Ojaide's poetic work, Uzoechi Nwagbara contends that Ojaide, a writer/poet from the Niger Delta region of the country "considers the ecocritical art of poetry as a kind of public duty, which he owes to the Nigerian people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria" (17). Akinfe joins a growing cadre of writers that include Tanure Ojaide, Isidore Okpewho, Kaine Agary,

Helon Habila and a host of others who see themselves as sentinels saddled with the responsibility of protecting the disenfranchised through their art.

In *Fuelling the Delta Fires*, one gets the impression that Akinfe is bonded to the Niger Delta narrative and therefore has the advantage of being in proximity to the unfolding events in the region. That proximity allows him to skilfully explore the varied reactions of the characters in the novel as they come to terms with the environmental destruction and governmental neglect that has plagued their region. As Tarila, makes the perilous journey back to Elem Tombia to negotiate with the disgruntled rebels on behalf of the government. He thinks to himself that "Anybody who wants to know what all the talk about deprivation in the Niger Delta is all about just needs to visit Elem Tombia. It is the epitome of underdevelopment in every sense of the word. For starters, it took Tarila two days to get to the village from Patani. It is one of the most arduous journeys anybody could take. Only mountain climbers and athletes involved in extreme sports put their bodies through such rigours in pursuit of a destination" (114)

Tarila's ordeal as he navigates the torturous journey to the base of the insurgents is a stark reminder of how precariously close to the margins the people of the Niger Delta find themselves. Their position of prolonged subjugation spawns suspicions and cynicisms as the characters come into close contact with each other – a fact that Tarila gets to see first-hand as he journeys through the inhospitable terrains of the Niger Delta. A flat tire during that journey, forces the passengers to disembark and Tarila's offer to assist the driver to change the tire is summarily rebuffed with a cynicism borne out of distrust – a distrust that is brought about by frustrations about their inabilities to change their situations.

The exploitation of crude oil resources and its resultant degradation of the Niger Delta's ecosystem is additionally portrayed in the following passages as Tarila arrives at the historical Kalabari town of Buguma. He notices "that seaweeds, water hyacinth, huge baobab and iroko trees, mangrove swamp and oil slicks surrounded the ancient town. At Buguma, the boat driver turned round, faced Tarila, and in an aggressive tone, snapped, "We cannot go any further. The combination of the oil and weeds will damage the motor of my boat." (115)

A cursory examination of the river by Tarila confirms the driver's apprehension as he notices the oil, and grimy slick that had covered the water surface. Aquatic life which is fundamental to the survival of the people of the region had been polluted by oil wastes dumped in the rivers. J.S. Oboreh points to the fact that "prior to oil exploitation and exploration, the Niger Delta region had been a peaceful place with fishing and farming as the main means of livelihood of its denizens" (18). He goes on to add that the region, however, "has suffered from environmental degradation and deprivation" since the commencement of oil exploration" (18). Through Tarila's observations, Akinfe simply endorses the notion of an imperiled region that has become a metaphor for everything that is wrong with the country. The obliteration of a people's source of livelihood generally elicits uncertainty, fear, tension, and danger and this is what Ayo Akinfe is keen illustrate in *Fuelling the Delta Fires*.

Tarila's unfortunate encounter with the environmental squalor is bleak, graphic and part of the pantomime that is the Niger Delta. John Enemugwem, corroborates the state of degradation of the environment and its association with oil exploration when he points out that: In the Niger Delta "no earthquake and windstorm had devastated this sedimentary environment of Nigeria. Water hyacinth was there but did not cause the disaster that came with petroleum exploration. (55-70). With the narrative focusing heavily in parts on the

dereliction of the Niger Delta environment and exploitation of nature, one could argue that Akinfe successfully responds to Glotfelty's call for contemporary literary studies to incorporate what she sees as a global environmental perspective. She avers that:

> Although scholarship claims to have "responded to contemporary pressures", it has apparently ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis…oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest … famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes. (xv-xvi)

One gets the sense from reading Akinfe's narrative that violence is never too far away. He paints a picture of restive communities who had become tired of being ruled by people seen as stooges chosen for them by the federal government. Communities in the Niger Delta felt more agitated by the fact the chosen stooges as Akinfe describes them, were corrupt men who would rather take monies allocated for the state to enrich themselves than develop the region. Frustrated by what the communities in the Niger Delta saw as neglect and apparent disregard for their welfare and the continuous deterioration of infrastructure, youths across the Niger Delta were forced to eventually take up arms and resort to violence. A few prominent politicians who were thought to be behind their sufferings – had been attacked over the last six months, with no fewer than a dozen houses burnt down. Most of those who had been attacked had made careless and restless statements dismissing the youths as mindless hooligans and thugs… (19)

Akinfe is unequivocal about the fact that the Federal government and multinational companies are primarily responsible for the slow pace of development in the Niger Delta but he is clearly in no doubt that state governors from the Niger Delta have also benefitted from colluding with the Federal government.

Akinfe points to state governors in the region who get derivations but have been too greedy to spend the money on projects that will benefit the citizens. Godswill, a member of the insurgent group NDLM echoes Akinfe's estimation of the complicity of the governors "If our people knew how complicit our own Ijaw leaders are in all of this mess, they would most likely direct their anger against them. They keep agitating for more money, but we all know that they do nothing with what they are currently getting from the federal government. What have they got to show for all the years we have been given our own state and they have been in charge? I for one doubt if things would have been much better even if we had 100 percent resource control. (178).

But it is not only the actions or the collusion of indigenes in the Niger Delta with the Federal government that Akinfe decries. He points to the corruption of the multinational companies and in particular Shell Oil Company as the primary source of the problems in the Niger Delta. As has been pointed out earlier in this research report, in 1937, Shell started to prospect for oil in Nigeria as Shell D'Arcy and was granted an exploration license. Three years later, the company had discovered oil in Oloibiri in the Niger Delta and by 1958 began to export in commercial quantities. Akinfe maintains that without the discovery of oil, the people of the region would have been better off with vocations as farmers and fishermen. Mene Bene, the leader of the NDLM encapsulates Akinfe's position in a speech to delegates who had been invited to attend the NDLM's first National conference in Bonny. Bene says

"While we must hold the rest of Nigeria to account, we must also not lose sight of who the main culprits are. These multinational companies come here to make billions and remit it back to their countries of origin, leaving our people with nothing but the polluted aftermath… they have left us infinitely worse off than we were before their arrival. Across Ijawland today, nobody can continue the fishing, boat-making, net-making, or farming activities of our forefathers. Polluted waters, desecrated land, and gas-poisoned air have made sure that we have been left destitute like leprous beggars." (54)

It is significant to note that Akinfe does not shy away from holding leaders in the Niger Delta accountable when it would have been easier to write a novel from a Niger Delta perspective that puts the blame elsewhere. In *Fuelling the Delta Fires*, Akinfe seems to be keen to demonstrate that the importance of protecting the environment is not an unfamiliar concept to leaders and politicians from the region but that it is their greed that prevents them from doing what they ought to do for their people.

Chief Tom-George's nonchalance during a fact finding mission to the United States where he hoped to get information on the supply of electricity from installations in the Gulf of Mexico reveals what Akinfe suggests is the mentality of politicians when it comes to doing what is right for their people. On his return from States, "Governor Tom-George decided to read through a Greenpeace environmental warning booklet he had been given. It highlighted the unique environmental problems that the Gulf of Mexico faced. Although these appeared minor compared with the Niger Delta's woes, they provided the governor with some sort of consolation." (191). One can only surmise that consolation for the chief was not because the Gulf of Mexico faced peculiar environmental problems but by the fact that he could State was not the only place with problems.

Fuelling the Delta Fires, explores the questions of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta underlining Akinfe's determination to show how corruption plays a significant role in keeping the region and indeed its people impoverished.

The main argument in this chapter has been to show how Akinfe connects corruption in the problems of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. In doing so, I have been able to also draw attention to issues of collusion between some Niger Delta politicians who are not exempt from culpability and highlight the privation that has been triggered by the exploration activities of the multi-national companies working in collusion with the federal government. *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is not just a catalogue of avarice and the Ozymandian[7] ambitions of an unscrupulous statesman in search of political power, it is Akinfe's contribution to advancing the African ecological debate beyond the socio-economic realities of poverty, underdevelopment and governance to constructing a significant and credible narrative that renders a true picture of environmental degradation as a menace that not only affects the Niger Delta area but the world as a whole.

Akinfe's aim throughout this work, has also been to use his narrative to reach the critical analysis that ecological degradation as a major issue in Africa, needs to be continually voiced, exposed and challenged by writers because as Timothy Clark points out "Literary

[7] Ozymandais is a sonnet written by Percy Bysshe Shelley somewhere between 1817 and 1818. It recounts the story of a derelict statue of an Egyptian tyrant (thought to be the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II) found in desert. The severed head of the statue which had rolled off and was just a few metres away from the rest of the statue, had an arrogant disposition with a 'sneer of cold command'. Etched on the body of the statue's pedestal is a proud inscription that reads: 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! 'The sonnet has been analysed to denote the transience and ephemerality of material wealth and in some cases, it is much about arrogance as it is about the quest for power. Ozymandias' insatiable desire for power clearly resonates in the Nigerian society. In portraying, Chief Tom-George in the manner at which he has been depicted in the novel, Akinfe has wittingly tapped into a theme of greed that is common in contemporary Nigerian literary works.

texts offer a space in which socially repressed and marginalised people or issues may voice themselves" (153).

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Fuelling the Delta Fires is a fictional evocation of recent events in the Niger Delta that could serve as an important reference point to articulate social ills afflicting the region. By delving into a not too distant history and using satire as a literary device, Akinfe makes an impassioned criticism for an examination of the social and moral vices, militating against the Niger Delta's socio-political development. What satire does brilliantly is that it acts as a prop for the writer to expose and condemn the anomalies that affect society. Austin Tamuno-Opubo George professes that

> as an expressive literary device, satire is a combination of mockery and ridicule executed through a caustic wit. Through satire, the writer is able to confront society with its vices and follies, and seeks to discredit these by using trenchant spoofs and send-ups. But beyond ridicule, satire also functions as a cultural corrective by which the artist tries to reset society's moral compass, by suggesting an alternative path through which society may regenerate its more positive mores." (147)

Tamuno-Opubo George's definition of satire is particularly pertinent in a country like Nigeria where minorities have lived on the fringes of poverty since independence and where greed, violence and corruption has almost become the norm. The writer's responsibility therefore in that kind of setting in addition to trying to reset society's moral compass, is to ensure that his or her work is not so entirely fictitious that it becomes unrecognizable. The redemptive quality of satire is in its potential to cast its fictionalised rendition in a manner

that is decipherable and yet covert enough to shield the writer from retribution. Akinfe does this successfully with the deployment of his main character in the novel who he depicts as recognisable, obsessively power-hungry and extravagant – traits that describe the typical Nigerian big-man.

Akinfe has succeeded in rendering a story that uses satire and exaggeration to lampoon social practices in society. His depiction of Chief Tom-George's penchant for exorbitance is as humorous as it is scathing. By overstating various instances of opulence and general wastefulness in the novel, Akinfe manages to underscore the negative conditions that are a consequence of a lopsided and prejudiced system that leads to unrest and violence. For example, at a time when a majority of the citizenry are struggling to eke out a living, Chief Tom-George hands out GMG[8] bags to delegates to boost his campaign and began to indiscriminately pay for the flights and accommodation for those who promised to back his candidacy. "For starters, all of the five hundred delegates from Western Ijaw State were being sponsored by his campaign team, and as the conference approached, this number ballooned to two thousand" (359).

While Akinfe's work does not necessarily suggest an 'alternative path for societal regeneration' as Austin Tamuno-Opubo George indicates, its documentation of the malaise that has eaten deep into every section of the Nigerian society draws attention to the effects of corruption and the depravity by a section of the Nigerian society that exploit the system and contributes to the difficult conditions that the people of the Niger Delta are faced with. It is

[8]GMG bags an acronym for Ghana Must Go, came into use in the early 80s when the Nigerian government repatriated millions of Ghanaians on the allegation they were economic saboteurs. The bag was quickly manufactured as they could not afford to buy conventional baggage to carry their belongings. It is now mostly used as a bag to carry large sums of money in Nigeria.

important to stress that Akinfe invites the reader to take seriously the issues of political manipulations which is one of the fundamental markers of corruption in Nigeria. Akinfe shows Chief Tom-George's manipulations of a nascent rebel movement to subdue his political rivals and by so doing enhance his ambitions for a loftier position in government, as a common occurrence within the nation's political arena and as I have stated in an earlier passage of this research report, that satire serves as a means for the author to escape possible recriminations. It is also important to note that the novel addresses the author's fears of a disastrous future in the Niger Delta where the effects from the exploration of oil will eventually turn the region into a desolate wasteland.

Akinfe's uses his work to articulate the culpabilities of the local politicians whose greed for material acquisitions have unwittingly had substantial and unpleasant consequences for ordinary citizens of the region. The work however, is disturbingly skewed in favour of the rebels who are accorded an exalted status that understates their contributions to the region's intractable impasse. One almost gets the sense that Akinfe conflates bravery with morality and thus fails to reveal that the rebels, despite their ideological proclamations are no different from the politicians they purport to despise. The actions of the rebels at a later stage in the novel when they eventually come into some money, ultimately reveals that they too have been motivated by greed. Paul Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner are unequivocal in their summation of the reason for rebellion in general. They declare that it is economic greed rather than grievance and a desire to accumulate resource wealth that propels rebellion. They go on to suggest that youth militants like the variety in the Niger Delta are no more than mass criminal groups who articulate doctrines of political injustices and concern for their communities only when it suits them. (3-20) Mene Bene and his followers' actions of living

off the proceeds of abductions when the patronage from the corrupt Tom-George dries up is clear illustration of a greed model that implicates everyone within and around the margins of power in the Niger Delta. In the end however, Akinfe demonstrates his commitment to seeing justice carried out by plotting a scenario at the novel's conclusion where Tom-George's political aspirations are halted by revelations of his previous misdeeds.

It is my view that ecology as it is shown in the novel draws attention to the devastating effects of politically corrupt practices in the Niger Delta. Akinfe's treatment of the theme of ecology is an affirmation of his anxieties over the despoliation of a region that accounts for over 85% of the Nation's gross domestic product (GDP). By fictionalising the recent history of the politics of oil in Nigeria, Akinfe has used literature to plot a distinctive sequence of events that gives voice to a desolate riverine minority whose territories have been ruined through several years of oil exploration and exploitation by multinational corporations.

The tone of *Fuelling the Delta Fires* is not exactly angst ridden, but the reaction of some of the characters to their devastated environment indicates Akinfe's exasperation at the twin forces of government neglect on the one hand and the residents' inertia on the other. One could argue that the choice to take up arms by the Niger Delta Liberation Movement is proof of a restive community who are not afraid to be subversive in order to achieve social and economic emancipation but as has been pointed out above, the imperative for mutiny is more often driven by greed rather than grievance and it is only a minority of the inhabitants of the region who are willing to intervene.

One of the questions posed by ecocriticism in the evaluation of fiction is whether the physical setting plays an important role in the plot. By presenting vivid images of destruction

of the Niger Delta's natural environment, Akinfe is able to give a nuanced view of the suffering that is engendered on the inhabitants by the despoilation of the physical habitat of of the Niger Delta and in the process exposes the contradictions between the devastating material conditions on the ground and the opulence exhibited by the politicians who benefit from the proceeds handed to them by the Multinational Corporations.

Throughout the narrative, Akinfe portrays a Nigerian society inhibited by the leaders who are detached from the reality of suffering around them. Through the employment of satire, he has been able to recount a Niger Delta that is a dystopia, inhibited by a corrupt ruling class whose sole intent is to amass wealth and whose actions are attributable to the devastation and imbalance that has plagued the region. It is perhaps fair to conclude this research report by pronouncing that Akinfe's narrativization of the story of the Niger Delta, can deepen our understanding of a region grappling with the aftermath of an ecological disaster.

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