

The Poet as an Eco-Activist: Crude Realities in Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* and Gomba's *Pearls of the Mangrove*

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Abstract

Oil exploration and exploitation in Nigeria's Niger Delta has had devastating consequences on the environment and its people. This has been a source of great anxiety for eco-activists who recognize the correlative relationship between environmental protection and the rights of humans to a healthy environment. They also understand the socio-political implications should these two significant issues go unaddressed - realities which are starkly addressed by Ibiwari Ikiriko and Obari Gomba, two Port Harcourt-based poets, in *Oily Tears of the Delta* and *Pearls of the Mangrove* respectively. Against the backdrop of ecocriticism, this paper explores their poetry as a radical platform for consciousness-raising and a campaign for socio-political change and highlights their grave concern, from the perspective of the eco-activist, for the deplorable state of the Niger Delta environment, the consequent impact on its people, and implications for society.

Keyword: *Poets, Eco-activists, Niger Delta, Oil, Crude realities, Environment, Change*

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Background to the Study

Poetry means different things to different people. For this reason, its definition is often enigmatic, vague and limiting, unable to capture satisfactorily what Rifenburgh (n.d.) refers to as the “power, range, and magic of this ancient, ever-renewing art form” (“What Is Poetry?” para.2). One certain thing about poetry, however, is that it gives voice to our thoughts, feelings and beliefs, a perception which informs the following observation of poetry by Housden (2011):

Poetry at its best calls forth our deep being. It dares us to break free from the safe strategies of the cautious mind ... open[s] our eyes, open[s] doors and welcome[s] us into a bigger world ... [It] reaches within its sounds and rhythms down below the realm of the conscious mind to awaken and nourish our imagination ... galvanize [our] attention and shake [us] awake ... make us more human, and more fully engaged in this world.

Indeed, poetry has evolved through the ages into one of the most powerful and transformative art forms and, through their creative compositions, many poets are engaged in making vital contributions to society.

The poets whose works are under discussion are both from Rivers State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, significantly known as “the treasure base of the nation,” and synonymous with oil and gas due its strategic geographical location and status as a leading oil-producing state in Nigeria (Igbifa, 2013, p. 116).

Prior to the discovery of oil in the region in 1958, the people of the Niger Delta had depended on agriculture - fishing and farming - as their mainstay, oblivious of the treasure that lay beneath their land. Now, despite producing more than 90 per cent of the nation's earnings in foreign exchange over a period of five decades, the oil producing communities have little to show for it. Briggs and Ndimele (2013) identify the following as being responsible for the breakout of conflict in the region: “... inadequate concern for the oil-producing communities by successive administrations in the Nigerian state and oil prospecting companies, coupled with severe environmental problems occasioned by poorly regulated oil exploration activities...”. This neglect of the region has resulted in the agitation for resource control on the part of the indigenes. It is this adverse situation that prompted Ikiriko and Gomba to take up arms through their poetry to raise awareness and fight for change.

Ikiriko and Gomba, belong to the third and fourth generations of Nigerian poets respectively, and their vision reflects Breytenbach's perception of the role of the writer:

...A writer, any writer to my mind has at least two tasks, sometimes overlapping: he is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the exponent of the aspirations of his people. [In countries facing] acute social and economic inequities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people ... [being] totally aware and self-questioning while contributing to the endless struggle for greater justice and more liberty.

Intriguingly, Gomba was a student of Ikiriko at the Rivers State College of Arts and Science, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in 1994. Both poets stand out in their portrayal and indictment of the Nigerian state's betrayal of the trust and violation of the rights of the indigenes of the Niger Delta, but they also indict indigenes who directly or indirectly contribute to the plunder and destruction of the land.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism, with emphasis on Glotfelty's definition, is the theoretical framework of this paper. She posits:

...ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment ... Most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. This awareness sparks a sincere desire to contribute to environmental restoration. (1994, "What Is Ecocriticism?")

Glotfelty subsequently makes a case for the inclusion of ecocriticism in the canon of literary studies. Slaymaker (2007) supports this notion by noting that, "...environmental literature and ecological criticism are a resonating dynamic signal generated by concern for the health of the earth and its resources" (p. 691). Ecocriticism is therefore suitable for dissecting the environmental issues raised by both poets in their collections of poetry, referred to from hereon as *Oily tears* and *Pearls* respectively.

Literature Review

Although Ikiriko's career as a poet was short-lived due to his demise shortly after the publication of *Oily tears* in 2000, the work has been impactful as it has attracted much scholarly and critical attention. Okunoye (2008) in an essay identifies and examines in Ikiriko's poetry what he refers to as "the link between the shared agony of the people of the Niger Delta and a tradition of protest poetry that has been thriving in the region in the past decade" (p. 418). He concludes that the poems reflect the shared desire of the people for social justice and equity).

Okunoye also acknowledges Ikiriko's poetry as, perhaps, that which best represents contemporary Niger Delta poetry within the context of regional consciousness. Ayinuola and Abiodun-Eniayekan (2017) in their study of Ikiriko's poetry concur with Okunoye's assessment of the work as protest poetry and further classify it under eco-poetry. They also highlight its depiction of the exploitation of the Niger Delta and the attendant fallouts as reflections of a global disaster (p. 17). Aghoghovwia (2017), on the other hand, explores Ikiriko's poetry as "a poetics of cartography" in which the poet dialogues with the global. He remarks that the poet's preoccupation with minority rights eventually induces him to favour "regional otherness" as the "veritable identity marker for the Niger Delta subject".

In a recent study on minority rights and resource conflict in *Oily tears* and other works, Gomba (2016) identifies an interconnectedness between oil and power which underlies the repressive attitude of the state and its control centres toward oil communities, and which serves as a strategy through which these communities are stripped of their wealth by those in power. He pinpoints the resultant conflict in the region (which Ikiriko captures in his work) as emanating from the people's demand for resource control and concludes that Ikiriko's poetry aptly reflects the repression and resistance which, unfortunately, are a long way from being resolved.

Gomba's *Pearls* (2011) has also received much critical acclaim. In a recent assessment of past and present Nigerian literature, Adeniyi (2017) describes Gomba as a poet who is deeply grieved about the effects of oil exploration on the environment of the Niger Delta and, thus, “decries the unholy alliance of the government and the irresponsible oil giants” whom he blames, in his poetry, for the crisis.

In his analysis of *Pearls*, Akani (2015) portrays Gomba as advocating resistance as an avenue through which every form of socio-economic and political oppression in the Niger Delta should be redressed for justice, equity and fairness.

For Dick (2016), Gomba depicts, in *Pearls*, the complexities of oil politics which has resulted in a crisis of enormous proportions in the Niger Delta, prompting his urgent call for a resolution due to the local and global implications of this turbulence. Dick perceives Gomba's poetry as a means through which he lends his voice “to the cause of humanity [by exposing the] systemic decimation of a people by the elites whose unbridled economic interests are rated over and above the people's existence”.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that the above critical works have evaluated the works of Ikiriko and Gomba as protest poetry which speaks against oil-politics and its devastating impact on the Niger Delta. This paper, however, identifies the poets as eco-activists, committed to not only highlighting, but fighting the cause of the Niger Delta and its people. Emphasis is, therefore, on their roles as activists, active players in the resistance which they advocate through their poetry - the platform and arsenal of their activism and their call to action.

Methodology

Aware of the failures in the system which are responsible for the crisis in the Niger Delta, Ikiriko and Gomba have resorted to consciousness raising to direct our attention to the impact of this crisis on the environment, as well as “the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications” (Glotfelty, 1994, “What Is Ecocriticism?” para. 9). How they use their poems to achieve this is analyzed and explained through the application of ecocriticism to their poetry.

Discussion

Faced with the crude realities in the Niger Delta, Ikiriko and Gomba explore the intersections between poetry, oil-politics, and the conflict in the region to highlight their enormous impact on the environment and the people. Hass' argument that poems can be “a valuable tool for environmental activists, on both a political and personal level [by] heightening and changing consciousness...” (Miller, 2005, para. 3) is validated in the works of these two poets. Underlying both works is a sense of urgency which propels their arguments against the wanton destruction and neglect of the region which serves as a catalyst for their activism and call to action.

Ikiriko (2000) reveals that the thirty-one poems in *Oily tears* are “a witness to the depredation of the Delta and a support for the claim of courage to halt the pillage” His call to action began with “Evening already” in which he assumed the persona of a storyteller, inspired by the “...drum of the water Spirits” to present the plight of the Niger Delta, to call attention to the urgent need to save the region before it is too late:

Do o do this with spirit speed. if it's evening already on creation day how much time is left to make hay?

This poem reveals the significance of his role as an activist whose aim is to lay bare the crude realities and their implications for all to see. In another poem, “Ikikali,” the “rocket-seed of the sign-post tree” of the mangrove forest is symbolic of the people of the Niger Delta whose growth and development have been stunted because of the pollution of the land:

Firm in the womb of the mud-flat, I am set to span out, willing to fruit-yield.
But the flares over my head Grope my sight. The sludges at my roots Choke my reach.

Although the resources of the region are more than enough to develop the land and its people, they are denied any of the benefits while other parts of the nation and foreigners enjoy the spoils. Angered by this situation, the poet wonders how long it will continue:

But you, base delta, stay sentenced to serve only as source and support.
Brave Delta, hail! But tell all, How long will this sentence last? (“To the Niger Delta,”

For the poet, the Niger Delta's predicament is like a perpetual prison sentence which will remain so long as nothing is done to set her free.

In “Oily rivers,” we are presented with a gory picture of the rivers, the lifeline of the people, completely polluted by oil:

I am of the Oil Rivers, where rivers are oily and can neither, quench my thirst nor anoint my head.

Here, the poet becomes a symbol of the suffering people, robbed of their daily bread, now stunted in growth. He further exposes the effects of crude exploitation on the ecosystem in “To Dapa-Biriye on the jubilee” in which he speaks of “sludged mudflats” now devoid of fish

and a polluted sky “Bereft of the gull's intricate flight-dance” (He succinctly points out that the presence of the gulls would have been indicative of the presence of plenty fish, the fisherman's joy, but the only things plentiful in the region are oil tankers “forever pipe-loading” while the land and people suffer. In “Them and us,” he takes solace in the fact that it is only God that can judge the case between the Niger Delta and these “Thieves of our everything” (p. 24).

Ikiriko, in “Okara's nun,” highlights the deplorable state of the River Nun which he describes as “lifeless” with “crude soiled banks” resulting from the “spillage” and “pillage” while tales abound “Of upcountry folks, / Paupers, waking up millionaires” from its pillaged wealth. A similar imagery is evoked in “Oloibiri” which remains desolate while its mineral,
Is tilled and used to lubricate sex and crime and biggity everywhere else.

These lines reflect the following observation by Anderson and Peek (2002) on the plight of the Niger Delta:

...exploited for mineral resources, this beleaguered area has remained much neglected in terms of social services and the material improvements associated with other oil-rich areas of the world such as Bahrain and Kuwait. [On the contrary, theirs is a tale of] poverty, abuse, and frustration...

In “For Ken” and “Remembering Saro-Wiwa,” Ikiriko calls on the youth to build on the sacrifices of the martyred activist. He reminds them:

Let's not forget that the cause of his hanging is still clinging to the bottom of oil wells.

This reminder is necessary to keep them focused and to encourage them to keep fighting so that the sacrifices of the past would not have been in vain. It is necessary to encourage the people in the face of the marginalization they face in different spheres which the poet highlights in “The minority man”:

Easily moved like a decimal point Insignificant in equations Without factor, without connection, weightless.

The outcome of this marginalization is that, the representatives of the people are rendered “impotent”, “out-numbered and outmanoeuvred” during negotiations for resource control. Ironically, in their hopelessness and helplessness, those they represent are labelled “unresourceful” and “unindustrious”. However, unproductive meetings, promises and betrayals have only heightened the frustration of the people and led to youth restiveness and revolt in the region, the fallouts of which Ikiriko highlights in “Rivers at 25”:

flights, arrests Detentions, fires Killings, starvation, destructions Live-burials, deaths...

Significantly, Ikiriko also acknowledges and decries the complicity of some indigenes in the oil-politics which, to him, has resulted in the devaluation of the past, present and future of

the region. In “Devalued,” he refers to them as “homebrokers” who have mortgaged the future of the Niger Delta to “foreign clubs” . He calls for the destruction of such traitors, and for the youth to “Resolve will into wheels” (“A government ago,”).

In “Delta tears,” the poet identifies himself, not only as an indigene, but also as a personal witness of the crude realities in the Niger Delta: “I utter not what I hear with ears / But what I see with eyes” (p. 33). It is this personal experience of the despoliation of the region that causes him to lament: “they have confiscated our lives / they have stolen our everything”. This is the catalyst for his eco-activism: the recognition that only through a fight, albeit a violent one, can wrongs done the region be righted. He, therefore, gives the rallying cry for action: “And its time to constrict, crush, / And grind insatiate bones and all” in order to “staunch” the oily tears of the Niger Delta.

For Ikiriko, Oily tears becomes not only an avenue of consciousness raising, but the weapon through which he makes his personal contribution to the fight for the freedom of the Niger Delta.

Gomba's Pearls serves a similar purpose as Ikiriko's poetry. Pearls is collection of 44 poems presented in two parts: Part One, titled “New rivers” and Part Two, titled “Old rivers”. Part One, which comprises twenty-one poems, is wholly dedicated to highlighting the crude realities in the Niger Delta. The poems analyzed in this paper are drawn from Part One.

In his assessment of Pearls, Barrett (2011) identifies Gomba's poetry as belonging to “a tradition of activist poetry that is literary in its genesis but diverse in its impulses” (Blurb). Indeed, Barrett is right, for Gomba's eco-activism is driven by the diverse crude realities in the Niger Delta which he presents in “New rivers” - poems which bring into sharp focus his concerns for the land and people. In his lamentation in “Elegy of the river,” he pays tribute to those who have sacrificed their lives for the cause and, in the same voice, rallies for action. This rallying cry underlies all the poems under “New rivers”. At the same time, he directly introduces himself as an eco-activist, ready to embark on the journey to freedom:

The horn is for the children caught in the cave of thorns. The horn is for the warriors bereft of amulets of light. The long horn booms out the voice of the River. The bardic flight is a long horn beyond the banks.

In “The feast of the old dragons,” Gomba, like Ikiriko, emphasizes the fact that the river is synonymous to the lives of the people and, therefore, must be protected at all cost:

We must go to the Root of the River For our birth-cords are anchored at the riverbed Where destinies are weaved in the great loom. We must go in search of strong selvedge

Clearly, the river is the “loom” which weaves the fabric of the lives of the people as reflected in the following observation by Berns and Roberts (2002):

In Nigeria where the Niger Delta occupies an enormous area crisscrossed by rivers, tributaries, swamps, and lagoons, water has always been far more

than a simple element of nature. Water is synonymous with life itself, with spiritual sustenance, with wealth and prosperity, and especially with communication and identity

Life is, therefore, practically non-existent without the river and this makes its protection synonymous to that of the lives of the people.

In “Confession of an oil thief,” Gomba highlights the demand for resource control whose denial has birthed militancy and oil bunkering in the region. The resultant face-off between government and its forces on the one hand, and the “oil thieves” on the other, has led to the untimely death of many, as both parties, realizing the significance of controlling the crude oil in the region, resolve to keep their grasp on it, be it through violence, bloodshed or death:

The Oil-Thief swears to his henchmen. We shall kill them with guns bought with oil money. We shall kill them with tanks bought with oil money. The President swears to his henchmen. The headlines cannot say it all. We shall know the corpses beyond statistics.

Gomba also directly indicts the government by revealing that, often, the numbers of the casualties are doctored to conceal the enormity of the atrocities committed and to staunch public criticism. In the final analysis, many victims go unaccounted for and unacknowledged.

In “Shell's love,” Gomba tackles the greed and duplicity of the government and multinational oil companies (represented by Shell), who approach the people of the Niger Delta supposedly with their interests at heart but end up betraying them:

Yet Shell swears it loves the Delta. SHELL SWEARS! Shell swears its strong love, its killer-love ... May we please ask when the owl started its great song? Is it why its oil-rigs are festooned with nine corpses?

Here, Gomba indicts Shell for its part in the death of the “Ogoni Nine,” activists of the Niger Delta, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa. They had fought against Shell's violation of human rights in the region and had, subsequently, been arrested, tried and executed in 1995 by the Abacha government.

Gomba also indicts the president (whom he refers to as an “ogre”) and his advisers for treacherously hosting the “the love party” for the plundering of the Delta: “SHELL LOVES THE DELTA! SHELL SWEARS! / King Ogre of Aso and his wisemen host the love party” This reference to the president as a monster emphasizes the inhumaneness of his actions.

In “A House of thieves” and “Pigs of power,” he also exposes the complicity of corrupt politicians and indigenes of the land who, rather than fight the cause of the people, join in the pillaging:

Someone should have warned us that our children will join the thieves even when they proclaim on mountaintops that their love for the land, fills ten million barrels per day...

He condemns the governors of the Oil States who reclaim money from the government and “...keep / the money safe in their own leaking pockets” and in “Pigs of power,” he predicts a revolution, a day of reckoning for these traitors who put their selfish interests before those of the region:

But a deluge will come for sure, unless change comes: the present tide is only child's play. A deluge will certainly come: the stormy flood of an angry people.

Bearing this deluge in mind, Gomba justifies the upsurge of militancy in the Niger Delta in “In the face of the gun” which captures the nightmares of pillaging and murder which have become daily experiences of the people. It is this that has led him to conclude that non-violence is not an option when faced with foes who wield the gun - “the first thing to find / is a GUN” This justification is reiterated in “Journal of the militant” which reveals the militant's perspective and what has driven the youth to take up arms:

My comrades and I think a lot in Crocodile Camp because death has perched on our eyelids long before the odd hour when we took up arms against a country that knows no love.

Evidently, it is the lack of love, the alienation of the Niger Delta and its people by their very own country (while the world seemingly turns a blind eye) and the numerous deaths that have strengthened their resolve to adopt new strategies in the fight began by their fathers - militancy. For them, the resistance is a just war because it is a fight to save not only the Niger Delta, but the very soul of the nation. For this, they are ready to sacrifice their lives if need be, until there is change.

In that regard, the youth are reminded that freedom comes at a price which is far better than enslavement, so they must fight relentlessly for their rights: “The land is ours, the waters are ours / And our grip must be firm on our rights” (“We Shall Look the Hunters in the Eyes,” In “The Children of the Delta Say,” the poet exhorts the youth, reminding them that only through their collective will to fight to the death shall the Niger Delta “...survive [the] gallows' hold / and tomorrow will come for sure”

Perhaps Alagoa (2013) best sums up Ikiriko and Gomba's perceptions of the role of the youth in the restoration of the land and harnessing of the future of the Niger Delta in his observation that the restive youth are a “...critical generation, one in which we may place our future hopes of progress”

Conclusion

In *Oily tears and Pearls*, both poets proved their commitment to the cause of social change and justice for the Niger Delta and its people. This they did by responding critically to the socio-economic and political issues that have placed the Niger Delta in a quagmire and the resultant crude realities that have left the land and its people in absolute desolation. Unfortunately, while all this is happening, according to Gomba, “The world dances on our skulls / Foul is fair in the politics of oil” (“The world has cotton in its eyes,”

The first-hand experience of the oil-politics and conflict in the region was strongly revealed through their diction and the vivid use of imagery. In many of the poems, both poets assumed the voice of the persona, using pronouns such as 'I', 'we', 'us', and 'ours' to clearly align their identity with those of the people as fighters of the cause. Ikiriko clearly declared his identity in "Oily rivers" when he asserted:

I come from the bottom of the Amalgam, the base delta where things are made base...

Gomba also revealed his stance in "We shall look the hunters in the eyes":

We shall look the hunters in the eyes Because freedom does not come from the barrel of silence Freedom comes from the sweat of agitation...

In their poetry, their eco-arsenal, both poets, with similar concerns, captured through vivid imagery, crude realities in the region among them the destruction of the ecosystem and the livelihood of the people; the health-hazards experienced by the people; the neglect of the land and its people while others benefit from the wealth of their resources; the unholy alliance between the government and its agents and multinational oil companies; the deceit, betrayal and repression of the people; the complicity of some indigenes of the Niger Delta in the oil-politics; the demand for resource control; youth restiveness and conflict in the region; the wanton killing of the youth and the passivity of the world to the plight of the region and its people. Their details of these realities, concrete and specific, are geared towards raising consciousness and creating opportunities for readers to re-engage positively with the world.

Each poet has also exhibited his passionate and commitment to his role as an eco-activist and this passion is evident in the forms of poetry presented such as tributes, responses and dramatic monologues, as well as their diction and style. Ikiriko focused more on laying bare the crude realities and their effects on the environment and the people through vivid imagery, as well as the use of restrained and cautious diction. Gomba's reaction to the crude realities and oil-politics, on the other hand, revealed his anger, loud and volatile, in his delivery as he focused more on rousing the youths to action. Both, however, emphasized collective will and perseverance on the part of the youth in their resistance, pleading caution, wariness and smartness in the fight for resource control and redress. For them, the future of the Niger Delta lies in the hands of its youths.

Most striking about both poets, however, was their ecocritical stance which found substance in the following observation by Worster that we are "facing a global crisis today ... because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them" (as ctd. in Glotfelty, 1994, "What Is Ecocriticism?") Evidently, their fight is geared not only towards the restoration of the Niger Delta environment and the lives of its people, but also for the reformation of the global ethical systems which allow the creation of crude realities such as those ravaging the Niger Delta and, by extension, society. As Rifenburg (n.d.) posits, "when poets harness their outrage and channel it into emotionally powerful poems of social and political persuasion, their art is often service to humanity in its quest for liberty and justice" ("What Is Poetry," One

might ask if Gomba's poetry was in any way influenced by Ikiriko and the answer would be a resounding yes; the student did learn from the teacher.

Inevitably, an unstable Niger Delta due to restiveness and militant agitation implies an unstable Nigerian and global economy. Urgent conflict resolution that is not only ethical, but fair is, therefore, mandatory for peace to return to the region and the nation. Should this happen, Ikiriko and Gomba would have been successful in their quest for a long overdue redress for the Niger Delta and its people.

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