

Subalternity and the Representation of Violence in the Niger Delta: Lessons from Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops*

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Abstract

Contemporary Nigerian dramatists have been concerned with various crises bedevilling the Nigerian State. From socio-political debacles, ethno-religious conflicts to economic doldrums, they interrogate the contradictions and imbalances in the society through their works. Based on this tradition of social commitment of Nigerian literature, many Nigerian writers have explored the Niger Delta oil crisis to express their visions. Through postcolonial theory, deriving from the insights of Gayatri Spivak, this paper examines the Niger Delta oil crisis in Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops* as it concerns the issue of violence and its consequences on the (ordinary) people, especially women in the region. The study also explores the elements of performance used in depicting this motif. Contrary to the assumption that the crisis represents the interests of the common people, the study observes that Yerima's *Little Drops* shows that the recurring violence in the area is borne out of egoistic interests among the contending forces in the region. It illuminates the negative impacts of the use of violence in the oil crisis on the ordinary people, particularly women, and the communities in the region. It contends that the crisis, rather than ameliorating the suffering of the downtrodden majority, inflicts physical and psychological pains on them with recurring preventable deaths. In its conclusion, the study contends that Yerima's *Little Drops* is an important play in the discourse on the oil crisis in the Niger Delta region. Rather than violence, the play offers dialogue, inclusive representation and good governance as panaceas to the crisis.

Introduction

Since the beginning of oil exploration in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta region in 1956, most people of the region have paradoxically been victims of socio-economic and environmental degradation and neglect. Fuelled by the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni activists in 1995 by the military regime of General Sani Abacha, the oil crisis has given birth to several militant groups which emerged from the region. These groups have always staged violent protests against what they perceived as socio-economic and environmental degradation and neglect emanating from oil exploration by multi-national oil companies. Writing on the development of the armed struggle in the oil crisis, Odoemene observes that:

...the 1990s ... coincided with the emergence of different ... groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Salvation Front (NDPVF), the *Egbesu* Boys, Martyrs Brigade, the Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta, Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Joint Revolutionary Council and Militant Camps Across the Niger Delta, amongst other less prominent ones. These groups were responsible for violent attacks against petro-businesses and destruction of pipelines belonging to the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)...This resulted in the loss of lives and property. The state's response to this development has been with further repression rather than dialogue and constructive management of conflicts (126).

Some scholars such as Ojaide, Darah and Feghabo have attributed the spate of violence in the region to the nature and character of the Nigerian State which privileges the people from the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) in terms of resource distribution and accumulation. Hence, the activities of the various militant groups are viewed as a collective struggle for the basic rights of the people in the region.

While this study recognises the validity in the scholars' claim, the recurring violence that characterises the activities of militant groups which often claim lives of ordinary people (for whom they often allege they are fighting) has shown that greed, egoism and power struggle

among the militant groups and their sponsors are among the major factors that are responsible for recurring violent struggle in the region. William Reno (cited in Omotola, 94) underscores this point when he contends that "in all conflicts, motives of personal gain and political grievance are inter-mingled."

This paper examines dimensions and effects of violence in the oil crisis as depicted in Yerima's *Little Drops*. Whose interest does the armed struggle in the region serve to protect? What is the attitude of the playwright towards violence in the oil crisis? Who are the victims of the violent struggle? Is the recurring violence beneficial to the ordinary people, especially women? In what ways has the playwright subverted the "ethnocentric" notion which "collectivises" the people of the region as the oppressed? How does he employ literary and performance elements to interrogate violence that has become the recurrent feature in the region? These are some of the questions addressed in this paper.

Subalternity: A Conceptual Clarification

Subalternity is a location/state of voicelessness. Thus, the subaltern, in this study, can be regarded as a group of dispossessed persons. They are people who are so marginalised that they have no "voice" to speak for themselves. Interrogating the Western thinkers' narratives of history, gender and identity, Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" problematises the subject of representation and homogeneity in the Third World. She argues that the radical criticism of some Western thinkers is meant to preserve the interest of the West. Critiquing the works of Western theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, she contends that the thinkers fail to abide by their intellectual dispositions which make them blind to the role of ideology in reproducing oppressive and hegemonic social relation of production between the West and the rest of the world. She questions their use of homogenised and universalist terms to represent groups that are heterogeneous in nature.

When Western thinkers assume the responsibility of representing the subaltern, they only (re)present the images of the subaltern they construct themselves. Thus, the Western notion of investigating heterogeneous culture and people with a

universalist/monolithic template is mainly to advance their socio-economic and political interests. Spivak further questions the work of Subaltern Studies Collective which studies the colonised subjects. She asserts that the "voice" of the subaltern is being heard through this elitist group. Like the Western thinkers—Foucault and Deleuze—members of the Subaltern Studies Collective undermine the heterogeneity of the subaltern when they attempt to describe the subaltern consciousness in monolithic terms. Spivak asserts that "woman" is assigned no position of "voice". White men are saving brown women from themselves. Using this as a paradigm to explicate the practice and the eventual abolition of Sati, Spivak argues that it is either the White men explaining reasons why Sati is a barbaric custom and, therefore, must be eradicated or Black men claiming it is a ritual that makes women sacred. Never has the voice of the brown woman been heard.

Continually being written as the object either by the patriarchal hegemony of her society or by the Western imperialism, the woman remains perpetually "voiceless". She cannot speak in so far as she is represented either by local hegemony or Western imperialists. Hence, unlike the Subaltern Studies Collective who uses the term to privilege men, Spivak broadens the concept to accommodate oppressed women and their histories. Although Spivak uses "subaltern" to refer to marginalised women, the term, in the context of this paper, refers to every ordinary person who is a victim of violence in the Niger Delta oil crisis. The subaltern represent those who have who no "voice" to speak for themselves in the crisis.

Subalternity and the Niger Delta Oil Crisis

One pertinent question to ask at this juncture is: how relevant is Spivak's postulation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to the Niger Delta oil crisis? It is relevant because some writings on the crisis have often read the crisis as a collective struggle of the Niger Delta people against the Nigerian State and its supposed conspirators, the multi-national oil companies. This notion of the crisis mainly (re)presents the Niger Delta people in homogenous terms, thereby undermining the heterogeneous nature of the region. For instance, Darah in "How Nigeria

Underdeveloped the Niger Delta” essentially attributes the underdevelopment of the region to the nature of Nigerian State which is perceived to favour the people from three major ethnic groups: the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo. He sees the Niger Delta people as collectively being oppressed by the “major” ethnic groups in the country. Similar views are expressed by Tanure Ojaide and Vincent Egbuson in their novels *The Activist* and *Love My Planet*. Edwin Clark, an Ijaw leader and former Federal Minister of Information, shares the same view when he claims that:

We have always appealed to the Federal Government to do something, provide facilities, develop the area, provide educational facilities, health facilities, for those youths. For instance, when you realize the situation whereby our youths when they finish their university education, they are sent to the North, West, East for youth corps service as required by law. Other boys and girls from other zones come to our area. After the end of the year, the youths from the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, are integrated into the various oil companies in our area with our youths returning with no jobs (20)

Likewise, Okunoye claims that:

The people of the Niger Delta consciously define themselves as the “Other” within Nigeria. This is evident in the way they draw attention to their margin location in the Nigerian project and the growth in various parts of the region of associations and movements committed to articulating and realising their basic rights (3).

Much like Darah, Clark and Okunoye, Tugbokorowie and Ogu-Raphael also submit that:

The Niger Delta inhabitants contend that the developments of this area do not in any way reflect a fair and justifiable measure of their contribution to the baking of the national cake. Therefore, attempts are made to force the authorities to concede to the demand of the people, and one of such methods is to force oil companies operating in these areas to negotiate with them (120).

Statements such as the ones cited above are based on assumptions of regional/cultural solidarity among the people who are highly heterogeneous. They undermine the ordinary people's voice in the crisis. Contrary to the claim that the oil crisis is the Niger Delta people's collective struggle against the Nigerian State and the oil companies, the voices that are constantly being heard in the region are those of the local elite (the militant leaders, local chiefs, local businessmen, godfathers, politicians and their various stooges) to preserve their socio-economic interests while the voices of the ordinary people who are the most oppressed remain suppressed.

Also, Ibiwari Ikiriko's poetic interpretation of the crisis is not different from the notion of regional solidarity that characterises the foregoing statements. In "The Palm and the Crude", for instance, Ikiriko laments the socio-economic dislocation and environmental degradation which oil exploration visited on the people of the region. The poet argues that the Niger Delta which is the source of Nigerian wealth is subjected to perpetual suffering by the Nigerian State and the multi-national oil companies. Tracing the cause of the oil crisis to the "master/slave" relationship between the Nigerian State and the Niger Delta, the poet further bemoans the perceived marginalisation and oppression of the people of the region:

Then came the crude
And the crude
Wasted our soil
Soiled our soil
And lacerated our lot

And we, Aborigines
Of the riverside, bereft, stoic,
Wash our palms
With dry spittle
As legs move up to tie hands

And sahelian
Dune boom with
Marine doom (31-32)

Ikiriko's allusion to the Niger Delta people as the natives of oil rich land ("Aborigines") wallowing in poverty as a result of the oil exploration tends to collectivise the people of the region as the victims of external oppression. The tropes of externally imposed poverty in the poem seem to overlook the internal wrangling in the region which has significant effects on the crisis.

Ben Binebai's *Drums of the Delta* also shares the "ethnocentric" notion of the crisis like Ojaide in *The Activists* and Egbuson in *Love My Planet*. Invoking the memory of Isaac Boro, the late leader of the Delta Revolutionary Front, the play portrays the Niger Delta people as being collectively subjugated and exploited by the Western powers and other ethnic groups in the nation represented by The Queen of Idokoland, Chief Dudu, Chief Ahmed and Chief Okoye. With the support of the Chiefs, The Queen captures and detains Ebitimi, the Niger Delta Prince, who is also a metaphor for crude oil in the play. Attempts to bail out Ebitimi from The Queen's custody fail. Led by MIJAB (Isaac Boro), the Niger Delta people, including women, revolt against the Queen and her cohorts. Hence, tropes of violence, hostility, secession and war dominate the play. Despite Binebai's "silence" on many internal factors that generate the crisis, the play depicts the few individuals from the region who profit from the crisis. For example, Chief Seigha and Oko collude with the Queen for their personal material gains. While Chief Seigha, "a chameleonic cannibal" is a "patriot when he comes to the palace and a nationalist when he meets with his people" (63), Oko is a militant who prefers to use the "opportunity (of the crisis) to make life merry" for himself (56).

In spite of the writers' and critics' attempts to homogenise the Niger Delta people as "othered" in the oil crisis, this study contends that the Niger Delta, as depicted in Yerima's *Little Drops*, is composed of multiplicity of centres and margins. Consequently, the paper, through the analysis of *Little Drops*, reveals that the hegemonic voices who claim to "speak" for the ordinary people use the crisis to "speak" for themselves, to advance their own socio-political and economic gains.

Little Drops: A Synopsis

The play begins at a clearing space in front of Memekize's shed by the river bank. Sounds of gunshots are heard from a distance. Amidst the turmoil, Memekize, an agile seventy-year old widow, is on the alert as she is busy roasting water yam. Soon, Mukume, running for her life, finds a respite at Memekize's shed by the river bank. She narrates her ordeal in the hands of militant boys: she has been raped by the militant boys who invade the hotel where she and her husband are celebrating their honeymoon. Abandoning her to her fate, Ovievie, her husband, escapes through the window.

In a similar vein, Azue, the young queen with her baby, running from the violence of Joint Task Force soldiers and the militant boys, also finds a temporary refuge at Memekize's home by the riverbank. She also recounts how the militant boys cruelly kill the King, burn down the palace and the shrines. The king in the hands of the militant boys "died like an animal at the shrines. The eyes at his headless body still twitched with life and his stomach rising and falling as blood gushed out from his headless neck" (79).

Like Azue and Mukume, Bonuwo also seeks respite at Memekize's home by the river in a bid to save her life from raging violence of the militants and the soldiers. The river bank, it seems, is the only available safe place for the defenceless women in the region. Like an oasis in the desert, the riverbank provides a kind of security for women against violence orchestrated by menfolk. The militant boys and the soldiers, also in the orgy of violence, kill forty-one students. Bonuwo recounts that the forty-one students are bombed to death. According to her, "not one soul ... not one child was spared [...] forty-one of them...all dead" (103).

Violence and the Mis/Representation of the Subaltern in the Niger Delta Oil Crisis

Little Drops raises a number of pertinent issues about the morality and rationale of the militants' struggle on the one hand and the wanton maiming and killing of ordinary people on the other. One of such

issues is sexual abuse of women by the militants which has become rampant in the oil crisis. How does rape become part of a “revolutionary” struggle? The question becomes more pertinent when the audience comes to realise that the rapists are the same men who claim to be fighting for freedom of the oppressed people of the Niger Delta. Mukume laments that she is raped by the militant youths who invade the hotel where she is celebrating her honeymoon. A typical African woman who keeps her virginity till her wedding night only to have it broken by militants, Mukume is not only visited with physical injuries, but she is subjected to psychological torture. She bemoans her experience in the hands of the militants:

MUKUME: Down there...where my virtue once lived. Tell me, Mother, will I ever be the same again I...we just got married, four days ago. Ovievie, my husband, has only just given me this ring and vowed to treasure and please me till death do us apart (*She begins to cry.*) He always said my body was his temple. And I was his goddess. But see what they have done to his temple. They have trampled upon my virtue, turned my passage to marshy swampy ground, and my soul lost, full of shame (73-4)

Apart from physical and psychological injuries, Mukumè's rape has some serious implications. One of these is that the women in the region are under a serious threat. They are no longer safe. This is even more evident given the fact that Ovievie, the man she calls her lover, abandons her to his rival militant boys who ruthlessly rape her. Mukume laments that “[...] I don't even know what I have in my womb now. What I took from those dirty wild men” (75). With Mukume's rape, Yerima shows how the militants use the oil crisis to abuse women sexually. This also points to the fact that the militants' violent struggle is not for the liberation of the women.

Another consequence of the violence on women is shown in the fact that Azue does not only become a widow, she also loses her only child. To save her life, she has to seek respite at Memekize's shed by the river. She bears the brunt of the violence caused by the King's corruption and the militants' lust for vengeance. Yerima further

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interrogates this waste of innocent lives of school children who are killed in the armed struggle. This is captured through Bonuwo:

BONUWO: The roof of my classroom was blown open. Huge smoke and heavy small of charred skin and burnt flash, not one soul ... Not one child was spared. All we saw were cut off limbs, little trunks, cut off heads, with their hair still burning ... Ayiba ... forty-one of them ... all dead. And when the parents came and met me alive, they took stones, shoes any other sharp objects they could lay their hands on, and chased me out of town (96).

With reference to the Biafran War, Yerima further questions the wanton violence perpetuated by the militants. For the women and their children in the Niger Delta, the tragedy of the civil war dovetails into the oil war, and there seems not to be any respite for them because they remain the victims of both wars. Memekize, for example, recounts how her husband and two sons are wasted in the civil war they know nothing about:

MEME: All my blood. My husband and two sons. They all perished the same day. During the Biafra War. A shell. It tore them to pieces. I never pick one complete. I found a head there ... a limb here ... a toe ... finger manacled trunks. In the rain, I picked each piece until I had each wooden box full. With my hands ... I dug each grave ... and buried them (88).

The playwright also interrogates the inferiorisation of women in the region. For example, the King who is later beheaded by his protégés, the militants, sends his three wives who suffer with him packing because all they have for him are female children. Ironically, men also fall victim of their evil design too. This is the case of the King who sells his conscience and abandons his leadership responsibilities for financial gains. Azue recounts the King's dishonesty which earns him brutal death from the militants:

AZUE: First, the boys came and drank and ate. They danced and chanted his praise. They left driving like a wild animal. Then came the government boys. Again they drank and ate with him. Leaving bags of money in the palace. Unknown to the king, he was being watched by his driver who was the informant of the boys. They came back, and there was confusion. They cut off the head of the king right in front of his family (78).

Beyond personal tragedy, however, the murder of the King and the Prince portends a bleak future for the kingdom. It represents a communal tragedy. The oil crisis would be compounded by a search for another candidate who would take the mantle of leadership. Intrigues and power-play are more likely to attend the search. It is doubtful whether the crises will be easily resolved. Hence, the kingdom and its people are faced with more complicated socio-economic and political crises.

Apart from the issues of gender, the war, in the long run, does not benefit the militants and their sponsors. For instance, Kuru invades the riverbank where he meets the women and threatens them with death. He is determined to kill them. Without minding Memekize's old age, Kuru orders her to be tied up in spite of the appeal from Bonuwo and Azue. However, Kuru is later humbled by his violence. Having sustained gun injuries, he slumps to the ground. He appeals to the women whom he threatens to kill to save his life. Here, Yerima submits that the oil crisis is a war of self-destruction because those behind it are also victims of the terror they inflict on the common people.

Similarly, there is general insecurity of lives and property. The society has been turned to a human abattoir by the militants and the soldiers. Both the innocent poor and the honest well-to-do who have no hands in the crisis are denied peace. Even the new baby that is born during the war bears the pains of violence because it faces a doomed present and a bleak future.

There is also the revision of the concept of heroism in the play. Yerima shows that the contending forces [the militants, the chiefs, the soldiers, the oil companies, etc.] in the crisis do not represent the interest of the ordinary people, especially women and children, in the

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region. All the contenders represent themselves and their personal interests. For example, Ovievie engages in the war for his personal ends. Kuru narrates Ovievie's self-seeking interest in the crisis to the women:

KURU: He [...] led some boys to attack a cargo ship, and after the operation, he ran away with the money, and he was marked to die (111).

In another instance, Ovievie himself confesses to his selfish interest in the crisis:

OVIEVIE: [...] I thought I had it all worked out. I thought my life was in my hands. I thought I would emerge a hero if I joined the boys...(101)

Ovievie's statement above captures one main factor which gives impetus to the crisis. Using the crisis as a cover-up, youths like Ovievie in the region take to violence owing to their desire for material wealth, fame and power.

In this crisis, how has Yerima represented the Nigerian State and its agents? Is the playwright glorifying "the gods" in the oil crisis? Does he exonerate the State or its agents from the brutality inflicted on the ordinary people? What alternative view has Yerima canvassed as a way out of the problem? These questions become pertinent considering the position of a Marxist critic like Uwasomba who contends that the bourgeois inclination of Yerima [...] "makes him place much premium on the high and mighty, than on the ordinary people, who are supposed to be the most important elements in the society" (68-9).

In *Little Drops*, Yerima shows that the Joint Task Force soldiers who are meant to maintain peace are also agents of violence. Without minding the lives of the innocent people who they are meant to protect, they engage the militants in armed struggle. To the playwright, this nature of "security measure" where violence is deployed to curtail violence leads to endless casualties. Through Azue, the playwright depicts the soldiers as agents of violence in the region.

MEME [...] The government men ... what did they do?

AZUE: They came too late. By the time they arrived, the king was dead and half the palace was already burning. They only met some of the boys who had stayed behind to steal what they could find from the palace. They did not bother to shoot at them when they heard that the king was dead, and some boys were still in the palace, they just simply blew what was left standing to smithereens. The king's body and all (79).

With Azue's account above, Yerima indicts the State and the security agents. He shows that the soldiers are not different from the militant youths. The blowing up of the palace with the King's body represents another dimension of violence in the crisis. Not only do the soldiers oppress the living, they also deny the dead a peaceful rest.

Yerima also alludes to State violence through Memekize's account of the murder of her husband and two sons in the Biafra war. The playwright contends that the oil crisis, like the civil war, is a struggle for supremacy among the elite. Like the civil war, the oil crisis is a proverbial struggle among various elephants whereby the grass, the ordinary people, are always the victims. Memekize submits that the oil crisis is an engagement in violence for selfish economic interests of the elites:

(Loud sounds of shells and explosion)

MEME: Only the gods know what they are fighting for this time. We shall see in the end, just like the first war where I lost everything, it will end being for the interest of [...] few again. So much blood...so much bodies...so much talk, and very little good to show for it. When shall they ever learn? (76)

Memekize's lamentation above is not only directed at the local hegemony within the region, but also at the elite in the postcolonial Nigeria at large.

Similarly, the playwright does not exonerate the agents of the Nigerian State in the poor state of development in the region. The neglect of the area also fuels the crisis. Not only are the majority of people alienated from the benefit of the oil, they also bear the brunt of

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environmental degradation caused by oil exploration in the region. Hence, the youth, the majority of whom are unemployed (and unemployable) are lured into militancy as a means of survival.

In another vein, Yerima shows that some multi-national oil companies in the region are not innocent in the crisis. The playwright indicts them for their role in fuelling the crisis. They employ a "divide and rule tactic" among the people of the region. In most cases, money meant for developmental projects and other opportunities are offered to selected Chiefs and politicians while the people remain marginalised. However, the playwright takes exception to violence in resolving the oil crisis. He advocates dialogue and an inclusive representation of ordinary people in wealth distribution:

KURU: The people must be part of the division of wealth.

MEMEKIZE: Faith and commitment, that is what you need. You must have trust among yourselves. Then decide what you want for our future...have faith in your decision, and when you are committed to it, it will be easy to achieve everlasting peace (133).

Although *Little Drops* can be regarded as a tragic play, it is also a celebration of the resilience and courage of women in the face of violence. Yerima depicts women as harbingers of love and peace. Their courage and love for peace is exemplified by their ability to forgive their enemies even when they have the chance to revenge. Memekize, Bonuwo, Azue and Mukume demonstrate these qualities. Because of her love for her murdered husband and two sons, Memekize lives by the riverbank where she buries them. She refuses to forsake them even in their death. Without minding his earlier harassment and death threat, the four women also take pity on Kuru by helping him remove the bullet lodged in his thigh. Similarly, Azue, who later discovers that Kuru is among the militants who behead her husband, forces Kuru to swear for peace with the same knife he uses to slit her husband's throat. By rescuing Kuru from the jaws of death and forcing him to swear for peace, Yerima shows that, in spite of oppression

inflicted on them, the women and all ordinary people are the real heroes of the oil crisis.

In terms of structure, the play is not divided into acts and scenes. This is a subversion of classical and neoclassical dramatic structure, which is often divided into conventional acts and scenes. However, the playwright appropriates a device of classical tragedy. In classical tragedy, physical violence is not always enacted on stage. Rather, it is reported by the character who witnesses it. For instance, apart from Kuru's riotous entry into the riverbank, all major conflicts in the play happen offstage. They are reported through each character who witnesses them. To this end, conflicts in the play tend to be psychological. For instance, Memekize laments the gruesome killing of her husband and two sons during the Biafra war. The spirit of her husband refuses to rest in peace all because he is killed before his time in the senseless war.

Azue and Bonuwo also express the psychological torture inflicted on them by the militants. While the former recounts the killing of her husband by the militants and the death of her son, the latter, who is also a school teacher, narrates the massacre of forty-one students in the armed struggle between the militants and the soldiers. These instances illustrate the psychological torture experienced by the ordinary people in the oil crisis.

Lighting and sound effects are crucial devices in shaping meaning in *Little Drops*. The playwright uses these elements not only to enhance visibility, but also to capture the tension and violence that characterise the oil region. With the use of lighting and sound effects in the play, the audience feels the insecurity that pervades the region as result of the violence in the oil crisis. For instance, the scary atmosphere is depicted at the beginning of the play as follows:

Dark stage. Sound of gunshots from afar. It is cleared space by the riverbank. A swampy forest surrounds the stage, there is small shed which is home to Memekize up centre stage. The illusion is that the auditorium is the sea. Once in a while, the sound of the sea billowing into the bank is heard. When lights come on, MEMEKIZE, an agile woman of seventy wearing trousers and blouse, is roasting water yam. She is frightened but tries to remain calm, as she continues to watch

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out for any danger. Then she hears the sound of someone breathing and running. She wears a hood, and a big leather jacket. She looks like a tough militant in the dim lights on the stage (67).

The above captures an atmosphere of war. The dark stage creates a sense of fear while the dim lights give the old woman a scary appearance. The sounds of gunshots indicate on-going violence. Also, the sound of the bellowing river suggests the riverine area of the crisis. These elements also accentuate the suspense as the audience is eager to know the reason for the tense mood.

In terms of setting, the play begins and ends at Memekize's shed by the riverbank. To save themselves from violence, the four women —Memekize, Azue, Mukume and Bonuwo— find respite by the riverbank. For the common people to have some peace, it appears that they have to remain on the periphery (the riverbank). Even on the periphery, militants still attempt to oppress them. Thus, Yerima's use of the riverbank as the setting in the play is apt for it signifies the displacement of the ordinary people by the elite. Oppressed and pushed to the riverbank, the masses now live like refugees in their own land.

Characters in the play can be broadly divided into two categories: members of hegemony (which include the militants and the soldiers) and the ordinary people (the four women). Through characterisation of the four women, Memekize, Mukume Azue, and Bonuwo, the playwright makes a conscious effort to capture the consequences of violence on the ordinary people on the one hand, and to celebrate the resilience, courage and love of the women on the other. All the four women are victims of war that is recurring in the Niger Delta in particular and in Nigeria at large. Apart from being a victim of war, Memekize, like Mama in *Hard Ground* and the Bishop in *The Bishop and the Soul*, exhibits certain religious syncretism. Memekize invokes "Benikurukuru", the sea goddess, and also calls on Jesus at the same time. She shows a kind of religious contradictions which are features of postcolonial societies. Tension and anxiety also give rise to these contradictions.

In the play, Kuru and Ovievie are the only militants who are visible. Ovievie represents an uncaring and deceptive husband. Although he is a member of a militant group, he pretends to Mukume that he is innocent of the crisis. Also, when members of a rival group come for him at the hotel where he and Mukume are celebrating their honeymoon, he escapes through the window and abandons Mukume to her fate in the hands of the militants. He engages in the war all because he desires to become a “hero”. Similarly, Kuru, a fierce militant, invades the riverbank to harass and threaten the women with death. However, his masculine power fails him and he is later rescued by the same “weaker vessels” he terrorises with his weapons. The echoes of the corrupt King who sells his conscience for money also reverberate. In the end, he is consumed by his greed and hypocrisy. There is also the heavy presence of Joint Military Task soldiers who, instead of protecting the defenceless people, engage the militant boys in a do-or-die armed struggle.

Yerima’s representation of characters in terms of costumes and make-up in the play is apt. For instance, when the Prince dies, Azue paints her face and hands in mud. In addition to this, she is covered with an old black wrapper. The significance of the costume and the make up in Ijaw culture is that she is bereaved. She is mourning the death of the baby Prince. Another instance of appropriate use of costume is seen in the character of Memekize who, like a militant, wears trousers, a hood and a big leather jacket. The old woman dresses in this manner as a response to the insecurity and brutality that have overtaken the region. This is the reason Mukume is afraid of her when she runs to the riverbank. The stage direction at the beginning of the play attests to this fact:

[...] she wears a hood, and a big leather jacket. She looks like tough militant in the dim light on the stage (67).

The significance of the Memekize’s costume could be explored beyond its literal level. Here, Yerima shows the possibility of using evil for good ends. While the militants wear hoods and black jackets to maim and kill, Memekize wears the same costume to protect herself

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and others who are victims of war. It also shows militancy as man's preoccupation. Bonuwo, a school teacher, is also dressed in "a skirt suit which is dirty, a pair of glasses and a roughened unkempt wig" (90). This costume is quite appropriate for a school teacher seeking refuge amidst violence. Hence, the use of costume in the play reflects the reality of "dis-eased" peace in the region.

Similarly, the use of stage props in the play also foregrounds war, death and massive destruction that characterise the oil crisis. Guns, bullets and daggers have replaced bread. The proliferation of these tools of war in place of life sustenance elements depicts the region's state of anarchy. When Kuru storms the riverbank to harass the defenceless women, the audience is informed that he has up to three guns on himself. He also carries a dagger. His interest is far from protecting the ordinary people. Rather, his aim is to unleash terror on them. In addition to the fact that he has used his guns to kill innocent people, his dagger is also symbolic. That the dagger is used to slit the King's throat is a pointer to this fact. Such instruments of war and their bearers are a threat to the region's peace. However, furious militants, like Kuru, bear certain burden in bringing peace to the land. Their destructive potentials nonetheless, such weapons and their bearers are not totally evil when they are positively used for the good of humanity. For instance, the dagger which Kuru uses to slit the King's throat is also the same dagger Memekize uses to remove the bullet lodged in Kuru's thigh. Thus, Kuru's life is saved with the destructive instrument he uses in murdering others. The same dagger also functions as a tool of forging peace in the war-torn region. This is evident in the play when Kuru, on Azue's request, uses the knife to swear that he will embrace and bring peace to the region.

What crystallises from the above elucidation is another possibility of using evil for good ends. Extended beyond the dagger, oil, which is the main cause of violence in the Niger Delta, also possesses this duality. Oil can be a resource for socio-political and economic development as it is in countries like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. It can also be a destructive and destabilising resource as it is in the Niger Delta region. Here, the playwright's message is instructive. Man in space and time is always the problem.

Where selfless leadership and inclusive representation are in place, the society will be better for it.

The language of the play depicts Ijaw background, one of the major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region. Yerima makes use of selective lexical fidelity through which he deliberately leaves indigenous words untranslated in the dialogue. For instance, all the four women—Memekize, Mukume, Azue and Bonuwo—use the word “Ayiba” in their dialogue. Apart from the fact that it captures their faith in the Supreme Being, this deliberate retention of native language (“Ayiba”) in the play is borne out of the playwright’s postcolonial engagement to subvert the “Master’s language” to foreground cultural difference and give voice to the ordinary people.

Similarly, the language is infused with proverbs, figurative expressions and idioms. These are explored by the playwright in order to indigenise the English Language as African playwrights such as Soyinka, Osofisan, Ama Ata Aidoo do. For instance, Azue, suspicious of Memekize and Mukume, says:

AZUE: This one belongs to the sacred gods. Mine is not for you to have for dinner, mothers of the night (84).

Azue’s reference to “mothers of the night” connotes witches. This metaphor indicates the cultural belief of the Ijaw in the supernatural forces. To douse her suspicion, Mukume also responds through a proverb:

MUKUME: [...] ours is only the concern of mothers, my queen. The stick that hurts the eyes hurts the nose, cheeks and all (83).

Apart from accentuating meanings, the use of proverbs, figurative expressions and idioms in the play indigenises the English language to reflect the Ijaw cultural milieu.

The technique of total theatre is also explored by the playwright to accentuate the play’s aesthetics. One element of this technique in the play is Ijaw praise poetry. Amidst the turmoil, Bonuwo still sings the praise of the young queen:

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BONUWO: (...rises to her knees as she sings the praise chant of the queen. The other women kneel.)

A thousand blessings to my queen
Mother of the land...
One whose skin radiates the wealth of the
riverside

Queen of the Coast
Daughter of Banikurukuru
Walk tall among other queens
For you are blessed.
You are the yolk of the golden egg
The life that shines in the heart of the king
Iyiii! Iyiii! Iyiii! (94)

The foregoing panegyric captures the character, function and personality of the King's wife. Although women are marginalised in the land, the King's wife is regarded as "the mother of the land", "yolk of the golden egg" and "the life that shines in the heart of the king". All these metaphors used in describing the queen signify her preeminent status in the society. They also show that the king owes "his existence" to the queen.

Invocation is another aspect of praise poetry in the play. To heal Mukume, Memekize does not only call on the Christian God, but she also invokes Banikurukuru, Goddess of the sea:

MEME: (*She goes into the shed and comes out with a bowl. She walks to the edge of the stage as if by the riverbank, clears the water, and takes some water, she raises the bowl. She chants.*)

Banikurukuru!
Goddess of the sea
I take from you to heal your own
Heal her (70).

The above instance shows festival and religious atmosphere in traditional Ijaw society. The playwright also uses dirge when the young Prince dies. This is indicated in the stage direction:

Memekize runs into the shed, and comes out with an old black wrapper. She opens it up and covers Azue. Bonuwo takes the little bottle of gin, takes a swig. She passes the bottle round to the other women except Azue, who stands transfixed. Bonuwo begins to lead a slow dirge, she dances as she sings. The others join. Azue does not dance but sways [...] (107)

The use of folk tale and song of abuse is also evident in the play. Bonuwo's frog story serves to remind the elite who sponsor violence and war about the transient nature of power. The song in the story is an abuse targeted at all warmongers in the Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria in general.

Yerima also makes use of flight as a technique of self-retrieval. A technique of subtle protest, flight is a movement of the oppressed people and war victims from a violence-prone area to a safe place. The technique is employed to profess life in place of death that violence and war bring to people. This technique is evident in Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*. For instance, Igwezu takes a flight away from the conservatism of his homeland. Clark also uses the same technique in *The Wives' Revolt*. In *Little Drops*, Yerima uses this technique as a tool of self-retrieval. To retrieve themselves, their freedom and peace, Mukume, Azue and Bonuwo take a flight from the scene of war. That the three women leave the area is a kind of protest against violence orchestrated by men. Their flight is also a way of protecting themselves from the recurring unrest in the region. By moving away from the war area, the women are saying they are not party to violence in the oil crisis. This also shows that the struggle does not represent them or their interests.

Concluding Remarks

Through various dramatic techniques such as plot-structure, setting, costume, lighting, stage properties, characterisation, language, irony, and elements of African total theatre, Yerima succeeds in exploring various dimensions of violence that attend the oil crisis in *Little Drops*. The playwright shows that the crisis is characterised by violence as a result of personal interests among the contending forces. To this end, the ordinary people and the entire community remain the victims.

Similarly, the militants who claim to represent the oppressed citizens in the crisis employ violence to advance their personal interests. Yerima has also demonstrated that the state and the multi-national oil companies operating in the region cannot be exonerated from the recurring violence. This, however, is made possible with the collaboration of the elite in the region. Consequently, violence in the crisis is predominately informed by leadership failure, corruption, greed and acquisitive predilection that are rampant in the region and in the nation at large. Hence, the playwright shows that dialogue, inclusive representation, youth empowerment, sincerity of purpose, and good governance are crucial in resolving the crisis in order to restore peace to the region.

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