



Graphological Devices and Meaning in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry

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Abstract. This study identifies the prominent graphological features in selected poems of Tanure Ojaide. It analyzes and categorizes these prominent graphological features and relates them to the socio-political contexts of the poems. This is with a view to understanding the graphological style of language use in the poems. Our data is drawn from selected poems of Tanure Ojaide and a close analysis of each of the poems is done to elicit graphological features using functional stylistics as our linguistic framework. The result showed that at the level of punctuation, the poet deviates from the usual norm of everyday use as he disregards the use of comma and full stop where convention calls for them. He also avoids the use of capital letters when it is necessary to do so. He uses these graphological deviations as a means of rejecting and protesting the destruction of his native Niger Delta environment through oil exploration and exploitation; and as a means of expressing his concern for deviant attitude of Nigerian rulers towards the political structure and order. The study concludes that the style which reveals the use of graphological devices projects the inherent messages of the poems.

Keywords: graphology, poetry, style, Niger Delta, Tanure Ojaide

1. Introduction

The origin of Niger Delta discourse in general can be traced to the discovery of crude oil in the region in 1958. The consequences of this

discovery are large scale environmental pollution, degradation and subjugation of the indigenes. This gave rise to different forms of agitations by the subjugated people. The manifestation of aspects of these agitations in literary works (prose, drama and poetry) is what is referred to today as Niger Delta literature – a form of protest literature.

As a regional literature, Niger Delta literature started receiving attention not too long ago. One of the pioneers of this body of literature is Tanure Ojaide with the publication of *Labyrinths of the Delta* in 1986 with poems set in the degradation of the region and exploitation of its people. Such poems in the collection were among the first to draw attention to the effects of oil exploration and exploitation in the region. As one of the trail blazers of this literature in terms of literary creativity and criticism, Ojaide defines Niger Delta literature as “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 region's people” (Ojaide, 2015:56). Consequently, this essay is a linguistic study of Ojaide's poetry from the perspective of graphology to show how Ojaide explores themes and settings of Niger Delta in particular and aspects of the Nigerian society in general.

1.1 Graphology as a Linguistic Level

Following the Systemic Functional Grammatical model, graphology is that linguistic level which links form and graphic substance. Form refers to the arrangement of substance into recognizable meaningful unit, while substance is the raw material of language – symbols that we use when we write (or the sounds that we use when we speak (Berry, 1975:37-43). According to Crystal and Davy (1968:18), graphology is the study of writing system or orthography of a language as seen in the various kinds of handwriting and typography. Simpson (2004:25) defines it as the visual medium of language which describes the general resources of a language’s writing system including punctuation, spelling, typography, and paragraph structure. To Simpson (2004), it can also be extended to incorporate pictorial and iconic devices. Similar to the above definition, Leech (1969:47) goes further to identify the characteristics line-by-line arrangement of poetry on the printed page with irregular right hand margin as a special feature of the genre.

Stylistic analysis at the graphological level is concerned with the visual devices such as indentation, capitalization, text’s layout (lineation), italicization, punctuation, spelling, font choices and sizes, hyphenation, logographs and how they are used to create certain stylistic effects and communicate meaning to the readers. Despite this important function of graphology, Leech and Short (1981:105) state that “graphological variation is a relatively minor and superficial part of style”. This may be appropriate in prose narratives which is the subject of their work. However, Adegoju (2008:160) argues that: *graphological features have a great deal of role to play in the interpretation of discourse. In fact, the meaning generated at the graphological level in some cases could be more significant than that generated by verbal signifiers.*

This position has been underscored earlier by Hodge and Kress (1988) that “in contemporary society, meaning resides strongly and pervasively in systems other than the verbal especially the visual (cited in Locke, 2004:23). As Campsall (2013) argues, of all the features that characterize a written or printed text, it is

the graphological that is first noticed and these graphological features go a long way to determine subtle and important aspects of the work such as genre and ideology. Graphological features of a text are more “eye-catching”, more attention catching and more prominent and foregrounded whether it deviates or not. Thus, Babajide (2000:131) states that “foregrounding is a major device in the graphological aspect of a text”. Deviant graphological aspects of a text do not only foreground parts of a poetic discourse, they are also designed to shed light on the important messages of the poet. As Ogunsiji (2007:273) observes, the utilization of certain graphological features in a text has some semantic and stylistic implications.

Poetry, the main focus of this paper, is marked off from other genres by graphological means in terms of lineation/line arrangement on the page, capitalization and other specific structure that abide by the conventional agreement of the genre (Ayeomoni, 2012:13; Osakwe, 1995:161). Lineation and stanzaic arrangement and other graphological devices as means of managing space have become the most obvious, if not the most important criteria for distinguishing poetry as a genre. It is our view that poets do not just organize line into stanzas arbitrarily; the choices of lineation, indentation, punctuation, capitalization and other graphological devices deployed by a poet have communicative effect. Such choices are imbued with meaning that could be iconic, indexical or symbolic.

2. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is textual analysis. Two poems each are selected from Tanure Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *Delta Blues and Homesongs* (1997) and *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007). The poems are analyzed through the linguistic framework of graphology. At this linguistic level, the selected poems/extracts are analyzed using the graphological devices of stanzaic pattern, spacing, lineation, punctuation, and capitalization, among others. These visual graphetic devices help writers to achieve certain visual communicative effects. Under

punctuation, the use and non-use of punctuation in our data are considered as both have a considerable effect in the poetic rendition of Ojaide. Punctuation helps poets to generate or change pace in a line or more, it can also help to bundle or separate units of meaning for communicative purposes. In this regard, poets can work with or against conventions of punctuation in written language. Our attention is also focused on capitalization to see if the poet deviates from the norm of capitalization in everyday use of language in general and in poetry in particular and how this helps to communicate meaning.

3. Data Analysis

The selected poems for this study are “Ughelli” (Ojaide, 1986:74), “The Cross” (Ojaide, 1986:73), “Without the trees” (Ojaide, 2007:38), “Oil Remedies” (Ojaide, 2007:27-28), “Abuja” (Ojaide, 1997:41), and “Army of microbes” (Ojaide, 1997:43). In what follows, each poem is identified by title and a textual analysis is carried out. Relevant extracts are presented where necessary.

In “Ughelli”, the stanzaic pattern makes it an invective, a tirade on the looters of the oil wealth of the Niger Delta. The poem is divided into three stanzas. Stanza one is made up of nine lines while stanzas two is made up of six lines. Each of the lines in the first two stanzas is made up of about seven to twelve words. The last stanza, stanza three, consists of one line carefully spaced out from the rest, and it consists of five words. Thus, it stands out graphologically. This graphological feature of one full stop at the end of the last stanza makes the entire poem a one sentence poem with multiple Adjuncts. Thus, it suggests fast rhythm/pace and fear of the looters of the oil wealth of the Niger Delta. The stanzaic form of this poem is also suggestive of its meaning. Stanza one is so rich in lines and in words. Stanza two is less rich while stanza three is so sucked by army of leeches. This stanzaic pattern represents the condition of “Ughelli” and all oil producing communities of the Niger Delta by extension. Stanza one is the pre-oil exploration era. Stanza two is the beginning of oil

exploration while stanza three is the present condition of “Ughelli” as it has been disrobed, sucked and exploited with nothing given back to replenish and revive it.

At the level of comma, there are two instances: one each at the end of stanzas one and two. These two instances of the use of comma is a deviation in everyday use of language. The comma is supposed to be used to mark off introductory structures which precede the subject of a clause, but this is not the case in this poem. Stanza one consists of nine lines and each is made up of a *to*-infinitive clause which should be separated from the main clause with a comma. The whole stanza receives a comma only at the end of the last line. Same for stanza two, it consists of six lines of four prepositional groups with a single comma at the end of the stanza. This miserly use of comma affords the poet a fast means of piling up of sequences of circumstantial information on the ills and deprivations in the Niger Delta in the context of fear and insecurity on the ordinary masses. There is only one instance of the use of full stop at the end of the last stanza of one line. This has a graphological implication: it makes the poem a one sentence poem (a simple sentence). This full stop marks the end of the poem and foregrounds the peak of the poet’s vituperation and disaffection with the system responsible for the abject deprivation, denial and destruction of the Niger Delta region. The use of dash in this poem affords Ojaide a means of authorial comment to achieve double voice on the content of the poem:

*for one to earn so much and be denied
all except life –
robbery wears a thousand marks in
official bills –
and for her to be sucked anaemic by an
army of leeches,*

it is a big shame.

The second line in the above extract is a comment clause. It appears medially and it is like a main clause in form, especially as it is sandwiched between two infinitive clauses functioning as Adjunct. It expresses the poet’s

attitude and reflects his assertion on the content of the poem.

“Without the trees” employs double spacing to demarcate each couplet as a stanza. Each couplet expresses a unit of meaning as a full clause, though not punctuated as such and there is no phonological similarity at the end of each line. Each stanza of the poem corresponds to a specific grammatical unit: the first line of each stanza is a prepositional group made up of a preposition and its qualifier while the second line is a full clause. The two lines which constitute a stanza combine to form a finite clause which is not graphologically marked as a sentence as the first three stanzas illustrate:

*Without the trees
the wind no longer gestures playfully to me*

*without the evergreen
nobody speaks the lingua franca to me*

*without the creeks
the rain no longer sate my voracious appetite*

Lineation as a device is also a foregrounding technique in this poem. Though the first line of each stanza corresponds to a grammatical unit (a prepositional group), it does not correspond to a full sentence. There is a continuation of the sense, and therefore the grammatical construction of the first line in the second line to make a complete thought. However, the point at which the lines break to create a pause before the beginning of the next line in each stanza is graphologically significant. The first four stanzas illustrate this:

*Without the trees
the wind no longer gestures playfully to me*

*without the evergreen
nobody speaks the lingua franca to me*

*without the creeks
the rain no longer sate my voracious appetite*

*without the currents
the flying fish no longer makes sorties into
my soup pots*

From the above, each line breaks for a pause before the words *trees*, *evergreen*, *creeks*, and *currents* to lay stress on the words. This is deliberately done by the poet to achieve stylistic effect. Incidentally, they are the destroyed features of the environment which the poet is concerned with. Thus, they are made prominent as they receive stress due to the pause at the end of each line. Another prominent feature of lineation as the above extracts reveal is the variation in the length of the lines. The first line of each two-line stanza is a prepositional group and it is shorter than the second which is a full clause. It is in these short lines that the poet lists the destroyed ecological features of the environment. Such short groups are functional: they aid recitability, memorability and visual patterning. The content of such short phrases creates dominant impressions of the impact and the effect of the destructions caused by oil exploration on the environment. At the spoken level, such features underscore the mood of the poem. In reading aloud, the short lines of each stanza is rhythmical and likely to be read in a fast pace. However, this rhythmical fast pace is dragged down to a sluggish pace in the second line. This sluggishness underscores the sad mood of the poem and that of the poet. And functionally, such rhythm depicts the poet’s mourning and disapproval of the destruction of his natural environment.

Non-usage of comma is also adopted in this poem. Introductory Adjuncts are often separated from the main clause with a comma but this is not the case here. Stanzas one and two illustrate this:

*Without the trees
the wind no longer gestures playfully to me*

*without the ever greens
nobody speaks the lingua franca to me*

The first line of each stanza in the above extracts consists of a prepositional group functioning as Adjunct. It ought to be separated by comma from the main clause, the second line of the stanza, but this is not so. This is a deviation from the accepted norm of language use. However, Ojaide discards the use of comma here to allow

for free flow and fast pace as it is obtainable in spoken form.

Also obvious is the violation of the rules of punctuation as a style at the end of a full sentence until the last line/sentence of this poem. Each stanza constitutes of a unit of thought as an independent declarative alpha clause with its internal constituents which is equivalent to a full sentence; and should be marked off with a full stop as an end marker. But the poet intentionally omits the expected full stop at the end of each stanza until the end of the last line of the poem. This graphological deviation at the level of full stop is not a common practice in everyday use of language. This anomaly is introduced to foreground each stanza of the poem and to create the intended impression of disapproval of the destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta. The graphological effect of the use of full stop only at the end of the last stanza in this poem is that it makes the poem a one sentence poem made up of nine alpha clauses (a compound sentence graphologically).

Non-usage of initial capital letter is also a graphological feature of this poem. Apart from the first letter of the first word in the first line of the poem, and the pronoun “I” as the first word of the last line, all the other lines start with small letters. This is the poet’s means of protesting and rejecting the wanton destruction of the ecological features of the Niger Delta. Such deviations reflect defiance against normative order by the destroyers of the ecosystem.

“The Cross” is a poem of three stanzas; each of the stanzas states the pain of exploitation and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta symbolized here by blood. At the level of punctuation, the poet observes acceptable punctuation pattern. Comma, semi-colon, full stop and question mark are used in the appropriate places. It also uses initial capital only at the beginning of a new sentence after an end marker. All these are marks of deviation in poetic genre. However, it is appropriate with respect to the message and to the poets of Ojaide’s generation whose poetic canon is to make poetry accessible to the ordinary man. Thus Ojaide’s choice of punctuation here is to bring the message of oil

exploitation to the masses, hence the use of prosaic punctuation pattern.

However, at the level of lineation, this poem offers the poet a means of foregrounding the themes of marginalization and exploited minority through lineation as a graphological device. It is a poem of three stanzas with all the lines made up of at least six words. But line six, in stanza two, and line eight in stanza three, deviate from this pattern as they are made up of four words and they are shorter in length from the other lines. The lexical-semantic content of these two lines also foregrounds their length:

*I bleed from blows of brutish majority.
Why must my blood be shed
because of my birth place
for nepotic groups to celebrate their mediocrity?*

In the above, the theme of minority as a result of the birth place of the poet persona is foregrounded in the expression *because of my birth place* which is the shortest line. Again in the last three lines of the last stanza, the theme of marginalization and exploitation is further made prominent through lineation:

*It is guerrilla war I must wage
small as I am
to live in this helpless land*

Sandwiched between two long lines, the clause *small as I am*, functionally depict deprivation and suffocation, the plight of the Niger Deltans in the midst of plenty. It projects the theme of marginalization of the minorities amidst the obvious plenty in their land. The line-break from the second line to the third in the above extract also foregrounds the theme of deprivation and pain as one may be tempted to read the *to-infinitive* clause *to live in this helpless land* alone which suggests a painful regret.

“Oil Remedies” is organized in fourteen couplets. Each couplet deviates from the poetic tradition of couplet. However, each expresses a complete thought as the first four stanzas state four different functions of oil, in this case palm oil, before the discovery of crude oil. In stanza one, oil is a source of wealth, in stanza two it

sustains life, in stanza three it is a healer, and in stanza four it nourishes the body. This stanzaic pattern runs through the poem. With respect to lineation, each line runs into the next (enjambment) with instances of the use of full stop and comma in the appropriate places. The poem also uses initial capital to mark the beginning of a new sentence and small letters at line beginnings that does not mark a new sentence. All these are used by the poet to make the message of the poem accessible to the ordinary readers. Furthermore, the use of dash affords the poet a means of realizing a double voice and makes his comment on the usefulness of palm oil. In stanza three, the use of dash enables him to comment on the soothing nature of oil on the skin in stanza four in form of praise:

*We keep our bride by the lavish oil
that massage their body to glow with allure –*

*preserver of skin from cracking harmattan
there is oil in the bride's praise repertory.*

*The second stanza above is a comment and a
praise on the first and it is triggered by the use
of dash. Again, dash brings out the poet's
comment in the following:*

*A decongestant relieving patients of acute
cough,
priceless oil the ointment that heals wounds –*

*necessity of every household and homestead,
it dispenses health in the clinic-less community*

Also, the second stanza here projects the poet's second voice and eulogy on the healing power of palm oil in the content of the previous stanza. The stylistic significance of this is the sharp contrast of the usefulness of this oil to the producers as against the uselessness of the crude oil to the producers as presented in the last four stanzas of the poem.

In denouncing the socio-political misrule in his country Nigerian, Ojaide adopts similar graphological pattern as above. For instance, in "Army of microbes" the poet uses a two-line pattern as a building block and each couplet is

separated by double spacing. The expectancy of the couplet is the presence of a recurrent pattern of rhyme and uniformity in the number and length of lines in addition to containing a complete thought. In this poem, the couplets contain a complete thought; they do not exhibit other features of couplet as stated above. Thus, it constitutes deviation from the standard norm of couplet in English poetry. However, this device is used to achieve foregrounding effect. It is a poem of eleven stanzas. Each of the first ten stanzas is made of a *to*-preposition with its qualifier, while the last stanza is made up of a single line of one main clause spaced out from the others with double space. As a graphological device, the use of double spacing marks out each stanza as a unit of thought, though they are groups, not full clauses. Each prepositional group expresses an aspect of the different evil marks of the ruling military junta on the poor masses. The last stanza is a marked deviation from the internal norm of stanzaic arrangement set up by the poet in the first ten stanzas. Graphologically, it is a full clause, not a group. It also consists of a single line which is graphologically marked as against the set norm of double line stanzaic pattern. This graphological deviation affords the poet a means of demarcating the speaking voice and as a foregrounding device, to realize the peak of the poet's invectives on the ruling military junta. It makes the overall message of the poem to be visual and prominent as Ojaide tells the *ruling council*, the *army of insatiable microbes* and their kinds to feel ashamed for their misrule, exploitation, and wickedness; and for impoverishing ordinary Nigerian citizens. Thus, the graphological form here is used to realize semantic function of disapproval of the activities of the ruling military class.

As a strategy of lineation, each line does not correspond to a particular grammatical unit as each stanza consists of a run-on line. For instance, each stanza of two lines constitutes a prepositional group with rank-shifted structures and the lines are of unequal length without a rhyming pattern to conform to the traditional norm of couplet. Stanzas five to nine illustrate this:

*To the ruling council fat in the neck and thigh
but whose plans make wraiths of workers*

*To those who have creased faces of farmer and
fishers
with lines of hunger and pain*

*To the Hyena and his cavalry of hangmen
that litter the landscape with mounds*

*To the cabal of loyalty and fealty
that sold the rest for coded Swiss accounts*

*To the executioner and his legion of praise-
singers
who maimed the land's totem pet*

As can be seen from the above, each couplet consists of an enjambment which does not conform to the English traditional norm, and they are unequal and irregular. This deviation from the poetic norm, coupled with the irregular and unequal length of lines in this poem is a graphological marker and of stylistic significant. It underscores the deviation of the military from accepted norm of leadership and the unpredictability of their evil deeds.

At the level of comma, the poet fails to use comma at the appropriate places. It is a rule in language use that comma should be used to separate one or more expressions of similar structure to mark a slight pause in speech. But this rule is violated in this poem. The first ten stanzas of the poem constitute of a *to*-prepositional group of two lines each functioning as Adjunct in the structure of the clause. None of these is marked off by comma as a group and as an introductory Adjunct. Thus, it is an irregularity in graphology. This deviation from the usage of comma underscores the deviant and fearless confrontation of the ruling military class and their cohorts. It also underscores the poet's disapproval of the wickedness and insensitivity of the ruling military class. It is important to point out the use of comma in the last stanza of this poem:

I say, Shame on you and your kind.

As we can see above, the comma is used here to separate the Predicator from its Complement in a simple clause. The pause which this comma produces in the spoken form serves as a means of emphasizing the poet's invectives on the ruling military class. This is because it signifies an emphatic pause, partly used to identify the speaking voice and to introduce what appears to be a short quotation by the use of initial capitalization for the word *Shame*. However, the effect is underscored by the discarding of the quotation mark to set off the expected quoted utterance. This use of comma and non-use of quotation mark in this clause is also suggestive of the fast rhythm and pace of movement and fear during the military era.

Furthermore, it is important to point out the effect of the use of full stop in the last stanza of this poem. It constitutes one line and the poet uses full-stop thus:

I say, Shame on you and your kind.

This use of final full-stop graphologically marks the poem a one sentence poem with ten prepositional groups functioning as multiple introductory Adjuncts. This gives the poem the clause structure of A¹⁰ S P C A as the full stop marks the end of the poet's tirade against the military junta of General Sanni Abacha.

At the level of capitalization, there is deviation in "Army of microbes". The established norm in poetry is that every line of a poem starts with a capital letter, that is, capital letter is used to demarcate one line of a poem from the other. But as we can see, it is only the first letter of the first line in each stanza that starts with a capital letter. The second starts with a small letter. Capitalizing the initial letter of *To* in the first line of each stanza is a means of stressing the direction of the poet's invectives and the recipients of the tirades. In speech, it signifies a shouting voice. It also serves as a means of identifying each stanza as a complete semantic unit. Also prominent in this poem are the words *Hyena* and *Shame*. Only proper nouns are supposed to be capitalized in the middle of a sentence. Capitalizing the initial letter in *Hyena* makes it obvious that the military dictators are wicked and inhuman. They are not better than

hyenas who feed on dead animals. *Shame*, a nominal element, as used in this poem, ought not to be capitalized; however, the poet draws attention to it through capitalizing the initial letter as the peak of his vituperations to the military junta.

In “Abuja”, Ojaide satirizes the Federal Capital Territory of his country, Nigeria, and the rulers of the country. It is a one stanza poem made up of fifteen lines. This stanzaic structure is appropriate to the message of the poem. Each line is a statement of an activity that goes on in the nation’s capital, Abuja. Thus, within this single stanza Ojaide piles up these different but related activities. In terms of lineation, all the lines are unequal in length on the left margin. This goes a long way to show the unpredictable happenings in the nation’s capital city, Abuja. As the norm demands, the first four lines of the poem which are Adjuncts are expected to be marked off by comma. But this is not the case. Apart from the first four lines, all the other lines are full alpha clauses and each constitutes a complete thought, yet they are not marked off by any end marker or comma as the norm demands. This non-usage of an end marker at the end of a full clause capable of realizing a complete thought marks deviation in language use. Equally, apart from the first letter of the first line, all the other lines of the poem start with a lower case letter. These deviations at the levels of comma, full stop and initial capitalization underscore the deviation from norms of accepted behavior by the rulers of a nation in the nation’s capital. It shows the poet’s disapproval of the activities that go on in Abuja. This non-usage of comma and full stop is indicative of suspense in Ojaide’s poetry. It is also stylistically significant as it is used to create suspense by the poet. These deviations at the levels of comma and full stop, and the use of full stop at the end of the poem, are particularly significant. Graphologically, they make the poem a one sentence poem: a complex sentence with eleven main clauses and four subordinate clauses.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown the extent that Ojaide manipulates the linguistic features of graphology

to put across his message in his poetry. Ojaide’s graphological features of stanza pattern and spacing exhibit some interesting features. The stanza pattern of the poems does not conform to the English closed verse forms of poetry. Ojaide uses free versification which uses miscellany of line arrangements and the poems are written in ordinary speech rhythm. This is in keeping with the canon of the recent generation of Nigerian poets which Ojaide belongs to as against the difficult lexis and contorted syntax of the older generation of Soyinka and Okigbo. What is also worth noting is his use of space and stanza pattern. This pattern is used by Ojaide to express his disapprovals and invectives of shame to the ruling military junta and the exploiters of the Niger Delta inhabitants.

Also, it is discovered that Ojaide’s lineation strategy is functional. His use of unequal lines as lineation strategy is identifiable in the selected poems. Such short lines as we have in “Without the trees” serve as visual devices to aid memorability and recitability. In “The Cross”, lineation affords the poet a means of projecting the themes of marginalization and deprivation. The irregular line arrangements play semantic function. They go a long way to underscore the irregularity in the socio-political order in the context of “Abuja”. Line breaks as shown in our analysis is significant in the discourse of the graphological features of Ojaide’s poetry as we can see in “Without the trees”. At the level of punctuation, Ojaide follows a similar pattern in the poems selected for this study. Apart from “Oil Remedies”, Ojaide deviates from the usual norm of everyday use of language as he discards the use of comma and full stop where convention calls for them. Graphologically, the non-usage of full stop in the appropriate place has implication for sentence typology in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. Furthermore, Ojaide does not use capital letters to demarcate the lines in his poems as the poetic genre demands; rather, he uses the upper case to mark the beginning of a sentence in some of the poems. This is also functional. This deviation from initial letter capitalization in is a marked deviation from accepted norm in the society in which the poet writes about.

Finally, graphology as a style marker in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide foregrounds deviation against the normative order in the society which Ojaide writes about. It helps to communicate the themes of rejection of the destruction of the primordial environment of the Niger Delta and fear in the context of military misrule among others.

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