FOUNTAIN UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES
A publication of the College of Arts and Education
Fountain University Osogbo

Eco-social Perspectives and the Limit of Violence in Jeta Amata's *Black November* and Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri*

SALAUDEEN Mariam & FASAN Rotimi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Osun State University

Correspondence Email:
mariam.salaudeen@uniosun.edu.ng

Abstract

While Jeta Amata's Black November (2015) and Curtis Graham's Oloibiri (2015) have garnered significant scholarly attention since their production, existing ecocritical discourses on them remain predominantly anthropocentric. Most analyses prioritise the human condition, focusing on youth restiveness and militancy as fallout of multinational firms' neglect and governmental indifference. While these socio-political readings are valid, this study argues for a critical shift that transcends human-centred perspectives. Utilising Sule Egya's (2020) "socio-ecological" framework and "Activism" category for analysing Nigerian ecocriticism, as well as Cajetan Iheka's (2018) theorisation on "rethinking postcolonial violence", this paper interrogates the representation of the environment as a co-victim of conflict. This study critically evaluates the efficacy of violence as a tool for ecological liberation, arguing that militancy fails to resolve the Niger Delta's ecological and social predicament. By shifting the analytical lens from a predominantly human-centred interpretation that favours armed resistance against perceived agents of ecocide in the Niger Delta cinema, this research contributes to a wider debate and understanding of environmental justice in contemporary Nigerian films.

Keywords

Militancy, Human-centred, Socio-ecological, Activism, Postcolonial violence, Niger Delta Cinema, Environmental justice

Introduction

Jeta Amata's *Black November* (2015) and Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri* (2015) are two significant films that have made enormous contributions to the body of critical discourse on the Niger Delta oil quagmire. They both serve as cinematic expressions of the quotidian struggles of ordinary

people in the Niger Delta, proving the utilitarian nature of African and Nigerian Cinema in particular. In this regard, Ajisafe and Ajisafe (2023) note that the establishment of the Nigerian Film industry, otherwise known as "Nollywood," has helped greatly in the development of the nation, and has served as a medium of entertainment, education, perpetuation of culture, employment and communication as well as a source of information for research purposes" (150).

In a similar vein, these two films have been instrumental in bringing the environmental pollution and human impoverishment of the Niger Delta region to the cinematic limelight. However, ecocritical engagements of the films remain predominantly human-centred, almost obliterating the non-human or other-than-human others with whom they share this degraded environment. Most critics focus on the struggles of the people against oppression meted out on them despite the resources and wealth strewn from deep down their lands, leading to what Iheka (2018) terms "human-centredness" in postcolonial ecocriticism, which overlooks the "interlinking of human and nonhuman lives in African societies (2)."

This study acknowledges the relevance of these approaches, but argues for a method that is not only "socio-ecological" (Egya 2020) but also advocates for a "rethinking of postcolonial violence" (Iheka 2018) in Nigerian ecocriticism. The reason for this is not far-fetched, as numerous scholarly works have validated the use of violence as a justifiable response to the region's marginalisation while overlooking the failure of militancy to resolve its core challenges. In other words, existing scholarship often neglects how armed resistance exacerbates the degradation of the very ecosystem it claims to defend,

rendering such methods ecologically counterproductive.

Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta and Cinematic Intervention

It is indisputable that environmental degradation in Nigeria constitutes a profound socio-political challenge that has elicited responses across diverse sectors. Filmmakers, in particular, have employed cinematic expression to interrogate and project this reality. Within this context, numerous Nollywood productions have explored environmental themes, thereby situating themselves within the discourse of environmental politics and utilising the cinematic medium as a platform for advocacy and critique. David Attwood's *Blood and Oil* (2010), Jeta Amata's *Black November* (2015), and Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri* (2015) remain canonical films based on the issue of environmental degradation in Nigeria.

Idyo and Ademiju-Bepo (2024) research these three films- *Blood and Oil*, *Black November*, and *Oloibiri*, which all centre on the environmental despoliation of the Niger Delta and its attendant youth militancy. Their investigation takes a detour from existing critical works on the films by adopting Marxist Film Theory and a qualitative research method that integrates document observation, media analysis, and focused group discussion to interrogate the degree of transformation achieved in the region through the production of these films, if any (159). They argue that even though Nollywood's intervention in the Niger Delta crises through these films has contributed to significant progress, there is a pressing need for the industry's continued engagement through the production of new films that address the emerging dimensions of environmental challenges in the Niger Delta (Idyo and Ademiju-Bepo 159).

It is important to recognise that the application of Marxist Film Theory, which foregrounds the role of cinema within broader socio-economic structures and its potential to engender societal transformation (Idyo and Ademiju-Bepo 163), primarily privileges human agency and perspectives. This anthropocentric approach in the analysis of the films overlooks the non-human populations adversely affected by violence, concentrating instead on the plight of the Niger Delta proletariat who resort to armed resistance against their exploiters. As the critics observe, "the films under review all seem to deploy the philosophy of Karl Marx in dealing with their situation – the proletariat of the Niger Delta fighting the bourgeoisie for justice and fair play" (163). Yet, as Iheka (2018) contends, such a framing marginalises the environmental dimensions of the crisis by privileging class struggle over ecological devastation and its consequences for other-than-human life forms. By reducing their interpretation of the films to a binary opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Idyo and Ademiju-Bepo (2024) risk neglecting the broader ecological concerns that are fundamental to understanding the Niger Delta crisis as an ecocide.

Similarly, Ernest-Samuel (2020) provides a comparative interrogation of the cinematic representation of the Niger Delta through an analysis of three films: Jeta Amata's *Black November* (2015), Ikenna Aniekwe's *The Liquid Black Gold* (2010), and David Attwood's British television drama *Blood and Oil* (2010). The study critically evaluates how these filmmakers portray the "Niger Delta environment, the human experiences of various categories of people... especially in the hands of government and management of the multinational oil companies" (230). This study critically focuses on female agency

within these cinematic narratives. Ernest-Samuel observes that across varying educational and social strata, the female characters consistently advocate for "social justice and the need to fight the situation confronting the Niger Delta communities" (237).

She also engages the case of youth restiveness prominent in the selected film in the study as a fallout of institutional corruption and a means of seeking social justice. While she highlights the nobility of this social justice pursuit, she acknowledges that methods employed could lead to unexpected outcomes rooted in human carelessness (239). However, the study largely elevates armed resistance; she notes that:

> The films bring to life, albeit on screen, extreme cases of youth agency in the form of militancy and insurgency in the fight against the exploitation of the Niger Delta region. Thus, the general interest of youth restiveness is to quench exploitation, environmental degradation and engender benefits from the mineral resources extracted from their region. (234)

Critically, Ernest-Samuel's position on youth resistance in the Niger Delta creates a theoretical friction with contemporary postcolonial ecocriticism. While she acknowledges that corruption and institutional failure drive youth restiveness (239), her analysis largely overlooks the "slow violence" and immediate ecological desolation caused by the resistance itself. As Iheka (2018) posits, there is a necessity to rethink postcolonial violence, as the tactics of militancy, including oil bunkering, illegal refining, and pipeline sabotage, are often inimical to the well-being of the already degraded environment that these actors claim to protect (Iheka 86). By failing to account for how armed resistance intensifies environmental desolation, Ernest-Samuel's study implicitly validates a form of agency that, while socially motivated, remains ecologically counterproductive. Thus, this current study suggests that a critical shift is

required to move beyond the anthropocentric focus on militancy toward an analysis that prioritises the long-term preservation of the non-human environment.

Taken further, Ayakoroma (2017) observes that the film medium has become a "veritable platform to interrogate the leadership question in Nigeria" (1). Like most existing scholarship on the Niger Delta oil saga, the study also accedes to the fact that leadership failure is the core reason for the degradation in the Delta, deprivation of the people and youth restiveness. He focuses essentially on the leadership question in the country where leaders do not feel accountable to the led. He argues that government at all levels need to be transparent regarding policy formations to overcome the challenge of youth restiveness in the Niger Delta. He also emphasises that the role of film in the clamour for good leadership cannot be underplayed, and Jeta Amata's *Black November* is an impressive example in this regard (Ayakoroma 15-16).

Complementing this cinematic interrogation, Ebekue and Nwoye (2019) conduct a sociological assessment of film as an artistic intervention in the management of resource-based conflicts in the Niger Delta. Adopting a qualitative case study methodology (106), the researchers use Jeta Amata's *Black November* as a lens through which the multidimensionality of the crisis is encapsulated. Their analysis categorises the conflict into four thematic thrusts: the foundational causes of the regional crisis, the state's ambivalent position toward the region's grievances, the international dimensions of resource exploitation, and potential remedies to the problem (Ebekue and Nwoye 114).

Ebekue and Nwoye argue that the cinematic narrative underscores a

fundamental sociological truth that only the implementation of "people-oriented policies" can bring about peace and regional stability (119). Their study concludes by advancing a series of policy recommendations aimed at the Nigerian government, emphasising that mitigating violence requires a departure from state-centred approaches in favour of a people-driven approach to conflict resolution (120). While their focus remains largely socio-political, their work provides the necessary institutional perspective for understanding the systemic failures that give rise to the environmental and human rights narratives like the one explored in this research.

Fyneface (2022) explores the generic evolution of Nollywood, identifying a significant shift toward the "Niger Delta agitation" sub-genre (422). The study argues that the sudden upsurge of regional directors and actors has turned the film medium into both a "commercial enterprise" and a potent "instrument of mass mobilisation and social consciousness" (422). Analysing a selection of films that includes Ugezu J. Ugezu's *King of Crude I & II* (2011), Ikenna Aniekwe's *Liquid Black Gold* (2008), and Jeta Amata's *Black November* (2015), Fyneface suggests that these films function as a collective expression of regional grievances.

The study adopts genre criticism, an aspect of film studies, to analyse the selected films, making the paper essentially situated in film criticism rather than an explicitly ecocritical approach. The study identifies Niger Delta films as a sub-genre of Nigerian films which emerged out of "viewers' desire to discontinue the viewing of the usual ritual films that have become recently boring in nature" and the hardship that oil exploration has brought to the region (435), thus, situating the study

within a broader generic development in Nollywood. This generic development is identified as a direct response to "economic degradation, poverty, exploitation" orchestrated by the state and corporate collaborators against the local communities (435-436). Fyneface's study underscores the emergence of an "agitation sub-genre" which marks a crucial representational turn in Nollywood, one articulating the ecological and political discontent of the Niger Delta people.

In conclusion, while preceding scholarship demonstrates Nollywood's increasing engagement with ecological themes, it simultaneously reveals a significant critical imbalance. Current discourse surrounding Nollywood's intervention in Nigeria's environmental degradation remains tethered towards anthropocentric interpretations, with scholarly critique gravitating almost exclusively toward concerns for the plights of the ordinary citizens of the region, and celebration of armed resistance. In contrast, this study examines the limitations of violence in resolving the Niger Delta environmental predicament and attempts an analysis that is not only social, but "socio-ecological", paying attention to both the human and other-than-human occupants of the Niger Delta space.

Egya's Socio-ecological Approach and "Activism" as an Interpretative Aesthetic

In defining Nigerian ecocriticism as a decentred corpus of postcolonial ecocriticism, Egya argues that ecocriticism in Nigeria should not be construed as purely ecological or purely social:

> In other words, the ecological concerns of this ecocriticism are not divorced from the social concerns of Nigeria. The two are tied together so that to talk of a Nigerian ecocriticism is to refer to an ecocriticism that is, like in most postcolonial societies, produced from the imbrications of the social and the ecological. In very clear terms, Nigerian eco criticism does not pretend to anthropocentric neutrality, does not vacate the social space, and yet it

> questions anthropocentric excesses and manifestations of social institutions that impede ecological justice. Its vision is socio-ecological, not merely social or ecological. (Egya 12)

This reiterates the need for maintaining an analytical balance between human-centred and environment-centred analyses. To achieve this, the film texts are analysed deploying Egya's socio-ecological method, which allows for an investigation into how both human and non-human life are adversely affected by pollution.

On the other hand, "Activism" as an interpretative model is one of the three aesthetic categories (Nature, Environment and Activism) for interpreting Nigerian ecocriticism identified by Egya (2020). The activism category is utilised for highlighting environmental works that adopt an "aggressively confrontational" stance against institutional structures within "zones of deliberate eco-destruction" (Egya 6). This framework catalyses efforts toward the emancipation of marginalised human populations and biodiversity, while simultaneously advocating for the dismantling of institutional entities responsible for human rights violations and ecological devastation (Egya 123). Egya's activism category is relevant for analysing the films which overtly display elements of activism through armed resistance against the established order.

It is however instructive to note that this study critically complicates Egya's assertion that texts geared towards activism almost always conclude with the triumph of the oppressed over the oppressors (124). Instead, the tragic resolutions of the selected films suggest that activism, particularly when reliant on violence, does not inevitably lead to victory. This clear limitation of violent eco-activism calls for urgent need for alternative, non-violent means of resolving the Niger Delta crises.

Iheka's Rethinking Postcolonial Violence in Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Violence has long been endorsed as a means of subverting and resisting all forms of colonial domination in postcolonial studies. This is the position of scholars like Frantz Fanon, who called for armed resistance against colonialists in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 6). The reality of global climate change in this contemporary epoch and its effects on humans and their environment have led to an increased interrogation of the role of violence, even when redemptive, on the continuous debilitation of the world's ecosystem. Postcolonial ecocritics like Cajetan Iheka have challenged the effectiveness of violence in resisting perceived subjugation from governmental and nongovernmental agencies in this era of global climate change, where violence tends to aggravate the destruction of the world's ecology. He submits that:

> Inspired by Fanon, postcolonial scholars from the earlier era of decolonization to more recent times–have often celebrated violence as a strategy of resistance. However, I insist that the reconstitution of a new postcolonialism must entail a reconsideration of catastrophic strategies because of the ecological degradation that often characterizes them, as is the case in the Niger Delta …. Postcolonialism needs to be attuned to the ecological implications of colonial and neocolonial oppression and ensure that its responses are not complicit in the problems it seeks to address. (Iheka 85)

Citing examples of bombing of oil installations and oil bunkering by militants in the Niger Delta, Iheka (86) argues that such steps seem antithetical to the protection of the Niger Delta that the militants seem to be agitating for, as it furthers the desolation to their ecosystem. Iheka, therefore, clamours for a rethinking of postcolonial violence in postcolonial ecocriticism, a category including Nigerian ecocriticism, where there is a need to "search for strategies with less collateral damage" in this "era of ecological decline" (Iheka 86). In this regards, he suggests other methods

involving open forum for deliberating on solutions, cross-border peaceful protests, intellectualism and active use of the media for effecting positive changes (Iheka 114-125). Without belabouring the point, this study critically analyses the selected films utilising Egya's socio-ecological approach and activism interpretative model in Nigerian ecocriticism, as well as Iheka's ideas on rethinking postcolonial violence.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach rooted in postcolonial ecocriticism to conduct a close textual and critical analysis of the selected films. This study adopts the theoretical frameworks advanced by Iheka (2018) and Egya (2020). It identifies and interrogates the major ecological and social tropes deployed by the filmmakers to critique degradation and resistance within the Niger Delta context. To substantiate its claims, the analysis draws on specific characters and their characterisation, dialogue, and cinematic scenes.

Rethinking Postcolonial Ecological Violence in Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri*

It would be recalled that Shell began its oil exploration in Nigeria at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State. With the first well completely dry and abandoned, and its environment wrecked from spills and gas flaring, the town today suffers unfathomable neglect from the company and its cohorts in the Nigerian government. It is then paradoxical that Oloibiri, which ushered Nigeria into the league of oil-producing nations, and generated the wealth with which the country was operated in the 90s, has become totally impoverished. *Oloibiri*, as directed by Curtis Graham, is set against the backdrop of this human and environmental impoverishment in Oloibiri, and as similarly experienced in

other oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta.

Oloibiri is a feature-length film set in the United States and in the town of Oloibiri itself. The filmmaker's choice of Oloibiri as one of the film's spatial settings is highly symbolic, as it brings viewers face to face with the ruins of the town and the lack of sophisticated infrastructure, as one would expect of any town with Oloibiri's historical legacy. It is highly laughable but pathetic that the only signage available to show that you have arrived at Oloibiri, as at the time the movie was produced is a small sign board donated by a National Youth Service Corp member (Nkume Chinedu Favour) once posted to the town as indicated on it. It is however intriguing that the motto of Oloibiri as imprinted on the bill board is "the goose that lay the golden eggs". The motivation behind such a motto is elusive but the phrase is indeed an aphorism for Oloibiri's plight bearing in mind that the first oil well ever drilled in Nigeria by Shell at Oloibiri has run dry and the town has been abandoned as an ecological wasteland, just as the folkloric goose was killed by its master in hope for more golden eggs.

Flashback technique is employed in the movie's narration with scenes from the past intermittently inserted into its plot structure. The movie begins with a flash back showing the death and mourning of two people who will later be revealed as Timipre's wife and brother who apparently died from environmental poisoning in 1965, few years after oil exploration started in Oloibiri. Immediately after this scene the deliberate target of the film maker at showcasing the ongoing environmental debilitating activities of oil firms in the Niger Delta is laid bare. This second scene returns to the present day, revealing the emission of black carbon into the atmosphere through

gas flaring from the companies; a daily occurrence in the Delta region. The crimson red twilight sky, and intense black fumes from the flare stacks present vivid images appealing to the sense of sight and smell, and these are arguably directed at evoking strong emotional and environmental concerns in the viewers.

Like Jeta Amata's *Black November,* which emphasises the corruption of elders of the region in its despoliation, *Oloibiri* also implicates the elders and community leaders in the region's ecocide. "Gunpowder", the major character of the movie, cites this as the reason behind his masterminding of militancy by the relatively younger generation in saving the region from the claws of environmentally debilitating practices. Boma, nicknamed "Gunpowder" for his ferocity as a leader of an Oloibiri-based militant group, is a first-class graduate of Geology, who abandons his well-paying job with LESH, a major Oil company in the region, for its alleged destruction of his people and environment. Gunpowder reveals that he is drawn into insurgency because the elders failed to protect Oloibiri when his mother, Ibieri, confronts him for his wanton killings in the name of justice:

Ibiere: Boma, the next time you take another life, I will curse you. What happened to my boy? The son who made a first-class in Geology and secured a good job. What happened to him?
Gunpowder: He died Mama, because the ELDERS failed. (*Oloibiri* 00:22:52–00:23:25[BLOOD & OIL Full Drama Action Suspense Movie English HD 2015])

This is reiterated in the scene where he accuses Timipre of deserting Oloibiri when he was needed most. He claims that: "I am the creation of your lousy generation. Such a timid bunch cheering while your land was being pillaged and sapped to dry" (*Oloibiri* 00:52:42- 00:52:22[BLOOD & OIL Full Drama Action Suspense Movie English HD 2015]).

Timipre and Ibiere are characters who belong to this older generation, accused of complicity in the face of exploitation by both the oil firms and the Nigerian government. This does not seem to be the case, as the younger version of Timipre is revealed, through a series of flashbacks, to be a highly intelligent man who fought relentlessly in his youth to ensure his people had a say in how their oil was exploited. He however lacked popularity among the elders of his time, who were satisfied with the crumbs thrown at them. Gunpowder seems to be oblivious of the efforts of the elders like Timipre during their heydays to fight for the Niger Delta's rights to development and sustainable methods of oil exploration. Thus, he constantly blames the older generation and resorts to violence, believing in its efficacy to redeem the region from squalor.

It should be noted that "Lesh", the transnational oil company Gunpowder used to work for, is a deliberate inversion of "Shell", and this is arguably deployed as a strategy by Curtis Graham to connect Shell with Oloibiri's lamentable condition. Several scenes in the movie allude to the debilitation of the town to make viewers feel the plight of the ordinary people who had nothing to benefit from "the rust that was Oloibiri's wealth" except sickness, death and constant pollution in their environment. The roads leading to the town are narrow, lacking proper drainage, with shacks arranged along them as shops, and the only available health care centre is Ogbia Clinic which looks highly neglected. With a close-up shot of the rusting gate and signboard of the small clinic, viewers are given a taste of life in Oloibiri. Interestingly, the clinic is crammed up with people waiting to be attended to in the apparently small, uncomfortable and short-staffed clinic. Most patients and their relatives are shown standing by, with the

available seats already occupied by others, in the outdoor reception of the clinic, in the scene where Timipre is accompanied to the clinic by his grandson, Boname, for his mental health check-up.

Timipre is now an elderly character who is depicted as one of those badly affected by the Niger Delta's situation. Despite fighting for an inclusive system of operation in his youth, without much support from the elders of the community, he loses his brother and wife to death, resulting from their exposure to environmental poisoning. Timipre never recovers from this traumatic event coupled with self-guilt. He believes that if he had tried harder and stood his ground against Lesh, Oloibiri might have been better off. This affects his mental health, and he often breaks down into psychosis, which is being managed by a young female doctor (Chisom) at the clinic. He is exemplary of the daily agony of the people of the region, having to mourn the death of their loved ones and a decimated ecology from time to time.

Several pointers are made to the degradation of Oloibiri's ecosystem apart from the devastation to the human characters. Many scenes are shot with a deliberate infusion of flare stacks emitting black smoke into their backgrounds. This is in a bid to not only intimate viewers with the devastation the ordinary people put up with, but also the daily devastation to the environment. These scenes show the reality of gas flaring as a daily routine in the region. This act alone has been implicated in severe devastation in the region's biodiversity- polluting rivers and affecting aquatic species, birds, lands and vegetation. On one occasion, Timipre stops a small boy from drinking water from the river near his house and hands him some naira notes to give his mother to buy "sachet" water from "Ogbia" (*Oloibiri* 00:24:03 – 00:24:50). The question that arises from this scene is

the desolation to marine creatures who live in theses polluted rivers and creeks, if the rivers have been declared unfit for human consumption, what then is the fate of its non-human inhabitants? Timipre's conversation afterwards, with his grandson, Boname, shows the lack of concern for the environment:

Boname: Lesh promised to clean the oil spills during my last visit.
Timipre: Let's just say Lesh thinks that the peasants relish some oil in our water. (*Oloibiri* 00:24:50 – 00:25:05 [BLOOD & OIL 🎬 Full Drama Action Suspense Movie 🎬 English HD 2015])

This brings back the memory of the cleaning up project of Ogoni land flagged off by the immediate past administration of President Muhammadu Buhari after thirty years of the spill, but which unfortunately has yet to commence.

Gunpowder on the other hand is depicted as a character who seeks justice for Oloibiri, with a good intention but a wrong approach. His dressing throughout the film is highly symbolic. Anytime he sets out to avenge Oloibiri, he is usually in his dark green khaki trousers and jacket under which he wears a black T-shirt emboldened with Adaka Boro's image. Isaac Adaka Boro was from Oloibiri and was the leader of the "Twelve-Day Revolution", which sought the secession of the Niger Delta from Nigeria in 1966. He and the likes of Ken Saro-Wiwa have been tagged key motivators of both violent and non-violent activism against marginalisation of the Niger-Delta. It is therefore not surprising that his daunting spirit is reincarnated in Gunpowder, who wears his emblem about.

Oloibiri resonates with Iheka's argument about the tendency of creative works geared towards environmentalism to favour humans, while "reducing the nonhuman presences to symbols and metaphors that merely shed light on the human world" (25). This is seen in how the film overtly concentrates on the agonies of the human characters with little attention to the non-

human characters who are co-victims of the region's degradation. Iheka's idea of rethinking postcolonial violence is, however, foregrounded in how the movie is employed as a form of sensitisation against violence in resolving the region's faceoff with their older generation, Nigerian government, and petro-dollar multinationals. In fact, *Oloibiri* emphasises the complicity and greed of local managers of transnational corporations in both human and environmental exploitation. This is evident in the character of Cyril, the Nigerian general manager of Foreshaw Exploration, newly licensed to mine oil in Otoboke, another Niger Delta town. He is depicted as a greedy and lavish character who believes that every militant group in the Niger Delta can be bought over with money. When pictures showing gaunt-looking children of the Niger Delta, and polluted rivers and creeks are sent by email to the executives of Foreshaw in America, by Gunpowder's group, Cyril is contacted to find out the extent of devastation, because he is the closest to the host communities. He only advises that the group should be identified and bought over with money, while the Chairman, Robert Powell, ironically shows profound concerns for the people's plight:

> Cyril: What we need to do is find out the group behind this, there is nothing money cannot do. Listen, oil companies have been in the Niger Delta for decades. You pay them thousands; they keep working.

However, Powell emphasises that "when I founded Foreshaw, I set out to be different in the Niger Delta, that's what I want us to be, different" and as such decides to visit the host community in person to have a first-hand experience of their suffering. Cyril does not seem to be comfortable with the arrangement and refers to Powell as a "lover of peasants" for his decision. It is more saddening that upon his arrival in Nigeria, Cyril goes ahead to dissuade him

from empathising with the host community:

Cyril: In Africa, people have a saying, be careful when asking a poor man what he wants.
Powell: It is an American programme; being asked! (*Oloibiri* 00:36:01- 00:36:11 [BLOOD & OIL 🎬 Full Drama Action Suspense Movie 🎬 English HD 2015])

Powell's response in this regard reveals his good intentions for the host community, while Cyril who is in a better position to feel his people's anguish is utterly inhumane.

While it is a common understanding that the metropolitan west benefits more from its capital orientated partnerships with nations at the margins, Graham uses the character of Powell to challenge this norm and creates an ideal capitalist in him; one who is not just after maximising profit at all cost, but concerned about the livelihood and environment of the people from where the wealth is accrued. This is evident where Timipre accuses him of inhumanity while trying to rescue him after his vehicle is ambushed upon entry into the Niger Delta by Gunpowder and his disciples:

Timipre: You siphon oil and send it to your country to build a better future, oh yes, while our own life is messed up. You bribe our chiefs so that they can keep quiet. You mess up our oil and river. Forty years, for over forty years, Oloibiri and indeed the entire Delta region is being manipulated by people like you. And, you know, you know how far we have to trek to get proper drinking water.

Powell: I did not come here to steal from you. I came here so that my company could learn how to treat your community with respect. (*Oloibiri* 00:59:41 – 1:00:28 [BLOOD & OIL 🎬 Full Drama Action Suspense Movie 🎬 English HD 2015])

Powell's response positions him as an ideal investor and advocates for the type of orientation every foreign investor in the Niger Delta should possess.

While Powell's family is besieged in his home abroad by two members of Gunpowder's syndicate, and he is finally kidnapped in Nigeria, Gunpowder requests for the cancellation of the new oil mine lease for Foreshaw in Otoboke by the Ministry of Petroleum Resources before they can be released. The senselessness of

violence in resolving the regions issue is foregrounded in how Gunpowder refuses to release both Cyril and Powell with the eventual cancellation of the oil deal by the Ministry. He retorts that "Robert Powell and Cyril Beke must pay with their blood", contrary to the promise he made to his assistants in America. Gunpowder, despite his noble intentions for Oloibiri, becomes a blood thirsty monster who would even hurt or kill his own people whom he claims to be fighting for.

Oloibiri is an exemplary movie which stands against violence directed at oil moguls and their Nigerian partners in the fight for the emancipation of the Niger Delta region. Needless to say violence is inimical to both human and environmental wellbeing. The non-violence stance of the movie is glimpsed in the scene where Chisom, the female doctor, Boname, Timipre and Powell are detained in Gunpowder's hideout for being enemies of Oloibiri. The conversation between Gunpowder and Timipre when the former orders the hoisting and lashing of Boname for hiding a "traitor"- Powell, is significant in this regard:

Timipre: You blame the Oloibiri elders, just hoist me and release this boy.
Gunpowder: Let us talk about the elders of Oloibiri, their corruption, their greed and their compensation culture
Timipre: I fought for Oloibiri, I never demanded a bribe
Gunpowder: you are worse than those who took bribes because you ran, you jump shelled.
Timipre: Was I expected to fight an entire clan alone?
Gunpowder: Nigeria is the way it is today because of the likes of you who just migrate, run away, or simply watch the militants and their greed. Churches ripping people off, multinationals exploiting the people all. Back to our Cyril Beke, case of our own land.
Timipre: I agree with you, I agree with you but violence has never brought a sensible solution.
Gunpowder: So you are on my side? Look at the youths of Oloibiri, hapless and hopeless
Timipre: You feed their haplessness with your wicked philosophies! (*Oloibiri* 1: 14: 40 - 1:16: 10 [BLOOD & OIL 🎬 Full Drama Action Suspense Movie 🎬 English HD 2015])

This underscores Iheka's concept of rethinking violence championed in the film

and positions *Oloibiri* as a film which condemns the pillaging of the Niger Delta and the resulting environmental degradation while preaching effectively against violence in resolving issues. Gunpowder is eventually killed in a confrontation between his group and the Nigerian Army, while Powell, Chisom, Timipre and his grandson narrowly escape death.

The Limit of Ecoactivism in Jeta Amata's *Black November*

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one that has received global attention due to the devastating impacts of unsustainable oil exploitation and exploration in the region since the mid-20th century. There have been immeasurable decimations to the once flourishing marine ecosystem that it has today, been considered as an "ecological wasteland" (Kadafa 22). The Niger-delta region has a history of bloody resistance against the Nigerian State and the multinational oil-extracting firms, Shell and Chevron in particular, perceived to be anchors of the region's ecocide. This has found profound reportage in mainstream media and has also been used as a leitmotif in Niger-Delta films. These films are notable for their overt support for armed resistance against established agents of destruction, since peaceful methods led by the likes of late Ken Saro-Wiwa did not seem to dissuade these petro-capitalists. However, such armed attacks launched by the different Niger Delta militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF), in clamouring for change and preservation of the region's ecosystem, have been implicated in the continuous degradation of the Niger-Delta environment. This is what Iheka means

when he advocates for a rethinking of post-colonial violence:

> If Fanon sanctioned violence as a manifestation of human agency and as strategy of resistance in an era where knowledge of environmental violence was sketchy, contemporary concerns over global warming and climate change necessitate the appraisal of such oppositional strategies. Take the Niger Delta case, for example, where the dominant forms of physical resistance against oil exploitation represented in literature include bombing oil installations and oil bunkering. While critics have celebrated these forms of resistance, I suggest we rethink such veneration considering the devastation that sabotage of oil infrastructure wreaks on the ecosystem. (18-19)

Black November as directed by Jeta Amata, is a feature-length film that challenges the notion of violence in solving the problem of continuous degradation of the Niger Delta region, and it adopts the flashback technique in narrating the ordeals of Ebiere Perema, the main character. The movie fictionally contextualises the origin of armed resistance and militancy against the Nigerian government and multinational companies domiciled in the region. It clearly draws insight from political arrests of Ogoni leaders, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men on 10 November 1995 by the Sani Abacha-led military regime and the support given by Shell to the military government.

The film is set in Warri, Niger Delta, Nigeria of the 1990s and Los Angeles, California, United States, when Nigeria was still under military rule. *Black November* follows the story of Ebiere, a vocal and brilliant lady who has just returned to her home town having studied abroad, being a beneficiary of Western Oil's scholarship scheme. Western Oil is the main multinational Oil firm in the region, and this is deployed to typify the role of Shell in the degradation of the Niger Delta region. Issues affecting the Niger Delta ecosystem due to oil exploration and production, like oil spills, gas flaring, loss of aquatic species, among others, are amplified in the film. The movie starts with an incident of oil spill from one of the

pipelines owned by Western Oil, which had been allegedly reported earlier to the authorities, according to Ebiere's mother. The pipeline blew off due to the carelessness of the cigar-smoking police deployed to the area to ward people off from "stealing" the supposed "property of the federal government of Nigeria" killing hundreds of people, including Ebiere's entire family on the day she had just returned home from studying abroad.

Oil spillage and theft from leaking pipes are common phenomena in the Niger Delta. The people claim to be saving their lands from despoliation that could happen due to such spills by taking the oil:

Police: You are all under arrest
Ebiere's mother: what is our crime?
Police: stealing!
Ebiere's mother: Stealing?
Police: Fuel is the property of the Federal government of Nigeria
Ebiere's mother: So, what would you rather we do? Stand by and watch the property of federal government of Nigeria spill and spoil our land?
Police: it is your duty to report any leakages in the pipelines
Ebiere's mother: But we did. Last week. And nobody came here to do anything about it
Police: I warn you not to continue
Ebiere's mother: What would you do? Shoot me? Which is worse? Watch fuel flow past your house and yet in three days you cannot get one gallon of what your federal government cannot make available? (*Black November* 00:15:19 - 00:15:57)

This practice of oil theft from leaking pipes however has its undesirable outcomes. While it can be argued that people troop out to collect leaking oil because of the hazard it poses to their farmlands and rivers, it is also an unsafe practice that often leads to explosions of such gas pipes, leading to deaths in thousands and more desolation to the lands and non-human others. This is exactly what plays out in the film, leading to the "death of over one thousand women and children"- and the often relegated non-human populace?

The remaining parts of the film is anchored on the different forms of despoliation and corruption witnessed in the Niger Delta- the multinational corporations' compensation

culture, Nigerian Government nonchalance, and the community leaders' greediness and complicity. After the tragedy that strikes Ebiere's community, Western Oil deploys its spokespersons to negotiate financial compensation for the affected families. This is the scene where Ebiere's eloquence and intellectual capabilities first enjoyed international recognition. While her community members are already cajoled by the corporation's representatives and ready to settle for "money", Ebiere wants more not only for herself but also her community:

Ebiere: ….Good show. Good show you put up here. Another wonderful way of pitching family against family or would I say man against man. You come here enriching yourselves from the spoils of our land, in the process wiping out families and generations. Yet you keep the fuel burning. Give the people a rest and they will rely on you. (Facing the people) What they do is give us sickness and then treat us. They make us hungry and then feed us. They kill our loved ones and then offer us money for burials. Can you not see their plan? (Facing the foreign representatives of Western Oil and the Local representatives of the region). It is high time you started to think more of the people other than your selfish fat pockets as well as that of your goons and cohorts. If you do not change your ways, the people will rise (She walks out of the meeting, and so do the local people). (*Black November* 00:22:00 – 00:23:05)

Before long, she is recognised as a strong voice of the Niger Delta region and starts to pose a threat to the operations of Western Oil in Warri and the incumbent military government, just as Ken Saro-Wiwa to Shell and Abacha's military regime in the 90s. Ebiere's role in instigating change in her community brings to mind Egya's observation on Nigerian eco-activism:

…the agency of humans, especially in the context of eco-activism in Nigeria, is almost always communal. That is, the ecological struggle is not usually an individual struggle but a communal one whereby an individual may start a form of resistance that will snowball into a group struggle. There is no doubt that this collective will to resistance is rooted in the ways in which life is lived in Nigeria. In spite of western modernity and its concomitant individualism, life is still communal. People share fears, struggles, and aspirations. The sense is always there that one should use her/his privileged position to fight on behalf of others. This communal sense is crucial to any fight to achieve environmental justice, either at the local or the global level. (Egya 18)

The above speaks to how Ebiere, as a brilliant, versatile and vocal young lady,

deploys her privileged position (as a young graduate from overseas) and voice to fight for the liberation of her people and environment. Her attempt at resistance becomes communal when all "marginalised" ordinary people, different from some of the elders who betray the community for money, line up behind her bravery and storm out of the meeting geared at paying them off for their loss in the blast.

Egya's "Activism" category for interrogating Nigerian Ecocriticism is deployed for analysing *Black November* here. To Egya, activism "goes beyond depicting the polluted environment to mobilising resources against the institutional powers responsible for the pollution" (118) while adopting "a belligerent tone and an outpouring of invectives against the oppressor figure, the killer of humans and biodiversity, whose characterization is enmeshed in forms of aesthetic parody" (123-124). In this regard, the youths led by Dede a supporting character who later becomes Ebiere's radical lover, deploy all in their power to assiduously fight for the reclamation of their lands from the oil moguls and mongers. However, while Ebiere is a catalyst for the youths' determination to bring an end to both human suffering and ecological despoliation of the Delta, she is more resolute on approaching change through protest and not violence, through intellect and not rashness, unlike the faction created by Dede who believe only violent subversion can change the status quo.

Several scenes in the film are used to address the failure of peaceful demonstrations in addressing the environmental challenges of the region, as most protests organised end up in a military crackdown on the protesters, injuring and brutalising them. After several attempts at peaceful demonstrations with no solution in

sight, the youths resort to militancy, showing how *Black November* instantiates the outset of militancy in the Niger Delta following the government's insensitivity, the greediness of the local representatives and the multinationals' nonchalance. The deprived youths turn depraved and adopt violence to send home their messages to Western Oil and the government. Perhaps they would understand their plight and that of their despoiled environment when all peaceful protests failed. Dede and his cohorts resort to armed resistance, kidnapping of oil expatriates in exchange for ransom and bombing of oil installations to amplify their community's grievances.

This new turn of events seems to hit both the oil company and the government hard, as operations in the community are stalled and Ebiere has to be invited to be a mediator between the militant group on one hand and the Western Oil and the Nigerian Government on the other. Worse still, when the militant youths led by Dede are invited to a peaceful dialogue in the hope of a better life and environment for the people, the government fails on its side and backstabs by bringing in armed police officers, disrupting the intended dialogue, leading to an altercation between the militants and the police force. This leads to a violent faceoff that causes casualties on both sides, leading to the death of Dede, who had become Ebiere's lover and four other members of his group. It dawns on Ebiere that she is only employed as a pawn and that the government is indeed not ready to do anything to bring relief to the people of her community, nor their despoiled lands, but even at this, she never succumbs to violence.

This incident increases the youths' restiveness and resolution to take over their lands by all means possible – increased violence as the most viable tool in this case. Although Ebiere remains adamant on the

avoidance of violence no matter the case, the stubbornness of her people eventually drives her to the gallows. She eventually takes up a messianic role and becomes the sacrificial lamb for the sins of her people when three elders of the community (Chiefs Kuku, Sam and Kokori) are mobbed and burnt to death for killing Chief Gadibia, who declaims he is already tired of the situation of the community and will no longer have bloods on his hand, and decides to hand over his fifty thousand dollars cash to the community for a developmental project. Threatened by Chief Gadibia's decision to follow his conscience, the remaining three chiefs conspire to spike his drink and kill him before he gets them busted. This is found out by the community, and Ebiere suggests that they are apprehended and handed over to face the law. However, the youths now led by Tamuno (Dede's cousin who dumps the Nigerian police force for militancy) and Peter, the dead chief's son, have other plans, as the chiefs are burnt alive while Ebiere is distracted by an interview with Kate Summers (an international reporter for ANN) at the scene of the disaster. She, along with many others present at the scene, is arrested and charged to court for instigating violence and murdering the three chiefs in cold blood. She knows the court is a kangaroo one, and instead of having all the people arrested killed, she pleads guilty to the offence and insists she carried out the crime alone, thereby implicating herself on behalf of the others. While the others are discharged and acquitted, Ebiere is pronounced guilty and condemned to die by the hangman's noose.

To reverse the pronouncement of the court and free Ebiere from untimely death, some members of the militant group find their way into California, and made the national news by successfully keeping people hostage in an underground tunnel. The

focus is on Tom Hudson, the CEO of Western Oil and his daughter, in the hope of bringing the attention of the world to Ebiere Perema's ordeals and perhaps have the American government stop her execution, which is bound to happen that same day. Her execution and the arrest of the militant members led by Tamuno for terrorism on American soil prove that violence may never be the answer to the Niger Delta question. While the filmmaker deploys violence to appeal to the emotions of the people and trace the unrest of the region to leadership failure, the outcome shows that this may never be enough nor an adequate solution to the environmental degradation of the region nor human impoverishment.

There is a sense in which the bombing of oil installations by the rebels shows that continued violence in the region is not only detrimental to the people but also to the environment they claim to be fighting for (*Black November* 00:55:50-00:55:57). This leads to more spills, inadvertently leading to more pollution of farm lands, creeks and rivers, bringing more devastation to their source of livelihood, and the non-human others with whom they share the environment. One is then left to imagine how the violent activities of the rebels also compound the level of degradation already witnessed in the region.

While the production of the film is essentially anthropocentric in nature, focusing mainly on the plights of the citizens and their maltreatment in the hands of the government, community leaders and multinational companies. Viewers are drawn to the desolation of the non-human populace through close-up shots on polluted rivers and dead fishes due to oil spills and the continuous display of smoke stacks emitting flared gases into the atmosphere by the oil companies. During the oil spill in the beginning part of the film,

one comes face to face with the desolation to the Niger Delta ecosystem. Oil and dead fishes are vividly seen floating on the river, showing the plight and helplessness of the "voiceless" marine environment (*Black November* 00:14:24-00:14:42). These cinematic choices force viewers to acknowledge the environment as a living entity rather than just a background. The death of the aquatic species creates a sense of loss for the people, not just of their means of livelihood but also their cultural identity and biospheric environment.

Under the activism category, Egya argues that "There is almost always something of a closure that suggests the triumph of the oppressed at the end since with the downfall of the oppressor figure, the oppressed can then rise and celebrate the victory of the majority poor over the oppressive elite." (124). However this is not the case with the two Niger Delta films analysed in this study. The leaders of the oppressed categories meet a fate of untimely death. Ebiere and Dede in *Black November*, and Boma in *Oloibiri*, bringing us to the limit of ecoactivism. This tragic end is arguably deployed by the film-makers to emphasise that no amount of violence can bring about a lasting solution to the injustice and deliberate ecocide of the region. This corroborates Iheka's position on rethinking postcolonial violence in the fight against ecological destruction, as the fight should not only be seen as a means of emancipation for the people but also the environment. However, continued violence keeps intensifying environmental degradation, which the restive youths claim to be fighting against. A case in point is the explosion that is witnessed in *Black November*, which claims thousands of lives and the often silent fact that the non-human environment is adversely affected, what about the wildlife, tree species and of course, the destruction of more pipes,

which leads to more spills and death of marine creatures?

While *Black November* ends without closure, Oloibiri ends on a note of peace where the youths in the person of Dr. Chisom and Boname embrace dialogue rather than violence championed by Boma and his group of militants. This suggests that an environmental work geared towards activism may not necessarily end with the oppressed victorious over the oppressors, as suggested by Egya (which in fact has been the case of the Niger Delta till date, if it were by activism in whichever mode, then the Niger Delta should have been liberated today). It can therefore be argued that texts which depict environmental activism may not necessarily end as Egya suggests; they may, in fact, end on the note of the oppressed losing out, especially if the method of activism is violent, as evinced in the two films studied here. This prompts a shift in perspectives on the region's situation to come up with better insights on resolving the imbroglio, one that eschews violent resistance.

Conclusion

Curtis Graham's *Oloibiri* and Jeta Amata's *Black November* present violence in the Niger Delta as an unfavourable outcome of the region's marginalisation and environmental desecration. Simultaneously, these cinematic narratives emphasise the structural inability of such violence to bring a sustainable solution to the region's environmental predicament. The analysis of the two films engaged here sheds light on the inherent limitations of armed resistance in achieving ecological justice and ensuring the preservation of an already precarious ecosystem. Consequently, the counter-productivity of militancy necessitates a shift towards alternative, non-violent methods for resolving the Niger Delta oil crisis.

Oloibiri for instance ends through a collaboration between the locals represented by Timipre, Boname and Chisom, the multinational corporation and the Nigerian government. This suggests a path forward through dialogue and a good understanding of the needs of the indigenous communities (championed by Powell's characterisation). Despite ending on an elusive note, *Black November* on the other hand demonstrates the efficacy of media in projecting local concerns globally through the character of Kate Summers, the ANN reporter. It also emphasises the importance of cross-border protests in gathering international understanding and sympathy. Although, Tamuno and his militant members are arrested for terrorism in America, this suggests that a more peaceful means of cross-border protest as suggested by Iheka (119), may have been more proactive in securing Ebiere's release, than holding international citizens hostage on their soil.

This study not only advocates for non-violent methods of solving the Niger Delta crises, but also amplifies the need for Nigerian cinema and critical scholarship to adopt a socio-ecological framework for representing environmental issues. This method extends beyond anthropocentric concerns to afford equivalent scholarly and narrative attention to nonhuman entities within shared environments.

Refereences

Ajisafe, Ibikunle Olayiwola and Doyinsola Ajisafe. "Film as a Medium for Transformation in Nigeria". *Global Scientific Journals,* vol. 11, issue 10, 2023, pp. 150-171.

Ayakoroma, Barclays F. "Contextualising Change in Nigeria's Leadership Question through the Film Medium: A Critical Reading of Jeta Amata's *Black November*." *Nigerian Theatre Journal: A Journal of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists,* vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-17.

Black November. Directed by Jeta Amata , Entertainment One, 2015.

Ebekue, Emmanuel O., and Michael Nwoye C. "Nollywood Interventions in Niger Delta Oil Conflicts: A Study

of Jeta Amata's *Black November*." *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies*, vol. 15, 2019, pp. 104-23. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.4314/og.v15i1.7.

Egya, Sule. *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature.* London and New York: Routledge, 2020.

Ernest-Samuel, Gloria Chimeziem. "Exploitation, Corruption and Agency in Three Niger Delta Movies." *The Literature and Arts of the Niger* Delta, edited by Ojaide Tanure and Ojanuga Enajite Eseoghene, 1st ed., Routledge, 2021, pp. 229-240.

Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963.

Fyneface, Harold I. "The Emergence of Niger Delta Agitation Films in Nollywood: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works." *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2022, pp. 421–37. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.25273/she.v3i3.14081.

Idyo, Solomon, and Adediran Kayode Ademiju-Bepo. "Nollywood Films and the Niger Delta Crisis of Ecology in Nigeria." *Nigeria Theatre Journal: A Journal of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2024, pp. 159-69. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.4314/ntjh.v24i2.4.

Iheka, Cajetan , *Naturalising Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Kadafa, A.A. "Environmental Impacts of Oil Exploration and Exploitation in the Niger Delta of Nigeria". *Global Journal of Science Frontier Research Environment and Earth Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2012, pp. 19-28.

Oloibiri. Directed by Curtis Graham. Vision Films, 2015. BLOOD & OIL Full Drama Action Suspense Movie English HD 2015 [accessed 29.03.2026]