

Sociopolitical Reconstruction in Niyi Osundare's The State Visit and Ahmed Yerima's Hard Ground

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Abstract

Socio-political reconstruction is a motif in African literature and it is for this reason, among others, African literature is regarded as literature of commitment since creative writers in the continent embed socio-political and economic problems plaguing the continent in their writings. Thus, African literature dwells more on the functional role of literature than the entertaining role, and that is why African literature is often described as functional literature. African writers see literature as a tool for societal re-education and liberation. They consider themselves as the conscience of the nation and terror on corrupt political leaders. Therefore, they take advantage of the opportunity literature affords and affect the lives of the people. They do so by portraying the everyday socio-political and economic challenges thereby making their literary art a commitment geared toward a reconstruction of the socio-political and economic systems of the society. This paper is therefore an attempt to highlight how Niyi Osundare in *State Visit* and Ahmed Yerima in *Hard Ground* depict and attempt to reconstruct the society.

1. Introduction

African literature has been described as the literature of commitment since creative writers in the continent embed socio-political and economic problems plaguing the continent in their writings (Oduaran 2017). As the mirror of society, the creative writer utilizes the pedagogical function of teaching, apart from the entertaining role to bring reality to men. It is in this light, it was cited in Gbilekaa (1997: 75) that "... the task of literature is to make you see, to work against familiarity and habitualization. This is achieved by strange-making, re-arrangement and deconstruction." However, this does not

detract literature from its entertainment role. Osofisan (1982) cited in Gbilekaa (1997) is of the opinion that:

Literature can entertain, in fact must entertain, but it is only the dull or brain-washed artist who his content merely entertains. The primary virtue of literature seems to me to lie in its subversive potential, that explosive charge hidden behind the façade of entertainment and which must be tapped, controlled and made to explode for the use of our people for mankind (76).

The explosive charge hidden in the façade of entertainment in literature is what the writer skillfully utilises to educate his audience. Therefore, the writer is a man speaking to men in the general sense and he has to be committed to his art. Ngugi speaks of the writer thus:

A writer responds with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive need, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. Thus, the same writer will produce different types of works sometimes, contradictory in mood, sentiments, degrees of optimism and even worldview (46).

Ngugi is positing here that the writer articulates his thoughts and responds to the happenings in his ever-changing environment intending to enlighten the people. It is in this regard that Achebe (1981) opines thus:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels especially the ones I set in the past did no more than 'teach' my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf, delivered them. Art is important but is the education of the kind I have in mind (45).

From the tone of Achebe in the quotation above, we can rightly conclude that "African literature was sociologically conditioned and did react to the colonial development of the time" Gbilekaa (1997:51), and to a relative extent, reconstruct socially the Eurocentric tendencies now inherent in African societies. To achieve this goal, the writer has to be committed, a sense of obligation to teach his people. As submitted by Achebe (1978) commitment is:

... a sense of obligation or a strong attachment to a cause, when we speak of a writer's commitment, we mean his attachment to particular aims and the use of his writing to advance those social aims. This of course, implies a belief that literature can and should be used as force for social change, and a writer has a responsibility to do so (177).

The social changes or the abnormalities Achebe enjoins writers to reconstruct are issues such as eurocentrism, moral depravity, corruption and bad leadership, oppression and injustice, among others which must be curtailed to engender an egalitarian society.

A multi-objective process designed to achieve among others the eradication of poverty and disease and liberation of the individual, increased productivity within a balanced ecosystem, justice and equality individual freedom and social security, cultural buoyancy and stable society (3).

The multi-objective process Alao (1991) talks about is caused by the lack of development in African societies, Nigeria to be precise. Acholonu (2002:13) succinctly explains the reasons for the lack of development in Nigeria thus:

Our collective predicament is both caused and compounded by a social ill as many Nigerian leaders seem so careless about the welfare of the ruled majority. The many development problems facing Nigeria today include the fact of a disintegrated bourgeoisie or middle classes, the near collapse of our socio-cultural and political system and structures, seriously weakened by the rules many of our incoming extent,

dishonest, corruption, selfish and unpatriotic leaders.

Having highlighted the various problems buffeting our society, reconstructing those social ills is now the next line of action, and many people both writers and non-writers alike, political activists, cultural, activists, etc have sought in several ways to reconstruct the society which now found expression in “Restructuring the Nigerian Federation” advocated by the likes of G.G. Darah. Many literary writers have, in one way or the other, tried to reconstruct the problem facing the society, among whom are the first generation of writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, and Okigbo, to name a few. According to Izevbaye (2014:12), the first generation of writers tried to reconstruct the social ills of the society thus:

The Soyinkas and Achebes were dealing with a period in history that is particular, they were dealing with things that were big. They thrived at a historical and cultural turning point. In fact, their literary productions have been easy to periodize because they dealt with issues like, self-consciousness, identity, independence the civil war etc. These are issues that have resonances beyond the nation. They have historical importance (99-100).

In the same token, contemporary writers are dealing with issues of billion naira fraud, power failure, loose moral behaviour, especially as occasioned by globalization and corruption among leaders... the unrest in the Niger Delta (Izevbaye: 2014:14). This paper demonstrates how Niyi Osundare who is described as the people’s poet, and Ahmed Yerima, one of Nigeria’s foremost playwrights, have successfully

represented social problems and their solutions in *The State Visit* and *Hard Ground* respectively.

2. Socio-political Reconstruction in Osundare’s *The State Visit*

The State Visit is a play that reflects the acute condition that bedevils Nigerian society today, which has plunged the country into a near hopeless, irredeemable condition. The play opens with a nauseating description of the Head of State in an imaginary country called Yankeland. The narrator describes Yankeland as “a land of Two Rivers, blessed with milk and honey, the softest of soil and the healthiest of sunshine. But a few men fouled up the milk and mixed the honey with cow dung. Men who have the power to act and not be questioned: men who measure their own height by the genuflection of others” (p.9). This is the situation with many African States including Nigeria. The wealth of the nation is in the hands of a few who use it to enrich themselves and family members, meanwhile, the people are bereft of the social rights to the good life and hence live in abject poverty.

The narrator continues thus:

Narrator: The flashiest of foreign cars find their destination in the land of Two Rivers: the Cadillac hurries through the assembly line abroad to join the queue in its cities, the Jaguar finds a resting place in its private garages, the Mercedes glides in a glossy wonder (p.10).

Just like the Nigerian government, the Yankeland government awards emergency contracts for bridges, which collapsed almost immediately. The ordinary people are always the ones that suffer the damage of the bridges because the Kings and Queens, no broken bridges hinder their helicopters in the sky unless it is the one between Yankeland and Switzard. As the narrator

expressed, the predicament of Yankeland spreads across all works of life:

... the doctor takes bribe from Kwashiorkor” patients, his stethoscope placed on the pulse of this bank account: the magistrate, counts justice in notes and coins: the guilty buy innocence from the courts as tender for public office. The journalist turns a mere minor for looting. He dips his pen in the slime of falsehood and his vision trips on the plane of history ... he bombards the public’s ear with official lies... the middle men of business who stand between us and progress: buying cheap, selling dear, smuggling, hoarding, extorting, crushing under the weight of profit; forwarders and backwarders, manufacturers’ representatives, habitual slavers who haggle away our freedom just like their fathers. The police man who flogs bribe out of their mere suspect, the port worker who makes cargo disappear through the talisman of tricks; the clergy who breaks into holy sweat after swallowing the widow’s mite; the university don who pawns his wife for a chair (p.11).

The State Visit is anchored essentially on the visitation of the State Head, who is President for life, of the Republic of Wilima. The President of Wilima is known for his parochial, promiscuous attitude. He commanded each tribal chief in the Republic of Wilima to donate a virgin to his royal harem under the façade of uniting the tribes; brought in expatriates to head all corporations in Wilima, imported a teacher to head the only University in the country; banned parliament for a direct rule by his family; burnt down media houses and incarcerated vocal critics of his government.

It is this kind of President that the Head of Yankeland is set to welcome. The State Head of Yanke land set up a cabinet to discuss the laborious preparation for the state visits without acknowledging the fact that there is a decline in the economy of the state. The Head asks the Minister of Finance how much he could spare for the visits. The Finance Minister responded thus:

Finance Minister: You should be asking how much altogether we have in the treasury. The decline in the production of cocoa, coffee, and tea has depleted our national earnings. Add to these drought and famine of recent months... we are barely managing (p.14).

This response shows that the country is not financially buoyant to host a welcome party for a State visit. However, the Minister of Agriculture who ought to be the mouthpiece of the farmers has the below to say:

Agric Minister: Yes, you know I complain every time. These farmers are growing lazy when they should be growing crops... they are just lazy.

The Agric Minister forgets that these farmers, as stated by the Minister of Finance “are too old, so old their backs are bent like ancient bows”.

It is through the Finance Ministers we get to know that five years ago locusts devastated the land and that the land also experienced drought, the farmers and their families had to starve for months. To make matters worse, relief materials that were sent were hijacked by the Agriculture Minister. Furthermore, the State only has two hundred arina in the treasury which was five hundred arina previously, the State head, diverted three hundred arina into buying jet fighters when there was no need for that. Since there is no other way to raise the money for the

state visitation the cabinet opted to borrow, but the Minister reminded them of their previous debt from the loan which amounts to two hundred million dollars. Their last resort is to divert the funds saved for the maize project – six hundred million arina for the welcome of the state visitation.

This is not surprising as it is not the first time they have diverted funds. The Minister of Agriculture has the below to say:

Agric Minister: What is but there? It has happened before. Remember that the money for our Water Dam project was diverted to the funeral of our leader's grandfather. After all, it was the people who ate the food and drank the wine (p.19).

This diversion of the maize project funds succinctly reflects our immediate society in Nigeria where funds are mismanaged and diverted for personal gratification. They do this because they do not care for the welfare and the future of the people, what they only care about is the present. The Minister of Agriculture buttresses this by stating: "What future are you talking about? The future is not the problem now. When it comes it will take care of itself. Let us eat and be merry today. Why should we bother about tomorrow? You can only grab what you see" (p.18).

The parochial and dubious members of the cabinet understand that if they divert the funds for the maize project the people would not be happy. They, therefore concocted a story to deceive the people, a story fabricated by the Minister of External Affairs. The only way to do this is by conniving with the journalist to correct already announced funds for the maize project. They asked the journalist to re-write thus:

Head: Just say that you had a frank and fruitful discussion with the cabinet and discovered that the six hundred million arina announced by the Finance Minister last week for the maize project has, infact, not been received. So, the Minister announced by mistake in error... through oversight... No... his statement was misconstrued... He was misquoted, create a small but conspicuous column apologizing for any embarrassment this might have caused the cabinet ... eh the government (p.21).

This is, of course, how the media is manipulated to dissuade and control the masses by the ruling class. This testifies, to the truth of Karl Marx statement that all workers in society are the tool of the ruling class. This is given credence by what the Head of State states:

Head: We have the power to say and unsay. We control the newspapers, and the radio and television, and we can always tell them what to say. After all we spend a lot on these media and we must get our money's worth (p.21).

One reason that makes the situation complicated is that these corrupt leaders do not owe any allegiance to the people, they either buy their votes or forced themselves on the people. So the people's welfare is not their concern. This is the social predicament people face in many African societies as reflected in the drama. A statement by the Head of Yanke land alludes to thus:

Head: We have the people in our hand. We decide what they eat, where they sleep, when they live, when they die. We may banish them, dissolve them if we choose. Our government owes nothing, absolutely

nothing to their existence... what are the people when we talk about government? What are they? By the grace of God, we are the government today. The people may do what they like. After all they didn't vote us into power. God in His infinite wisdom has put this crown on our head... abi? We are in power today (p.22).

Apart from buying votes and imposing themselves on the people, some leaders bribe their way through the ranks. The head who only became Head of State just by polishing shoes exemplifies this, he never wrote any exams. The Yankeland Head of State explains:

Head: I didn't pass many of the "bukuru" exams, but I got promotion for my hand work. Ah, those oyinbo, they all knew me and they gave me medals every empire Day. And gradually I rose through the ranks-and to the top... I polished shoes like no one else; they knew I was no trouble maker. Yes, that was how it started. Now I am a General. I command the army. I command the country (p.26).

On this note, nothing is holding these bad leaders from realizing their objectives since they have everything within their reach. The stage is almost set for the state visitation however, for peace to reign amongst the people and the government as well as the President, beautiful girls are put in place to care for his sexual desire, even as he has numerous wives for himself, they cannot satisfy him. The Police and the Soldiers are charged with the responsibility of controlling traffic and disciplining any erring drivers and beggars, to clear the road for the state visit. To the changing of the people, they have no voice to speak for them. The only voice they had was the Minister, but could not beat them and had to be replaced, and his whereabouts could not be found

thereafter. This is because he refused to join them in the people's oppression and exploitation. Something similar was done to the painter because he stood against oppression and protested. These are what we see in society today. People who want to protest against bad governance are either made to suffer or put to death. Ken Saro-Wiwa's death is a testimony of this oppression in Nigeria. All activities to protest are hindered, and the students are raided and killed. This is atrociously expressed by the Head thus:

Head: I will mention this to the commander of the Garrison organization. We shall ask the police to keep greater watch. Let any of these students make peke and cross our path. They will enjoy the kindness that is our custom to extend to the opposition ... Let them try. They will know that the lion on our immoral eh... armorial bearing is not a lamb (p.24).

The protest that is staged by the students, workers, and beggars results in the death of six people including two police officers. It must be noted that the Yankeland President caused these deaths.

The analysis so far underscores the ills in society as portrayed in the texts.

However, the playwright did not stop there. He moved forward to state the needed action to redress the political situation – Revolution, a total overhaul of the political system. Although the political class puts the revolutionary drums sounded in the form of protest under control, the people are still very much hopeful for a better society soon to come. Through the painter, the former minister of finance, the peasants, and workers, Osundare (2002) envisions a transparent society. Through the painter, Osundare says:

Painter: You murderers of the body, can you ever kill the spirit? You are a passing cloud. After you the rainbow shall come, and earth's children shall see the light again. Shall see the light again, Shall see the light again (p.55).

The children of the light can only see the light if the children take drastic revolutionary steps like those of the Finance Minister, the painter and the students, unite and overthrow their oppressors, then the light will come. What that means is that, as suggested by Osundare, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' Marxist ideology, when the society subscribed to the revolutionary steps, then, there could be a free and fair society.

3. Socio-Political Themes in Ahmed Yerima's Hard Ground

One endearing quality of drama is that it brings with immediacy the happenings in the society closest to the people than every other literary genres. One reason could be the re-enactment of what is affecting the lives of the people and it excites pity and fear, and the purgation of those emotions.

It is this hallmark of drama that makes Yerima's Hard Ground tenable because it is what concerns the Niger Delta people he brings to the fore – the core issues in the Niger Delta.

We live in an illusion that is predicated on the irony of the title of the play, Hard Ground. What it means is soft ground. We all walk on a soft ground that can unpredictably swallow humans, and eat them alive through multiple mechanisms: natural death, accidents, political struggle in the face of tyranny, and many other unforeseen occurrences. The mechanism that appeals to our discourse here is the struggle for political freedom struggle; it is the motif that runs through the entire play that won the NLNG prize in 2006.

The Niger Delta has created an enormous wealth of literature that is now regarded as Niger Delta literature. This literature is borne out of the need to re-order the ever-neglected region, politically and economically. The Niger Delta produces more than 90% of the country's revenue through oil exploitation and exploration which has rendered the region almost a wasteland and as well as the socio-economic life of the people in the region. In fact, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is regarded as among the dirtiest of all places in the world due to oil exploration and neglect on the part of government and oil companies and failure to rehabilitate the land. This utter neglect displayed by the government has yielded so many crises, which put both the region and the entire country in jeopardy. Therefore, the literature produced within this socio-political landscape portrays the agony of oil exploration and exploitation on the people occupying this mass land and the adverse effect of oil exploration on the environment.

Writers within the corpus include Tanure Ojaide, Kaine Agary, Ben Okri, Ogaga Ifowodo, J.P. Clark, and Ogundipe Leslie, among others. Their works reverberate with a protest against the unwholesome use of the land and the effect of oil exploration on communities, families and the entire welfare of the people, an example of which is Yerima's Hard Ground.

Ahmed Yerima's Hard Ground portrays the social-political struggle for freedom in the Niger Delta. This struggle manifests in both peaceful and hostile protests. Some of the peaceful protests that were staged some decades ago resulted in the death of the protesters during the military regimes, such as the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his supporters at the hands of Sani Abacha. The hostile protest is the one staged by Niger Delta militants; the idea is that if freedom cannot be got by peace then it has to be by force through warfare and other physical combats. It is this

hostile protest and its effect that is dramatized in Hard Ground.

Hard Ground dramatizes how young boys are recruited into an army of militants – freedom fighters, to reclaim their stolen wealth. The play opens with Nimi, the central character's escape from death at the hands of the police while every other person led by Nimi is slaughtered, twenty of them in the last militant operation. It is revealed that a traitor among them reported their premeditated attack to the police. They call the traitor vulture and Nimi vows to avenge the lives of his boys thus:

Nimi: Young boys who believed in me, who said that I was born to lead them to the promised land. But see now they were all cut down in their prime, their young foamy and hot blood flowing... staining the dark oily soil. Oh Tamuno! I shall kill somebody as atonement for their lives (23)

With this, the audience understands that among the freedom fighters there are people who only joined as spies or informants to reveal their secrets to the government agencies and to thwart their plans. Nimi is conceived to be the killer of the twenty boys placed in his care by the Don and so the Don vows to kill Nimi to avenge their death but Nimi deny the accusation thus:

Inyingifaa: Only the done can save you now. But now he has put a death sentence on your head. That is why we want to know the truth, something to change his mind about, You.

Nimi: A death sentence? On me? I swear I am innocent... I swear

The play ends with the unravelling of this conflict between Don and Nimi. It is also revealed in the play that some profit themselves in the struggle, an example of this is Uncle Inyingifaa. His only

concern is his weapon business. Below is his statement:

Inyingifaa: My business stopped. My shipment could not pass through. No one wanted my guns. I was told that the big men have established another route and another source. My men were killed. Paraded on television that they were caught bunkering. But I never meddle in oil, only guns, now the lives of my boys must be avenged (p.22).

Apart from Inyingifaa's interest in his business alone, there are others, who, like Chief Tomfort, enrich themselves on the sweat of the militants. The below is what Christy Tonye and Alobo say of him.

Tonye: It was the way you handled the removal of Chief Tomfort that amazed us all. He was a middleman who enriched himself rather than taking care of his people. As long as people like him were the power broker, there was no future for the youths.

Christy: We all thought he was a hero at first. He built a school and a midwife clinic for us... he rebuilt the church alter for his daughters' wedding. And had the whole Anglican Parish repainted. No wonder the marriage did not see or hear the tears of a child. Is God asleep? He gave her a blue Volkswagon Beetle as a wedding gift. I say is God asleep? Those who eat alone die alone.

Alabo: I say with whose money? Ours! He was not doing anyone a favour. That was what he was given the money for in the first place. I remember him in his long white big care at the palace, performing the rites of philanthropy ... he was

spending our blessings. The deepest part of hell fire awaits him, I swear! (p.27)

Tonye: He built his own army. He bought arms and gave to small children while all his children were sent abroad. His removal was most appealing... (p.34).

The reasons Nimi engaged in the freedom fight are stated by Nimi thus:

Nimi: I was little man in trenches, planning attacks of blocking the oil wells in trenches, finding how well to kidnap the whitemen, exploiters of our States, and making their hearts feel pains... they dress in true clothes at weekends in the cities after exploiting our oil, dancing to town in their helicopters and jeeps, to exploit our women and girls... no more. They created us. They gave us the reason to find our place..., Breaking up this country is our next agenda (p.35).

What Nimi points out here is that the oil exploiters cause the fierce opposition they engage in; they are the reason they want to regain themselves, that is, find their place once more, even if it means breaking the country up. The play's climax is revealed in Nimi's dismay as his beloved woman and unborn child become his bane. Pikibo is the vulture that reported to the police that nearly claimed Nimi's life. However, this idea is not accepted by Nimi as he vows to kill Don.

Don killed Pikibo who is the traitor that caused the death of twenty boys and beheaded the unborn child after he took the child from Pikibo's womb. This retribution and the manner it took place as well as the havoc it wrecked on Nimi's family is the thematic thrust of the play. Baba who in the past two years never proved to be a real husband to his wife (Mama) and who eloped

with another woman simply because his wife suffered ailment, came back to his family because of Nimi who has returned home from the bush. Nimi's presence in the house brought some sanity, harmony and happiness because Nimi became the bond that holds Mama and Baba together and militancy took him away from them for eleven years, thus, the family knew no peace. Mama expresses this fact thus:

Mama: Your parents need you, too. Because of you, your father has stayed and slept at home these past two days. He was even a husband to me last night. Now he has asked to eat my food. I have waited two years for this, and then you came and all these good things happened. You will go nowhere, son. If only to make me ... your mother... live longer, son you will stay. We shall find you a new wife and happiness, that is that (p.36).

This new happiness that graced the family was immediately put to an end as Baba who disguised himself as Don and who promised to visit Nimi at his homestead is killed by Nimi. Don had previously killed Mama's father, and brother and later executed Pikibo and the unborn child all from the same family. It is this animosity that weighed heavily on Nimi's heart that prompted him to slit the throat of his own father who disguises himself as Don. Perhaps, Baba felt, if he could sacrifice his life just to make his family happy in the belief that Don might have been killed as he pretended to be Don, he would have fulfilled his duty as a father. However, when mama insisted that the face of the fallen man be turned for her to see, everything never remained the same for her and Nimi. Nimi exclaimed: "It... is... Baba and Mama says "somebody holds me, I feel an attack coming".

The family is shattered. The destruction of Baba's family owes largely to the issue of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. With this play, as other writers have done, Yerima decries and laments the havoc militancy, oil exploitation and neglect on the part of the government in the rehabilitation of the region and its bearing on families ties. It is therefore a call for the government to respond to the needs of the Niger Deltans. Little children are recruited and led to die in the name of freedom. Unless the government redresses this issue, there shall be no peace in the Niger Delta. This is the submission of Yerima in *The Hard Ground*. Although the ground is hard, it is soft enough to swallow people, little children and adults alike.

4. Conclusion

The forgoing discourse highlights the fact that African writers utilize literature not only to entertain but also to educate. It can be argued that African literature dwells more on the functional role of literature than the entertaining role, and that is why African literature is often described as functional literature. African writers see literature as a tool for societal re-education and liberation. They consider themselves as the conscience of the nation and terror on corrupt political leaders. Therefore, they take advantage of the opportunity literature affords and affect the lives of the people. They do so by portraying the everyday socio-political and economic challenges as demonstrated in Osundare's *State Visit* and Yerima's *Hard Ground* thereby making their literary art a commitment geared toward a reconstruction of the socio-political and economic systems of the society.

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