



Probing the Preoccupation of Oil Politics, Avarice, and Wanton Disillusionment in Uzo Nwamara's *Dance of the Delta*

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Abstract

This study explores socio-political contradictions, hypocrisies, deceits, and the marginal existence of suppressed and exploited individuals in the Niger Delta communities of Nigeria who are unjustly stifled by a few members of the superstructure. The literary analysis is undertaken through the lens of Uzo Nwamara's play, *Dance of the Delta*. This study adopts a Marxist framework to examine the aspects of politics of disillusionment and disequilibrium as captured by the playwright. This is to see the fidelity of the play to the region in terms of verisimilitude. Marxism as a critical template for this study is an economic and political theory that draws close attention to the unfair exploitation of the masses by the political class. It seeks a reversal of the system so that a greater portion of the people's wealth is entrusted to the people who produce it. The study underscores that the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta region, despite its enormous mineral resources, is hinged on the avaricious nature and corruption of a few members of society, who are metaphorically represented through the characters of Chief Akpan and his cohorts. It therefore concludes that the revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed and suppressed is sine qua non for the dethronement of injustice and corrupt practices.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Greed, Crude Oil Politics, Marxism, Niger Delta, Nigerian Dramatic Literature

Introduction

It is not oil that is the problem; it is the greed of human heart. What the oil brings can go round and all will be happy, but a few want to enjoy the good-ies alone...at the expense of communal poverty, penury and regression, that is the crux of the matter (Nwamara 2010, p.24).

The Niger Delta region¹ of Nigeria is culturally rich, with important literary and geographical significance. It is located in southern Nigeria and consists of massive systems of river, marshes, and wetlands. The lives and literary manifestations of the locals have been profoundly affected by the region's unique physical location. The Niger Delta is a literary hotbed, producing an abundance of works that capture the region's complex history, current sociopolitical climate, and diverse cultural traditions. The environmental deterioration, socioeconomic injustice, the effects of oil exploration, and the resiliency of the Niger Delta people are common topics in these literary works.

The trajectory of modern Nigerian drama has witnessed a remarkable shift. Okpara (2017) in "Utopian Social Vision in Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over* and Osundare's *The State Visit*," observes that it has moved from its roots in social life, festivals and rituals, mythologies, and conflict between western and traditional values to plays that x-rayed bad leadership and oppression of the base structure in the society by the new Nigerian leaders as well as general moral laxity immediately after independence. Some of these plays do not merely explore issues of disillusionment and avarice in the immediate post-independence era in Nigeria; they also stretch towards portraying a positive vision for a better society, igniting revolutionary consciousness, and fighting for a better living condition. There is therefore no gainsaying that *Dance of the Delta* is a commendable dramatic piece in this regard as it unveils the blurry oil politics in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which has always favoured a few mouths in the past decades. Chief Eziokwu² in the play believes that they could mobilise the youth to fight these scavengers when push comes to shove. However, these avaricious thieves are going to fight dirty to retain their hold on the people's lifeblood. The implication is that "they do not want the [people] to develop so that they and their children would rule over the [people] forever". (Nwamara, 2010, p.5). By delving into and analysing works like *Dance of the Delta*, we may learn more about the social and political issues in the Niger Delta area, especially as they relate to the extraction of the region's natural resources. This play is a potent vehicle for exposing the plight of the region's marginalised inhabitants and challenging the current power systems.

Using Marxist theory as a theoretical framework, this research will explain the play's significance to the larger conversation about Nigerian literature. Not only does a deeper understanding of this play contribute to the body of literature, but it also provides a springboard for debates about the power of stories to alter the world for the better and bring about social transformation.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Marxist theory as its framework, advanced by Marx and Engels³. The underlying tenet of this idea is that social beings determine people's social consciousness. The idea of a "social being" refers to the actual bonds that people have with

one another and the natural environment as a result of the rise of civilization. On the other hand, "social consciousness" refers to the beliefs, theories, and psychology of social classes. History is ultimately shaped by material production, which has an impact on social structures, nations, and other historically created groupings of people. With the aid of an architectural metaphor, Marx demonstrates this point of view: the "superstructure" depends upon the "base"⁴ (socio-economic relations), i.e., the foundation defines the nature of the superstructure. When the base changes, so does the superstructure.

The foundation and superstructure metaphors represent the aggregate of social ties that people use to generate and maintain their social lives. In other words, according to Marx, the mode of production profoundly determines and influences every aspect of social existence. All mental (ideological) systems, such as morality, religion, philosophy, and law, are, according to him, echoes and reflections of real processes. Other facets of society were rejected by Marx and Engels as "phantoms created in men's brains," and they held the view that other types of awareness are comparatively autonomous and have the power to independently alter men's lives. They believed that other characteristics of society that reflect the objectives of the ruling class during a specific historical period are ultimately determined by the economic aspect of society.

Marx and Engels' literary aesthetic theories were never condensed into a single book, in contrast to Aristotle, and were never at all dogmatic. Their writings on literature and the arts can be found in many distributed anthologies and publications. They analysed literature using dialectical analysis and historical materialism. Marx and Engels had a socially conscious view of literature. It emphasises mankind and their ability to influence history while downplaying the metaphysical. More so than just its historical approach, Marxist aesthetics is best exemplified by its revolutionary readings of history. Their literary ideas try to shed light on a variety of subjects, including the connection between art and reality, the nature of class origin and the class character of art, the unequal development of art and society, and many others. For the sake of this investigation, we would want to clarify categorically that Marxism is a philosophy dedicated to the fight for the total emancipation of humanity through the downfall of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist state by the working class. Marxist philosophy sees art as a partner in the struggle to achieve this aspirational objective.

The purpose of Marxist literary criticism is to explain the literary work in greater detail, and this necessitates paying careful attention to its form, style, and meaning as a by-product of a specific history (Eagleton, 2002). Marxist analysis has significantly improved our knowledge of Niger Delta literature. Since literary works are historical artifacts that represent a social class's consciousness, the Marxist theory is relevant to this study because, as historical artifacts, they can only be fully analysed by considering the individuals who created them, their political and economic relationships, as well as other social systems.

Marxism is vital as a trustworthy tool for understanding the complicated and contradictory issues that occur within the Niger Delta social structure because it can look at how people interact with one another through their behaviour, culture, and experiences. As a result, it is recognized as an important or reliable source for researching current Niger Delta literature, which is essentially a fidel reflection of Nigerian society.

Review of Related Literature

The Niger Delta region, located in southern Nigeria, has been marked by a history of colonialism, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation, which has led to a range of social and political struggles. Marxist literary criticism has been instrumental in providing a framework for analyzing and understanding the political and economic conditions in the region.

One of the key works that addresses the role of Marxism in Niger Delta literature is "Marxism and the Nigerian Novel" by TanureOjaide⁵. In this article, Ojaide argues that Marxist literary criticism is particularly relevant to Nigerian literature because of the historical and economic context in which it is situated. He contends that Nigerian literature is marked by a concern with the struggle for social justice and the need to critique the oppressive structures of power that have shaped the country's history (Ojaide, 2012).

Marxism has played a significant role in the literary discourse of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The ideology has been used to analyze the socio-economic and political conditions of the region, which has been characterized by underdevelopment, poverty, and environmental degradation. This review of related literature examines the use of Marxist theory in the literary representation of the Niger Delta in African literature.

According to Akwaeke (2013), Marxism provides a framework for understanding the political and economic structures that have perpetuated underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. Another work that addresses the intersection of Marxism and Niger Delta literature is *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila⁶. This novel explores the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation on the lives of people in the Niger Delta. The novel's critique of the Nigerian state and multinational corporations reflects a Marxist perspective on the relationship between power, economics, and the environment. Habila (2011) argues that the capitalist system, which prioritizes profit over people, is responsible for the environmental degradation and social inequality in the Niger Delta.

Similarly, Saro-Wiwa⁷ (1994), in his novel, *Sozaboy*, employs Marxist theory to critique the political and economic structures of Nigeria, which have perpetuated poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa argues that capitalism has failed the people of the Niger Delta, and a socialist revolution is necessary for their emancipation. Otiono (2009, p.99), in his article, "Socialist Realism and the Militant Narrative of the Niger Delta," uses Marxist theory to analyze the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa and

Tanure Ojaide. Otono argues that Marxist theory provides a critical lens through which the political and economic conditions of the Niger Delta can be analyzed.

Another important work that addresses the intersection of Marxism and Niger Delta literature is "The Nigerian Novel and the Marxist Tradition" by Onookome Okome. Okome argues that Marxism provides a useful framework for analyzing the socio-economic conditions that shape the lives of the people in the Niger Delta. He contends that Nigerian literature, and particularly the literature of the Niger Delta, is marked by a deep concern with the economic and political conditions that have shaped the region (Okome, 2008).

In "The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide," Adebayo (2009, p.81) examines the work of Tanure Ojaide, one of the most prominent writers from the Niger Delta. Adebayo argues that Ojaide's poetry reflects a Marxist perspective on the social and economic conditions in the region. He contends that Ojaide's work is marked by a concern with the impact of capitalism and colonialism on the lives of the people in the Niger Delta

Marxism has been an influential theoretical framework in Nigerian literature, particularly in the context of the Niger Delta region. Works such as "Marxism and the Nigerian Novel" by Tanure Ojaide, "The Nigerian Novel and the Marxist Tradition" by Onookome Okome, and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila have provided important insights into the socio-economic conditions that shape the lives of people in the region. These works reflect a Marxist perspective on the relationship between power, economics, and the environment, and have been instrumental in shaping the themes and concerns of writers from the Niger Delta region.

Textual Analysis

The play, *Dance of the Delta*, made up of five slides (the scenes into which the play is divided), is another voice to the numerous literary voices against the greed, corruption, and blurry crude oil politics of the political class in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, who by all means abort the hope and thwart the development of the region. Their sole aim is to oppress the people and suppress emerging voices of truth in order to perpetually retard the growth of the communities.

Nwamara lays bare the intentional political deceit and disillusionment of these scavengers who do not only guzzle the people's dividends of oil exploration, but are also blood thirsty; causing harm to any voice of truth that stands on their way. Chief Akpan, Tanure, Wariso, Kalada, Elder Timi and the youths used as thugs to perpetrate harm, are metaphors of the never-ending avarice, conflict, underdevelopment and backwardness in the society.

It is pertinent to highlight here that "Eziokwu", an Igbo word which by English interpretation means 'plain truth'. As a character therefore, he signposts the light that we

never see at the end of the tunnel, cut short by cruel hands. Nevertheless, the ending of the play through revolutionary consciousness and the emergence of the young Ikem, reverberates hope and a new dawn void of leeches. It also challenges the budding youths to conscientise themselves and be a positive part of the change that will better the society at large.

Of Greed and Disillusionment in the Niger Delta Region: The Lens of Nwamara

The playwright, commenting on the blurry sides of leadership in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region, observes that it has been punctuated by a bunch of sleazy, greedy, grabbing leeches and vultures whose trademark is to perpetually oppress, repress, and totally stifle the people. This they do by imposing ignorance, poverty, hunger, diseases, and wars on the people. The rulers, their children, and collaborators would continue to drain and feed on the vital life-blood of their helpless and hapless victims without provoking any protest or challenge (Nwamara, 2010).

The deceit and hypocrisy of the Nigerian political class, which collects bribes and embezzles public funds, are brought to the fore in the dramatic arts. One could describe this level of hypocritical attitude as the *chop-and-clean-mouth* syndrome, regardless of whether the other members of the community die in the shackles of poverty and hunger. For instance, we encounter the greedy chiefs who, having eaten and dined with the multinational companies to the detriment of the entire oil-producing region, ironically proclaim:

We have been inside since morning turning the heat on the white man and his collaborators. God knows we have not tasted even water since morning; we rejected everything they offered us. How can we be eating when our children are hungry and suffering? (*The chiefs hurriedly drop their tooth-picks*). We gave it to them. We let them know that the oil is ours not theirs. (Nwamara, 2010, p.2)

It is no secret that most of the inhabitants of some of the oil-producing communities do not have good means of livelihood. Unfortunately, the communities' political heads are just leeches who collect cars and other expensive gifts from the oil companies at the expense of the masses. Through the character of Elder Fubura, we are informed of the good intentions of the oil companies. As he reveals, "They [are] plans to develop our community by building the needed infrastructure for the good of all." "They also talked about a scheduled meeting with leaders of the community to finalise the arrangement" (p.4). During the meeting, Okwu, the community relations manager, specifically outlines the 7-point plan as follows:

One; we have observed that there are no roads in this community, therefore we have resolved to build new roads, especially the long one leading to the farms to enable the people evacuate their farm produce to all the markets around. Two, we shall build and equip a standard hospital, with staff, to bring to your doorsteps the benefits of modern medicine. This will save you the trouble of trekking thirty kilometres to the nearest dispensary. Three, we shall construct a standard market here that will be the envy of your neighbours. It will be equipped with mills for the processing of palm oil and other farm produce. Four, we learnt that cholera is a problem; we have resolved to sink twenty four boreholes in the entire community. One in each chief's compound and others in the village squares. Five, our gas turbine is big enough to supply electricity to the entire community and beyond. Therefore, we shall commence electrification immediately in the community. Six, we have observed that there are no schools in the six villages that make up the community. To assist in bringing enlightenment..., we shall build and equip primary and post-primary schools. Every child will be assisted to excel through our scholarship scheme. There will also be special schools for adults who may wish to take advantage of the benefits of modern education. And finally, we will provide employment for as many youths as we can absorb in our operations. (Nwamara, 2010, pp.17-18)

In Elder Wigwe's words, "we all know that this is not the first time that such good plans have come to nothing, owing to the greed of a few men calling themselves our leaders." "These thieves, we learned today, have almost bought over the youth" (p. 4). One is bewildered at the revelation that a set of these leaders have been sabotaging the developmental plans of the multinationals. For instance, Chief Akpan, in response to the 7-point development plans, has these words to say:

You have a most comprehensive plan of what we have planned for our community too. But as you can see, our community is a rural one that needs to be led gradually into the light of the modern world. You know what is called culture shock; we would not like our people to be exposed to such massive attack of development to the detriment of our way of life. Much as we welcome modernity, we also guard against a sudden erosion of our values and ways of life. You talked about roads; we don't think that roads are what we need urgently now. As you can see, even the old road that your company uses to your base here has brought us quite a number of troubles; we now see strange characters in our community. Our young girls are becoming mothers too soon; in fact, mothers without husbands. The road roads

brought such evils, so we don't really need roads now. (Nwamara, 2010, pp.18-19)

It is not out of concern for or love for one's community that Chief Akpan babbles these words. It is apparently out of his selfish and avaricious nature, which he intends to feed. As one would expect, his cohort chiefs do not have anything against his response. In a similar vein, his colleague Chief Wariso believes that they do not need hospitals since they already have local medicine men in the community. In his words, "If you build a hospital, you will throw them out of their business" (p.19). Commenting on the proposed new market for the villagers, Wariso maintained that "the women are happy with their thatched stalls" (p. 19). Thus, any modern structure or facility may alter their way of life. Picking up where Chief Wariso stops, Chief Kalada begins with the plans of the multinationals to sink boreholes for the community. His own argument is that the community does not have a water problem. In fact, he believes that what they called cholera is actually a normal situation with the villagers. As he puts it, "we use a runny stomach to cleanse our system; it is not disease at all" (p. 19). He further adds, "If you drill boreholes, the stream will be abandoned or suffer neglect, and our gods will be angry with us for abandoning them" (p. 20). While we commend the playwright's use of sarcasm in the context above, we must also adjust our minds to these realities.

One should therefore not be quick to apportion blame to the white man and the multinationals, who may have fulfilled their own part of the bargain. Like Eziokwu, "the white man does not kill or eat anybody" (p. 11); by corroboration, Ego asserts, "You know very well that it is not the white man that I fear." It is those bloodsuckers who guzzle human blood like the white man guzzles oil. "Both have an insatiable appetite; they are like the grave" (p. 12). Similarly, in *Fountain of Betrayal*, Ted Elemeforo, writing on the relationship between the host communities, their leaders, and the disillusioned masses, leaves a somewhat succinct explanation for this:

Think about it, my dear, a man comes into your father's house. He has paid his rent to your father, and then, tomorrow, your brothers go to him to demand more money for rent. The man has an agreement with your father, not with you. If you feel he's not paying enough rent, go to your father to review the rental agreement....See, that is why you must go to school and get your degree so that no one has an excuse not to give you an opportunity in life. (Elemeforo, 2021, p. 137)

The metaphor of school in that last sentence is synonymous with the revolutionary consciousness of the people who seek freedom from the den of oppression. It is a point of emancipation and enlightenment where one realises that nothing moves until you move it. There is an obvious disequilibrium in the oil-producing communities where only the chiefs

live a life of opulence, and to change this order, the masses have to arm themselves with revolutionary weapons.

Conscientisation and Revolutionary Consciousness

Uwen Affiah asserts in "Protest, Resistance, and Activism in the Drama of Osonye Tess Onwueme" that "nowhere in the world have forces of oppression been known to willingly set the oppressed free at any point in history" (p.284). The implication is that these avaricious thieves, as captured by Nwamara (2010), are going to fight dirty to retain their hold on the people's lifeblood. They obviously do not want the people to develop so that they and their children could rule over them forever. The proven panacea to dethrone this level of injustice and oppression of the masses is to be armed with revolutionary consciousness. The leeches, however, remain.

There have been cruel hands cutting down trees of truth. Most times, the youths are used as tools to perpetrate these evil acts. For instance, Chief Eziokwu's father, the previous Oji-Ofor of the land, was killed for standing for the bitter truth. Indeed, these scavengers are vindictive. Their greed knows no bounds, and they brook no opposition. Despite the prevailing circumstances, Chief Eziokwu seems to be dogged and determined in the consciousness-raising of his people, as well as being the voice of change for the community. As he puts it, "I can't deny the community and the elders my service." Remember, I am Ojo-Ofor. I bear the burden of truth. "I must stand by the truth at all times" (Nwamara 2010, p.11). When Chief Akpan and his fellow enemies of the community were representing their selfish interests in the presence of the multinationals, it was Chief Eziokwu who stood to their faces and confronted them with their dirty dealings. He says, "You are all thieves!" You blood-suckers. Don't you ever want our children to have a future like yours...? Can't you change from the evil ways of your fathers? Don't force me to place a curse on you. If not, these evil deeds that killed your fathers will kill all of you. You graves that keep swallowing the future of our people, when will you change?" (p.22); Apparently, the chiefs physically attack him in the presence of the white man and eventually leave him bleeding from several bruises. Yet, the cruel hands are not done till they forcefully quench the remaining flicker of light to glory in the darkness of their making. Ikem reveals this to his father, thus:

I saw the chiefs meeting and I overheard them say that the battle is not yet over; that the frog that calls for rain must have a strong waist before the flood comes. The other short fat one with bloated face said that the dog that wants to grow horns must be ready to bear their weight. Also the big pregnant one with six fingers said the message given to smoke has got to the sky. He also said that the boil must be ruptured for the buttocks to sit well. (Nwamara, 2010, p.24)

The quest to install the desired change and revolutionary consciousness is not a sky of rainbows where children smile at the sun. It is a war zone where revolutionaries are either made or maimed. Eziokwu eventually dies in a conflagration masterminded by the evil Chiefs. His house is set ablaze in an attempt to eradicate the entire family. Fortunately, his wife and children escape, but Eziokwu perishes in the fire. For Ikem, his son, "a man must die for the ideal he believes in if he is really a man" (p.42); he believes that his father's death was brave, and since he knew that this could happen, he prepared him for a day like this. As he puts it, "He told me that a child's parents are like the *Ikwu* and *Imo* rivers that never dry." The day an Oji-ofor dies, another Oji-ofor is born! My grandfather died for the people! "My father died for the people, but I will fight and live for the people" (p.42).

The survival of the young Ikem and his later emergence to champion the struggle against the oppressor for a progressive society is a signpost that no one stifles the voice of truth and change. An idea whose time has come may be fought, but it will obviously sprout from where one least expects it. One is therefore not taken aback when the Third Youth declares, "I am planning to sneak out and join the revolution" (p.47), and accordingly, other youths follow. Nevertheless, to achieve this revolutionary idea, Ikem must not negotiate with men of violence through peace. He must dialogue with them with superior violence.

The play's end gives the impression that the gospel of revolution, unity, and doggedness could be the only alternatives to unseat the oppressor and enthrone a working society for all.

Conclusion

Uzo Nwamara's *Dance of the Delta* takes a bold and categorical position within the Marxist ideal. It satisfies the primary function of literature as a tool for social engagement by mirroring situations where individuals who are supposed to be the leaders of the underprivileged masses have oppressed and taken advantage of them. The Chiefs portray the superstructure's avaricious greed and self-aggrandizement as efforts to keep the proletariat (community indigenes) in poverty while they enjoy wealth. The drama illustrates the possibility of a victory for the oppressed if they can rise up and struggle to wrest control away from the oppressor, which is in accordance with the Marxist temper. The play's vanguardist confronts the oppressive forces head-on and with brute force, like most Marxist heroes do. The researchers, therefore, are of the view that literature can be used as a tool to reemphasize class consciousness and educate the masses on the best course of action.

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Notes

- ¹ The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been thrust into the global limelight due to resource extraction and conflict, but it is also a region with a rich culture, environment, and heritage. The creative imagination of the area's artists has been fuelled by the area's pressing concerns of indigenous peoples, minority discourse, environmental degradation, climate change, multinational corporations' greed, dictatorship, and people's struggle for control of their resources. See Tanure Ojaide and Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega's *The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* (2021)
- ² A character in Uzo Nwamara's *Dance of the Delta*. He is called the *Oji-ofor*; one who bears the burden of truth.
- ³ Marx and Engel are famous 19th-century intellectuals, philosophers, and political theorists include Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). They are most well-known for the works they wrote together, including the landmark *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and Marx's *Das Kapital*. Socialist philosophy and the communist movement owe a great deal to the work of Marx and Engels.
- ⁴ The means of production and the social relations of production, as argued by Marxists, are the bedrock upon which a society's economy is created. The interests of the ruling class, which derives its power from its control of the means of production, are reflected and served by the superstructure.
- ⁵ Tanure Ojaide is a Nigerian poet, writer, and literary critic Tanure Ojaide. Ojaide, who was born on February 9, 1948 in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, has made important contributions to the literature of Africa. The social and political climate, environmental difficulties, and cultural traditions of the Niger Delta often feature as significant topics in his works.
- ⁶ Novelist Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* delves deeply into the thorny social, environmental, and political concerns that have arisen as a result of Nigeria's oil sector. The protagonist, a journalist named Rufus, takes the reader on a terrifying trip across the Niger Delta, where oil spills, corruption, and violence have had terrible impacts on the environment and the people who live there.
- ⁷ Ken Saro-Wiwa was a Nigerian author, environmental campaigner, and Ogoni tribal leader Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) died in 1995. In the fight against environmental destruction brought on by oil production in the Niger Delta area, he was a vital voice for the Ogoni people and their rights. Saro-Wiwa became a household name due to his advocacy for the Ogoni people and their concerns about the environmental and socioeconomic effects of oil extraction in the region.

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