WOMEN AND THE NIGER DELTA CRISES: AHMED YERIMA’S SOCIAL VISION IN LITTLE DROPS

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Abstract
The crises facing the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria have been represented by Nigerian dramatist in various works. Evoking from the focus of Ahmed Yerima in Little Drops, this paper conceptualises the tragedy faced mostly by women of the Niger Delta region due to objectification, gender socialization and societal inequality. The play re-echoes the pains of neglect, underdevelopment and the painful results of agitation; highlighting also the pains of displacement, involuntary disappearance, family separation and disintegration, victimization, sexual slavery and rape. Based on a qualitative method of analysis, the work reveals the anguish, travails and trauma faced by women of the region. It emphasises the need for collaboration, understanding and support as a measure for peaceful resolution and promotion of human consciousness. It is the argument of this paper that all actors involved in the course of peace and conflict prevention and resolution adopt a gender perspective that include the special needs of women during repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction because women suffer disproportionately during crises where existing inequalities are magnified, social networks broken down, making them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Key Words: Crises, Drama, Nigeria, Niger Delta, Women
Introduction
The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has recorded series of crises as concern societal and economic development. Available records show that these crises have established relationship with conducts in the environment resulting in a cause and effect situational tragedy that distress people of the region, leaving sad tales especially for the women folk. The unwholesome experiences associated with the Niger Delta region has placed the populace at the menace of environmental degradation which has extended to dehumanizing tendencies. Following such, Nigerian dramatists have risen to the occasion; using arts to address the various vices faced in the Niger Delta. Playwrights such as Ahmed Yerima, J. P. Clark, Esiaba Irobi and Tess Onuweme are some of such writers. However, the onus of this paper is on Ahmed Yerima, who in *Little Drops* employs literature to engage the realities of the Niger Delta milieu. He presents, in the play, a reproduction of social experiences, a refraction of the totality of women’s ordeal in the midst of crises. Buttressing the point made by Ngugi wa Thion’o (1972), that literature does not develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, and direction by social, political and economic forces in a particular society.

This paper, through the lenses of Yerima’s social vision in *Little Drops*, analyses the various dimensions of the human development challenges in the region, with particular focus on the predicaments of women in periods of crises.

The Niger Delta Region
The present definition and composition of the Niger Delta region is a pragmatic one that brings together all oil producing states in the Nigerian Federation, because they have common ecological and socio-economic problems. This includes all nine oil-producing states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states” (UNDP, 2016). The challenges to sustainable human development in the region are manifested in the conflicts over resources among communities, and between communities and oil mongers. The Niger Delta region is, according to the 2016 UNDP report, a place of frustrated expectations and deep-rooted mistrust the reports adds that:

Unprecedented restiveness at times erupts in violence and long years of neglect and conflict have fostered a siege mentality, especially among youths who feel they are condemned to a future without hope and see conflict as a strategy to escape deprivation. Persistent conflict, while in part a response to poor human development, has also entrenched it, serving as a consistent drag on the region’s economic performance and expectations for advancement.

Unfortunately, the siege mentality (of mostly the youth) has adverse effects on the people generally and women in particular as they experience violence because they are women, and often because they do not have the same rights or autonomy that men do. More often than not, women of the crisis prone Niger Delta region are subjected to gender-based persecution, discrimination and oppression, including sexual violence and slavery.

*Rufus* (2018) observes that the Niger Delta people of Nigeria were foremost farmers, fishermen and fish sellers until the discovery of crude oil in their land in 1958. Yerima resounds this in *Little Drop* as he made Memekize say my family were fishermen before the other war took them. And I was the best fish seller in this part of the Creek, but now the water is polluted. Oil kills the
fishes before we get there (Yerima, 2011). Ironically, the people of Niger Delta have been the least beneficiary of the wealth from their land and despite the riches, what they can pride over are environmental degradation, neglect, unemployment, poverty and violence amongst other vices. Furthermore, vast of the region is surrounded by a tributary of rivers that flow into the surrounding Atlantic Ocean (Rufus, 2018). The region could boast of fertile land as well as earning their living through forestry, farming and fishing since they were foremost farmers and fishermen, but the current situation makes that an unrealized dream. In tandem with Rufus, Abah (2009) submits that:

Since the successful discovery of an oil well in Oloibiri in 1956, the Delta has been eyed and explored by various multinational petroleum companies. The oil industry is responsible for over 80 per cent of Nigeria’s wealth. Despite such huge earnings, it is said that much of these proceed goes to only one per cent of the population. In addition to the environmental degradation and community displacement caused by the oil companies in the region, the corruption over oil revenues has been the source of various conflicts over the years.

Above contributions postulate that crude exploration has accounted for the gradual debasement, violence and dearth of human support mechanism in the Niger Delta. This is manifested in various literatures that deal on the Niger Delta theme as most dramatists employ arts as a vent for dislodging their dismay, thoughts and concerns for the inhabitants of the region.

Yerima’s Drama and the Niger Delta Crises
Julius-Adeoye (2009) posits that Ahmed Yerima leads other third generation dramatists in redefining the direction of contemporary Nigerian drama, which he is also treading with vigour. Explaining the energy behind his approach to playwriting, Yerima (2014) notes:

In some of my plays, sometimes I find out that I have to make a social comment. I look at contemporary Nigeria and I find that, for instance, the tragedy that exists is no longer that of Aristotle or even Soyinka. Theirs is the tragedy of destiny and that of fourth wall. They have been taken over by contemporary and the society’s tragedy. Break in social orders and ideological factors create tragedy these days.

The above expression defines Yerima as a dramatist of socio-political realism who uses the medium of drama to comment on the prevailing socio-economic and political situations in his own country and in the case of *Little Drop* (just like in *Hard Ground* and *Ipomu*) the concern is the Niger Delta crises. Adeoti (2007) contributes that Yerima is:

one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary drama stage in the last decade of the twentieth century. Apart from being a playwright, he is an artistic director, a theatre manager, a teacher and a researcher ... Yerima’s dramaturgy combines the practical orientation of a theatre practitioner with the aesthetic consciousness of a critic. He draws broadly from generic elements of tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy and satire; freely experimenting, in sometimes eclectic manner, with theatrical forms known in theatre history.
Julius-Adeoye (2013) describes Yerima as a playwright who is conscious of his immediate environment and reflects this in his drama. This assertion can be related to the number of plays Yerima has churned out about the Niger Delta crises and his engagement with the natural environment through his writings. He creates an overhaul of the situation thereby presenting a wholesome experience and uses historical sources to create a perspective whereby states of plurality, marginality and “otherness” are seen as instruments of government and potential change by the political class. In elucidating this awareness, Yerima portrays that the displaced and marginalised members of the society need to rise to the occasion in order to free themselves from this unholy, demeaning and degrading position. He attempts artistically to expose and portray the history of environment decay and its implications on the people especially the women. Also, Yerima explores reasons why the environment becomes hostile to the inhabitants, the young men and women in particular. What brings about societal indifference, degradation, displacement, dislocation and violence experienced majorly by the women stands to be the major preoccupation of Yerima in writing his plays.

Yerima’s manner of representing situations of the Niger Delta in his drama has earned him recognitions among which are the 2006 NLNG (Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas) Prize for Literature and the ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) Prize for Drama; these awards are attributed to his play text, *Hard Ground*. Another of his play, *Little Drops* made the final three lists of NLNG Literature prize. His recounts of the Niger Delta crises in *hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu* are important highlights for studies of the Nigerian Niger Delta militancy struggle and the varied effects thereof. Consequently, it will not be too quick to say that Yerima has exerted great influence in the evolvement of contemporary Nigerian drama and by extension African drama. As a playwright who is not oblivious of his environment; he creates his stories to reflect the immediate happenings, as evident in the play discussed.

*Little Drops* recounts, from the perspective of women, the evils that come with war situations and acts of terrorism. Yerima seems to be consenting that men often initiate war situation, drive it with their unreasonable ideologies and then have the women bear the brunt by sacrificing their self-worth. Yerima’s creative approach in *Little Drops* brings four women to the fore as voices of sanity in a socio-political and gender disordered society while stressing that these chaotic crises is the creation of men wielding money, gun and little intellect. Furthermore, the play reveals how four women though victims, refuse to be swallowed by the harsh realities confronting them. Rather, they exploit the tensed situation to educate minds like Kuru, Ovievie that have long been entrapped and steeped in a stagnant mentality thus, the playwright leaves the footprint of his ideologies on the characters of Memekize, Mukume, Bonuwo and Azue.

Ahmed Yerima’s perspective of women imaging is evidently shown in his continuous exploration of traditional and cultural backgrounds in the crafting of his plays. Therein lies the diametrical strength of some of his play’s dramaturgy. He expresses passion towards the plights of Nigerian women in a male-dominated oppressive culture and his portrayal of the images of educated and career-driven female characters in some of his plays like *Little Drops*, *The Sisters; The Portraits; and The Mirror Cracks*, depicts a gentle satire of career women in the African context while empathising with the plights of the uneducated characters. Ezenwanebe (2009) posits this as she claims that Yerima, in his plays make younger girls and unlearned women enjoy considerable sympathy. They are represented as real victims and in such a way that evokes
genuine sympathy. Also, his plays demonstrate women agitation against male oppression as seen in *Aetu*; a play that decries girl-child marriage dilemma and its devastating impacts on not just the girl-bride, but also on her offspring and the society at large. Awoyemi (2014) explains that Yerima’s main focus in *Aetu* seems to be the psychologically training caused by early girl-child marriage. He adds that Aetu is left numb with pain, anger bitterness and confusion as a result of the injustice meted her… and having been deprived the right to education by the singular rape on her personality… she cannot be economically viable neither can she be self-reliant. She then is a zero-contributant to national development.

The same replays in *Little Drop*, as Yerima empowers Memekize, Mukume, Bonuwo and Azue to stand up against male oppression, take fundamental steps to soothe pains and help restore peace. Some of his works blend myth, poetry and folklore to present a picture of traditional African elements. In many cases, elements drawn from contemporary African and world realities come together to carve a positive position for human society. The nature and character of the Nigerian state, especially in terms of power access and accumulation of resources, are recurrent subjects in Yerima’s plays as he uses his dramatic works to not only capture the totality of the people’s experience but satirize the ills manifested in the Niger Delta region and bring those issues to the forefront of national and international discourse.

**Women Exploitation and Debasing in Little Drops**

The play *Little Drops* dwells deeply on the devastated effect of the senseless killings, gender induced violence and emotional war induced by the crises of the Niger Delta. The story is told from the perspective of four women: Memekize, Mukume, Azue and Bonuwo. Each of these women pass through dehumanizing situations influenced by their gender. Yerima empowers them to stand up to the situation, find strength in each other and pave the way for a better future. Memekize who lives by the river had lost her children and husband to the war; left to live a life of loneliness and relying only on herself for survival in a crime filled community. In a quest for safe survival she often disguises as a man and put up defence mechanisms thereby avoiding ordeals that otherwise could befall the female gender in a war zone. Memekize is later joined by Mokume, Azue and Bonuwo. Mokume was raped by the militants who invaded her honeymoon hotel room on her wedding night. She explained her terrifying ordeal thus:

Memekize: We were on the bed celebrating our honeymoon at the Life is Sweet Hotel, when all of a sudden, a loud gunshot noise came into the compound. It was deafening at first. We grabbed all we could. My husband was stronger and quicker… I was caught by the door by three hefty, ugly mean men in black hoods and guns. My loose wrapper fell at the sight of death… (Yerima, 2011).

Mukume never knew of her husband’s vile identity until his death. Having passed through the horror filled experience of being raped by three man at an instance, she found no more strength to fight the evils that came calling, she poured this out to Memekize, who she mistook for a man with intent to rape her. The conversation:

Mukume: Ha, God! Ayiba! This is rape? No! Don’t rape me. I beg you, don’t (*sobbing slowly*) I beg you.
Meme: Why? You are too good for me? Haa, I smell? I am good enough to die for you like a swamp pig but not good for a little enjoyment? I am not good enough to rape you?

Meme: No … you are more than good enough …

Meme: Then why?

Mukume: No but please. I am all sore

Meme: Sore?

Mukume: Yes. Please I have been raped three times today already. Kill me instead. Shoot me and let me die! (crying) No! I will not let another man touch me. Kill me first. (slowly, she raises her head) I shall die first, not one more finger on me. (Yerima, 2011)

Mukume expresses the anguish that comes with rape. She considers it an act that has misplaced her being; introduced and created a lasting change that might be impossible to revert. She laments this when she addressed Memekize thus: Down there … where my virtue once lived. Tell me, Mother, will I ever be the same again? (Yerima, 2011). On the other hand, is Azue, the Queen who flees from the hands of militans who had killed her husband, the King. She escaped with her son, the Prince. Upon reaching Memekize’s hut and in the course of their interaction, it is discovered that the little Prince strapped to Azue’s back was long dead. Thus, in a single night she lost her husband, her home, her peace, her marriage and her son. Also added to her personal grieve, she faces condemnation as the one who pushed the king to indulge in dubious acts. This is revealed in her interaction with Memekize who initially knew not that she is the Queen:

Memekize: We heard his new wife pushed him. Urged on by her evil mother. We even heard that he had taken her from the hand of a youth leader, who had sworn to take her back with his last breath. And then he tried to please her with all he had. Buy her love … he went crazy with gifts. Now see what she has done. Pushing the man to an early death. She was his honeypot of death and shame!

Azue: (Calmy. In a whisper, with authority) She did not

Memekize: She did not, heeh?

Azue: Yes

Memekize: How then … the great king remains headless like you said … and she must be floating in pleasure with white oil diggers somewhere in the Garden City. Ayiba will judge her … I tell you … He will (Yerima, 2011)

Invariably, Yerima uses Memekize and Azue’s conversation to buttress the point where women are always blamed for the ills of men. A situation where it is always assumed that the evils of a man are induced by his wife, mainly for selfish reasons. And once the man is down, the woman
moves on embracing the pleasures of life. It is also a pointer that crises sometimes are fuelled by deepen factual inaccuracies; assumptions assumed to be a representation of the true situation. The fourth woman, Bonuwo, a primary school teacher escaped from the devastating site of seeing her school children killed by exchange of ammunitions. She explained the devastating situation thus:

Bonuwo: … I heard this loud explosion. I ran out when I heard screams and shouts. First it was like a bad dream. The roof of my classroom was blown open. Huge smoke and heavy smell of charred skin and burnt flesh. Not one soul … not one child was spared. All I saw were cut off limbs, little trunks, cut off heads, with their hair still burning … Ayiba … forty-one of them … all dead. And when the parents came and met me alive. They took stones, shoes and any other sharp objects they could lay their hands on, and chased me out of town (Yerima, 2011).

Unlike what is obtainable with the male folk, as blame shifting and sharing seems to be the most preferred, the women looked inwardly to how the ills would have been averted. They scrutinize their contributions to the society and the place of women therein. Bonuwo expresses this when she said: Maybe we too did not do right by them. Maybe we mothers also failed them as mothers and teachers. Maybe we let them play too long in the sandy shores, eating “bonga fish”, “popo gari”, and drinking “kaikai” that they feel that life is one paradise, . . . Maybe we too have the blame to share in this matter… (Yerima, 2011). However, Memekize thought differently even as she laments that women as well as mothers have been marginalised and the children once fed by them take up decision without considering what is at stake. Bonuwo and Memekize’s differing opinions are reflections of the different causes that build up crises. They are mentions which should not go unnoticed and worth considering.

Yerima, through the characters of Memekize and the other women reflects on the position of women in the Niger Delta crises, he projects them as translators of a positive transformation agenda. The play emphasises the gains of togetherness, as the women come together like one family, survive the fire and brimstone of war and militancy and address the chaotic and socially disordered society established in the play text. The capturing of Kuru, the head of the boys in Benikuruku Kingdom and the true voice of courage of Memekize, help transform the play as the characters acknowledge that the militants’ formula for the struggle is destructive instead of productive. The play resounds that though the militants believe they are fighting for the economic emancipation of their land, the women and children are daily made victims of the reckless struggles. Memekize objects to the militants’ tactics and makes Kuru see reasons why he must not go the violence route. She purges Kuru of his mentality and educates him saying: That is not the answer . . . it will never stop. The . . . women and the innocent children will always lose their lives. Faith and commitment that is what you need. You must also have trust among yourselves. Then decides what you want for our future . . . have faith in your decision and when you are committed to it, it will be easy to achieve everlasting peace. (Yerima, 2011)

Memekize insists that if the struggle should continue then it must follow a peaceful approach. Exemplifying the mother figure character, Memekize helps the other women find strength and support in each other; together they make plans for better lives ahead. She also demands that Kuru embrace the peaceful approach not as an option but a must-do. The character of Kuru represents the militants whose concern is the achievement of a Niger Delta Republic. To
actualize this desire, they find that the deaths of both children and women are justified and inevitable. On the contrary, the Niger Delta women choose peace instead of war, life instead of death; because they are aware that, in the course of wars, the female gender is the hardest hit. This is declared by Memekize who say: “We have not sent anyone to kill and die for us. We want peace. We are tired of burying our beloved ones….” (Yerima, 2011).

The effect of the Niger Delta militants’ activities against women is not different from what female groups encounter under any war situation. The women’s psychological integrity is often destroyed by heinous acts such as rape and other sexual violence. Women are most often seen as loot of war and instruments of pleasure for the male fighters. Even in the case of the Niger Delta insurgency, Bonuwo claims that when the militants are paid ransom for the release of kidnapped persons, they spend it on “big jeeps, cigarettes, drinks and girls” (Yerima, 2011). Thus, either way women are always adversely affected by the lights of war.

Conclusion
The crises of the Niger Delta are represented in *Little Drop* by constant killing, kidnapping, rape and other dehumanizing vices. The situation in the region has garnered both national and international attention and has in many ways affected the peaceful development of the region. Hence, contemporary Nigerian writers have seen it fit to bring to fore this reoccurring and challenging trend of the region through their literary engagements.

*Little Drop* reveals that the harm, silence and shame women experience in war is pervasive; their redress, almost non-existent. It further comments that the situation of women in armed conflict has not attracted the much needed attention. A study of the Niger Delta crises through the dramatic works of Ahmed Yerima proves that the deepening violence women experience during war, the long-term effects of conflict and militarization create a culture of violence that renders women victims of extended personal and societal trauma. Arguably, *Little Drops* does not claim the universal innocence of women, nor does it argue that men are generally opposed to peaceful resolution. Rather it examines the concept of gender prone violence and roles assigned to men and women in societal discourse.

Through the female characters in *Little Drop*, it could be concluded that women have not given up hope of a transformed, peace inclined society; that women are pulling strength to not just survive but overcome the horror of war crises and intensify on peace-building efforts. *Little Drop* exposes women’s invisibility – as victims, as survivors and as peacemakers and leaders; an attempt which forms some baby step to addressing the opportunities and obstacles to improving progress for women facing crises.
References


