The poet as a social crusader: Tanure Ojaide and the poetry of intervention

Jide Balogun

Introduction

Tanure Ojaide uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation and social control. The task in this paper is an exploration of his use of poetry to expose the socio-cultural and political dilemma in his Delta landscape. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria suffers great social deprivation, political marginalization and economic alienation in spite of its abundant natural resources.

The problem of the Niger Delta is further complicated by an instituted economic conspiracy of the moribund Nigerian civilian and military regimes and the various exploiting multinational oil companies. It is this condition of social injustice and destruction that poets in the like of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Tanure Ojaide and other human rights activists from the region endeavour to resist. Naturally such resistance would attract a counter resistance and this was readily found in the reactionary violence of the power machinery of the Nigerian Military symbolised in the General Sani Abacha military junta.

Tanure Ojaide’s poetry no doubt serves as a framework for a discursive understanding and analyses of the Niger Delta and its historical as well as contemporary woes. For the purpose of this discussion, we would draw illustrations from selected poems in his Delta Blues & Home Songs and Daydream of Ants and Other Poems. Here, fundamental issues that are salient to the socio-political, socio-economic emancipation and survival of the Niger Delta people form the basis of Tanure Ojaide’s aesthetic vision.

The writer in politics

Creative writing and literary criticism are propelled by a number of motifs. Thematically, such motifs could aim at protest against oppression, political emancipation, demystification and demythologization of phenomena etc.

Writers and critics adopt different literary approaches and strategies to drive home their messages. Literary approaches such as the sociological, historical, psychological, moralist, formalist and other approaches usually form the framework within which creative writing and literary criticism are channelled. However, in spite of these multi-divergent approaches, their effect is always social. In other words, art is essentially committed to practical social realities. The artist is saddled with the task of practically assessing the contemporary situation in society with the mind of identifying and proffering solutions to the different prevailing contradictions.

Tanure Ojaide uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation, and social control. The concern of this paper is to explore how Ojaide uses art (poetry) to regulate and moderate the socio-economic and socio-political modus operandi in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria in particular and all other oppressed people in general. He sees art as a potent instrument to expose the dilemma of his Niger Delta landscape vis-à-vis the neglect of the former by the successive regimes of the Nigerian political scenario. It is undisputable to assert that the people of the Niger Delta region suffer great deprivation, political marginalisation and economic alienation. Very importantly, the landscape itself is reduced to a land receded by her citizens in spite of its abundant natural resources. The problem of the Niger Delta is further complicated by an instituted economic conspiracy of the moribund Nigerian military regimes and the various exploiting oil companies.

It is this condition of social injustice to their people that poets, artists, scholars and critics in the like of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ojaide and other human rights activists from that region endeavour to resist and reject. It is unfortunate, also anti-social and anti-human for such moves to be rebuffed. It is more pathetic and more dehumanising that the political structure expected to pursue and defend the cause of its subjects is responsible for their frustration and affliction. The picture of a people suffering from devastation is revealed as the poet says:

I beat my path through a wild lifescape
with nobody insight.
Everybody has an estate
of lonely stretches
overgrown with great shrubs.
There you rehearse fantasies, overtaking
your shadow in a marathon,
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I beat my path through a wild lifescape
with nobody insight.
Everybody has an estate
of lonely stretches
overgrown with great shrubs.
There you rehearse fantasies, overtaking
your shadow in a marathon,
kneading down the lion
that has made your resting place a den.
(\textit{Daydream of Ants}, p.23)

The reactionary violence of the power machinery of the Nigerian military
symbolised in the Ibrahim Sani Abacha military Junta contributed immensely
to the misfortune of the Niger Delta people. Because of the exploitative ploys
informed by the capitalist motif of the military and the multinational oil
companies, the survival of the people of the Niger Delta region became a great
illusion. Their struggle for survival culminated into the gruesome murder of
Ken Saro-Wiwa (an uncompromising and an illustrious son of the Ogoni tribe
in the Niger Delta region) and eight other Ogoni martyrs on November 10,
1995 by Ibrahim Sani Abacha’s dictatorial regime. This development opened a
new era in the Niger Delta struggle.

For the purpose of this discussion, we would draw illustrations from selected
poems in Tanure Ojaide’s \textit{Delta Blues & Home Songs} and \textit{Daydream of Ants}
and Other Poems. In these texts, fundamental issues that are salient to the
socio-political, socio-economic emancipation and the survival of the Niger
Delta people form the ethos of Ojaide’s aesthetic vision. In other words, his art
(poetry) serves as a discourse on the Niger Delta Saga.

\textbf{History and the Niger Delta question}

An articulation of historical contradictions is expedient for a clear
understanding of any discussion on the development of the Niger Delta region.
Colonialism and the domination of the region by the exploiting multinational
oil companies on the one hand, reinforced by the gluttony of the successive
political structures/strictures in Nigeria (the military in particular) are historical
antecedents that have provoked the contemporary Niger Delta discourse.

What we term the Niger Delta question here is a product of the abundant
endowment of natural resources in the region versus the inordinate quest of an
imperial force for wealth and materialism at the expense of the former. This in
turn is colonialism born out of capitalism and breeding oppression.

Accentuating this abundance, the poet says:

\begin{quote}
The planks smell fresh,
sardine-packaged for export
\end{quote}
create “a race of brown-skinned Englishmen” in his “Minute on Indian Education” which “insult though it was to Indian men, allocate even less agency to the role of Indian women in the discourse of British colonial culture.”(Gairola 2002:1) In this connection, limiting herself to the broad African landscape, Aidoo contends that the displacement of African women from the centre of activity was engendered by the same colonialism which worldviewed a subservient position to the colonized world and has remained so ever since (Msiska 1997:6).

References


they came in rafts by water,
and left by water.
plywood obeying the rule of commerce....
When a decade later I went home
to the delta of hardwood,
a big clearing welcomed me;
no longer the unending sheet of green.
(Daydream of Ants, p.30)

The above confirms the abundance of wood in the Niger Delta as a part of the natural resources occasioning the scrambling by multinational companies for possession in the area. The African Timber and Plywood Company (AT&P), located in the sleepy backwater called Sapele, is the multination cabal trading in the lucrative wood products.

Also, petrochemical products form the major commodities being manufactured in the Niger Delta region. An evidence of their abundance are reflected below:

This share of paradise,
the delta of my birth,
reels from an immeasurable wound.
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow
from this hurt to the unquestioning world ...
My nativity gives immortal pain
masked in barrels of-
I stew in the womb of fortune.
(Delta Blues & Home Songs, p.21)

Historically, the Niger Delta question in the context of the present struggle for the emancipation of its people was not conspicuous in the colonial Nigeria. However, it became a question, albeit a fundamental issue, in the post Nigerian socio-economic and socio-political setting in particular, from the early 1990s. In specific terms, the Niger Delta question became a national and more importantly an international phenomenon with the consciousness of its people in particular, as the radical elements among its elites articulated their people’s poor living conditions, in the context of a land flowing with milk and honey. Anchoring this struggle was Ken Saro-Wiwa under the platform of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Biodun Jeyifo (1998) sees the endeavour of Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP as a legacy that Africa, the third world and the developing nations should emulate to liberate their
oppressed people from the shackles of impoverishment borne out of exploitation. Alluding to this position, Charles Bodunde (2002: 196) posits that Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP’s efforts are human rights struggle “imperative in seeking to restore the people’s well-being”. Femi Abodunrin (2001) describes Saro-Wiwa’s life and writing in theoretical terms within the larger context of what he calls the tripartite phenomena of “politics as material for the writer (‘the writer in politics’), politics as a threatening power over the pen (‘The writer under politics’), and politics as a viewpoint held by the writer (‘The writer with a politics’)” (p.45). From whichever perspective we view the Niger Delta question, it suffices to perceive it as a historical phenomenon whose analysis and resolution are better articulated from the materialist dimension.

Contemporary issues and the Niger Delta crisis
The history of the Niger Delta crisis is the history of capitalist struggle. On the other hand, it is the quest motif of an oppressed people in postcolonial Nigeria to procure freedom and assert a meaningful identity and a more meaningful condition of living for themselves.

It is imperative to situate our analysis of the Niger Delta situation within the purview of dialectical materialism. Balogun (1990:14) contends that the theory of contradictions forms the essence of dialectics. The teachings of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels metamorphosed into dialectical materialism which is a description of an economic domination of an “inferior” being by a “superior” power. What obtains in the Nigeria Delta region is a question of interpreting the provisions of dialectical materialism as a philosophy of exploitation and oppression. Thus the fundamental contemporary issues in the Niger Delta region are political marginalisation, economic alienation, environmental devastation and pollution, social injustice and deprivation, man’s inhumanity to man and an endless list of the allies of these social-economic idiocyncrasies. In Marxist dialectics, the economic situation is the base around which other aspects of entity – politics, the educational system, the judiciary etc., etc. – constitute an elaborate superstructure.

Through his poetry, Tanure Ojaide succinctly articulates all of the above social features in the context of his Niger Delta home. Through metaphors, images and other literary devices, he takes us to his Delta landscape where the political participation of his people until recently had almost gone into oblivion. We could find in him, the voice of a poet telling freedom for his people. Could there be any better way of describing the ordeal of his Delta kith and kin in the representation. Spivak has a more sophisticated approach to the question when talking of the kind of representation as that carried out by Indian Subaltern Group. She particularly objects to their approach which seems to border on pure conjecture something which she also accuses First World critics of Third World literatures to be doing. However she does not rule out the possibility (if not also the need) of some forms of representation. In this connection Childs and Williams observe: “While Spivak cautions against ‘giving a voice’ to the subaltern, she is not against representation as such: a distinction [must be made] between ‘making speak’ and ‘speaking about’ (preferably after speaking with)...”(Childs 1997: 171). However, while one notices that even though Emechea claims to be doing the same about African women she infuses too much of her own subjectivity such that she risks being seen as behaving like the Indian Subaltern Group. It would seem that an author like Ama Atta Aidoo seems to succeed better at concealing her personal subjectivities and speaking from the point of view of her fellows than does Emechea. I think the latter sometimes trades in over-generalisations arising from her personal projections and also offers black and white, (hence simplistic) analyses and solutions to issues.

11. This is a problem that has plagued Third World feminism for quite sometime. In their essay “African Writing and Gender” C.L. Innes and Caroline Rooney observe that early male African writing did not give a prominent place to female characters (Msiska, 1997: 194-98). It could be said that for male African writers at this time the question seemed to have been like the one Rahul Gairola quotes from Kristen Holt Petersen’s essay “A Feminist Approach to African Literature”: which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? (Gairola 2002:1) This question as Gairola notes in “(Dis)positions of Postcolonial Women” has led most post[neo]-colonial feminists to question the relationship between the woman and the post[neo]-colonial, one subaltern with another.”(Gairola 2002:1) The Indian Subaltern Studies Group themselves put it as follows: “...the term [subaltern] is used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.”(in Childs 1997:161) In an example that expresses in the same breath both the racialised subaltern of the colonized in general and the gendered subaltern specifically, Rahul Gairola makes mention of Thomas Macauley’s call to
1990: 68-69). All I am doing here is to try to suggest a possible alternative viewpoint to what Emechta herself presents to explain the possible causes of Onorwadi's conduct which I regard as negative protest.

7. There is something along those lines in the character Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's gothic novel of that title. It is wondered whether Alphonse and Caroline were indeed good parents to Frankenstein. Johana Smith doubts it. Emechta seems to be like such a too nurturant parent who also demands gratitude for it.

8. It appears the effects of oppression can run so deep that overcoming them requires uncommonm effort. For instance, most women have always found it very difficult to break away from male domination feeling very hesitant to freely venture out and seize life on their own terms whether in writing or in the lived life out there.

9. Some argue that the problem is not about numbers and a lack of resources per se but the greed of some sections of society. I personally find such arguments generally lacking in substance —just wallowing in cold comfort —in the sense that there are proven health problems to women arising from too many pregnancies even where such women may be well off materially. Furthermore, I have always believed that for proper family development surely smaller numbers would do-it is easier to manage a smaller group of interests than a larger one which is why even in general management circles decentralisation is highly recommended. Above all even if greed were the sole problem as some like to console themselves —to me it both is and is not depending on what you apply the term to- then given that you have not yet dealt with that greed a more pragmatic approach would have to be the next best thing namely, have fewer children whom you can handle properly under the constraining circumstances rather than have a lot and make your lot even more miserable. Perhaps there is some middle ground to be struck between Nwakwaluoz's philosophy of not wanting to be extremely poor in people while extremely rich in wealth, on the one hand, and being extremely 'rich' in people while extremely poor in wealth, on the other (Head, p.9).

10. Take note that the youngsters at the 70s too see her as a black bourgeoisie who cannot represent their interest as they think she would not understand them an observation which points to the problems inherent in the issue of extract below other than political marginalisation? “Nigeria sleeps in a makeshift grave” (Delta Blues p.24) is a symbol of a people already buried while still living. Also, “A gunful of children broke the tetrarch's eggs” (p.24) symbolises efforts made by the people to decry this political abandonment. “You can tell from one stone country” (p.24) on the other hand, is a metaphor for people living in psychological and spiritual prison as we find in Alex La Guma's classic illustration of apartheid South Africa, The Stone Country (1967). The degree of the political marginalisation witnessed by the people of the Niger Delta is more nauseating as their land is the custodian and major supplier of the oil wealth with which the entire Nigeria nation is run and sustained. The poet says of the new political capital Abuja, it “is where chiefs celebrate on the sweat of slaves.” (p.41) “The sweat of slaves” here equates the negligence with which the Niger Delta people are subjected, while they are represented by the hare and the chiefs (the powers that be in Aso-Rock), are represented by the hyena in “this is where the hyena cornered the hare.” (p.41) Sample-extracts of the images of political marginalisation in the anthology Delta Blues and Home Songs are here and there but for the constraint of space, the analysis would shift to a discussion of economic alienation.

It is incontrovertible to assert that the driving force of imperialism is economic domination and oppression. Imperialism of the 19th century colonial age or imperialism and those of post-colonial Nigeria as we find in the Niger Delta experience are undoubtedly motivated and sustained by economic factors. Economic alienation is a conspicuous product of economic imperialism. The desire to maximize profit by the multinational cabal is responsible for the impoverishment of the Niger Delta people even on their own soil and in the midst of plenty. Tanure Ojaide in his characteristic manner does not mince words in making his audience see the pauperization of the Niger Delta people by the multinational companies — the chiefs of whom are Shell-BP and Chevron in the oil sector while the African Timber and Plywood Company, Sapele represents the timber sector. “Robber baron championing charity” (Daydream of Ants...p.55) is a symbol of exploitation which produces “workers will chase out drones” (p.55) The latter extract is an image of economic alienation. In Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood (1962) we see the railway workers in the colonial Senegal rejecting the oppressive maneuvering of the white man symbolised in Isnard the foreman. In Ojaide's Daydream of Ants and Other Poems (1997) from where this extract is taken, the reference to “workers” here is in the context of company workers who also function as the economically
alienated natives. It is the same symbol of economic alienation that Ojaide attempts to pursue in “I beat a calabash and sing for every ear, but I am not a beggar” (Delta Blues... p.34). A calabash and a beggar are used in this context as metaphors for somebody not economically relevant or viable. The relationship between the people of the Niger Delta and the multinational companies in the region is not better than that of a beggar and his benefactor. This is obviously a development that is undesirable for the Niger Delta people.

A product of the political marginalisation and economic alienation witnessed by the people is social injustice and deprivation. In spite of the gracious blessing of nature to the people, they still suffer in plenty. Until recently when government presence is just being scantly and sparsely felt in the different communities of the Niger Delta region, their experience had been the story of woe and wretchedness. Again the poet unmistakably expresses this as he says:

But what of the many proud names that flaunted the flag before the world? Destroyed by barbarians invited to be allies. What of the heart that expelled dirt despite the allure of making love in mud?
Sunk into a naira-bed of stench.
What of deference to elders, mothers, children and the disabled of the land? Strangled by testy nerves. (Delta Blues... p.37)

The above is a handsome and wholesome description of the social life of the people. A contrast of the living condition of the people with the managers of the multinational companies shows a high degree of compartmentalisation. While “what of the heart that expelled dirt” (p.37) represents the shanty and ghettoish life style of the Niger Delta people, “barbarians invited to be allies” (p.37) symbolises the administrators of the multinational companies and “allies” (p.37) symbolises the joint trade partnership of the Nigerian power machinery with those multinational companies.

Perhaps a very traumatic experience of the Niger Delta people is the environmental devastation and pollution of their land by the exploiting conspirators – the Nigerian military dictatorship and their civilian allies in conjunction with the multinational companies. The people’s experience is more traumatic as theirs could be described as “multi-tragedy” – exploitation of the human and natural resources, inability to have access to the throne of economic and political grace and a pathetic destruction of their land with little or no economic compensation. Detesting the conspiracy of the government and its allies for devastating the land, Ojaide says:

change (Umeh 1996: xxxiii-xxxiv). It would seem that after the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa in 1995 the men have resorted to employing women to continue the battle with some good measure of success. Recently a group of half-naked women rowing boats up the river Niger themselves waged a successful battle against Shell Oil Company in the Niger Delta taking over one of the company’s premises demanding special benefits for the damage these companies are causing to their immediate environment (www.allafrica.com Sept. 2002).

4. Margaret Busby points out that ‘at a Rwanda benefit evening hosted by black writers in London, in September 1995 Emecheta suggested that the way to address the ailments of many African nations would be to put women in positions of power’ (Umeh, 1996: xvi) Yet one of the alleged chief culprits in the genocide and who is currently on trial was a former Hutu female minister for Family and Women’s affairs, Pauline Nyiramasumuko (and take good note of her portfolio) who it is alleged used to encourage Hutu men to rape Tutsi women! (www.allafrica.com- July 2002) Furthermore did Emecheta and her friends stop to analyse some of the possible historical causes of the Rwanda genocide before offering women as the only leaders who can handle it? We can no longer afford such simplistic and narrow-minded solutions, or we are only risking running away from one problem and falling into another, equally crippling, problem. For my part of the solution is to have both sides well represented. So I will always be critical of views that either seek to perpetuate stereotypes that deliberately put the black African peoples in a bad light or those that offer a simple way out of fixes.

5. See Catherine Hall’s “The History of the Housewife” (In Hall, Catherine. 1992. White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History. Cambridge: Polity Press) in which she charts the emergence of not only the separate spheres doctrine but the virtual enslavement of women especially from the upper classes -during in Victorian society in England). African societies do not seem to have ever been that rigid. Indeed in some matrilineal cultures in Malawi, some men find it very easy to move across some of these roles where necessary.

6. About this incident I am not defending Onwordi at all as does Chikwenye Ogunyemi who accuses Emecheta of writing as Westerner, etc.(see Ward
Notes

1. In her article Margaret Daymond quotes an interview Emecheta had with Itala Vivan published in 1984 in which Emecheta points out the need for African feminists to be ultrafeminist (Umehe 1996: 287). Now one would expect that with that she is quite a radical feminist herself. Yet in an essay which she wrote in 1986 she seems to have toned down quite significantly when she says if she is a feminist then she is a feminist with a small ‘f’ (Umehe 1996: 369). But in the autobiography which was published in the same year she seems to oscillate between mild and ultra feminism the latter especially when she declares that a household does not necessarily need a man (p.242). And in her 1994 novel Kehinde she comes up with such an ultrafeminist protagonist Kehinde. I am not sure what her position now is, but with all this information no new position would surprise or shock me.

2. Umehe makes a very important point regarding symbolic clitoridectomy when she describes it as: The effacement of women through cultural norms such as polygamy, son preference, and wife [widow?] inheritance occurring daily in African women’s lives and is recorded in their oral and written literature (Umehe 1996:xxiv). In Malawi we have such women’s traditions as the pounding song where women vent out their frustrations against their husbands, mothers-in-law etc. This is common among all the tribes both patrilineal and matrilineal. But among some matrilineal tribes, which are also largely unxorilocal (where the man goes to live in the village of the wife), the men too have their own institutions such as Nyauma mask dancing tradition among the Chewa-trough which the men vent out their anger at their women and especially their often demanding and troublesome mothers-in-law using the most bawdy language under the guise of the mask. It is therefore important to take into account the fact that it is not only women who are victims of oppressive cultural practices but men as well. Most of these matrilineal societies tend to have female chiefs too except that even if that is the case you still have the uncle figure lurking somewhere. So a man can have a lot of influence at his sister’s village as advisor while he may be a virtual slave at his wife’s village as son-in-law.

3. Umehe points out the revival in recent times of the efforts by women to keep up the spirit of protest through groupings such as WIN(Women in Nigeria) 1982 and Better Life Programme formed by Mrs Babangida etc. She notes further though that they are largely impotent to effect much

From the year soldiers broke out of their barracks to share the pumpkin and march in a mad frenzy, the streets felt crushed by their loaded boots. There’s never been a bright day since the first decree-only soldiers have seen a full moon all the years. Roads became a sting of potholes. Water hyacinths closed waterways for boats. (Delta Blues & Home Songs, p. 51)

There is no doubt in the fact that, the above extract summarises the destruction of the Niger Delta landscape by its invaders – the government and its allies. “From the year soldiers broke out of their barracks” (p.51) has dual interpretation. Since the soldiers were the political rulers of the Nigerian nation state during the period under study, Ojaide’s use of soldiers is an appropriate description of their coming and the subsequent evils perpetrated by them. On the other hand, the phrase is a validation of the presence of the multinational companies and their exploitative ventures in the region. The effect of their advent is tantamount to the wretch they made of the land.

A final contemporary issue in the Niger Delta that we would like to discuss in this paper is the incarceration and in extreme cases the killing of the Niger Delta people. In particular, the state murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other martyrs of the Ogonis by Abacha’s Provisional Ruling Council is the peak of literary censorship. Though the act was a setback in the struggle of the Niger Delta people for their emancipation, it is no doubt a morale booster for those left behind to keep the flag of political and economic emancipation flying. As a matter of fact, the likes of Tanure Ojaide and other human rights activists are not relenting in the struggle for the meaningful survival of their people.

An expression of this resoluteness is found in Ojaide’s “Wails” where he mourns his departed compatriots symbolised in Saro-Wiwa and the other eight martyrs of the Niger Delta. While he mourns these martyrs, he also reiterates the needs for the world to know more about the Niger Delta saga. Thus he says:

If I don’t open my mouth, I will be a dumb-and-deaf who’s unable to forewarn after a bad dream (Delta Blues…p.17)
Ordinarily, the gruesome murder of his colleagues would have instilled a terrible fear in him to shut his mouth. Rather than shutting his mouth, he opens it wide to talk more about what others had died for. That is a symbol of bravery and continuity. No wonder, criticism is employed by him as a potent weapon of liberation in the Niger Delta experience.

**Criticism and the emergence of a new Niger Delta**

Balogun (1990) opines that: “art which is not committed to an assessment of practical social realities is a purposeless art”. The above is the implied and applied function of criticism. In particular, the art of Tanure Ojaide studied here validates the belief that there is a close affinity between art and society. Though his works studied here are anthologies of poems, they are products of a sturdy creativity by a critical mind. In the struggle for political emancipation and the liberation of the down trodden, authors, critics and other human rights activists suffer incarceration, murder and other forms of literary censorship. However, to them the end justifies the means. Tanure Ojaide in the contexts of his *Delta Blues & Homes Songs* (1997) *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems* (1997) proves to the world that criticism in very germane to the emancipation of the down trodden. His publication of the two anthologies was quite symbolic and historic. This is so because they symbolise a post Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta struggle. They are particularly symbolic because it is after the demise of those martyrs that the attention of the world and particularly the interest of the born-again Nigerian political machinery are more vigorously awakened. A noticeable effect of this endeavour could be the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the review of the revenue sharing formula with a strong emphasis on oil derivational formula. The effect of criticism on the Niger Delta struggle is specifically embedded in the subtitle “I carry no weapon.” The subtitle itself is antithetical. He says he carries no weapon but his “weapon” of poetry is stronger than the weapon of war symbolised in guns.

Let those who will plot against me open their mouths helplessly as if buried by ripe pepper fruit. Their secret will spill into the street & abort before their unbehaving eyes; they will never reach their goal of hurting me and celebrating a coup ... I will foil their stratagems

opportunity to analyse this condition in her novel *In The Ditch* in which she combines British feminist analysis of the oppression of women with African values of women working together to form a community”. There is so much human goodness at Pussy Cat such that even after Ada moves to a flat near Regent’s Park “she still goes to ‘the Crescent’ near her old neighbourhood to shop” (in Umeh 1996:373). But of course that may very well be painting a picture which is “too good” to be true as each and every society has its own problems of human relationships.

**Conclusion**

This essay has explored how Buchi Emecheta presents herself as Wife, Mother and Writer in her autobiography *Head Above Water* principally and her other writings and pronouncements in general. Through the exploration of Emecheta as an Igbo woman and as Sylvester Onwordi’s wife I have explored the extent to which the experiences she relates in her works could not entirely be said to be representative of the experience of the “African woman” as both she and Cynthia Ward maintain. And through an exploration of Emecheta as mother/writer I have sought to demonstrate how her experiences as a divorced woman and, subsequently as a single parent, affect the kind of views she propagates (which I have identified as ambiguous mostly) relating to biological motherhood especially and her brand of ‘feminism’ in general. As we have noted Emecheta’s perspective on her feminist mission is highly oscillatory. It is not any single thing, it would seem that it cannot be distilled into any coherent system of thought. She generates a sizeable amount of controversy along the way in which she herself, controversially, gets caught up. Also what came in for scrutiny was the quest for universal sisterhood a project that for Emecheta, as for any utopian, is still highly problematic. All in all, by the end of the autobiography Emecheta does achieve some measure of autonomy - a problematic autonomy though, it has transpired, hence the ambivalence.
that both struggles require equal attention from all those interested simultaneously.¹¹

Furthermore, with respect to problems of global or universal sisterhood, apart from Miss Humble and Emechta’s mother who try to stand in the way of the would-be writer and the First World feminists whom she sees in some respects as enemies of Third World women, several other women come in as Emechta’s opponents in one way or another rendering universal sisterhood difficult. For instance, when she first arrives in London, the Onwardi’s first landlord and landlady harshly evict them from their lodgings because, as Emechta suspects, being childless themselves they are envious of young Buchi with her ‘troop’ of children (p.31). As she is about to give birth to her fifth child the social service workers she goes to refer her case to fail or, rather, refuse to understand her situation when she feels that labour is about to set on - and to imagine that they were her fellow women!

Class and perhaps race is yet another barrier. There is the case of her ‘friend’ Phyllis Long who disliked the fact that she lived in the same high class area as Emechta (p.103). She also has an issue to pick with those who are advising her that she retry marriage which she later realises is deliberately ill-advice: Later her female friends are keen to have her re-enter the life of matrimony which Emechta suspects is advice given out of envy to injure her: “The few women friends I had at the time kept telling me what I did not want to hear. They were so keen on my re-entering into matrimony again that I became suspicious. They could not have been enjoying themselves that much, and I later realised that the facts that I got myself published and was reading for a degree were too much for some of my female friends”(p.96). Much as this could have been true, yet, Emechta’s successes taken proper account of, still one gets the feeling that she could be seen as a snob as from time she looks at herself as a sort of ‘superwoman.’

However, Emechta does achieve some good measure of cordial relations with her fellow students when she is reading for her undergraduate degree in Sociology—they divide up which areas whom will work on and share their research findings. This seems to reflect the sense of togetherness she experiences at the Pussy Cat Mansions where, as Christine Sizemore(in Umeb 1996:3-73) observes in her article “The London Novels of Buchi Emechta,” “Adah [Emechta’s another alter ego] finds that the problems of poverty bring women together and create an interracial community...[and] she takes the

with a steam of songs that please my god. (Delta Blues & Home Songs; p.36)

“About before their unbelieving eyes” (p.36) is a symbol of defeat. How does he hope to defeat his enemies when he carries no weapon. The foiling of his enemies stratagems “with a stream of songs” implies the use of his art (critical poetry) to dethrone oppression in his Niger Delta region. Tanure Ojaide in his two texts studied in this paper calls himself a singer and his work, song, which in his own context and by implication our context are critical materials valuable in liberating his oppressed and impoverished people of Niger Delta.

Conclusion

What we have done so far in this paper is to examine the place of art in society. Our conviction is that art is a product of social dynamics. From the foregoing discussion, Tanure Ojaide uses his poetry by means of various literary devices to accede to the interdependence of art and society.

Throughout the two anthologies, we see the coalition of the artist and his art at work to bring to the limelight a society foregrounded by forces ready to send it to extinction. In the contexts of the two collections, we could be right to describe Tanure Ojaide as a poet-crusader who uses his poetry to mediate and intervene in social contradictions as noticeable in the pre-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta. In other words, his art transcends the theory of art for art’s sake, but his is art for transformation and illumination. This is visible as we appreciate the embittered pre-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta translating into a better post-Saro-Wiwa Niger Delta home.
Notes

1. Described by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka as an intellectual and spiritual dwarf, Sani Abacha’s unparalleled profligacy has attracted a range of condemnation and psychoanalytical studies. See, among others, Femi Abodunrin, “Oratory in the tongue: Ken Saro-Wiwa’s A Month and a Day and The Writer in Politics”, Journal of Humanities, No. 15, 2001

References


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places to study. It does not mean that they did not love her. What the Western type of civilisation demanded was not the type of civilisation demanded earlier on” (Umeh 453.) It would seem that at this stage she is perhaps learning to let go of her seeming possessiveness]. She is also critical of some aspects of First World representation though especially what she calls ‘sensationalist’ and ‘insensitive’ presentations on clitoridectomy in Africa. In an interview with Oladipo Ogunede she takes Alice Walker head on for what she regards as an aspect of such misrepresentation and disrespect for Africa’s elderly women in her writings in general: “I personally don’t welcome her intervention and there is a group of us who are very angry about it...She parades herself all over talking down on African old women and reducing us to nothing. You know we respect our old women. She talked down to them and that is unforgivable...” (Umeh 1996:455). Another largely unwarranted stance there since female clitoridectomy is still a prevalent symbol, a brutal one too, of female oppression on this continent.

Dr. Harriet Sibisi’s charge against First World women’s exclusive and narrow focus on birth control and the suffering of African women under the yoke of patriarchy at the same conference, however, viewed in a slightly different light does seem to make sense: her argument runs something like ‘fight all battles.’ That is if First World women are truly concerned about the plight of women in the Third World then they must first engage their own peoples, their governments, their trade and financial institutions in their countries and some such bodies and individuals to stop their genocidal policies against the peoples of the Third World because these lead to the further oppression of the Third World women they are trying to help free from patriarchy. All these issues touch on what Katherine Frank calls an internal contradiction of African feminism: “the very notion of a liberated African woman is a contradiction in terms. The issues of the irreconcilable antagonism between the African woman’s identity as an African and as a woman( qtd in Ward 1990: 84). The troubled question has been: what comes first between the fight against imperialism on the international scene and the fight against male chauvinism at home? According to Marie Umeh while both fights are important at this stage top priority must be given to the gender fight: “There can be no question that the “politics of gender” has to cease in order for the collective struggle against the real enemies-social injustice and human degradation-to take place around the world (Umeh 1996: xxxiii-iv). I beg to differ with her on this point and suggest