CHAPTER 4

Defining Niger Delta Literature: Preliminary Perspective on an Emerging Literature

The terms Literature of the Niger Delta and Niger Delta Literature are used interchangeably in this study to mean works of literature that have been produced by both indigenes of the Niger Delta and outsiders about the region. These literary works are either set in the Niger Delta or take their themes from the experiences of the people of the region. This study attempts to define Niger Delta literature and examines it as a reflection of the experiences of the region’s people. This literature also reflects the locale and is informed by, among others, geographical, bioregional, sociocultural, and political factors.

Niger Delta literature has received more prominence in literary discourse since the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni minority rights and environmental activist in October 1995. Saro-Wiwa’s activism and the worldwide abortive campaign to save him from being hanged by the brutal Sani Abacha junta in Nigeria generated a lot of interest in the Niger Delta region. The body of literary works on this oil and gas-producing region forms a corpus that can be described as Niger Delta literature because the writings attempt to reflect the worldview, sensibility, identity, and experiences of the people as well as the society and landscape that form the Niger Delta.

Without doubt, Niger Delta literature has been enhanced by worldwide interest in the related areas of climate change, the environment, and ecocriticism. This has been more so because of the highly publicized political campaign to draw attention to the excesses of multinational oil corporations working in the Niger Delta since 1958 and the subsequent environmental and ecological degradations that have adversely affected human and nonhuman lives in the area. Additionally, one can anchor Niger Delta literature on the incorporation of the
folklore and shared experiences of the people in the writers’ works. Among the writers of the area are J. P. Clark, Ben Okri, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Isidore Okpewho, Gabriel Okara, Tess Onwueme, Elechi Amadi, Okogbule Wonodi, Ogaga Ifowodo, Kaine Agary, Ebi Yeibo, Ebinyo Ogbowei, Onookome Okome, Nduka Otiono, Dike Okoro, and Tanure Ojaide. Two writers who are nonindigenes of the area but have written sensitively about the Niger Delta are Ahmed Yerima and Helon Habila in their respective *Hard Ground* and *Oil on Water*. This list of producers of Niger Delta literature is not meant to be definitive or finite but includes most of the best known authors of the literary tradition as will be defined and discussed in this chapter.

While this literature has received increased attention in recent times, it is important to acknowledge the older writers who have always set their works on the Niger Delta region. Writings such as Okara’s *Fisherman’s Invocation* (1975), Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966), J. P. Clark’s *Song of a Goat* (1965), and Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986) were published long before the wave of environmental awareness and distress from oil exploitation. These earlier literary productions about the area were not studied as Niger Delta literature until only recently. It is important to state then that literary works can be classified as Niger Delta literature that remain Nigerian, albeit African, literature. Writings that are studied as Niger Delta literature receive more attention in depth and breadth and are also open to interdisciplinary approaches that impinge on the people’s specific experiences, especially in the areas of ecology and environment, folklore, and politics. Also while critics have tried to see postcolonial literature as antagonistic to the literature of place such as Niger Delta literature, in this particular case the literature still carries the features of Nigerian and African literatures, which are highly postcolonial.

Since the literature of the Niger Delta is set in a specific place, it is important to know what constitutes the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta in Nigeria is not synonymous with the South-South geopolitical zone, one of six of such zones that make up the Nigerian federation. Edo, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom States are in the South-South geopolitical zone but are not part of the core Niger Delta. However, Cross River and Akwa Ibom residents consider themselves as part of the Niger Delta. The exclusion of Edo State as part of the Niger Delta could be because for a long time the former Midwest Region that became Delta State always comprised of Delta or Warri Province and the Benin side. It is true that the minorities of the old Western and Eastern Regions had struggled in the 1950s to be separated from their respective Yoruba and Igbo majority groups. While the Midwest