



Reading Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* as Tragedy of Blood

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Abstract

Niger Delta oil crisis has been one of the major social, political and economic problems confronting Nigeria. As a result, Nigerians of different arts and professions have been showing concern about this persistent confrontation between the federal government and Niger Delta militant youths. Literary writers have been reflecting this oil crisis in their literary creativity in any of the genres of poetry, drama and prose. Ahmed Yerima is one of the literary writers who have reflected the Niger Delta oil crisis in their literary creativity with the publication of his Niger Delta trilogy (*Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*). *Hard Ground*, the first of the plays in the trilogy is this paper's primary text. The play uses dramatic device of irony to advance its plot and theme as the tragedy of blood. With critical reading, the play presents tragedy of blood/ revenge tragedy from two levels of interpretation: denotative and connotative/metaphorical. The play's success is reflected in the playwright's use of characterisation (as seen in Baba and Nimi) and creative use of irony to advance the plot and to complicate the play's conflicts.

Keywords: Ahmed yerima's dramaturgy; Revenge dramaturgy; Niger delta oil crisis; Oil and tragedy of blood.

1. Introduction

Ahmed Yerima's reputation as a playwright rests on the contemporaneity and thematic relevance of his plays. Till date, he has written scores of plays which address private and public concerns of individuals and Nigeria's socio-political space at large. Doing a rough classification of his plays, one can say that Yerima has written plays on historical personages such as Attahiru, Ameh Oboni and Ovomramven Nogbaisi, cultural plays such as *Igatibi*, adaptations such as *Otaelo* and political history of Nigeria as thematically presented in the three plays on Niger Delta – *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*. These three plays on Niger Delta oil conflicts focus on the lingering confrontations between the Federal government of Nigeria and Niger Delta militant youths.

Of the three plays, this paper selects *Hard Ground*. The first of the reasons is that the play pioneered Yerima's forage into Niger Delta dramatic discourse following other writers such as Tanure Ojaide and Ogaga Ifowodo. Another reason is that the play creatively presents all the overt and covert complicities which surround the lingering Niger Delta oil conflicts. Similarly, the play presents the tragedy of blood from denotative and connotative perspectives. The concept of tragedy of blood as used in this paper is explicated in due course.

This paper is not oblivious of some critical engagements of Yerima's *Hard Ground*. These critical works either see the play as fictional reality or a play agitating for the rights of Niger Delta people whose general assumption is that they are marginalised in the economic and political matrix of the country. Austin Ovigie Asagba's "Between Reality and Fiction: Issues and Challenges in Clark Bekederemo's *All for Oil* and Yerima's *Hard Ground*" examines the artistic strength and weakness of the play in relation to Niger Delta discourse. The critic critiques the play in comparison with J. P. Clark's *All for Oil*. The core of his argument against *Hard Ground* is that the play is structurally weak in plot and characterisation. Tugbokorwei and Ogu-Raphael (2010) "Agitation and the Limits of Rights: An Assessment of Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* in the Context of the Niger Delta Question" is another critical work on Yerima's *Hard Ground*. The critics review the genesis and trends of Niger Delta oil conflict with its effect on the country's economy. They go further by critiquing how Yerima captures the dimensions of the conflict in the play. The critics situate their critique of the play within the context of economic and human rights of Niger Delta people.

Niger Delta oil conflicts have been widely documented in political, historical, sociological and literary texts. Among the available texts and critiques of Niger Delta oil conflicts are G. G. (Darah, 2014) *The Niger Delta Resource Control and the Quest for Justice*, (Ekpo, 2004) *The Niger Delta and Oil Politics*, (Peel, 2010) *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontier*, Azeez Akinwumi Sesan's "Mismanaged Niger Delta Oil Conflicts as Terrorism in Amata's *Black November*" and Austin Ovigie Asagba's (Ed.) *Theatre and Minority Rights: Perspectives on the Niger Delta*. The central idea in all these documented texts is that all is not well between Federal Government and Niger Delta militant youths following their displeasure with the management and allocation of resources derived from oil.

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It is against the background of Niger Delta's oil crisis that Yerima writes *Hard Ground*. The plot and characterisation of the play reveal that he has a fairly reliable understanding of the tension and uneasiness between the government and the Niger Delta militant youths. His understanding of the psychological and emotional stress that the oil crisis has caused Niger Delta people may be as a result of due consultations he made in the course of writing the play. This argument is based on the inference made from the author's note where Yerima writes "this is where I must thank my research assistant, Soibifaa Dokubo, who sometimes believed more in the project than I did" (*Three Plays*, p. 9).

2. Oil and the Tragedy of Blood

The first manifestation of tragedy of blood comes from Roman/Senecan drama and later extended to Elizabethan/English drama. The concept of tragedy of blood negates Aristotelian conception of Greek tragedy which forbids violence and blood on stage. This paper's conception of tragedy of blood is consistent with Holman and Harmon (1992) description of tragedy of blood. In their view, tragedy of blood is "an intensified form of revenge tragedy popular on the Elizabethan stage. It works out the theme of revenge and retribution (borrowed from Seneca) through murder, assassination, mutilation, and carnage". The deduction from Holman and Harmon's description of tragedy of blood is that it can be used interchangeably with revenge tragedy. In the light of this, this paper uses tragedy of blood and revenge tragedy interchangeably.

Yerima's *Hard Ground* demonstrates features of tragedy of blood/revenge tragedy in its treatment of the faceoff between the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the Niger Delta youth militants. The playwright's plot, characterisation and overall dramatic gestalt in *Hard Ground* reveal its conformity with the essential features of revenge tragedy/blood tragedy. The essential features of revenge tragedy as given by Holman and Harmon are given as follows (i) the offense, which can be maximized by the multiplication of injuries and by adding of insult; (ii) the antagonist, most effectively some really formidable (but still vulnerable) person or force; (iii) clarification of strategy and marshaling of resources; (iv) a series of delays, obstacles, diversions, mistakes, reservations, and so forth – anything to retard the momentum; (v) some unforeseen development that almost thwarts the scheme, but not quite and (vi) the showdown, with the revenge carried out in some answerable style (p. 404).

Since the existence of Niger Delta, oil has been the albatross hanging on the neck of the region. The whole oil crisis in the region began with palm oil in the pre-colonial and post-colonial history of Nigeria. There is a shift from the palm oil crisis with the discovery and exploration of petroleum oil products at Oloibiri. In this line of argument, this paper corroborates (Sesan, 2019) view that:

The federation of states that constitutes the modern day Niger Delta region of the country has witnessed one form of resource control problem or the other during the era of palm oil production in the region. What we currently witness as oil crises in the region and the whole of Nigeria as a country is a repeat of all the mismanaged conflicts of the palm oil era. The nature and dimension of these palm oil crises have been re-enacted in J. P. Clark's play, *All for Oil*. The play reveals the height of mistrust, betrayal and gross impunity which characterised trade in palm oil before the discovery of petroleum oil in the region. The current militancy and insurgency in the Niger Delta region reinforces the inability of the government to tackle the resource control problem head on because of some socio-political and economic problems such as ethnicity and visible lack of political will.

The oil exploration in the region has been characterised with tension which has been affecting economic and social activities of the region. The fierceness of the tension is seen in the lingering bloodletting and blood shedding which is persistent in the region following the agitation for fairness in the distribution of oil resources.

It is in the light of the above that this paper discusses Yerima's *Hard Ground* from the perspective of tragedy of blood, which is seen at the denotative and connotative/metaphorical levels of meaning. At the denotative level, the focus is on the plot, subject matter, characterisation and themes of the play. Nimi's opening statement shows that blood shedding is not strange to the Niger Delta militant boys. In this opening speech, Nimi complains that he does not request anybody to rescue him and that he prefers to die like other militant boys who have lost their lives in the struggle. Like other militant boys, Nimi believes that dying in the course of the struggle is martyrdom because it is equated with dying for the land.

The characterisation of Nimi, Baba and Mama in the play sustains the play's tragic vision. These three characters are directly related by blood and this situation brings the complexity to the tragic vision of the play. Mama is worried about the safety and sanity of her son who has been indoctrinated into the Kaiama Declaration which "cease to recognise all undemocratic decrees that rob people and communities of the right ownership and control of their lives and resources". Baba seems undisturbed in the whole situation for the reasons best known to him. With Kaiama Declaration and the perceived economic and political marginalisation of the region, Niger Delta militant youths do not see themselves as Nigerians. This situation is presented in Nimi's dialogue as given below:

NIMI: No! No man from this swampy area is from this country. Any man from the swamp who says he is a Nigerian is a traitor! They take our God-given gifts and share unequally and now you want us to share the same birthright with them. Death! To the last of us standing. Death until we get back our freedom. (HG, 39)

Nimi's view is representative of the collective believe of Niger Delta militant youths. These militants are ready to 'sacrifice' their lives for the 'liberation' of their land. Consequently, these youths now suffer from double consciousness. This paper's use of the term is consistent with W.E.B. Dubois (1997) use of the term. While describing double consciousness, Dubois avers that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls two thoughts two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (38)

The Niger Delta militant youths find it difficult to reconcile the two 'warring ideals' in them. They, therefore, prioritise their being from Niger Delta over being from Nigeria. This double consciousness does not make them see anything wrong with killing and other forms of criminality associated with militancy.

The complications which surround Nimi's rescue from Don's jaws of death precipitates the crises in the play. The unfolding events in the play really qualify it as tragedy of blood/revenge tragedy. Different individuals who are related by blood as husband, wife, son, mother, uncle, cousin and nephew secretly aim at one another's throat. The overall assessment of the events reveals the play's consistence with the essential features of revenge tragedy, as reiterated below for clarity:

(iv) a series of delays, obstacles, diversions, mistakes, reservations, and so forth – anything to retard the momentum; (v) some unforeseen development that almost thwarts the scheme, but not quite and (vi) the showdown, with the revenge carried out in some answerable style (Holman and Harmon, 1992).

There are series of delays, obstacles and diversions in the actualisation of the vengeance lurking in Nimi's and Mama's respective minds. Despite these diversions and obstacles, Nimi is able to execute his act of vengeance.

The tragedy of blood is more problematic in the play because of mistrust and misrepresentation that each of the characters has for one another. These characters are suspicious of one another's action. For instance, Nimi is suspicious of his uncle, Father Kingsley while Inyingifaa, another uncle of Nimi is suspicious of Nimi. Similarly, Mama is suspicious of the moves and actions of Inyingifaa. In a discussion with Nimi on the personality of Inyingifaa in relation to the brewing tension, Mama describes Inyingifaa as a traitor. The following excerpt reveals thus:

MAMA: That one is a traitor. He will sell his own blood if the price is good. He measures everything in terms of money. Tamuno ... sometimes I think (*Hard Ground*, 33)

What happens at the home front of Baba and Mama indicates that there is no cohesion and understanding among the members of immediate and extended family. This is very tragic because this situation breeds acrimony and hatred which may lead to bloodletting and blood shedding. Without arguing too far, the disharmony in the family eventually leads to the aggrieved individuals aiming the lives of their victims – Nimi, for instance, threatens Father Kingsley's life with a dagger he collects from Inyingifaa. This shows that all is not well among people who are related by blood.

Baba who later turns out to be Don executes Nimi's wife and the unborn child with the accusation that she is the traitor who always reveals the secret of the militants to the government. It is the death of his wife and the unborn child which aggravates the hatred that Nimi has for Don. Similarly, the death of his wife and the unborn child inspires Nimi's urge for vengeance. Reacting to the news of his wife's murder, Nimi threatens as follows:

NIMI: Noo! Not Pikibo! No! Not my son! He did not offend a soul! Not my woman. The Don should have spared their lives for my sake. I must find the Don and kill him too! (NIMI *jumps up trying to run out. The men hold him. He continues to scream between tears and wailings.*) Not Pikibo! Not my son! (*Hard Ground*, 52)

The excerpt underlines an argument that one tragedy leads to another in the home stead of Baba and Mama. As Nimi is poised for vengeance against Don, Mama is also resolute on avenging the death of her brother as masterminded by the Don. Baba's homestead, therefore, is a hot bed of violence and tragedy. At the end, Nimi carries out his threat as he kills Don. With sense accomplishment and fulfilment, Nimi says:

I have killed the Devil. Did you not hear how the bastard fell on the hard ground! I slit his throat with one stroke. (*Hard Ground*, 61)

If the tragedy of blood can exist within a family circle, it is no longer strange that vengeance permeates through the whole struggle in the play. The Niger Delta militant youths with their patrons and sponsors embark on militancy as a vengeance for presumed neglect and marginalisation that their region has been subjected to. Nimi's statement to Father Kingsley shows the ideology guiding the militancy in the Niger Delta region – blood for blood. The following excerpt reveals thus:

NIMI: No! That is the law of God. We ... him and I, operate the law of the jungle. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth, and thus, a bite for a bite. (*Hard Ground*, 53)

Nimi's statement reveals the reasons behind the brutality of the militancy in Niger Delta. The militants are ruthless in their operations. They engage in kidnapping, hostage-taking, murder and vandalisation of oil installations.

Reading the play connotatively, one can say that the nation's economy bleeds. The sponsors and the patrons like Inyingifaa milk from the troubled waters. They engage in oil bunkering and gun running. For this reason, they do not want the militancy to come to end. The little time that the militants are subdued by the government, Inyingifaa begins to count his economic losses.

INYINGIFAA: My business stopped. My shipment could not pass through. No one wanted my guns. I was told that the big men had established another route and another source. My men were killed. Paraded on television that they were caught bunkering. But I never meddle in oil, only guns. Now the lives of my boys must be avenged. (*He brings out a dagger, and moves towards NIMI, determined to hurt him.*) (24)

The above is among the critical issues which need to be considered in the sustainable resolution of Niger Delta oil conflicts.

That blood flows with oil in the Niger Delta region is not news. The militants are ruthless in dealing with the local people and expatriates, thereby, following the tragic path of blood. The militancy which is believed to be an attack against the federal government is also aimed at some individuals in the region. In the light of this argument, this paper corroborates (Akoh, 2010) view that:

It must be noted that the agitations are not limited or directed at the federal government alone but also among the ethnic and political groups within the region. The contentions and agitations within the region as they affect the Nigerian federal system are based on resource control: who controls what and to what extent?

Akoh's view shows the tragic situation that the country has led itself to. Brother killing brother all in the name of resource control. What is worrisome, however, is that militancy is for the economic benefits of selected few. In this confrontation between the government and the Niger Delta militant youth, women and children are the worst hit.

The playwright's use of god, Tingolongo, is an attempt to say that the ancestral spirits of the founding fathers of Nigeria are not pleased with the spate of violence lingering in the Niger Delta region of the country. Tingolongo warns "the struggle will take you all, if you do not allow the heartbeat of your brother control your hot temper" (*Hard Ground*, 48). While talking with Tingolongo, Nimi justifies the militancy in the region. He states that it is in the best interest of the region and its people that the youth engage the government in violent agitations. In its reaction, Tingolongo says:

The people have to die. For whose cause? (*Chuckles again.*) Yours or theirs? (*Strong voice.*) The gods need the people! When you kill them all, who will worship us? Who will pour libation at the shrines? Who will sing our praises? Hum? You have become a disease which robs the children of the swampy fields of their future, instead of giving them life. Childish fool! (*Hard Ground*, 50)

One of the deductions from Tingolongo's statement is that tragic path that human toll is affecting gods. The ancestral spirits are not convinced with the altruistic claims of the militants. In another view, Tingolongo covertly offers a view that the path of dialogue should be tolled to avoid further killing of innocent souls of Niger Delta and Nigeria at large.

3. Situational Irony and the Play's Tragic Vision: A Postscript

The simple definition of irony is the incongruity which exists between thought and reality or assumption and actuality. To achieve the tragic vision of the play, Yerima uses irony to complicate its conflicts and tensions. The very beginning of the play suggests the use of irony. At the opening of the play, Nimi complains that he does not want anybody to rescue him because he does not want to be called a coward by Don, his group's militant leader. He is not aware that he is actually complaining in the presence of Don who also doubles as Baba, Nimi's father. This paper argues that Yerima, perhaps does this on purpose. If he does not do this intentionally, it is our concern here to argue that he creatively uses this situational irony to achieve the play's tragic vision. This position is maintained because:

While the writer is free to think and write what he/she thinks is right in the most suitable language and style according to his/her judgement, the literary critic who is part of the consuming audience is well positioned, by virtue of his knowledge and experience of literary aesthetics, to dissect the inter-relations of all the constituents of a literary product. The critic not only attempts an interpretation of the work but also a statement of assessment of its quality. (Adeoti, 2015)

The release of Nimi after the ransom has been paid is a ploy by Baba to bring Nimi to safety of the home. The irony of the situation is that Baba pays the ransom (and by implication to himself) in order to secure Nimi, his only son. If he does not bring Nimi back home, other militants who believe he has betrayed the course will murder him. Besides, Baba brings Nimi home, perhaps, to hear the true account of the situation directly from Nimi who leads the boys for the operation. Unknowingly, Nimi has given the account to Don who he is afraid to meet because of the ugly incident which happened to the boys he led for the operation.

The irony of the play is creatively used as it advances the contradictions and conflicts of the play. Nimi has so much respect for Don (before things go awry between them) and detests his father's complacency. The comparison of Don and Baba's personalities is given in the below excerpt:

NIMI: A real man, Mama. The one who knows what the children need for the future. A man of God, Mama. A man sent as our Messiah. The Don is god in our part of the country. He feeds and clothes us, he is not like some men that we know, who stay in Lagos and do nothing about the future of their land or children. (HG, 16)

It is inferred in Nimi's statement that he refers to his father as "some men who stay in Lagos". This argument is made because we learn in the play that Baba is a soldier who was once in Lagos. It is while in Lagos that he sent Nimi back to this home town for education. Similarly, the utmost disrespect Nimi has for his father is given in the following excerpt:

NIMI: Mama, I do not want to be like my father, ever! He is seen as a coward back home. I have had to live out the shame. Son of a coward they would whisper. I bore the humiliation with a sense of pain. Never, Mama. (*Hard Ground*, 30)

The boldness and direct attack on Baba's personality is convincing enough for Don/Baba that Nimi is sincere to the struggle.

The irony is further established in the play with the insistence of Nimi that he wants to meet Don for self-explanation of his role in the death of some of the militant boys. Through critical discussion, Don/Baba is able to know the Nimi's secret ambition to be the most dreaded among the boys. Besides, Don/Baba is convinced that Nimi has unalloyed loyalty to the agitation. Through the dialogue between Baba and Nimi, the former is convinced that Nimi is exonerated from the allegation levelled against him. The following excerpt reveals thus:

BABA: Your life hangs, son.

NIMI: I know, Baba. But why? All I wanted to be was a good leader, please the Don, and maybe, one day die for the cause of the nation state. Shed my blood like many great people before me for the love and goodness of my people, the future of the children and the welfare of the old.

BABA: That is if you live, son ... if you live. (*Hard Ground*, 23)

The use of irony to establish the relationship between Baba and Nimi as well as Baba and Mama advances the plot of the play. This position, therefore, negates (Asagba, 2010) view that:

For example, it is difficult to reconcile the role and activities of Baba throughout the play, especially the revelation that he was the much dreaded Don, the militia leader. Apart from the fact that he does not appear a rounded character, he does not come out as a credible figure in the scheme of things. He is more of a masquerade in sleep's clothing. Perhaps, the final movement and senses of the play needs to be radically restructured and developed to give credence to the revolutionary status and role carved for Baba in the end.

Asagba's reading of the play is not critical enough to see synergy in Baba and Nimi's characterisation. By hiding his real identity, Baba is able to know that Nimi is ripe enough to lead the group. At the end of the play, Nimi is able to murder Don/Baba as a mark of vengeance for the death of his wife, Pikibo and the unborn child. Our close reading of the situation is that Baba willingly surrenders himself to be killed by Nimi. This argument is made because in experience and military prowess, Nimi has no strength which can match up with Baba/Don. Besides, Don cannot go for such visit without body guards or weapons. Thus, the use of irony in the play places Baba's role in the play in proper perspective. This dramatic device also complicates the conflicts before the actual resolution.

4. Conclusion

Yerima's dramatic intervention in Niger Delta oil discourse unearths some salient features of the crisis. Our deduction in this paper is that family structures in Niger Delta have significant roles to play while bringing the crisis to end. The home of Baba where nearly all members of the nuclear and extended family have direct or indirect involvement in the struggle is an indication that family structures need to be re-engineered for sustainable solution to the lingering oil crisis. A careful reading of the play reveals it as tragedy of blood/vengeance tragedy at the micro and macro levels of interpretation. The characterisation of Baba/Don and Nimi sets the conflicts of the play. What their characterisation, however, suggests in the whole dramatic configuration is that there is chain of continuity in the struggle if there is no in-ward look into the family structures.

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