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Oil Politics and its Social Implications in the Niger Delta: A Study of Obari Gomba's *Pearls of the Mangrove*

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Abstract

The oil politics in the Niger Delta has assumed a global dimension. It is stronger and more complex by the day. It is now a diplomatic weapon even more deadly and efficient than the nuclear warhead to effect any political change and or to maintain the status quo in any part of the globe. This has led to the militarization of the zone and especially the oil-producing communities, the gradual and systematic 'genocide' through oil spills and environmental pollution. It is no longer in doubt that there is a crisis of monumental proportions in the Niger Delta and that this crisis need to be resolved urgently because of its all-round implications on the social and economic lives of the people. These activities have snowballed into the scenario that Obari Gomba captures in his collection of poems, *Pearls of the Mangrove*.

Introduction

The Niger Delta issue has become an artistic gold mine amongst literary artists. This might not be unconnected with global dimension which oil politics in the region

has assumed over the decades. Poets, especially those whose literary works are modelled towards social commitment, have had a mouthful and an inkpot of what to say and write about. Rather than taking to the creeks in masks, young artists have sharpened their intellectual weapons and have been very vocal in expressing their views on the deplorable condition in the Niger Delta due to long time neglect of the region and activities of oil exploration.

I

In his collection, *Pearls of the Mangrove*, Obari Gomba, a Niger Deltan, devotes greater part of his work to the oily issue that has plagued the region as a show of his social commitment using poetry as a medium for such expressions. Like his contemporaries who themselves have decried the destruction of the ecosystem and environmental degradation due to oil exploration, his focus is on the social implications in terms of the people's reaction in the face of this 'death by instalment'.

Other writers in the region have equally embraced the challenge, thereby producing works that form a tradition within the larger corpus of Nigerian literature in English just like the literature on the Nigerian civil war. For instance, the novelists: Chukwuemeka Ike, I.N.C. Aniebo, Elechi Amadi Kaine Agary; and the poets: Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Sophia Obi have all produced provocative works in this tradition. The tradition that focuses on oil and militancy in the Niger Delta as the issues of literary discourse. *Pearls of the Mangrove* also lends a voice to the avalanche of artistic literary composition decrying the 'sorry' state of affairs in the oil-rich Niger Delta.

II

The calamity of the people of Niger Delta started more than fifty years ago when crude oil was first struck at Oloibiri by Shell and like any oil-producing communities in the world, peace eluded the region and indeed the entire sub-Saharan West Africa due to the strategic position of Nigeria in oil production in West Africa.

In 'Shell's Love', there is the use of irony of what love actually implies;

Yet Shell swears it loves the Delta. SHELL SWEARS

Shell swears its strong love, its killer-love

We may never ask whether it loves the oil

More than it loves the people but may we please ask: (14).

The idea of love is very ironical here considering the capitalist and exploitative tendencies of what Shell is known for. It is more interested in the drilling of the crude than the protection of the environment and the provision of basic social amenities that

will enhance the living condition of the people. ‘Shell’s Love’ which is a ‘killer-love’ as observes by the poet, is based on deceit and falsehood and eventually the use of violence on the people in collaboration with the active support of the government that be:

SHELL LOVES THE DELTA! SHELL SWEARS!

King Ogre of Aso and his wisemen host the love party

King Ogre and his cronies set a model for the future.

They all froth

From their large mouths because Ogoni-blood is too rich (15).

The experience of the Ogoni people also of the Niger Delta, is aptly captures by the poet in expressing the calamities visited on the people Shell. The poet’s use of capitalization is to express the fallacy in the supposed love by Shell for the people of Niger Delta as events and happenings in the region have made such self-acclaimed love suspicious especially in the use of violence in which Shell has always being the mastermind.

III

Shell’s operations in the region have always been disrupted at one point or the other due to it callous, mindless modus operandi and capitalist tendency. The killing of the ‘Ogoni Nine’ and other killings on trumped up charges by security agency have become the lots of the region.

Right there in the house of oil and blood, you will see
The owl that has hanged nine men on oil -rigs.

Right there in the house of oil and blood, it stands
In its fine hood of logic: SHELL LOVES!

SHELL LOVES DELTA! SHELL SWEARS!

A very strong killer-love. The duty roster says so (14).

But this ‘love’ takes the form of militarization that is characteristic of oil exploration by Shell usually on the orders of political leaders both in the military and ‘democratic’ dispensations whose materialistic interests depend solely on Shell free access to oil in the region. Shell has always foot the bills of any military operation in the Niger Delta having most senior military officers on its payrolls.

SHELL LOVES THE DELTA. Its dogs of war
Are beyond law, beyond reason. Men of valour?

Dauda Komo, Paul Okuntimo, Obi Umahi. Psychopath!

Soldiers of fortune plunder and kill for state and Shell
SHELL SWEARS IT TAKES ONLY STRONG LOVE
TO DRILL BARRELS OF HOT OIL FROM CORPSES.
SHELL SWEARS IT LOVES THE DELTA
But how many corpses build one oil bloc? (15).

The poet expresses sadness at the way and manner Shell controls the apparatus of power to the detriment of the people who actually needed protection from the government in the face of military brutalization and killings in the hands of officers who were trained to protect the lives of the people and the sovereignty of the nation but are now soldiers who stand guards at the gates of Shell officials and escorts of their wives and mistresses to the markets and shopping malls. The ‘psychopaths’ of the likes of Dauda Komo, Paul Okuntimo and Obi Umahi have failed to uphold the ethics of professionalism in their chosen military career by turning their guns on the defenceless and already traumatised people of the oil-bearing communities as if a number of corpses will help build an oil bloc.

IV

In what looks like an internal monologue, the poet paints a graphic picture of what culminates in the Niger Delta militancy debacle through the mind-set of the persona in ‘In the Face of a Gun’. The peaceful and serene rainforest region wakes up one day to witness an unprecedented youth restiveness triggered by long time neglect on the parts of government and oil exploiting companies like Shell. Rather than for attention to be given to the issue of neglect, more deaths are recorded from the battlefield of which the poet calls ‘blood-field’ in Gbaramatu, an oil-producing communities. Militancy is a product of marginalization. An analogy is made between Gbaramatu and Abuja, the seat of power. The latter is metaphorically referred to as the city of ‘signs and magic’.

The bloodfields of Gbaramatu come
as daily menu to me
in distant Abuja the city
of Signs and Magic (16).

‘In the Face of a Gun’ or in the face of violence, from whichever angle one looks at the Niger Delta, one sees anger, frustration and disenchantment that characterized the lots of a people from whose land the resource that built ‘the city of Signs and Magic’ flows. This creates nightmare and frustration:

Last night, I bought a gun

on the bank of a river

What if I had woken up
with hot steel in my hands?

Pillage and murder
near the blueprints of the gun (16).

Violence, they say begets violence. The situation in the Niger Delta has reached a point where no one would allow himself to be seen as an underdog. This is the beginning of the confrontation has snowballed into militancy. When Shell employs the instrument of violent oppression in the area of Joint Task Force (JTF), the situation escalates with the influx of arms and ammunition. To this Otoabasi Akpan writes:

In the Niger Delta crisis, the quality and quantity of weapons..., would frighten some armies of some less developing countries and as a matter of fact, they run into billions of naira (143).

Violence may equally leave a legacy of disruption and developmental stagnation in any society and the case of the Niger Delta is not an exception. For this Akpan further affirm:

Crisis and insurgency create roadblocks for national integration and unity. Violence conflicts leave legacies of atrocities (147).

The persona's nightmares become real when rather than a peaceful negotiation, Shell opted for violence. A people may be foolish sometimes but not all the times.

I may be foolish in all things
but this:
when up against a foe
that loves the gun
the first thing to find
is a GUN (17).

The reality of the people's environmental degradation requires reactive approach since there was no pro-active method towards peaceful settlement in the first place. The effect of the arms insurgency in the Niger Delta on the nation's economy has been devastating. The social implications have been colossal on both human and infrastructure. Shell is an enemy in the Niger Delta; an enemy that must be confronted with arms.

V

The emergence of militancy in the region comes as a result of lack of political will to protect the ecosystem from the consequences of oil exploration such as oil spillage and other forms of environmental degradation. Though it initially wears a protest colouration, it is a reaction to the brutal military crackdown on dissenting voices in the area such as the killing of the environmental activist, Mr. Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1995.

‘‘Journal of a Militant’’, is a catalogue of the life of a militant in the creek fighting for the survival of the people and the region. So many groups spring up to register their protests in one way or the other but all with one ideology; to further the cause of the Niger Delta people. Some with militant stance, others adopt the subtle passive protest method such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) which is purely a pressure group as against the militant MEND and NDPVF, the latter led by Asari Dokubo:

In the Camp, my comrades and I think
Of the gravelly voices which sing
The agony of the Delta.
Gravelly voices tell
Of a Delta which pukes and spurks its sorrow.
And a mess of oil-spillage (25).

Gomba gives a vivid picture of a situation that is gradually evolving and reaches its apogee when the militants and the military task force engage themselves in a military showdown reminiscence of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war but confines to the creeks and the mangrove forests.

In crocodile camp, we think
Of the congress of vultures
Which convokes on the banks
They are the egrets
Of the supertankers (long
At the practice of funeral regatta) (26).

The poet talks of ‘‘congress of cultures’’, which connotes greed and savagery on the part of the government and its agencies including the military, who are determined to ensure that all dissenting voices are put to silence either by death or incarceration. The long narrative poem with six movements chronicles the emergence of militancy and the consequence of military confrontation culminating in human and material loss in the region. The question is, ‘‘Is there no end to bloodlust?’’ (27).

Lack of sincerity on the part of government to show genuine concern for the plights of the people is attacked when it announces the offer of amnesty to combatant militants.

Things are hazy
Government to offer amnesty?
Government is still on the offensive.

I am worried, I tell Commander
Amnesty is the subtiest offensive
... (42).

This same doubt and suspicion is expressed in Sophia Obi-Apoko's *Floating Snags*. Her "Paradox of Freedom", gives the irony of how the search for peace and freedom usually ends in despair and sorrow.

An exodus of convicted souls to the gallows
Hearts weighted down by the paradoxical search
For peace and freedom in Niger Delta (19).

In as much as the situation remains the same in terms of environmental pollution and the absence of basic social amenities, peace and freedom will remain elusive as government continues to doublespeak, saying one thing and doing the opposite.

What beasts lurk
In the shadow of peacetalks?
I have said to myself

Never fall asleep
When oysters fall
Fall the lure of full moon,

When they open to the tryst
Of moonlight, wily crabs crawl from holes
With missiles of seaweed. (43).

Government will assure the people of Niger Delta that peace has finally returned, but the banner of peace is flown by those benefitting from the oil crisis.

Today, they are here
With Damage controls
The oil-thieves fly the banner of peace

They sing by-gones-be-by-gones
But their long guns

Jut out from the folds
Of their carnival drapes
We see through the sham
The smokescreen fails (44).

VI

In ‘‘Ogoni Day’’, the poet makes a clarion call to the people of Niger Delta to stand up against any form of oppression and not to forget the fallen hero who started the struggle against environmental pollution and Shell, the perpetrator of the heinous crime. The call re-echoes the point made by the slain environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, to the people of the region to rise against environmental degradation and against Shell.

Where is the great Ogoni star in the sky?
Is it now dross in a whirl of clouds?
Or is it a bulging lucre in a small purse?
Once again, it is time to count our teeth with our
tongues!

It is time to remember the testament of the dead
It is time to remember the price of blood paid in full (48).

The Ogoni saga resulting in the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists in 1995, has become the turning point for other oil-producing communities in the region.

Conclusion

In sum, poets from Niger Delta and indeed concerned poets for the plights of the people have lent their voices to the cause of humanity through their works of art. It is a devotion of talents and knowledge for the fight against systematic decimation of a people by the elites whose unbridled economic interests are rated over and above the people’s existence. Oil remains the only ‘‘essential’’ commodity from which their economic interests can be fulfilled.

The politics of oil, locally and internationally, has become more complex than any war ever fought. The consequence of neglect and marginalization is even more costly and deadly; the emergence of militancy.

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