

The Dramatic Witnessing of the Niger Delta Crisis: A Means to National Development

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Abstract

Inasmuch as the case of the Niger Delta remains unattended, or is even worsened in the country, the precarious experiences of the people of that region shall remain explorable in the literatures that emanate from that region. Writers of this emergent literature have remained bold in confronting the policies of the government aimed at impoverishing the people through their exploitative tendencies. The exploitation this group suffers is indeed heart wrenching and therefore requires immediate response of the government, as well as a literary domestication by concerned artists. This paper entitled “The Dramatic Witnessing of the Niger Delta Crisis: A Means to National Development” is, therefore, aimed at exploring how dramatists employ literature as a tool for the interrogation of both human and social activities, thereby proffering solutions for national development. These dramatists continue to proffer what they deem as lasting solutions to the ever-increasing problems of this over marginalized society. Research has shown that there are solutions to this problem as it behoves the government to adopt necessary options in implementing peace within society. This study is theoretically anchored on Eco Criticism and Marxism, as it tends to evaluate the activities of the oil companies operating in Niger Delta, and how these activities affect the human environment as well as the individuals whose livelihood largely depends on the survival of that environment and how they react to the exploitations they suffer.

Key words: drama, Niger Delta, emergent literature, exploitation, witnessing.

Introduction

Drama like every other genre of literature has always been a watch dog of the society. It is an artistic and pleasant representation of history and a clear manifestation of life and human experiences in man’s immediate environment. Through their literary productions, modern dramatists have tried to explore the salient and current issues prevalent and pre-eminent in the contemporary time and society, one of which remains the Niger Delta crisis.

However, with the discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantities, life in the Delta region of Nigeria has drastically changed into an unhealthy living condition. As a matter of fact, the Niger Delta region was originally inhabited by ‘unsophisticated’ people who largely depended on the abundance of nature for their daily livelihood and the sustainability of that crucial livelihood. They were a people psychologically and emotionally allied to their agrarian livelihood. But the discovery of oil and gas in the region, particularly with the obnoxious legislations that have continued to come with the oil exploration have destroyed such beautiful relationship and almost annihilated this originally peaceful people.

The Niger Delta crisis is all about agitation engendered and propagated by exploitation, oppression and marginalization of the region by the callous government and greedy oil companies operating in the region. This is why the social, political and economic disharmony we find in the area is perhaps as old as the oil discovery itself, and this has necessitated the incessant restive moments predominantly experienced in the area. As Alwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu have rightly pointed out

The crisis situation in the Niger Delta has emanated from the dissatisfaction of the citizens of the region over a number of issues that are associated with oil exploration and exploitation, and can be said to be as old as the trade itself. (51)

Yet the Niger Delta quest for sustainable development remains unfulfilled as their call for a better living has always fallen on the deaf ears of the government, while the potentials of the people are grossly threatened by the ecological devastation and the worsening economic conditions of this important group. Ray Ekpu presents the situation of the Niger Delta in an ironical and paradoxical perspective, thus:

The story of the Niger Delta is the story of a paradox, grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives on the bank of a river and washes his hands with spittle. It is the case of a people who live in the farm and die of hunger. (10)

Significantly, what most of the writers of the Niger Delta region tend to do in their creative work is the portrayal of the image of dearth and want even in the midst of an overwhelming opulence. They have plenty yet survive on nothing. As a people, they die of hunger, or at least made to inexplicably endure hunger in the face of superfluous resources and economy. Hence, the precarious and gory situation of the region is a serious cause for concern. Dramatists have identified themselves as ardent witnesses to the social activities within the nation's terrestrial hemisphere. In the case of the Niger Delta, these playwrights have allegorically charted the experiences of a certain maligned and marginalized group who are displaced of their natural blessings. In their plays, the dramatists attempt to liberate the people and their condition from the somewhat imprecation oil politics has placed on them. As a matter of fact, the oil discovery which should be a blessing to this group has by the making of the inconsiderate government ironically become a curse to the people and society. According to Chris Onyema, "the experiences the oil producing communities undergo in the hands of the oil exploration companies, and the conniving Nigerian government and their local leaders are so awful that the blessings of oil turn into curses" (204).

However, new trends in Nigeria's imaginative realm which concerns itself with literary representation of the prevailing circumstances frustrating the Niger Delta have emerged. It is instructive to point out clearly that literature/art should always try to accommodate the historical and socio-economic experiences or circumstances of a people, as Adolfo Sanchez argues in *Art and Society* thus:

In a certain sense, each society gets the art it deserves ... This means that art and society [...] can never completely their back on each other. Art and society are thus necessarily connected: no art has been unaffected by social influences and no art has failed to influence society. (112-3)

In a similar vein, Kontein Trinya argues that “every history beckons on the writers of its age with the subject matter and themes, ...to chart an allegorical graph of that history through the paths of tempers and its literature” (400). It is therefore the ultimate function and responsibility of literature, in this case, drama to record and portray the people’s situation. Chidi Amuta in *Towards a Sociology of African Literature* buttresses this point thus:

As a refraction of social experience through the prism of human imagination, the ontological essence of literature is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experience and transform it into an aesthetic proposition. (38-9)

Literature notably is inseparable from society and helps to mould it. Thus, it is the peculiar function of literature in general and drama in particular to inform the society about the ideal a writer wishes to reach. The dramatist has always been a social commentator and watch dog through whom social vices as well as certain disastrous inhuman behaviours are condemned. In his own words, Emmanuel Otete-Akpofure notes that: “The dramatist is a watch dog of society and through the medium of drama he lampoons negative and anti-social behavior in the course of creating characters involved in such deeds” (248).

J.P Clark-Bekederemo’s *The Wives Revolt* is a play that mainly deals with the subject of patriarchal influence, local colonialism, as well as the inequality and injustices being suffered by the people of the Niger Delta, especially the female folk of this apparently marginalized group on account of being richly blessed with oil. In the play, the issue of oil exploration and the attendant consequences of such activities remain prevalent. The revolt which we find in the play is triggered by the grossly marginalized sharing formula of the compensation money given to Ehuwaren community by the oil company operating there. As Okoro announces the sharing formula, it is clear to see the marginalization thus:

It is the matter of the money sent by the oil company operating in our land. The amount is well known to us. This sum, after due debate in the town hall, has been shared out in three equal parts, one going to the elders of the town, the second to the men in all their age groups and the third by no means the least, to the women, also in all their age grades. (1)

It is this unequal sharing pattern enforced by the covectous male group that brings about the conflict between the women and their husbands as portrayed in the play. As remarked by G.G Darah, *The Wives Revolt* is an allegorical tale about communal conflicts between wives and their husbands over the sharing of little spoils of oil revenue that excludes the womenfolk”

(8). In their quest for equity and fairness, the women call for an equal distribution of the windfall from the oil company thus:

... However, our womenfolk, led by a few reckless ones, fed up with doing simple duties for their husbands and children as befits good house wives, are repudiating this fair and reasonable distribution of the money, demanding that it should have been divided into two equal parts, one going to them and the other to the men ... (1)

Clark-Bekederemo's evaluation of the effect of the oil politics in the country is beyond the physical devastation of the oil exploration and exploitation brings upon the Niger Deltans. Rather, *The Wives Revolt* is a lucid portrayal of the lurid and gory situation that has become the lot of the female folk, thereby portraying the negative impacts of the oil money especially, when not properly and judiciously managed. This can be seen in the play when the women, disenchanted as they are, abandon their husbands and social duties as well as their filial responsibilities to their children and elope to a neighbouring village, Iyara as a way of protesting against the injustices meted against their gender, but unfortunately they contracted some venereal infection in the process. It is on the basis of this health disaster that Reuben Embu in "Drama and the Niger Delta Challenges in Selected Nigerian Plays" notes that "what this invariably means is that the oil money has brought not only discord amongst families, husband and wife, but also diseases, environmental pollution and lack of peace" (149). It is therefore part of the dramatist's contention that since man is always at the helm of affairs within his immediate environment it behoves on him to create an enabling atmosphere for a peaceful co-existence. In the case of Ehuwaren, Clark-Bekederemo is saying that the male should jettison some of the laws that are directly or indirectly targetted on their female counterpart if the society must advance and experience peace and social order, especially within the family sector. In the play, Clark-Bekederemo is of the opinion that often conflict could be used to resolve some serious and bothering issues that may cause great harm to the human psyche and/or environment. It is in the light of this observation that Otete-Akpofure remarks that

Clark highlights the importance of empowerment as basis for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta. The women have much right and claim as the men in the charting of a glorious future for the Niger Delta region in particular and the nation in general. There is, therefore, the need to involve both women and youth groups in this resolution process. (253)

Yet the dramatist is much aware of the consequent disorder and unhealthy living this conflict could be made to bear on the most crucial aspect of social engagement, the family.

Ahmed Yerima is another dramatist who fervently explores the Niger Delta crisis through his dramatic engagement. In *Hard Ground*, the playwright clearly identifies literature and drama in particular as a weapon which the literary artist uses to confront the society, interrogate or question the excesses of both government and man, and very importantly demand for social

change under the pressures of social problems. The issues which Yerima tends to confront through drama are undoubtedly the prevailing circumstances of the Niger Delta, perhaps necessitated by the problem of neo-colonialism in the region. These circumstances are the problems of social and environmental degradation, water and land pollution caused by oil spillage, oppression, exploitation and the marginalization of the people by both the government and oil companies. As Nimi reveals, “my people are exploited every day. We started crying since 1940” (53). The implication is that oil discovery and exploration rather than being a source of human and national development adversely connotes vicious tendencies. Tonye also reveals how African political leaders exploit the naïve masses and expose them to the cruel realities of life, “He bought arms and gave to small children while all his children were sent abroad” (34). The youth in harsh and brutal manner confront the government and other people who contribute to their ugly situation. This is why Nimi relishes in the killings he has partaken in the play thus:

...then soundly as the faces of the dead people multiply, and killing means nothing to you any more, soundly, your eyelids shut to the cries of the world, and you justify in your heart that the people you killed are the enemies of the land, not yours as an individual, and after a while, all you think about are the fiery songs of the people, and the good of the land... (12)

In his own view, Otete-Akpofure argues that “only a bitter and sustained agitation and class struggle can end the barbarism, brutality, repression and inhumanity of our neo-colonial dependent capitalist society” (249). The grievances of the Niger Deltans against the government as we read in the play are genuine even though the means through which such grievances are presented is perhaps a subject of controversy. Following the nature of oil business that goes on in the region, farming and fishing activities in the land have been crippled by oil spillage. The two most crucial elements of life: oxygen and (drinking) water are consequently polluted while the glaring dearth of infrastructure does not help matters, to say but the least. In obvious reaction to their situation, the youths vandalise oil pipes, terrorise the society, kill, maim and kidnap in the most dastardly manner. They inflict all manner of terrorism in the region so much so that living becomes nightmarish for all. Nimi reports the activities of the boys thus:

The boys caught him, and hacked him to death, removing his head from behind as he sped. In the wildness, my boys ran into the shrine, pulled out the second man... A stick was pushed through his anus until it came out in his bowels. We then dragged them back into the shrine, and burnt them. (45-6)

Yet, these ruthless and brutal killings adversely affect the psyche of the same youths who orchestrate them. As young as Nimi is, he has already become avarious with blood thirst and a destroyer of human life, even without regret. As Onukaogu and Onyerionwu rightly observe, Yerima’s main lamentation in *Hard Ground* therefore is that the Niger Delta crisis has obstructed the maturative process of the average Niger Delta youth, male and female, to the extent that he

or she has been negatively psychologized, most especially by the imperative to join and execute the struggle. (63)

Embu buttresses this point further

In *Hard Ground* by Ahmed Yerima, Nimi is presented as a youth engaged in militant struggle and the repercussion of his action. The author depicts the restiveness in the Niger Delta through the activities of Nimi and his family. (151)

Essentially, Yerima believes that the problems bothering on the peace and socio-economic progress of the region deserve appropriate redress. He proffers education as the all important tool through which the future can be secured. It is Yerima's contention that with education, the Niger Deltans can convincingly make a case for themselves. With education, the people will be properly represented in the legislative house which will further help facilitate their agitation/cause,

School. I want you to go back to school. With education, you still fight. That time more people will listen to you. People always believe these days that a man who did not go to school should not be believed. Poverty tastes sour in the mouth. School, son... (29).

As Yerima has rightly points out, the people can rewrite their history through the acquisition of education and it is only even then that the government can listen to their complaints. Yerima equally suggests that the absence of education breeds poverty.

More so, Esiaba Irobi has responded to the quagmire of life in the Niger Delta through his drama, *Hangmen Also Die*. In his own purview, Irobi indicts the Nigerian politicians who loot the economy of the nation dry only for their selfish interest and that of their families. Otete-Akpofure writes that

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi explores the theme of self, while satirizing the Nigerian political system using the Niger Delta situation. The play unveils the tragic and sorry situation of the Niger Delta region, where the protesting oppressed youths are silenced by those in position to solve their problems. (248)

The story of Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* is therefore one that emanates from the tragedy of the Niger Delta. It is about a people bedeviled with the heinous life that has become their lot. What we find in the play is a bold rejection of the ugly life that has already become part and parcel of the Niger Deltans, through the insurgent activities of a group of sad, educated but unemployed individuals, as well as the confrontation of the situation by these rebels through defiance. Irobi suggests corruption at all spheres of the nation's political endeavours as the bane of national development, that which militate against the progress of the nation. Through this play, Irobi interrogates the hope of better life which education is charged with providing for the youth (as we saw in Yerima's *Hard Ground*). Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* ponders on how government explains the problem of unemployment in the Niger Delta society while angry youth roam about the streets with unattended First Class certificates. In spite of their

education, the society portends a bleak future for the youth as government places little or no value on education. It is obvious that the political leaders do not care if the situation wreaks havoc on both the social and human psyche as they revel in their exploitative overtures. Austin Emela has noted that Irobi's concern is that the government should provide jobs for the youths and solve or alleviate the social unrest, "Irobi's preoccupation in *Hangmen Also Die* is the need for the Nigerian government to address the issue of youth-unemployment in Niger Delta, as that is the only way they can avoid the form of social unrest caused by the activities of the Suicide Squad" (43).

Hangmen Also Die reveals that the case of the Niger Delta is a case of disillusionment. Disillusioned by their prevailing circumstance, these boys recruit and organize themselves into a strong rebellious fraternity identified as 'Suicide Squad' whose mission is to ensure out 'justice for their injustice'. This situation is even more gruesome if we consider what this group identifies as the vital prerequisite for joining them, the number of years of unemployment experience. It is possible that the idea behind this stringent criterion is to ensure that an aspiring member must have gone through the formative stage of hardship, pain and agony, so that he/she does not feel sober in the excruciating activities that must follow. This stage becomes a 'baptism of fire', the furnace that sharpens and hardens the souls of the 'Suicide Squad' that even if a relation stands in the way of justice; he/she must be eliminated without sentiment.

Irobi's play explores the gory, hideous, heinous, cruel and inimical situations and challenges of the Niger Delta thereby condemning the evils inherent in such maligned and dire circumstances. In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi entails that education without necessary provision by the government cannot solve the problem of the region and nation since the youth who form the 'Suicide Squad' are all well-educated, yet unemployed, "our jobs in this nation is to look for jobs" (46), despite the plethora of resources and capital that accrue from that region. To Irobi therefore there is only one means of solving the problem and that is through a revolution aimed against our corrupt politicians, as Acid charges the Suicide Squad thus:

Terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all down-trodden people seeking to combat oppressive government ... you are all young men...not even your leaders make any plans for your future, you are potential revolutionaries... revolutions are always based on violence. On bloodshed and terror. Revolutions are never achieved by holding hands and singing "we shall overcome"... It is an act of insurrection where one party overthrows the other. It occurs as an accumulated grievance of the common man. It explodes like gun powder. (39)

Just like in Yerima's *Hard Ground*, the situation of the youth in *Hangmen Also Die* is one that affects their psyche to the point that the only thing they consider is to maim, kill and lynch lives as intoned in their utterances:

We are the Suicide Squad. We maim. We murder. We massacre.
We are the Kamikaze. We are the murderers... We are the Head
Hunters. We stab and draw, and stab and draw, and stab and draw,
and stab and draw again... To hear the froth of blood! We sway.

We swing. We prow! We prow! We prow! We strike like mambas and leave on your flesh, the marks of our fangs, the sign, of our venom, the insignia of our grief... (90-1)

In view of Irobi's language Leon Osu writes that "in the plays, *Nwoke* and especially *Hangmen*, we notice such wanton and brazenly violent statements and actions by characters that suggest the kind of individuated and uncoordinated protests against an unjust social order" (154).

As with every other literature of the Niger Delta, Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* addresses the issues of environmental degradation which has always remained a major part of the negative effects of oil politics and dealings in the Niger Delta region. Oil spillage has in fact become a regular occurrence in the region and has affected both their drinking and fishing water as well as their farm lands. The biosphere is grossly affected by these oil activities; with all aquatic life exterminated, and terrestrial ecology annihilated. Ibiaye's revelation of the cause of his blindness becomes apparent here:

One day, we woke up to hear explosions. The waves were surging and the shore foaming at the corners of its mouth... Two of my sons hurried down to the oil sites. One of them died from a ruptured hernia... my other son floated on top of the sea. His belly had been blown open by the mine he was trying to plant. I had two sons. But now, I am left with none... Our plants began to die. Our roots to rot. Our seeds shriveled... We fled... We swam. But little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil... On the first day my eyes were only itching. The next day I scratched throughout the night. Three days later, I could no longer see the sunlight... Seven days later, the darkness fell... am now led by the hands... to beg for coins daily, to buy a piece of fish or a loaf of bread to feed the ones waiting in the stilt hut... (96-7)

As Ibiaye's revelation shows, the environmental degradations have brought total hardship and suffering to the inhabitants of the region.

Conclusion

Dramatists among other writers have explored the medium of drama in portraying the exploitation, oppression, marginalization, ecological devastation, anarchy, chaos, social unrest, insurgency and restiveness found in the Niger Delta. It is however these experiences and the attendant plethora of literature that emanate from the region that have led to the birth of the nomenclature, "Niger Delta Literature". These dramatists have shown that drama can really be used to chart the history of the heavily marginalized Niger Delta people. They therefore employ the art tool in decrying the condition of the people they represent. Through their plays, dramatists have presented and interpreted the historical issues of the Niger Delta and used their plays to interrogate the condition and experiences of man within his immediate environment. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Wives Revolt* has demonstrated that the problem of

the Niger Deltans has equally eaten deep into the fabrics of the family sector and consequently degenerates into some matrimonial discord.

However, most playwrights advocate physical confrontation as the core solution to the Niger Delta problems. Irobi and Clark-Bekederemo belong to this group as demonstrated in their works. But some dramatists like Ahmed Yerima think otherwise. For this group, education is the hope of the future generation, since violence and revolution have failed in ensuring social harmony and progress. Yerima's view is that education will bring about peace and serenity in the environment. With education, all fractions of terrorism will completely cease. However, quite apart from providing education for the youth, government should ensure good policies that will accommodate these youths in the governance system which will to restrain them from social vices and mayhem.

Finally, it could be safe to surmise that the Niger Delta crisis has gotten so bad to the point where it perhaps requires Marxist consciousness for social change. As a matter of fact, the case of the Niger Delta as shown by the dramatists is one that is encased in rather lachrymal tone. Thus, the oil which should be a blessing to the people has brought about an ominous implication. Therefore, literature generally remains an agency through which writers engineer social, political and economic change within every human environment.

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