

The Politics of Dispossession and the Redemptive Praxis in G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Marsh Boy and Other Poems*

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ABSTRACT

This essay interrogates how African writers, especially those from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have used their works to shape society; redirects its steps to the path of progress and at the same time, chastise obstinate characters in the society. The study relies on G'Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Marsh Boy and Other Poems* which he employs as a radical tool to participate in the struggle for liberation of his people from the hands of their tormentors. The sociological theory which entails the extrinsic relationship between literature and society is adopted in this paper to foreground the revolutionary dialectics of Ogbowei poetry and the social formation that birthed them. Our motivation derives essentially from Mao Tse-Tung's conviction that "revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary writers". Thus, this essay provides new insights into Ogbowei's poetics as a leitmotif for motivating mass movement against socio-economic and political ruptures in Nigeria. It argues that Ogbowei, through his poetry, not only confronts evil in all its manifestation in the lives of the people but also lampoons the insensitive nature of the Nigerian government who collaborates with foreign capitalist oil multinationals to defraud the people.

Keywords: Politics, dispossession, redemption, praxis, Ogbowei

INTRODUCTION

The king has soldiers to enforce his orders, and prisons for their infractors; the pontiff has a captive congregation by the "divine sanction" behind his words. But the writer has no such far-ranging temporal and spiritual powers. He can only reach the willing reader through the private antennae of his consciousness (Niyi Osundare 1986:1).

The Niger Delta Poets "do not merely nag; they also guide. They are gravely involved in social criticism of their troubled society. Their howling songs commemorate the ecocide in the Niger Delta region" (S.E. Kekeghe, 2014:68).

Writers have over the years used their works to shape society; redirects its steps to the path of progress and at the same time, chastise obstinate characters in the society. The early works of Charles Dickens, George Elliot, Jonathan Swift, to mention a few, inadvertently changed aspects of the despoliation of the English country side of the 18th century. Dickens' *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist* not only created awareness in the mind of the people about the degrading condition the poor and their children suffer, they instigate the society to redirect her resources to better the conditions of the downtrodden. It is this socialist reality that engendered what has come to stay as modern African literature. From the works of Sol Plaatje, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwe Armah, J.P. Clark, Sembene Ousmane, to mention a few, one apparent decimal that confronts one is the urgent quest to right the wrongs in the existing social order. This is why G.G. Darah contends that "... all classical traditions of world literature are fostered by environments where there are intensive struggles against great evils for the restoration of human dignity" (100). These evils are those foisted on the masses by society's superstructures whose proboscises are constantly connected to their arteries where they bleed to an un-remedied death.

In Nigeria, one of the issues that have engaged creative writers in recent times has been the reckless despoliation of the Niger Delta environment by the activities of oil multinationals in collaboration with the Nigerian government. This crass dispossession cum internal colonialism has generated debates and counter debates from many quarters; and more often than before has inspired literature which interrogates various strands of the injustices that are daily meted on the helpless people whose God-given crude oil wealth has become a curse to their existence. Committed and Radical writers of the region, such as Tanure Ojaide, Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Ibiwari Ikiriko, G' Ebinyo Ogbowei, Ebi Yeibo, among others seem to have heeded Osundare's call for the writer at this moment of grave despoliation of their land to produce more of "literature of praxis, a concrete, activist literature with a clamorous statement about the social situation" (6), by churning out works that interrogate the disenchantment of the peoples of the Niger Delta. Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *The Endless Song* (1989), *The Fate of Vultures* (1990), *Daydream of Ants and other Poems* (1997), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1999); Bassey's *Patriots and Cockroaches* (1992), *Intercepted* (1998), *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood* (2002); Ifowodo's *Homeland and other Poems* (1998); Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000); Yeibo's *A Song for Tomorrow* (2003), *The Forbidden Tongue* (2007), *Shadows of the Setting Sun* (2012) and *The Fourth Masquerade* (2014), among others, are ready examples of literary works that examines the Niger Delta predicaments. In other words, the Niger Delta poets, like their English counterparts have constantly used their works to confront squarely, the distortion that the discovery of crude oil in the region has brought on the life of the people. However, in the Nigeria case, art does not change society because the authorities who benefit from the injustices against the people seem to be allergic to change.

The Niger Delta and Politics of Dispossession

The Niger Delta, comprising geographically, six states of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Cross Rivers and Rivers; and politically, nine states, with the addition of Ondo, Abia and Imo states, is blessed with abundance of human and natural resources. Crude oil and gas resources have served as the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy since the end of the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. However, instead of progress in terms of development, the discovery of crude oil resources in the Niger Delta has translated to pains and sorrows to the people and their environment. We can therefore say that the Niger Delta is that "region within the political and geographical set-up known as Nigeria that suffers monumental social injustice, political marginalization and economic alienation in spite of its abundant natural resources" (Omoko 2013:180).

The status of the Niger Delta is made parlous by hegemonic forces in high places. As the essayist has noted elsewhere, since the 1970s when crude oil became the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy,

Successive military regimes had alienated the people from the affairs of their country. Their resources – land, economic trees, and waterways have all been destroyed by the oil multinationals in collaboration with the military dictators with no corresponding development in the land. Therefore, when democracy was gained in 1999, the people accepted it as a breath of fresh air. They had hoped that the civilian politician would be more accessible and would listen to their demand for social justice. But few years into civil rule, it was clear to the people that the civilian-politicians are a chip off the old block – as gross mismanagement and looting of the nation's wealth become a normal way of life among the privileged few (Omoko, 2014:122).

Owing to these socio-political injustices perpetrated against the people, the youths of the region had no choice but to take up arms as an imperative option to confront their oppressors. And Ogbowei, like his predecessors, cannot fold his arms and watch from behind – he employs his art radically to participate in the struggle for liberation of his people from the hands of their tormentors. This, according to Osundare, is the real duty of the writer:

... a real writer has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression. Like the prophet of the Old Testament, he is the guilty conscience of the king, his words the nagging, unremitting images in his mind, his words are an incitement to revolt, to disrupt the deathly equilibrium, the mendacious "peace and stability" of a truly violent system(4).

It is against this backdrop that Ogbowei takes up his pen, cocked with the pellets of defiance against the centrifugal powers that have held his people down for a long time. A course, he bears like an epic hero on a

redemptive mission for his people. In other words he is alive to his responsibility as a critic and chronicler of his peoples' shared experiences, as a commentator on the ills and tribulations of his society (Oyeniyi Okunoye, 2002:19). It is in this regards that Okunoye expresses his thoughts about African literature that "any informed assessment of contemporary African literature must recognise the fact that it is at once a recreation of social reality and a critique of the African condition (19).

G'Ebinyo Ogbowei is among the leading voices of the Niger Delta whose poetic oeuvres rest on the reclamation of the natural inheritance of his dispossessed kindred. He uses his poems to constantly attack various hegemonic structures within the Nigerian state for its conniver with foreign oil multinationals to perpetuate untoward evils upon the hapless peoples of the Niger Delta whose only crime against society is that crude oil deposit is found in their backyard. His foray into the art of poetic craft since his early days at the university, and his thematic thrust in recent years has demonstrated his commitment to the plight of the suffering masses in Nigeria, particularly his people of the Niger Delta who suffer daily from environment degradation, pollution, and poverty. Faced with these experiences, the Niger Delta poets are committed in the quest to salvage their communities and region. No wonder Awhefeada declares that the Niger Delta poet "is sensible to the plight of his people and the prevailing condition of social decadence to which they have been subjected by political leaders" (380).

In recent years, Ogbowei poetry has attracted attentions from different quarters of the society. His collection *Let the Honey Run and other Poems* made a shortlist in the LNG Nigeria Prize for literature 2005, *The Towncrier's Song* and *The Heedless Ballot Box* were joint winners of the ANA Bayelsa Isaac Adaka Boro Prize for Niger Delta Literature, 2008 while the collection *Song of a Dying River* made a shortlist for the LNG Nigeria Prize for literature, 2009. With these robust outputs, Ogbowei has established himself as one of the leading poetic voices in the Niger Delta. In this essay therefore, we shall interrogate the revolutionary engagements of Ogbowei's poetry. Efforts will be made to address their redemptive mission in the face of serious socio-political realities in the region. Our focus shall be on his collections, *Marsh Boy and Other Poems* (2013). This is because the collection best exemplifies the revolutionary stand of Ogbowei's poetic oeuvres, who, like other radical poets of the region, believes that violence is a necessary ingredient in bringing the agitation of the masses to the purview of their oppressors.

Ogbowei's *Marsh Boy and Other Poems* explores the conflict between the forces of exploitation and those of popular struggles as well as the intrigues that have become the fulcrum of the Niger Delta consciousness over the years. He uses various poetic tropes in evoking these thematic engagements. The collection is replete with poems that explicate the suffering and degrading condition of the people of the Niger Delta. In this collection, Ogbowei demonstrates a keen knowledge of the Niger Delta question and personalizes the suffering of the people who must come out of their shell to confront their tormentors, the oil multinationals and their Nigerian political allies. For example, in the title poem, "marsh boy", he uses the marsh boy to symbolize all those in the Niger Delta who are locked in the prison of poverty denied the right to rise out of holes in sighing swamps (*Marsh boy*, 21)

The entire poem is clothed in revolutionary garbs that are capable of transporting the individual from the realm of apathy to that of anger and reaction. The poet injects into the individual the blood of confrontation, and the spirit to stand for justice even if it means sacrificing one's life for it. Hence the poet-persona must become the marsh boy who must reclaim the lost land from the hands of the oppressors.

i am the marsh boy quick and handy with a gun, i am the marsh boy stalking beneficent tyrants, swept south by cruel storms stolen in the mean months of '66 (*Marsh boy*, 21)

The image of '66,' in the last line of the above quoted stanza unfolds the history of the evil of military infidelity and the inherent violence that it birthed. The socio-political events of 1966 in Nigeria that culminate in the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70 are of immense significance to the people of the Niger Delta. This was the period in which Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Federal Commissioner (Minister) for Finance advised the then military head of state, Gen. Yakubu Gowon to promulgate a law that will invest on the Federal Government the right to own and control all petroleum resources in the Niger Delta. This was done to prevent the breakaway Biafran army from having access to the crude oil resources of the Niger Delta to prosecute the war against the Federal Government. The law, known as the Petroleum Decree 51 of 1969, now Petroleum Act, (Cap.350, laws of the

federation, 1990), “empowered the Federal Government to arbitrarily hijack and nationalize the natural resource rights of the states and communities where petroleum was mined” (Darah, 2014:11). Hence, the resources of the Niger Delta were “stolen in the mean months of ‘66”. Over five decades after the end of the Nigerian civil war, the status of dispossession has remained the same. Here, Ogbowei’s political stand becomes apparent. The status quo must change to express justice and fair play in the Nigeria project. This, in the views of Peter Nazareth, is the duty of the committed African writer who must produce works that will unsettle the distorted political equation of their nations. According to him, no “African who writes about society in present day Africa can avoid being committed and political... In the sense that every attempt to re-organise society in Africa is a move which affects everybody, the figures at the top and the bottom” (6). In other words, instead of the people of the region, the owners of the petroleum resources to benefit from their God-given wealth, they are starved and pauperized by the authorities. Ogbowei intones:

We’d be decked in royal robes

But you dress us in shrouds

(Marsh boy, 22).

It is this abnormally of double standard where the people who own the crude oil wealth of the nation are impoverished that the writers of the region have come out to address in their works. But successive military and civilian regimes have paid deaf ears to the demands of the people. This is because as far as oil remains the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, the status quo will benefit them.

Ogbowei further exposes in the poems that it is indeed the politicians and the military commanders in power that fuels the Niger Delta crisis. In their greed to own all the oil blocks in the region they make sure new entrant to the lucrative oil business is shut out. They work in collaboration with foreigners to recruit hungry youths from the region to help them engage in oil theft/bunkering and sometimes pay them to wreak havoc to oil installations where they make money through repairs and inflated budgets. As the essayist has observed elsewhere, “...the forces against the African people are those of political and property groups who work in alliance with foreign compradors to milk the people of their self-dignity by impoverishing them through the exploitation of their services” (Omoko, 2013b: 59). In other words, these political and economic vultures benefit from all fronts of the crisis which unknown to them, deepens the level of distrust between them and the people:

angry waves wash away turkey cocks

commanders wrestling for control of oil

clinging to privileges that deny our humanity

establish the objective merits for war

commanders coveting stone to throne

legionnaires would live forever in the soaring city

recruits us to steal for them the useful objects

...

(Marsh boy, 23)

Ogbowei, therefore, blames the environmental ruins and poverty in the Niger Delta to the politics of greed that has become rooted in the Nigerian political landscape. In “the tyranny of greed” he describes the average Nigerian politician as one who “...does nothing but grab and hide” (41). The politicians are selfish and care only about what they can grab from the system. They are entrenched in politics of seductions, killings as well as despoliation of the land. This status of dispossession and greed is well expressed by Chinyere Nwahunanya when

he laments that the Niger Delta which “accounts for 98 percent of the nation’s foreign revenue ironically seems not to have been included in the calculations concerning how that revenue would be spent or invested” (xiii). The poet thus makes it clear that,

this is the tyranny of greed

this seductive violence

that snares your scoffing soul

that takes captive your mooning mania

takes it on a tour of killing fields

deep in the despoiled delta

(Marsh boy, 41)

This idea also resonates in the poem, “welcome to our smouldering swamps” where Ogbowei paint the Federal government as a monster whose central focus is on the oil and gas wealth accruing from the Niger Delta, and not on the wellbeing of the natives of the Delta. Their waterways and forest resources have been devastated and all their means of livelihood taken away from them by the activities of the oil multinationals. Whereas, their counterparts in other parts of the world where crude oil resources are found, either in Asian, Europe or in the Americas, are treated like kings. This colossal disaster of the Niger Delta environment is well illustrated by Darah thus:

The oil industry has had a devastating impact on economic and social life. This is illustrated with unquantifiable amount of oil spillages, gas flaring, burst-pipe fires, degrading of exploration sites, and attendant ecological disasters. The negative socio-economic consequences of the petroleum industry are devastating because, being an export-oriented system, there is limited local involvement. The wealth generated from the industry benefits more foreign users and sections of Nigeria that enjoy hegemonic power to divert the wealth to favour their areas of the country (56).

The hostility of the Federal Government to their plight therefore, makes them to question if they are actually part of the general Nigerian project. This according to Nwahunanya, is “the symbol of the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests teaming up with the local comprador bourgeois class” (xiii). This idea is also expressed by Stephen Kekeghe when he avers that the “Niger Delta poetry bears the characteristic rhythm that unfolds the paradox of pains, disappointments and hopes of the natives” (60). Amidst these obvious dislocations between the tormentors and the people of the region is the open coronation of corruption and dispossession with bloated fangs, ready to pounce on anyone who tries to dare the status-quo. These already crowned vices are imposed on the people and sustained by force and violence. This has resulted to a situation where the people are cowed – many with tortured sensibilities mused about aimlessly. Of course, those to whom they look up to have already sold their consciences to the Mephistophelian cabals that have held them down over the years. For the oppressors see anything that comes between them and the oil wealth of the people as an enemy which must be crushed to death. As the Ogbowei laments,

you who’d kill your way to oil and gas fields

you who’d cultivate our confidence

pounding cross creeks into submission

waltz with us through the starving swamps

waltz with us through the maze of time

...

(Marsh boy, 28)

Good schools and health facilities to the oppressors are a luxury to the people. They are non-entity in the Nigerian state that must be kept in a state of abject poverty in order to make them perpetually submissive to the exploiters.

what are schools and clinics to the vanishing ones

what are water pumps and power mowers

what are cruisers and ~~suvs~~ to the swamps dwellers

...

(Marsh boy, 28)

Furthermore, the poet sees the oppressors as people who are always not comfortable with any move of resistance from the oppressed. They want them to be contented with their debased status.

i am the evil child who cries too much

you say

i am the spirit driving the delta round in loops

you say

(Marsh boy, 22)

It is instructive to note that the poet also engages the sincerity of the so-called freedom fighters who benefit from the struggle of others just because they are privileged to negotiate the future on their behalf. These privileged few are the rural elite who recruit young boys and girls into the various militant camps to unleash terror on the state. They are the ones who decide when and how temporary peace is needed in the region. They are the ones the insensitive government and the oil multinationals trust and patronize. To the poet, these are the bad eggs who betray the quest for justice and equity by the people. He does not hide his anger against them and their allies in government.

now locked doors are blown open

see scheming cowards and cunning criminals

celebrate the valour of partisans

their watchful practised steps

bringing them to thrones others have died for

(Marsh boy, 25)

To the poet, until the authorities recognize that justice and equity is a prerequisite for peace, the Niger Delta will always be a battle field where the oppressed will continue to fight for their rights:

how can they live in peace

whose seductive symphony

calls out of ravaged rivers

the avenging demons of destitution

(March boy, 25)

The consciousness that derives from the insensitive actions of the politicians in collaborations with the oil multinationals has made the people to be resolute in their quest to reclaim their land and God-given resources from the hands of the oppressors. They must do it by all means necessary to make sure their voices are heard in every quarters of the nation. This idea is well ontologised in the poem, “to brig-gen wuyep”

...

where we’ve resolved to make our stand

...

we’re the lowlifes

crawling out of the cracks

of your hissing hearts

mambas we raise our heads

stare you straight in the eye

stare you back your thieving tracks

lighting out of the undergrowth

(Marsh boy, 46)

Here, Ogbowei becomes confrontational and uses his art as an appropriate instrument of propaganda to sensitise the people about the evils of the Nigerian government which collaborates with the oil multinationals to oppress them. It is against this creative thrust that Kalu Uka contends that all “arts is in essence propaganda. Once one writes or dramatizes, one is in it. We must therefore do propaganda – with our art” (30). Ogbowei therefore does not hide his redemptive mission – he uses his art to create consciousness in the minds of the people, spur them to action and make them believe, as Ola Rotimi puts it, “not to do something is to be crippled fast” (6). As Ogbowei himself, explains:

...for me poetry is a legitimate weapon of war; to sensitize my people of the impending doom...we have a weak, dishonest government that doesn’t represent any region, but a clan of murderous kleptocrats holding down and running a nation with great potentials... They are merchants of death, traders on the soul of the people they claim to serve (qtd. in Kekeghe, 2014:61).

He thus assumes the voice of the voiceless peoples of the Niger Delta, showing them the path that leads to salvation – which is to him, is a direct confrontation with the oppressors. The poet believes that his mission as a writer is “not only to explain the world” but to “change it” (Ngugi 1981:75). Ogbowei therefore explains that, he is

determined to cleanse the contumacious coasts

determined to drain the defiant wetlands

with flattery bribes and broken covenants

written with the blood of her branded braves

...

(*Marsh boy, 51*).

To make headway in this noble task to reclaim the land from the hegemonic forces that

a wicked wind blows out of the parched north

a thirsty wind blows out of the improvident north

besieged like Leningrad

...

Who'd cleanse a race to advance a clan

(*Marsh boy, 33*),

the people must be united. This is the means by which the collective call for justice and equity can be heard by those who care. Ogbowei affirms that at this stage of our political maturation, the people must put away fear and be ready to hunt down their disturbing nightmares. This idea is apparently conveyed in the poem, "hunt down ephialtes"

...hunt down ephialtes

clever little pig in brick house

turncoat has turned the truculent plains

over to pillagers and sackers

take our deathless message

take the deathless seed

sprouting in schoolrooms and trenches

take it to the master of the tables

(*Marsh boy, 31*)

The image of the "clever little pig in brick house" is reminiscent of the character of Squealer in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* who is notorious for using 'sweet words' to deceive the other animals in the farm just to make sure that they are in perpetual submission to the whims and caprices of Napoleon's dictatorial rule. In other words, the people should be weary of vain promises by the government and the oil companies. This according to Osundare is the fulfilment of the writer's aspiration:

The fulfilment of a writer's aspiration is fraught with problems. While the king and, to a lesser extent, the pontiff... have an *instant* power to precipitate change, the writer's strategy is a slow and painstaking process of appeal and persuasion. But it is the very nature and ramifications of the powers of these two that often give impetus, purpose and meaning to the writer's mission: to help the people, through his vision and inspiration, to demolish the chains and dungeons of the king and rout his task masters, and to disperse the clouds of mystification formented by the pontiff between the people and the firmament of social awareness. So in many ways, the existence of temporal and spiritual oppression which manifests itself in socio-economic and cultural subjugation does not make the writer's mission necessary, it makes it inevitable (3).

The aspect of Ogbowei activism that strikes us in his redemptive mission is the quest to reclaim the machinery of power from the political and economic gladiators who have woefully failed the people in the provision of infrastructural development in the region. This theme is well foregrounded in the collection in that it is highlighted as his motivating insight.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, Ogbowei has thus shown that he is committed to the reclamation of his peoples' lost glory which have been bastardised by the activities of the oil-majors. He not only confronts evil in all its manifestation in the lives of the people but also lampoons the insensitive nature of the Nigerian government which collaborates with foreign capitalists to defraud the people. With this thematic thrust, Ogbowei has therefore engrave his name in the pantheon of African writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Ayi Kwe Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Tanure Ojaide and others who have used their works to champion the course of the masses.

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