

scheme of things. When the exploiter takes this docility and humility for granted however, the result can be volatile because as Ekwedike, the griot, confesses at the play's end, the affinity between a woman and a robber is a very close one indeed.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE MANY FACES OF MINORITY: A STUDY OF ESIABA IROBI'S *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*, JP CLARK'S *THE WIVES*

REVOLT AND AHMED YERIMA'S *HARD GROUND*

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Abstract

The condition of minority groups in a country is a test of democracy in that country. In this democratic dispensation, minority problems have received the greatest attention in history. But, whereas countries grapple with minority matters, and the so called minority groups agitate for recognition and justice, it remains even more unclear who these minorities really are. Existing definitions of the word leaves one with the impression that anybody and any group of people can be minority at different places and at different times, depending on the basis racial, political, gender, economic, religious, social class and age. In the absence of an encompassing definition of minority, we are going to examine three plays that deal with the minority problems with a view to understanding what defines a minority group; what it feels like to be in minority. The paper will attempt to address some burning questions such as; is minority status an immutable existential law? What can be done to turn things around for the better for the minority groups? How far has Affirmative Action gone in providing the needed solution to minority problems? How can Minority Rights be achieved through dialogue or violent confrontation?. These plays portray many faces of minority. The paper will, also, critically appraise the various

approaches to minority problems as contained in the plays.

Introduction

Minority problem seem to have defied solution in spite of United Nation's declaration of the Rights of the Minority. What appears even more difficult is understanding who the minorities are. Considering that many diverse groups have suffered as minority, it has become clear that minority has nothing to do with being smaller in number or being younger in age. It depends on the context, hence in global politics, the Global South Africa, Asia and Latin America occupies a minority position to Global North, Euro-America. From gender perspective, women occupy minority position.

In religion, depending on time and place, Christians are a minority, Moslems can be a religious minority, traditional religion is now occupying a minority position in Eastern Nigeria where the Christians are waging war against them, intimidating, converting and desecrating their worship spaces, just as Moslems are doing to Christians in Northern Nigeria, burning down churches and even killing them. Social classes can become a minority group and treated as such by the dominant group as black South Africans in South Africa who were dominated by the White South Africans, and black Americans in Mississippi dominated and mistreated by the White Americans. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, minority group refers to any disadvantaged and marginalised group of people, who invariably depends on a dominant figure who often exploits and oppresses its members. Thus there are religious, racial, tribal, ethnic, political, sexual, economic, social and even ideological minority groups. All these groups share the condition of being dominated and oppressed, exploited and marginalised. They seem to accept their subordinate position for a long time using it as an identity, until

a messiah arises to challenge the status quo thereby triggering off conflict or war, which never really ends. The world is burning because of such wars and conflicts. Where there is no peace, and there is hardly peace anywhere in the world right now, sustainable development will be a senseless catchphrase that signifies nothing.

The three plays selected for study are set in the troubled Niger Delta region of Nigeria, a marginalized group who could not be left alone because they have what the rest of the nation and, in fact, the world need natural oil. The presence of oil in this region should translate to empowerment and transformation for the region, but there seems to be a law against the development of a minority group so that no matter what they do to shake off their minority status, they remain suppressed and exploited. So it is that, inline with minority logic, Niger Delta oil has acted as developmental degradation instead of sustainable development for the region. It is not only that they are not allowed enough access to their God given riches, their poor agrarian life is also destroyed because of the activities of the oil drilling multinationals who do not know how to plunder the oil without damaging the environment. It is difficult to know the real situation here is it that they do not know how to drill without spilling and polluting the environment or that they do not care about the environment? The latter will be more inline with the general apathy towards minority groups.

The purpose of this paper is not to recount how Niger Delta has been plundered and neglected. There is enormous scholarship on that already. The paper is not even going to explain how progress is systematically stalled in the that region, because that has also been variously addressed in many Niger Delta discourses. This paper is rather concerned with the

endemic nature of minority sensibility and how this constitutes the actual obstacle to achieving the world peace which is germane to sustainable development.

Analysis of the selected plays, reveals how amorphous the minority ideology is and how difficult it is to achieve sustainable development where this hydra-headed beast exists. The study will also reveal how minority conflict is operates at various levels in a society as exemplified in the plays.

A civil war broke out in Nigeria on July 6, 1967 as a culmination of the various tensions that had been building up in the country from the amalgamation to the independence and thereafter. That war was a civil protest by the Easterners who believed that they were marginalised in the country and so felt it necessary to secede. The Northerners were the majority both in population and politics, which perhaps gave them the audacity to rescind on the agreement reached in Ghana and at the same time reject the issue of the foreign oil companies paying taxes to the oil rich Eastern Region Government, instead of to the Federal Government. Thus sense of insecurity, exploitation and marginalisation and an urgent need for political autonomy led to the attempted secession of the East from the rest of the country. The rebellion was crushed in what was conveniently termed “No Victor, No Vanquished.”

Rebellions of this nature rarely receive support not even from other marginalised groups. People usually rally round the rich and the powerful, or the dominant force, it doesn't matter what. Thus as the civil war broke out, some Easterners defected and joined ranks with the Federal troupe against Biafra. Those who remained in the struggle suffered monumental lose of life and property for three years. Among the defectors was a man who was to become an icon of Nigerian literature Ken Saro Wiwa. He expressed his disapproval of the war, and his attitude

to the condition of the Biafrans during and after that war is recorded in his poem, “Epitaph for Biafra” [1985: 33] in which he mocks the Biafrans for their failures in that war in the following lines:

- i. Where will they go now?
Nowhere, nowhere.
Where can they go now?
Nowhere, nowhere.
Nowhere.
Where the young men lost their bones
In lonely trenches
In a plain of agony.
Marching to nowhere
Where nothing waits upon nothing
Where the bones await the bones
In a dance of death.
- ii. What will they do now?
They'll have toads for supper
They had snakes for lunch
And lizards for breakfast.
Reptiles are delicacies
On the survival menu.
The cooks of Europe will praise
Their ingenuity
In the survival game!
- iii. They will play at rebels
And vandals
Fill the nation with blood
And scandal.

- Then they will return as agents
And angels
Laughing and weeping and begging
For minor mercies.
- iv. Didn't they know that bones are brittle
The matchet swings a bloody path?
Didn't they test the hardness of the egg
On the skin of their teeth
Before dashing it against the rocks?
Didn't they know that water turned wine
But once in days of yore?
So they should stop their foul breath
From infecting God's good air.

The poem is reproduced in this work because it is central to the point made in this paper and for the fact that the poet hailed from Niger Delta. Ken Saro Wiwa is clearly an anti-war person and has no kind words for perpetrators of acts of war. In "Thoughts in Times of War" from the same collection of poems, Songs in a Time of War, he debunks the idea that it is a mark of honour to die for one's country, calling it "the famous lie" [In 15: p.24] He queries the advocates of war;

Ye bakers and hawkers of lies
Who bare your jaws and call for wars,
Inviting the lame, the blind and the deaf
To the merry ways of the guns
Where shall ye find the lotion,
The balm to heal their wounds?
[Stanza 4: p.24]

"Epitaph for Biafra" was published fifteen years after Nigeria's

civil war. Five years after "Epitaph," Saro-Wiwa hints at "*The Coming War in the Delta*" [1990] in which he demanded that oil money be used to improve the deplorable condition of the Ogoni people. This is after he had made several attempts at an amicable and peaceful solution to the problem and was each time rebuffed both by the Federal Government and the Shell Company. Having come face to face with the reality of the exploitation and marginalisation of minority groups, Saro-Wiwa is about to adopt the remedy he has condemned war, after the "Ogoni Bill of Rights" which was submitted by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was dismissed by the Federal Government.

An interesting twist occurred to test further the idea of dialogue as effective tool for conflict resolution, when four Ogoni chiefs defected to the side of the oppressive forces, the Federal Government and the foreign oil companies. Torn between allegiance to Ogoni "rebels" and the Federal Government, the chiefs chose to serve the dominant force. They probably had their reasons for defecting just as Saro-Wiwa had for betraying Biafra and crossing over to Federal side during the civil war. He was rewarded with an appointment as the administrator of Bonny. The four Ogoni chiefs did not live long enough to receive their reward for betraying the cause of their people. They were assassinated and Saro-Wiwa was arrested and accused for their death. His declaration of his innocence and the intervention of the international community notwithstanding, on early hours of November 10, 1995 Saro-Wiwa was executed, along with eight others accused along with him. What a violent end for an angel of peace? But that was only a beginning of the catastrophe that the nation was going to witness in the hands of the Niger Delta insurgents.

Minority problem has been there since the beginning of human communities. But while some adopt violence as means of securing their right to exist, others prefer peaceful approach of dialogue. Mohandas Ghandi, Indians nationalist and spiritual leader, is best known for his policy of non-violence. But in 1922 he was arrested for his involvement in a civil disobedience and in 1948 he was assassinated. What all these go to show is that there is safe haven for minority groups. Whether they adopt dialogue or violence, their fate remains the same, or they lose so much to achieve so little. It seems everybody is guilty of dominating others, even within the so called minority groups as the plays will demonstrate.

The Plays

The three plays under study are properly set in the oil rich region and capture the life of the people as they try to cope with their existential problems compounded by the oil drilling activities and spillage of the foreign oil companies and the failure of the Federal Government to adequately compensate them for their loss of sources of livelihood, namely fishing and farming. These plays are very important for the study of the Niger Delta because they capture various stages of the struggle and various levels deprivation and oppression. The impact of the struggle is felt at three levels national, community and family levels. *Hard ground*, though the latest of the three plays under comes first because it represents an earlier stage of the struggle, at the point when the struggle had turned militant. At this stage talks had broken down and the exploited group had turned to violence, as Saro-Wiwa prophesied. Instigated by a character called “the don” and driven by abject poverty and the reality of exploitation, a group of impressionable youth set about attacking and breaking oil pipelines in order to get at the

government and get the attention they deserve. Soldiers return violence for violence, shooting and killing the villagers at sight aided by some villagers who have turned saboteurs against the cause of the community. The traitors are killed thereby creating mistrust and division within the community. As lives are lost some people begin to question the sincerity of purpose behind the war stance as it soon becomes clear that the boys are more interested in exercising their newly developed military skills than finding solution to the problem. As Nimi explains to his mother,

First you listen to what the elders say about the struggle. Even when in primary school. You live in pain, then it sounds right to join the struggle, first as a boy of a group, then as the eye or spy. By the time you are halfway through primary school, you carry guns for the boys, and by the time you are eleven, in these days of automatic guns, you become an expert. You see people die every day, either of hunger or just death, so it means nothing to you. It is a hard life, mama...

...then soundly as the faces of the dead people multiply, and killing means nothing to you any more, soundly, your eyelids close to the cries of the world, and you justify in your heart that the people you killed are the enemies of the land...[12]

Obviously “the don” did not envisage that the boys will become terror to the very people whose interest they claim to protect. But that has often been the case. When one is so disgruntled that he trains some people to commit act of terrorism against his foes, how can he ensure it does not go out

of hand, that is if he does not become victim of his own handiwork. Oil drilling may have caused a lot of hardships for the people in the area, but the militants have caused more problems for the people. The killings engender a lot of misgivings and mistrust, a dangerous precedence that spells doom for the struggle as the people turn against themselves. The militants are now seen as the problem instead of the solution especially after twenty of the boys were killed. Their plan to break oil pipeline does not only fail but leads to the death of the entire group, except Nimi, their leader. Somebody obviously leaked the plan to the soldiers. The ultimate sentence is passed on the culprit even before he is known. Being the only one that survived the crackdown, Nimi becomes the first suspect. The don passes a death sentence on his head and the families of the dead militants are sworn to make him pay with his life. Nimi in turn suspects his uncle, Kingsley, a priest to whom he disclosed the plan during a sacramental confession.

What is exposed in this play is not the exploitation of the oil region but the immature thought form of the militants and the insincerity of their mentors who use the youths to achieve their political vendetta. During the questioning by his family Nimi keeps saying "I was eager to please the don" [14, 15] Any wonder then that Mama hates the don so much, a person who sends children to their early graves. But Nimi is also on ego trip, as the dream reveals. He engages in the senseless acts because he wants to show that he is a real man, not a coward like his father. It takes a reality check to make him feel the pain he is causing others and bring about the necessary change of heart in him. Thus, the love of his life and the mother of his child to be, Pikibo, turns out to be the traitor that is leaking all their plans to the police. Again, he is poisoned by the same people who sing his praise and give him the impression that he

is their hero and invincible.

However, when the angel of death, in the image of Tingolongo the masquerade, arrives and Nimi realises that he will die, he becomes afraid and begs for forgiveness, thereby reclaiming his humanity. His intention to kill the don is symbolic of this change of heart, and by the time he has killed his own father, inadvertently, the lesson is believed to have been learned. The lesson is not only for Nimi, but also for all who engage in acts of violence. Violence is therefore presented here as a very bad idea, not only is it foolhardy and suicidal to fight a force to which one is no match, these militants end up causing more problem for the people than the dominant force. This play represents the first phase of the conflict. At this point all efforts to secure compensation money to make up for the deplorable condition of the Deltans have failed, and the war which Saro-Wiwa envisaged have ended in defeat. This takes us to the next phase. This is the stage captured in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*.

Hangmen Also Die takes the issue to the next stage of the conflict as seen through the eyes of yet another set of disillusioned youth of the oil region. They do not engage in the breaking of oil pipelines, probably because the compensation has eventually been paid, which ironically created another problem. The Suicide Squad, as they chose to call themselves, is made up of angry and disillusioned Izon youths who have managed to graduate from the university but cannot find jobs for years. They took to crime to survive, since their university education has failed to secure them decent jobs. Frustrated and feeling betrayed by their society, they rob and terrorize the community. The problem is not that they are not compensated. In contrast to the situation in *The Hard Ground*, this community received the compensation money but which does

not get to the people because their corrupt leaders share it among themselves, leaving undone all the projects for which the money was provided, projects that would ensure better life for the people.

The Suicide Squad, just as many members of the community, is not aware that the money has been paid. Thus, because of corruption within the rank of the minority group, the deplorable condition has remained unchanged despite the fact that Federal Government has paid three million Naira toward making life better for the Deltans. This is another face of minority. When they are not exploited by a dominant outside force, they are exploited by their own home government. The decision to rob the community amounts to misplaced aggression, with the result that while the victim of robbery is receiving the punishment, the robber is free feasting on his booty. The aggression of the Suicide Squad needs to be channelled to the right cause namely the enemies of progress. This is the idea Tamara sells to the restive youths. When they are thus convinced of who the real enemies are and where their act of heroism should be turned, Suicide Squad decides to end the history of squander mania in the community. They storm the palace of Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, the Honourable Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, during his chieftaincy ceremony where he is to be crowned the Amatemeso 1 of Izon State, whisked him away to their hide out. After torturing the man to disclose where he keeps the money, information which he is unwilling to divulge, they sentence him to death and hung him.

Irobi has been variously criticized for his hard stance against corrupt leadership. ABC Duruaku (2000: 104) for one has a lot to complain about Irobi's harsh approach to corruption in not just *Hangmen Also Die* but also in *Nwokedi*. While

criticizing Irobi for not proffering way out of social problems, he adds that, "What is surprising is that people of such high education and ideals could degenerate to solving societal problems by brought force applied on the masses". Referring to Duruaku's earlier outburst on Esiaba Irobi's anarchical presentation of corruption and corrupt leaders, Norbert Eze maintains that Irobi's attitude is exemplar of his age. Eze explains that Esiaba Irobi belongs to the third generation of Nigerian playwrights, "a generation of coups and counter coups, a generation that feels the pains of austerity measures and the agonies of joblessness, inspite of good university education" (2000: 27). It may be important to add that Irobi was emotionally attached to the fate of the jobless Izon graduates, not just because it reminds him of his own frustrations and that of his peers, but because he was initiated into the plight of the Deltan life and daily frustrations.

As a student of the playwright, this writer remembers that Irobi spent some weeks in the creeks to witness, firsthand, what the situation was like. He came back and wrote *Hangmen*. He was a witness to the events he re-enacted in his play. Members of the Suicide Squad are found guilty of murder and sentenced to death by hanging. Their death is presented as unfair and replication of the oppressive leadership that has robbed the people of their future. The hangman, Yekinni, cannot be intimidated into hanging the boys, for he does not think it is logical to kill seven young men for the death of a thieving community leader. To make matters worse, he is aware that the sentencing was not based on fair trial but a ploy to save the skin of the superintendent of prison who himself is a beneficiary of the compensation money. Everybody knows the truth, yet they all want to carry out such an outrageous act, for fear of losing their jobs. The hangman prefers to resign instead

of suffering, for the rest of his life, the guilt of hanging innocent young men, to save the actual guilty cabal. Thus, the boys die as martyrs instead of villains. Does this remind one of the robbers in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*? Yes it does. The two plays present a good example of bad leadership in which victims are killed for the crimes of those in power. Let's assume that the Federal Government decides to pay compensation money again, or that Erekosima and his his fellow community cohorts did not squander the money, would there be peace in Niger Delta? For answer we now turn to John Pepper Clark-Beckederemo's *The Wives Revolt*.

In *The Wives Revolt* we meet another level of exploitation in the oil region. This time it is not the exploitation of the oil community by an oil company, nor is the exploitation of the people by their community leaders. but the exploitation of the women by the men in the oil community. In this play by J.P. Clark, the compensation money is brought to the people, but it is not equitably shared among the citizens. The men decide to keep two-thirds of the money to themselves and give one-third to the women. The women protest against such blatant disparity. But instead of correcting the injustice, the men impound the women's goats, thereby adding salt to injury. In revolt, the women walk out of the community. Cast in comic mode, *The Wives Revolt* gives the impression that exploitation and oppression of women is a funny experience. This paper argues that it is this type of attitude that sustains minority crisis and continually threaten sustainable global peace and development. Minority crisis can and have often escalated to a point where lives and properties are lost thereby cutting the entire nation off economically from the rest of the world. The many faces of minority are, thus, present in these plays. It goes to prove that there is an exploiter in everyone, just as Chief

Isokipiri Erekosima says many times during his trial in the hands of the Suicide Squad. When Mortuary calls him a thief, he responds "You are also thieves. Are you not? My children, there is a thief in all of us." [89] At every level of existence, a certain group is considered weak and exploited. The victims of exploitation always protest against their exploiters. But almost always their protest is crushed. Thus, in *The Hard Ground*, the militants do not only lose the battle for resource control or compensation, but their lives as well, and their only surviving member repents. All the seven members of the Suicide Squad, in *Hangmen Also Die*, are executed by hanging, while the stolen money remains unrecovered even with the thief dead. Even though *The Wives Revolt*, is a comedy, the women's revolt meet the same failure. The women get back their goats and the mode of sharing the compensation money is reviewed, the women, however, suffer a measure of humiliation. While in their self imposed exile they all contract diseases and come back to beg their husbands for help and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Minority crisis is a global epidemic that has defied solution and thereby rendering global peace and development impossible. As we have seen in the preceding pages, the problem is caused mainly when disparity in power sharing occurs, a situation that keeps a section of the community in perpetual dependence on a more powerful force. A situation of inequality engender domination and exploitation and these in turn naturally provoke protest, which if not appropriately addressed can lead to loss of lives and property. However, the attention of this paper is not on the exploiters or even the exploitation of the minority but on the contribution of the minority groups themselves to the fate that befalls them. We saw through a

study of Yerima's *Hard Ground*, Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and J.P Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, that the minority problem is sustained by an innate disposition in man to dominate, control and exploit. Thus while the minorities are being exploited they, in turn, are exploiting members of their group. In *Hard Ground* they battle the Federal Government (who has exploited them and plundered their land for many decades) for resource control and compensation money. In *Hangmen* the compensation money is paid but the rulers share it among themselves, thereby robbing the people of the reward they earned with their lives. In *The Wives Revolt*, the compensation money does reach the people, but the men of the community hijack it, taking two-thirds and leaving only one-third to the women. This tendency for the minority to exploit themselves in turn leads to mistrust and disunity among the exploited making it impossible for them to present a unified front. It seems therefore that to achieve sustainable development minority situations will first be adequately addressed, failing which will create enabling environment for conflicts that often lead to loss of life, property, opportunity to achieve any meaningful progress. If human rights of all members of the society are recognised and respected, the cycle of minority crisis will be broken and sustainable world peace and development will be achieved.

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