

Eco-Criticism, Niger Delta Despoilment, and Governance Failure: A Study of Youth Restiveness in Yerima's *Hard Ground* and Ayakoroma's *A Chance to Survive*

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Abstract: Focused on eco-drama decrying polemics of conflicts between elders and youths, government and inhabitants, because of the subsisting environmental degradation in Niger Delta, the article exposes dimensions of frightening inhumanity, wastage, and monumental governance failure. Eco-literati such as Ahmed Yerima and Barclays Ayakoroma objurgate a repulsive culture of hypocrisy, mediocrity, nepotism, lack of patriotism, social injustice, and dysfunctional socio-political structure. This paper discusses the nuances of convergences and divergences in the playwrights' utilization of eco-critical language in portraying shades of victimhood claims, and deplorable actions and inactions, which are inimical to the environment and wellbeing of the people in the region. Drawing from eco-criticism and interpretive approach, the paper examines the portrayal of implicit and overt instances of complicity in the actions and inactions of key characters in the plays as metaphors representing social-political negativities propelling retrogression, pain, and restiveness in the Niger Delta. The observation is that both plays blame the upsurge in discontent and violent restiveness on abysmal leadership by local elders/leaders, as well as the state, federal government and the multinationals.

Keywords: eco-criticism, eco-heritage, leadership failure, Niger Delta, oil, restiveness, Yerima, Ayakoroma

INTRODUCTION

The consequences of unwholesome oil exploration and exploitation in Niger Delta, beginning at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State in 1956, and

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continuing until date, in other parts of Niger Delta, are the subsisting colossal environmental and eco-heritage devastation, which has increased poverty, sense of victimhood, and youth restiveness. Before the unparalleled force of globalization massively ignited global demand for oil and gas, history indicates that in the recent past in African communities (like in Niger Delta), “there existed in traditional society a partnership between humans and nature” (Mazrui 29). Thus, “many African societies, despite their complexities and differences, are drawn to an ethics of the earth” within which “certain nonhuman forms, including animals, plants, and so on, are considered viable life forms worthy of respect” (Iheka 2018, 7). Unfortunately, in the present Niger Delta, these ethics and partnership are regrettably gone. Scholars variously discuss possible and plausible factors that are supposedly responsible, and the effects they have on the environment and well-being. Evidently, there are growing scholarly discussions examining different views and postulations explaining factors behind the reckless abandonment of human and environmental symbiosis in the Niger Delta. Mostly, scholars observe that before oil exploration, Niger Delta people considered the health of their natural environment vital, because their well-being and livelihood (fishing, farming, and hunting), depend so much on that (Aluko 2001; Wiki 2009; Ebegbulem et al. 2013; Nwaozuzu et al. 2020; Eze et al. 2021). Hence, scholars describe the subsisting painful irony in Niger Delta as “awesome wealth and endemic poverty” (Emuedo 2013) or simply a “resource curse” (Ross 2003). As Carolyn Forché (1993, 34) puts it, the literati deploy their creative writings “to speak for more than one and to engage all others.” Therefore, the question is, to what extent, do Ayakoroma and Yerima in their aforementioned plays demonstrate these objectives? This conceptualization by Forché indicates that literature is metaphorically a mirror through which societies’ realities are projected. The literati’s representations coming from diverse inclinations, ideological bents, point-of-views, and worldviews, help in instigating meaningful discussions and re-aggregation of opinions. The key benefit of assessing authorial views and suppositions on a given topic as subsumed in creative writings is to ascertain the level of convergence or divergence of perspectives and explanations. Here, we are examining what Ayakoroma and Yerima have to say on youth restiveness in their plays *A Chance to Survive* and *Hard Ground* respectively. In addition, this paper looks at how both playwrights provide information that emphasizes the importance of a healthy

environment to inhabitants' wellbeing, how an unhealthy environment is a reason behind the nuances of despoilment, disenchantment, violent restiveness and how leadership failure is portrayed as a primary causative factor. More so, this paper espouses the narrative deployed by both playwrights in deepening the reader/audience's appreciation of the deplorable actions and inactions of oil multinationals, militants, community elders/leaders and the government.

ECO-HERITAGE, ECO-LITERATI, ECO-CRITICISM: PERSPECTIVES

Eco-heritage has to do with specific nature's gift to humanity, which includes all naturally existing fauna, flora, water, minerals and topography that are uniquely combined to define a given locale's landscape, habitat, eco-system, bio-diversity, and natural environment. According to Oluwafemi S. Alabi (2021, 2), natural environment refers to the "physical set-up which encompasses earth, air, water, land, trees, fauna, flora, rivers, lakes, mountains, hill, valley, the seasons and all original inhabitants of a given geographical location." Eco-literati, in their writings (prose, drama and poetry), provide differently inclined perspectives about the human relationship with the environment. Furthermore, eco-literati attempt to propagate the desired consciousness in readers through their writings. Some eco-literatures primarily project nature's aesthetics, splendour, magnificence, awe, and enthrallment, while others vigorously interrogate the effects of man's actions and inaction on the environment. Espousing on the latter category (eco-critical literature), Tanure Ojaide (1995, 16), in his book *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, observes that Nigerian eco-critical literature is inspired by the "senseless destruction of our original neighbours, the trees and animals." Pointedly, in "Delta Blues" (an eco-critical poem), Ojaide with emotion-laden lamentations, agitates the consciousness and awareness of his readers as he creatively takes snap-shots of the unjustifiable devastation of eco-heritage and livelihood in Niger Delta by oil multinationals, as successive governments make feeble attempts to reverse the trend. The indication is that eco-critical literature is a medium through which committed writers make fervent interrogations of the consequences of human actions and inactions towards the eco-heritage and the natural environment. Therefore, eco-critical works of literature capture how the growing need by humans to procure necessities such as food, homes, clothing, and raw materials for domestic and global commerce

and industries, have caused massive deforestation, to give way for human settlements, agriculture, and mineral exploration. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, people all over the world, at various levels, have continued to engage in actions and inactions that impact negatively the eco-heritage and natural environment. Even though the above-mentioned human necessities are unavoidably vital for human survival, satisfaction and well-being, countries have placed stringent adherence to sustainability rules as enshrined in their national legislations to enhance positive symbiosis between humans and the natural environment. Such legislations aim to create sustainable utilization of natural and eco-heritage resources as a means of ensuring environmental health and eco-heritage conservation.

ECO-CRITICISM AND THE ECO-LITERATI

Eco-criticism is an informed interpretive assessment of eco-critical creative arts (such as drama, prose, music, films, drawings, paintings, cartoons, and poetry), aimed at deepening the understanding of the subsumed ideas and messages concerning the effect of human actions and inactions towards the natural environment and eco-heritage. William Rueckert coined and explained the term eco-criticism in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" published in 1978. In his interpretation, he presented ecocriticism as an informed critical discussion of eco-critical literature's portrayal and interrogation of human and ecology symbiosis and mutuality both in historical and subsisting realities. Commenting on Rueckert's contextualization, Susie O'Brien notes that eco-critical literature is responses, portrayals and lamentations of eco-despoilment, while eco-criticism is the informed interpretation of eco-critical literature. Furthering, she observes that eco-critical literature variously highlights that "the environment is in a state of crisis, largely of human making, and that urgent action is required if future disaster, encompassing humans and other species, is to be averted" (O'Brien 2007, 179). Thus, in line with Rueckert's idea, ecocriticism revolves around the re-reading of major literary writings from an eco-centric perspective, with particular attention to their representations of the natural environment and eco-heritage conservation or impairment by human actions (Barry 2009, 254). The notion here is that eco-critics in their interpretations, attempt to "extend the applicability of a range of eco-centric concepts" such as "growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and

resources” (Ibid). In addition, ecocriticism projects articulations of “eco-centric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility” in eco-critical arts (Ibid). Essentially, from the work of Rueckert, eco-criticism, which began as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, xviii), has evolved to encompass interpretive discourses on emerging eco-critical portrayals in music (see Rehding 2002; Allen 2011; Smith 2019), film (Ivakhiv 2013; Kääpä 2014; Bülbül 2015), and fine arts (Braddock 2009). Currently, eco-criticism interpretively examines what the literati and other artists have to say about human actions and inactions concerning earthquakes, desertification, deforestation, flooding, forest fire, land degradation, air and water pollution, waste management, acid rain, massive erosion, global warming, and climate change, in songs, cartoons, films, documentaries, literature, stage-drama, and paintings.

NIGER DELTA AND THE LAMENTATIONS OF ECO-LITERATI

Niger Delta consists of nine oil-producing states in the south-south, southeast, and southwest regions of Nigeria. They are Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo and Rivers states (in the south-south), Abia and Imo (in the southeast) and Ondo (in the southwest) (Asuni 2009; Nwaozuzu et al. 2020). Niger Delta is the world’s third-largest wetland, and the world’s second-largest delta with a coastline of about 450 km, occupying a total land area of 75,000 square kilometres and is located on the Atlantic coast of southern Nigeria (Awosika 1995; Ukiwo 2009). Niger Delta remains a major economically viable region because Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings overwhelmingly depend on the region’s oil and gas (Nwilo and Badejo 2006; Nwaozuzu et al. 2020). Elaborating on the critical importance of Niger Delta natural resources, eco-heritage, and bio-diversity, Okonta and Douglas (2001, 63) observe:

The Niger Delta is one of the world’s richest areas. Apart from its substantial oil and gas deposits, there are extensive forests, abundant wildlife, and fertile agricultural land where rice, sugar cane, plantain, beans, palm oil, yams, cassava, and timber are cultivated. The Delta is also famous for its fish resources. It has more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa.

Several studies have evaluated instances of oil spillages in the region, with emphasis on the effects on biodiversity and the aquatic

environment. They are in concordance in their observation that the gravity of damage is monumental. Some of these studies such as those belonging to Akpan and Akpabio (2003), Wunder (2003), Nwilo and Badejo (2001, 2005, 2006), Adelana et al. (2011), Ekpo et al. (2018), indicate that oil spillages severely affect both plants and animals in the estuarine zone, ocean floor, and beaches. These studies suggest that conflict in the Niger Delta revolves around oil exploitation resulting in massive environmental degradation which has destroyed the traditional livelihoods of the inhabitants (fishing and farming) without providing sufficient livelihood alternatives (Nwaozuzu et al. 2020; Eze et al. 2021). Thus, youth restiveness and a sense of victimhood emanate from the fact that:

Despite its mineral wealth, the Niger Delta is one of the poorest regions in Nigeria. There is no infrastructure to speak of and the inhospitable geography of the region has added to the region's remoteness from the rest of the country. (Asuni 2009, 3)

After three decades of muffled grumbling, the Niger Delta youths, who are by far more educated, exposed and radicalized than their parents and grandparents are angry, emboldened, and restive. This is because they are aware that "Nigeria has drawn more than \$400 billion in oil revenues from the delta since independence" and "around \$200 billion in the last decade alone," yet poverty in the region is increasing, and the standard of life decreasing (Asuni 2009, 5). The alarming level of poverty, lack of infrastructure, environmental degradation, and diminished livelihood in comparison to the opulence and density of iconic structures in Abuja, Lagos, Kaduna, and other Nigerian cities that contribute zero oil wealth to Nigeria constrained the Niger Delta youths to see the situation as deliberate marginalization (Nwaozuzu et al. 2020). The subsisting situation in Niger Delta to the youths represents a clear lack of desire or will by the government to plough substantial resources back into the region for purposes of building critical infrastructure and proper environmental management and conservation (Ibid). According to Inya Eteng (1997, 21), "what currently prevails in the Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism" because "the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave." The monumental despoliation due to unwholesome crude oil exploration in Niger Delta is increasingly a major thematic purview in Nigerian literature. Through

these works, the writers variously blame corruption, poor leadership, greed, and parochialism as the major reasons why Niger Delta has remained a tale of tears, despair, conflict, contestation and subjugation. In their observations, Eze et al. (2021), Abba & Onyemachi (2020), Iheka (2018), and Ali (2017), note that Nigerian eco-literati such as Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Nnimmo Bassey, Christopher Okigbo, Christian Otobotekere, Barclays Ayakoroma, and Ahmed Yerima, use their writings to highlight the deplorable realities of oil exploitation, emancipation struggle, and the lack-lustre actions of government. For instance, Ali (2017) explains that eco-literati variously utilize their writings to “celebrate nature’s beauty and potentials” as well as “chastise exploitative activities of man” and at the same time “urge moral and social change in favour of the natural environment”. An example of a celebration of nature’s beauty and portrayal of melancholy is Otobotekere’s “Lake Bird” in which he reminisces on the elegance, beauty and healthy environment Niger Delta was, before the ravaging oil exploration. Similarly, Ojaide’s “Delta Blues” projects dismay, anger, and melancholy that propel youth restiveness in Niger Delta. He berates the oil-gobbling economies for their ‘selfish’ and ‘sanctimonious’ aloofness because all they bother about is the continual flow of oil regardless of the monumental despoliation repressed oil-producing communities in places like Niger Delta endure without choice for decades. Likewise, Niyi Osundare in “Ode to a Falling Tree” presents trees as important entities of nature, by alluringly appreciating how trees are essential ecological chain linking and mutually benefiting all inhabitants in a natural environment. Unreservedly, Osundare describes indiscriminate human tree felling as a loss to humanity and ecology with grave consequences.

In *Hangmen Also Die*, which is one of the first dramas on the Niger Delta experience, the playwright, Esiaba Irobi demonstrates tumultuously how exploration and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta has become dehumanizing, destructive and the source of all kinds of wreckage that sometimes arouse morbid fascination. The play paints a terrible picture of a land hounded into socio-economic and even spiritual turmoil due to youths’ restiveness that now culminates into egregious crimes of kidnapping and wanton killings and vandalism. In this moving tragedy, the unemployed graduates of Izon state (the suicide squad) hanged a traditional ruler, Isokikipiri Erekosima, for embezzling the compensation money given to the

community due to oil spillage that messed up their environment and sources of livelihood. The eventual hanging of the young men by the government foreshadowed the hanging of the Ogoni environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa, by the government of late General Sani Abacha, which drew the ire of the world in 1995. Norbert Oyibo Eze peered intently at *Hangmen Also Die* in two separate articles entitled “Meaning and Significance in Esiaba Irobi’s *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*” and “Environmental Impact Assessment and the Dramatist: A Conceptual Study of Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die*”. He submits that the play shows how the unwholesome exploitation of oil has ignited a multitude of immoral happenings, which have turned the Niger Delta into a rich land gravelling in the muck. Eze (2000, 35) argues that the unemployed youths in the play otherwise called the suicide squad “is a child of depravity, a child of necessity, formed as a means of walking out of the terrains of neglect, poverty” and hopelessness. In the text, Chief Erekosima is projected as a symbol of Nigeria’s cancerous leadership. Through him, the playwright paints the picture of leaders that inhibit the Nigerian political landscape, leaders who do not conceive of leadership as service, but means of self-aggrandisement.

Similarly, Greg Mbajiorgu’s play, *Wake up Everyone* portrays how the genuine efforts of the policy world represented by retired Professor Aladinma to get a local government chairman to assist in building defences against looming flood due to climate change ostensibly caused by capitalist oil production in the area was rebuffed. The Chairman, Edwin Onyechonkeya preferred instead to use the resources from the oil companies to bankroll his election. The flooding, which eventually came, destroyed farmlands and municipal services. Norbert Oyibo Eze examines *Wake up Everyone* in an article entitled, “Drama and the Politics of Climate Change in Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal of Greg Mbajiorgu’s *Wake up Everyone*”. According to him, “the play brings the people, the intelligentsia and the politicians together in a climate-changing scene” in a bid to portray how selfishness, leadership failure, “lack of unity of purpose, and self-aggrandisement thwart genuine efforts at climate change mitigation and adaptation” (Eze 2013, 68). He further posits the play as suggesting that the natural environment is severely under human pressure because of the mindless exploitation of oil, which put an unbearable burden on nature leading to tremendous loss of biodiversity and means of livelihood.

In their writings, these eco-literati suggest that deplorable actions towards the natural environment are unacceptable because they result in different degrees of collective burden, pain, and agony (directly or indirectly, now or later).

PLAYS' SYNOPSIS

Yerima's play *Hard Ground* relays a story that revolves around a boy (Nimi), who was sent to his village (an oil-bearing community in Bayelsa) by his parents who reside in Lagos, to stay with his grandparents, and learn his people's history and culture. In the village, Nimi becomes radicalized, adopts a gang name Scorpion, and enlists in a militant group, which sabotages oil business installations as well as engages in kidnapping and bloodletting. In a failed mission to break oil pipes, a military task force based on intelligence ambushed Nimi and his gang. In the encounter, most of his members were neutralized, but he escaped barely. Yerima presents Nimi as a recently radicalized youth, who is angry, restive, and prone to violence. Nimi who belongs to a militant organization is a metaphor representing the consequence of leadership failure. The inability of successive governments to manage satisfactorily the grievances and complaints of Niger Delta people regarding unwholesome oil exploitation, loss of livelihood, and unhealthy environment results in youths' restiveness. The play depicts the turmoil, travail, treachery, and conflicts a family is enmeshed in as a microcosm of what families in oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta go through due to environmental devastation.

Ayakoroma's *A Chance to Survive* portrays some leaders, elders, and traditional rulers in Niger Delta as those contributing to youth restiveness because they are corrupt and selfish. The play's story focuses on the character, His Royal Highness (Dr.) Kurokaki, a king in an oil-producing community, is projected as a corrupt and self-serving person. The conflict erupts from the king's adamant refusal to distribute transparently the twenty million naira compensation money he received from an oil company on behalf of his community, but the youths insist that he must do so. The king squandered the money on frivolities (acquiring another wife and purchasing an honorary doctoral degree). To force the king to accede to their demand, the youths led by Oloye (a radical youth leader) embarked on a protest. As the protest increased the king's vulnerability, he blamed Oloye and immediately engaged an occultist to eliminate him remotely. However, when the occultist summons the spirit of Oloye, the spirit of Oloye's

father appears and smites the King. The impact sends the King into a state of unconsciousness. To revive the King, three electric fishes are needed for the ritual. Thus, a massive irony and dilemma emanate because the community's ponds cannot boast of such fish. After all, the King has sold the fishing rights to outsiders. Incidentally, the only place where such fish can be obtained is in Oloye's private ponds located at the back of his house. After much pleading, Oloye accepts to give the fish needed for the King's survival because he is in love with the King's daughter. In response, the King gave his blessing for Oloye to marry his daughter.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXTS

In *Hard Ground* Yerima links the causative factors behind youth restiveness to leadership failure, by projecting the apparent inability of the government to ensure an environmentally friendly oil exploration practice, which will eliminate or reduce to an acceptable minimum the incessant incidences of oil spillages and gas flaring to align with international best standards. In addition, Yerima points to massive unemployment as a factor instigating the youths' feelings of neglect and anger. He presents the continuing degradation of eco-heritage and the natural environment as the primary reason behind restiveness and insecurity in parts of the Niger Delta. To illustrate these views, Yerima uses the character Nimi as an example to show how and why the Niger Delta youths transform from peacefulness to restiveness. First, Nimi relocated from Lagos as an 'innocent well behaved boy' to his village, one of the troubled oil-producing communities specifically to learn firsthand the culture of his ancestors. Unfortunately, the things he sees (the degraded environment, glaring inequality existing between the corrupt community leaders and the locals, the inequity between his locality and other places in Nigeria), and the things he hears (the history of marginalization by the federal government, how some corrupt leaders enjoy oil bribe, how few children of corrupt leaders are given employment), seems to compose largely the complexities that agitate his young mind. Thus, Yerima through the deplorable socio-economic realities projected in Nimi's community and its environs, which include lack of employment, lack of social amenities, increase in diseases, decreasing opportunity to engage in their usual peasant farming and fishing because of incessant oil spillages, indicate that government had failed to give the community a meaningful sense of belonging. Therefore, Nimi as a character represents what the complex

oil politics in the Niger Delta has done to the minds of the youth. Yerima presents Nimi as a vulnerable and disillusioned young person who becomes restive because the things he sees and hears daily are woeful, painful, agonizing, deplorable, and inflicted. The play demonstrates that these variables are strong factors that make Nimi (just like other Niger Delta inhabitants) angry and bitter. Hence, when Nimi's mother began to lament Nimi's apparent and rapid radicalization, Nimi petulantly tells her:

You cannot grow up in our ways, as you put it, Mama, and not feel what I now feel, unless you want to hide in the folds of your wrapper, like Baba, and pretend that all is well. (Yerima 2006, 13)

Through Nimi's outburst, the playwright encapsulates the troubled and malignant psyche of most restive youths in the Niger Delta. The deplorable variables instigating radicalization as exhibited by Nimi are visible and widespread. In Nimi's statement, there is a clear sense of disdain for the elders, whom the youth lampoon for their adoption of tacit humility and muffled grumbling.

In addition, Yerima suggests that youth restiveness also revolves around the sense of victimhood brought about by systemic repression and pauperization as Nimi rationalizes. "The school you sent me to was made up of wasteland and poverty" and "even as a child, you smell it and you quickly learn that nothing is free unless you ask for it, and when they refuse to give you, you grab it, and that is what we are doing" (Yerima 2006, 13). The text seems to suggest that the level of unfairness and lack the youths experience as they grow up in a squalid environment in the Niger Delta propel them to become infuriated and restive as indicated in the following comment by Nimi: "Boys first growing up fighting for bean cakes and puff-puff. Then, gradually, we were forced to grow to become men overnight. Asking for our rights" (Ibid). This comment by Nimi suggests that the day-to-day witnessing of the pains and agony orchestrated by the destruction of livelihood due to oil spillages and lack of hope instigates resentment and restiveness. Pointedly, Nimi notes that:

Poverty stinks, and if another man holds the soap, and won't let you have it, then nudge him slightly and collect it. For you need a good bath to become a decent performed human being like him. (Ibid)

The deportment and audacity exhibited by Nimi when his father asks, "so it is your right to kill," and he responds, "If we have to" (Ibid),

subsume what repression, subjugation and indoctrination have done to Nimi who like other youths are systemically compelled to endure unimaginable agony and hopelessness. The above statement by Nimi implies that he resolutely refuses to follow the inclination of the elders, which entails 'tacit humility'. It is rather his belief that they are being unfairly and systemically repressed when it is their full right to share equitably in the oil wealth coming from their backyard. Again, Nimi's comment suggests that the Niger Delta youths consciously see themselves as collective victims of silent but obvious nepotism. Hence, his restive and indoctrinated mindset propels him to admonish his mother:

Why does Mama cry? There are younger boys and girls than me in the struggle. Children who believe in the cause. First, you listen to what the elders say about the struggle. Even when in primary school. You live in pain, and then it sounds right to join the struggle, first as a boy of a group, then as the eye or a spy. By the time you are halfway through primary school, you carry guns for the boys, and by the time you are eleven, in these days of automatic guns, you become an expert. You see people die every day. Either of hunger or of just death, so it means nothing to you. It is a hard life, Mama (Yerima 2006, 13-14).

To Nimi, continuing with crying, a show of emotion, and muffled grumbling as exhibited by his mother, which is the archetype disposition continually displayed by most of the elders, is unproductive. Yerima projects Nimi as a metaphor for the Niger Delta youth who sleeps and suddenly wakes in sadness because his well-being, safety, future, and dreams are gloomy.

A CHANCE TO SURVIVE

In *A Chance to Survive*, Ayakoroma points at environmental despoliation and eco-heritage degradation as the major factors behind Niger Delta youth restiveness. Through the character Oloye, a radical militant leader, Ayakoroma projects the emotions and worldview of the youths in strong rhetoric:

My people, I want you to realize that this is not a personal war. Our problem now is that we are suffering because our oil boom has become a curse. (*There are hisses from the gathering*). We do not have fish in our river again, our food crops are not producing, and our only source of water supply is contaminated always, because of incessant oil spillages.

We have nothing to show for the presence of these companies around us. (Ayakoroma 2002, 20 - 21)

In the above statement, Oloye places emphasis on the loss of livelihood which touches most people in the community, hence, he pleads and rouses the people to view the need for agitation against the perceived repressors as a collective endeavour for the greater good of the community. Ayakoroma presents Oloye as a leader who attempts to galvanize the masses against the government and the oil multinationals. For Oloye, oil exploration has brought with it monumental wealth for others (the oil multinationals, corrupt government officials and their cronies) and poverty for them the unfortunate peasants who have no other ancestral home than the Niger Delta. He notes that the youth and the people are aware that the Nigerian government, corrupt politicians, and the oil multinationals are receiving huge profits from the oil business but what they receive are degradation, repression, penury, and despoilment. He observes that their livelihood, which depends on farming and fishing, is in ruins because of oil spillages. In addition, poverty and diseases are increasing exponentially because oil spillages hamper good farm yield and pollute cooking and drinking water.

In the dialogue between Oloye and three other youths, the playwright suggests that the anguish and despoilment Oloye mentioned in the first excerpt have remained a mere complaint that the government has failed to act on. The play indicates through the dialogue that the youths have reached a disturbing point in their attempt to avoid conflict and continue to remain docile and hopeful; hence, they are becoming increasingly more restive:

Oloye: And we are not ready to take it anymore. Now that we know that, the oil companies have jointly paid the sum of twenty million nairas to our community, as compensation

Youth 2: And it has entered into one man's pocket...

Youth 3: He will vomit it!

Oloye: Yes, he will vomit it. Instead of using the money to improve our lot, he has used it to marry a seventh wife, and buy an honorary doctorate.

Youth 4: Is that so? I did not hear that one o. Tori!

Oloye: Yes. We made the oil companies pay the compensation money because they wanted to cover up the gas explosion (Ayakoroma 2002, 21).

In the above discussion, *Ayakoroma* focuses on one of the reasons youth restiveness persists in the Niger Delta – conflict between corrupt traditional rulers and youths due to the embezzlement of compensation monies by the former. *Ayakoroma* projects the king of the community as the reason behind the youth's restiveness and their resolve to employ violence. The dialogue harps on four levels of factors that propel restiveness in Niger Delta youths. First, due to the continual degradation of the natural environment, which supports their livelihood through oil spillages, the youths are unhappy. Secondly, the subsisting government are doing very little to remedy the situation; thirdly, youths have to apply force and cohesion to compel nonchalant and foot-dragging oil multinationals to clean up oil spills and part with compensation money each time there is an oil spillage. Fourthly, the typical complicity of the king, who is a metaphor for corrupt Niger Delta leaders, due to selfishness would prefer to take bribes and then ignore or work against youths' agitation to end the evils of oil exploitation. The community's King is selfish and not progressive as he delves into self-aggrandisement by engaging in vanity and triviality of marrying more wives and buying honorary doctorial degrees with communities fund. The idea of misappropriation of the community's palliative funds means that the youth will not see the evidence of meagre things promised by the government and oil multinationals; hence, they resort to violence because of anger and disenchantment. In addition, the youth are angry and restive because their selfish king equally sold fishing rights to outsiders thereby depriving them (the youths) the rightful owners the opportunity to fish in such waters to earn a living. The action of the king represents what the youth see as selfish interest, which the elders and community leaders are exhibiting to the detriment of the youths' struggle to force the government to listen and accede to their demands. It can be deduced from the above analysis that the Niger Delta leaders are not absolved of blame as regards the youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region because of the huge toga of corruption they wear. Some scholars pointedly indicate that the youth blame the Niger Delta leaders for their complicity, lack of resolve and sacrifice to frustrate the oppressive federal government (Ross, 2003; Afolayan, 2011; Adeseke, 2011).

The eco-plays of *Yerima* and *Ayakoroma* portray the deep feeling of melancholy, disenchantment, and nostalgia, as some of the characters lament the loss of breath-taking beauty and appeal to their natural environment and eco-heritage exhibited before the oil

exploration and exploitation calamity. Both playwrights, in their stories, present similar reasons and factors behind increasing militancy, restiveness and pro-violence exhibition among Niger Delta youths. Similarly, both plays blame the government's lack-lustre approach towards consistent oil spillages and massive gas flaring, which have continued to exacerbate environmental degradation, loss of livelihood (farming and fishing), massive unemployment, and deplorable unhealthy environment as the reasons for youth restiveness. In both plays, there are indications that from the period, the Niger Delta nations such as the Ijaw, Efik, and Ibibio lost their self-rule to the forceful amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates by the colonial British administration; they lost the power to govern their natural environment and eco-heritage. Thus, the colonization of Nigeria by the British marked the beginning of the discontinuation of a healthy partnership between humans and nature in the Niger Delta while neo-colonization aggravated it. During the period of colonization, the Niger Delta appeared gullible to the promises of good life and development by the European oil multinationals in liaison with the British colonial administration. The Niger Delta people in this era protested mainly with muffled grumbings.

However, the youth began to develop a deep sense of victimhood in what can be classified as the post-colonial/neo-colonial era of exploitation of the Niger Delta. This era involves the 'new master' (leaders from Nigeria's majority ethnic groups) and 'neo-colonizers' (foreign oil multinationals), who have assumed political governance and economic domination respectively from the time of independence until date. Hence, the consistent and central narrative presented by the restive youths in *Hard Ground* and *A Chance to Survive* is that 'neo-colonizers' are not interested in their development and well-being. Consequently, the youths in both plays believe that Niger Delta people are deliberately impoverished as a means of keeping them from emancipation to challenge their stranglehold on power.

In both plays, the playwrights depict that conflict subsists between the Niger Delta leaders/elders and the youths, and between the youths and the government/multinationals. Similarly, both plays present complacency, corruption, and greed as the problems the youths identify in the elders. The plays similarly indicate that the youths are restive and pro-violence because the elders' idea of tacit humility has not yielded positive results. Again, the playwrights similarly reveal that the youths are angry and sad because the elders take compensation

money from oil multinationals' proxy and pocket them without making the sum available for the development of the community. Thus, in both plays, the youths blame the elders for their complicity in the ongoing poverty and pain they suffer because of their selfishness.

Scholars blame the painful realities of oil exploration on the Nigerian government's continual domination by corrupt politicians from other ethnic nations in Nigeria, who are careless about the Niger Delta people's wellbeing. They have explained how oil exploitation has increased penury (Ebegbulem et al. 2013; Aluko 2001), developed a sense of victimhood (Eze et al. 2021; Nwaozuzu et al. 2020), and how poverty and a sense of victimhood have ignited restiveness and violence (Obi 2010; Wiki 2009), among oil-bearing communities' inhabitants. In some studies, scholars looking at the nostalgic and painful recollection of realities before globalization, question why the government in Nigeria fails to plan for proper environmentally friendly oil exploration in Niger Delta (Obi 2010). Consequently, poverty and victimhood have led to restiveness, radicalization, increase in violent crimes and militancy, mostly among the youth population. This scenario has resulted in increased insecurity, disruptions in the oil business, and a significant loss of revenue to the government. In response, the government employs carrot and stick approaches in an attempt to contain the situation.

Restiveness among the Niger Delta youths revolves around their sense of collective victimhood which is "a state of mind that is brought into being by society members and transmitted to the members of new generations" through assimilation (Bar-Tal et al. 2009, 257). According to Bar-Tal et al, this mindset is developed based on seeing and feeling the factors within and around individuals' surroundings. The youths in Niger Delta on daily basis see and witness the deplorable realities of their environment and well-being. Therefore, once the instigating variables are visible and available "the sense of self-perceived collective victimhood is an unavoidable part of the human repertoire in the context of intractable conflict" (Ibid, 258). Also, some scholars observe that a sense of victimhood can germinate when individuals harbour "self-perception of having been the target, either momentarily or over time, to harmful actions emanating from one or more other persons" (Aquino & Byron 2002, 71). Aquino and Byron argue that "in the most general sense, a victim is anyone who experiences injury, loss, or misfortune as a result of some event or series of events" (Ibid). Furthermore, Tami A. Jacoby (2014, 511),

observes that “in contemporary violent conflicts, the construction of grievance-based identity is a fundamentally contested process as the lines between victim and perpetrator are blurred by ongoing cycles of belligerence and retribution.” According to James Bayley (1991), people are victims if and only if they have suffered a loss or some significant decrease in well-being unfairly or undeservedly and in such a manner that they were helpless to prevent the loss; the loss has an identifiable cause; and the legal or moral context of the loss entitles the sufferers of the loss to social concern.

Victimhood and restiveness in Niger Delta are largely blamed on unwholesome oil exploitation which brought with it massive wealth to corrupt government officers and their cronies, and monumental environmental despoilment and socio-economic hardship to the Niger Delta inhabitants. The increasing disenchantment and frustration are instigated by the people’s conviction that they are victims of systemic pauperization, alienation and repression. According to Leonard Berkowitz (1989, 59-60), “frustrations generate aggressive inclinations to the degree that they arouse negative affect”, which “invariably lead to open attacks on an available target.” It is the frustration the characters Nimi in *Hard Ground* and Oloye in *A Chance to Survive* alluded that manifests in their engagement in the busting of oil pipes and kidnapping of oil workers to disrupt oil business in a bid to compel the oil multinationals and government to dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The eco-plays of Ayakoroma and Yerima depict the deplorable but avoidable actions of the oil multinationals, the government and local leaders who exhibit clear disinterest in the conservation of the natural environment in Niger Delta, which has altered the eco-health, the inhabitants’ well-being and livelihood adversely. In both plays, the playwrights demonstrate deep insider awareness as they utilized pertinent perceptual language to drive the message and to tell their stories. The plays seek to draw the attention of the world to the continual large-scale despoilment of the Niger Delta natural environment and the variables instigating youth restiveness. In addition, both playwrights, through the characters Oloye in *A Chance to Survive* and Nimi in *Hard Ground*, highlight the sphere of the conflict, which will help in understanding ways of tackling it. The playwrights indicate that before oil exploration and exploitation in Niger Delta, the place had a beautiful and healthy environment and

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bio-diversity. Now, it is replete with contaminated rivers, streams, and lakes. This chokes the flora and fauna, driving them to inevitable extinction. Unambiguously, both Ayakoroma and Yerima deplore the prevailing unfortunate atmosphere of indifference by most Nigerian leaders. Particularly, they decry the unfortunate indifference oil guzzling economies and the people who focused on getting the oil not minding the despoilment and depravity oil multinationals from their countries are perpetuating in Niger Delta, which they will not tolerate in their countries. Lastly, both stories indicate that restiveness, violence, insecurity, and crime are likely to continue and fester in Niger Delta so long as corrupt leaders continue to ignore and rebuff the tears and complain of the disenchanting youths who are increasingly rebellious.

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