

The Niger Delta Crises and the Paradoxes of Emancipation Struggles in Chiemeka Garricks *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*

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Abstract

*In the contemporary Nigerian literary ferment, the issues of environmental degradation and socio-economic exclusion, as they affect the oil-bearing Niger-Delta host communities, have been brought to bear on creative ingenuity and literary talents. Also, the mismanagement of oil wealth and environmental sustainability has resulted in the proliferation of militant groups, and through the activities of these groups such as bombing of oil installations, oil bunkering, kidnapping and other sundry criminalities, leaders of these groups evoke an impression of championing the cause of the region. However, from Garrick's creative insight, it becomes clear that some groups, with self-serving interests, have infiltrated the ranks of those who are genuinely pursuing patriotic cause of environmental justice in the region. It is against this backdrop that this paper critically examines the ambivalences of the Niger Delta struggles with a focus to unravelling the ideological challenges that characterise the much-touted Niger Delta struggles for emancipation. Through an in-depth textual analysis of Chimeka Garrick's novel *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, the paper establishes that some of the acclaimed 'freedom fighters' are mawkish elements with personality quirks advancing their individual interests, at the expense of the region. The paper concludes that the 'war' to liberate the region may get more complicated if the struggles are not driven by ideology.*

Key words: Niger Delta, Ideology, Freedom fighters, Liberation, environment

Introduction

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta region at the onset held brighter hopes for a region that was at the verge of transformation, in terms of human and structural developments, both in the region and in the entire nation's political economy. Shehu Sanusi quotes Sunday Inengite, a Niger Deltan describing the general feelings of the people upon the arrival of the oil expatriates: "They made us to be happy and we clapped like fools and danced as if we were trained monkeys...you can imagine the jubilations; after all they had been looking for oil in commercial quantities for years" (189). Unfortunately, the boom soon gave way to what appeared to be doom, as the environment became completely degraded through oil spills and gas flares. The multinational oil companies, exploiting the prevailing culture of impunity that characterises the Nigerian state, adopted oil drilling methods that defies the template of the global best practices of oil exploration. This unethical method of drilling has consequently resulted in untold wreckage and devastation of the Niger Delta environment. The gas flares became inimical to health, marine lives and farmlands, which is the mainstay of the local economy, grossly punctured, thereby plunging the people into unpleasant socio-economic circumstances. Up till this moment, the Niger Delta region continues to toil and grapple with the consequences of oil-related environmental devastation.

Helon Habila in his *Oil on Water* graphically captures the magnitude of the plight of the Niger Delta people. In this narrative, Rufus and Zag, in the course of searching for the kidnapped Isabella Floode, encounter a nightmarish scenario of environmental devastation: "... dead birds drapped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed while bellied between tree roots" (*Oil*, 8). As they further traverse the host communities "that looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it" (7), taking pictures and looking for one accidental survivor to interview, they come face to face with a more horrible scenario of devastation:

...the same squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. In the village center, we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under

the mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depth and slapped my face: I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter (8).

With the sordid situation in this extract, Habila does not only stress the aridity and emptiness of the Niger Delta region, as a result of oil activities, but also paints a picture of "the plight of human beings trapped in a suffocating enclave as well as their condemnation to a slow genocide" (Simon, 59). The most pathetic angle of the saga is that even when the government knows that oil extracted from the Niger Delta environment constitutes the sole foreign exchange earner for the Nigerian state, it still exhibits gross indifference to the plight of the people, particularly, of the host communities.

In other oil producing countries like Iraq, Kuwait, Mexico among others, the ethics of oil exploration is strongly upheld by oil companies, and the authority is always swift and proactive in events of oil spill. For instance, during the Deepwater oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The United States Government, knowing how calamitous the spill could be, immediately initiated an action plan and cleaned up the affected areas. In Nigeria, Kemedi Dimieari avers that "clean ups are usually tardy and limited. As such, little oil is recovered, making pollution impacts more acute on the ecosystem" (62). For example, the federal government of Nigeria is still politicising the clean-up of Ogoni land, many years after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine of his vocal kinsmen, for crying out against environmental injustice in the region. This has resulted in the depletion of the environmental assets and values and, also brought untold hardship and poverty on the people of this region.

Expectedly, this state of damage brought to bear on the Niger Delta environment and the attitude of indifference exhibited by the Government, in the face of this devastation, triggered an upsurge of resistant groups agitating for a better deal for the region. The struggle dates back to the pre-oil era and was spearheaded by the Niger Delta activists agitating for Nigeria's independence alongside other nationalist agitators from other regions of the country. The efforts of this early group culminated in the famous 1958 Willinks Commission which declared the region as special area for development and, thus recommended a holistic development of the region. This was not to be, as the Nigerian Government under the first

Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Belewa exhibited a lack of will power to implement these recommendations.

The failure to implement the recommendations of the Willink Commission led to the emergence of what could be regarded as the second phase of the agitations spearheaded by Isaac Boro, Sam Owonary, and Nottingham Dick who established an organisation known as WXYZ for the advancement of Ijaw cause in Nigeria (Sanusi, 190). This group achieved fame for halting oil exploration in the region for more than two weeks. An offshoot of Boro's era latter emerged and was spearheaded by Ken Saro Wiwa of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), who opposed the Nigerian Government over ethnic domination and environmental degradation. Ken Saro Wiwa doubled as the president and spokesperson of MOSOP. However, what should be noted here is that, although the agitations were seriously tensed, they were devoid of arms struggle. Through series of rallies, lectures, interviews and persuasions, they brought to limelight the Niger Delta question, and also placed it on the front burner of global environmental discourses, and as a consequence bore the brunt of intolerable regimes in Nigeria.

Unfortunately, in the wake of the fourth republic, the struggles assumed a violent dimension that resulted in an unprecedented militarisation of the region, with criminals hijacking the cause. Unlike the early groups, the latter groups tend to device some nefarious and clandestine practices that contradict sanctity and negate all rudiments of revolutionary struggles. They take hostages for ransom, bunker petroleum products and destroy oil installations in a way that the line between revolutionary struggles and criminality becomes unnoticeable. Some of the leaders of these groups have been accused of being on the payroll of some corrupt politicians, from the region and else way, who use them as instruments through which they harness their political powers and remain perpetually corrupt. This informs the editorial comment on a Punch Newspaper that:

Criminals have, undoubtedly, hijacked what, otherwise, is a Niger Delta struggle for equity and justice. They should be stopped from making the peace process more difficult. That is what their demand for government to withdraw alleged corruption cases against all former public officers and indigenes from the zone represents. This is

criminal; and no government that is worth its salt can acquiesce to it (12).

This shows the extent to which the Niger Delta struggles have been watered down. In fact, the kidnappings are no longer restricted to oil expatriates, militants now kidnap fellow Niger Deltans in the streets, churches, social gatherings and even night clubs, all in the guise of agitation for the emancipation of the Niger Delta.

What seems to be baffling is that plethora of scholarships on Niger Delta crisis tend to justify this criminality as an approach to attracting the desired development to the region. For example, Godini Darah argues that: "The gun-wielding category of advocates demonised as "Militants" by the government-favoured media are only deploying non-verbal but lethal weapons to propagate the same gospel of a long walk to freedom as Nelson Mandela epitomised this motive in his autobiography" (11). E. D Simon also echoes Dara when she avers that: "Kidnapping, vandalisation among other issues are the consequences of discontentment and lack of development and job opportunities in the region" (64). However, none of these authors has investigated the efficacy of this approach to achieving lasting solutions to the Niger Delta crisis, neither has any ever wondered why the principal actors of these groups and their cohorts are living in stupendous affluence, while the 'rank and file' are daily strangled by poverty.

This is the gap this paper seeks to fill in some of the Niger Delta discourses. Against this backdrop, the paper sets out to deconstruct the popularly-held opinion that all militant groups in the Niger Delta region are freedom fighters championing the cause of the region. Through an in depth extrapolation of Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday*, this paper simply aligns with the position of the editorial of the Punch Newspaper mentioned earlier that: "In effect, the region bears more of the consequences of the riotous criminality there than the entire country, under the guise of agitation for a fair deal. Time has come to apply the brakes and for all hands to be on deck for constructive dialogue" (12).

The Niger Delta Struggle and its Paradoxes

The Niger Delta question may be deemed to have been over flogged in the global environmental discourses, but this paper, coming from the perspective of Garrick in his novel, seems to have opened a fresh vista that may trigger a deconstruction of some popular standpoints that

characterise the Niger Delta discourses. As stated earlier in this paper, the bulk of scholarship especially by critic from the region, on the resurgence of militancy in the Niger Delta tend to justify the wanton destruction of lives and properties by militant groups as a means by through which restitution for the gross devastation wrought on the Niger environment could be redressed. It may quite be justifiable, as widely presumed, but this paper departs from this popular opinion, as it vehemently contends that, violent approaches to resolving the Niger Delta crisis have never been efficacious rather, it has entrenched criminality and continue to plunge the region into socio-economic doldrums. Thus, the paper re-interrogates the contradictions and apprehensions that characterise the Niger Delta emancipation struggles.

Garrick's narrative revolves around four childhood friends; Doye, Tubo, Kaniye and Amaibi, reunited by the events of the aftermath of the kidnapping and eventual death of Brian Manning, an oil expatriates. Through these four friends, Garrick exposes the different shades of the Niger Delta struggles. In this narrative, a military assault, resulting in the dead of many Asiamas indigenes, leads to the formation of Asiamas Freedom Army, headed by Doye Koko popularly known as Doughboy, a militant organisation with the audacious claims of fighting for the liberation of Asiamas people. As events unfold, the reader quickly realises that Doughboy, in cahoots with some highly placed individuals in the society, is running a band of kidnapping empire that fetches money into their pockets. That is why Kaniye, on realising that Doughboy is into kidnapping for ransom, asks in derision: "so all your talk about fighting for the rights of the people of Asiamas and the Niger Delta is just nonsense? (*Tomorrow*, 162).

In their ignorance, Asiamas people idolise Doughboy as their role model and something more than a hero committed to the cause of justice for the people. This is evidenced in his arrogant bragging that some parents even beg to enrol their children in the Asiamas Freedom Army: "what you don't understand...is that these people believe in me and the justice of my fight. To them I am more than a hero, I'm an ideology. Most of their children and young men beg to join me or imitate me" (*Tomorrow*, 163). Through this dialogic scene, Garrick seems to opine that ignorance, on the part of the people, on what an ideal revolution represents, has been one of the reasons the Niger Delta crisis lingers. In an interview with Doughboy, Dise explains thus: "A Revolutionary fights in the hope that he will change the

system...if you cannot change the system, why then are you still fighting" (*Tomorrow*, 220). In a conversation that follows, Doughboy frankly reveals the real motive for the struggles. To him, the Niger Delta struggle has never been out of patriotism. Behind the struggle, there is a scramble for oil and other selfish inclinations: "Look, the Niger Delta struggle is essentially a fight for oil, or the control and use of the resources from oil. No one fights for oil for purely philanthropic purposes. Yes I have made some money from my fight..." (*Tomorrow*, 220). The above comments are not only revealing, but also buttress the position of this paper that the purported struggle for emancipation of the Niger Delta region is completely bereft of ideology and any sense of patriotism.

Following these selfish strings attached to the Niger Delta struggle, all manners of groups have now emerged in the guise of fighting for the liberation of the region, only to negotiate and get their share of the oil proceeds. Related to this, is the financial settlements of militants to keep them out of vacation. For example, Ibara, Ibara, quoting *National Standard Newspaper*, posits that: "Asari Dokubo, the leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) has revealed that the Rivers State government, at one time, was paying militants 100 million naira to steer them away from disrupting oil production" (14). In fact, sustenance of this payment made militant activities low, and also surges at the slightest breach of this compensatory payment. This, expectedly, has triggered a growing and frightening menace in the region. For instance: "There are now several self-styled militant groups who are really glorified political thugs, robbers, arsonists, rapists and assassins. In years to come, it is predicted that these people will hijack and cheapen the Niger Delta struggle" (*Tomorrow*, 220). That is, if the struggle has not already been cheapened.

Another most unfortunate dimension to this situation is the fact that this criminality enjoys the backing of leaders and politicians from the same region, who are supposed to occupy the front row in the quest to liberate the region. In this narrative, Chief Ikaki, a member of Asiama council of chiefs and a Special Adviser to the Governor on special duties is a very influential politician. However, he is mischievous, greedy and a sadist. The reader first notices his manoeuvrings during a meeting in the Asiama Council of Chiefs, when he vehemently proposes that the council demands huge compensation from the Imperial Oil Company for the pipeline explosion that killed thirteen Asiama young men. His greed blurs his

reason to acknowledge that oil bunkering and pipe line vandalism are acts of criminality and that, these people died while committing a serious crime, not only against the government and oil companies, but also against the region's ecosystem. This informs why such proposal is met with stiff opposition from reasonable members of the council. Sir James explains why he cannot support the idea thus: "I refused to support that for two reasons and I explained them to him. The first reason, which some people here have chosen to ignore, is that our young men who died were doing something criminal...I repeat, they were stealing oil" (*Tomorrow*, 89).

It is worrisome to note that apart from pilfering of public funds and bunkering of petroleum products, kidnapping, carried out in the guise of freedom fighting, has become the most lucrative and profitable business in the Niger Delta region. Tubo explains how this works:

For example, a militant group like Doye and his boys...kidnap a white man, and then make all sorts of reasonable demands-development of the Niger Delta, jobs for indigenes, compensation for spills; oil companies should leave the area, etc., etc. In reality, however, all it takes is a ransom. Sometimes, the government pays part of it. The government money usually comes from a special fund called Security Vote. Imagine a bottomless pot of money, actually billions, to be spent without the scrutiny of accounts... (*Tomorrow*, 134-5).

This further exposes the level of infiltration, insincerity, hypocrisy and complicity that characterise the Niger Delta Struggle. Taking hostages for ransom has completely disfigured the essence of the struggle. In the words of the narrator: "All they do is buy arms, bunker oil, kidnap, extort, do violence, talk bullshit, and call themselves militants" (*Tomorrow*, 163).

In this narrative, Chief Ikaki instigates almost all the kidnappings in Asiamama and, using his connections, will later interface with the militants, the government and the oil companies to secure the release of the hostages, and inflate the price of the ransom. Tubo further explains how this is also done:

...the militants make a ransom demand, for say, five million right? Now this is where the wayo starts. Since they have the direct link to the militants, and the blessing of the politicians, the government

security guys can say the figure is ten million, fifty million, or anything they want it to be. If it is the company that is paying the ransom, some people inside the company may be in the know...if it is the government that is paying the ransom, the politicians give approval to the security guys to dip into the security vote and collect anything they want (*Tomorrow*, 135).

Thus, the fact that Doughboy, the kidnapping kingpin, cannot be arrested is because his organisation is blessed with cohorts within the highly placed men from the same region. This also allays the surprise why no militant in Niger Delta has ever been charged and prosecuted for kidnapping. The kidnapers all work for the leaders and politicians from the same region knowingly and unknowingly. Tubo reveals that: "Doughboy was the best "worker" Chief Ikaki and Wali had" (*Tomorrow*, 135). It is in this same spirit of criminality that Doughboy, a career kidnapper, on his death, is described as "a revolutionary, a freedom fighter, and was mentioned in the same breath as Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa" (272).

The narrator notes that: "...his heroic resurrection in the media as a revolutionary is typical of today's African contemporary society where everyone gets an open invite into a hall of shame-fame-for just being naughty and selfish and reprisal" (274). Doye's post-mortem elevation is too absurd that Kaniye confesses thus: "... I stopped watching television and reading newspapers when they called him 'a patriot and 'a man of peace" (272).

The question now is, what has this achieved for the people and the region as a whole? The narrator summarises the consequences thus:

...we, the people of the Niger Delta are our own worst enemies. Some of our governors loot our state's share of our revenues; some of our chiefs and youth leaders frustrate development from coming to our communities, simply because they won't receive any monetary percentages for the contracts. Yet we always blame the oil companies and the government (*Tomorrow*, 221).

It is against this backdrop that Catchiest Akassa, Amaibi's father advises Doye shortly before his death: "My son, many say you fight for justice. They say you do what you do because you want good things to come to our people. If what they say is true, then you need to learn. You cannot bring good by doing bad" (*Tomorrow*, 198).

On the other hand, Garrick's delineation of the character of Amaibi Akassa as a foil to his friend Doye, provides a clue on how the Niger Delta crisis could be resolved. Unlike Doughboy who kidnaps for ransom in the guise of fighting for justice, Amaibi emphasises non-violent approach to the struggle, even in the face of his incarceration. Tubo reveals this of him:

...Amaibi was an activist, who was mainly concerned about the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta. Yes, he ranted a lot about damage to the ecosystem, gas flaring, pollution, acid rain, greenhouse gas emissions, bronchitis. Yes, he organised rallies, environmental seminars, publications and protest marches. But they were all peaceful (*Tomorrow*, 214).

Upon his release from the prison, Amaibi vows to continue in the fight, but will never consider violence as an option: "But let me say this, my fight will continue to be nonviolent. I sincerely apologise for all the time in the past when I failed to condemn the mindless violence and crime perpetrated in the name of the Niger Delta struggle" (280). Through this excerpt, Garrick seems to wish that participants in the struggle will come to this awareness that violence can never and will never resolve the Niger Delta crisis.

Amaibi likens the gale of kidnapping in the region to the era of slave trade, when Africans, because of greed, sold their brothers, sisters and children to the slave traders. He sees kidnapping as a reoccurrence of that dark part of history. "This is slavery too, but in different form. Now we own the slaves; we punish the slaves and we are the slaves" (281). Thus, to win the battle:

We need to change the way we do things. We need to stop fighting the wrong battles. Our people must drop their arms and get off the streets and creeks. The war will not be won there. The war will be won in lecture halls as we expand the minds of our

young people...the war will be won in the legislative chambers, if we persuade our lawmakers to change the laws that deny us our resources...We will never win with our guns or aggression. We will win with our intellect, ideas, by serious negotiations and informed debate (*Tomorrow*, 281).

Winning a revolutionary war, most importantly, demands strength of character on the part of the participants and not individuals with personality quirks, who are easily assuaged by any little promptings. A true revolutionary is uncompromising and will resist any attempt to be bought. In this narrative, Amaibi is portrayed as true revolutionary and an environmental champion in the order of Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Following his radical environmental activism, the Imperial Oil tries to silence him with monetary inducement but will not succeed. McCulloch, the General Manager of the oil company inquires of Amaibi thus: "How much money will it cost to buy off this trouble maker?" (*Tomorrow*, 243). Tubo quickly answers that "He's not interested in money, Sir. He's on a crusade" (243). When that fails, they try to offer him employment as bait, but he equally turns it down: "Go back to your bosses, Tubo. Tell them it'll take more than a fantastic job offer, more than all their money to buy my silence" (*Tomorrow*, 235). Garrick uses Amaibi's strength of character to project an ideal revolutionary as opposed to those who claim to be fighting for justice, but cannot live beyond self-aggrandisement.

Amaibi's resolve is antipodal to that of his friend Kaniye, a lawyer who quickly compromises and falls for the oil company. Garrick exploits this contrast of character to buttress his persuasion that most of the acclaimed freedom fighters are actually pursuing selfish interest and do not have what it takes to take part in any struggle. In this novel, following an oil spill on the Forcados river, from Black Star oil's platform, Amaibi, on behalf of Asiaman Fishermen Cooperative writes a strong report, capturing the degree of devastation of the oil spill on the Asiaman river and even goes ahead to testify in the court. "Those who were there say it was Dr. Akassa's report and testimony that convinced the court to hammer Black Star Oil" (*Tomorrow*, 244). Through this, Garrick seems to say that the war to change some aspects of the society could be won not through kidnapping, killings and destruction of oil installations. The battle of wit is always superior to that of the weapons.

During the second oil spill, it is also Amaibi who advises the Asiamma Fishermen Cooperative to sue Imperial Oil Company for damages and retain Kaniye as their lawyer. To Amaibi, it is an opportunity to show to the world the level of impunity with which the Niger Delta environment is exploited. "He wanted to use the publicity from the spill and the lawsuit to press for radical changes in the way companies drilled for oil in Nigeria. He wanted restitution for the devastation of Asiamma and other communities in the Niger Delta" (*Tomorrow*, 245). Unfortunately he is betrayed by Kaniye who accepts out of court settlement for seventy million naira. This is where the two friends part ways and remain cold towards each other for six years. This scenerio is very typical of the Niger Delta struggle, where personal interests override the region's interest. Most of them make the loudest noise, threatening fire and brimstone but will not fail to jump at every little offer at the slightest promptings. This is justified by the affluence and expensive lifestyle of leaders of these groups as opposed to the poverty stricken lifestyle of the common people in the region. Thus, this paper condemns violence or the use of force to bring the needed changes in the Niger Delta region. As explored in the novel, there is a need to change the tactics if the desired results are to be achieved. The war cannot be won from the barrels of gun.

Conclusion

Although the Nigerian state has failed in engaging the Niger Delta region with human and infrastructural development, as a commensuration for the devastation wrought on the environment in the course of drilling oil, this paper, through the analysis of the novel, maintains that taking of hostages for ransom, bunkering of oil and destruction of oil installations in the guise of agitation for a better deal for the region has never been, and may not be potent in achieving the desired result. Rather, the development has triggered growing and frightening menace in the region, and has watered down the struggle for environmental sustainability and for socio-economic emancipation of Nigeria's Delta geopolitical sphere. As explored in the novel, the agitation should be driven by ideology and patriotism and not to be used as a medium through which some selfish individuals advance their cause at the expense of the the stability of the region. It is also the position of this paper that the agitation should be spearheaded by discipline and uncompromising individuals and not by some mawkish elements waiting to jump at every offer at the slightest prompting.

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