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Socio-Political Realism and Insurgency in Nigerian Drama: A study of Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops*, *Heart of Stone* and *Pari*.

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Abstract

The history of the formation of Nigeria is replete with conflicts, insurrections and insurgency. Before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria into a nation state, it witnessed various indigenous ethnic groups' oppositions and conflicts with the imperial British colonial power. Post independence Nigeria has been characterized with incessant intra and inter-ethnic strife and religious unrest. Since the return of democratic governance in the country in 1999 - after 16 years of unbroken military dictatorship - agitations, militancy and insurgency have been a recurrent decimal in the nation's socio-cultural and political space. To respond to these issues, Nigerian dramatists have preoccupied themselves with the dramatization of the menace to the nation's existence. This paper looks at the representation of ethno-religious clashes and the issue of insurgency in Ahmed Yerima's Little Drops, Heart of Stone and Pari. It analyses the texts on the backdrop of socio-political realism.

Keywords: Insurgency, Drama, Ahmed yerima

Introduction

Socio-political realism is used in this paper as an aspect of realism that deals with the representation of social and political issues within the environment from which the literature emanates. It represents some aspect of events as they occur in real life as a method of literary compositions. As a literary method, it does not make pretense or claim to authentic presentation of life, (this is because reality itself cannot be presented in literature), but its narration is structured around actual events and figures in real life. As a literary theory, it looks at the social and political contextualization in the text in relation to the reality that it represents. Julius- Adeoye argues that drama of socio-political realism "criticize anti-masses policies of governments or harmful socio-cultural practices may have immense impact on cultural and political debates as well as among intellectuals" (195). In fact the statement is in tandem with Julien's position on the same subject, that:

> it is not easy to write or speak well about socio-political reality, to avoid the path of least resistance which consists of making a (necessary pale and poor) copy of the real. If art has anything to give to that reality, it is its power to symbolize, to balance the realistic with the visionary" (1).

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This means that art is not just a reflection of the society but also the compass for the people to project future's course. In this regards, Yerima's *Little Drops* (2009), *Hearts of Stone* (2013) and *Pari* (2016) attempts at representation of reality, are bold steps. Dramatists can speak truth to authority by the blend of fiction with reality. For a playwright to represent severe violent action and unrest (bombing of oil installations, kidnapping of expatriate oil workers, destruction of lives and properties, environmental degradation, government neglect and high-handedness) within his society, he has to accommodate socio-political reality in his plays. In his works, the dramatist has to reveal the atrocities of the parties involved, especially those who are fuelling the confusion either covertly or otherwise in dramatic form for posterity. Empathy has to be sought for innocent women and children, who are suffering, maimed and killed, left widowed, childless and or orphaned. In the words of Yerima, the writer is "a product of the society in which he or she exists, and also must create within the parameters of the socio-political reality to remain a representation of the society" (8).

Militancy and extreme violent insurgency provoked by ethno-religious division, severe social and economic deprivation with both intellectual and material poverty have been recurrent decimal in Nigeria since the return to democratic governance in 1999. The activities of ethnic militias especially in the Niger Delta in the early period of year 2000, the radicalization of the Boko Haram (BH) terrorist group since 2009, coupled with the ongoing deadly onslaught by "Fulani herdsmen" have combined to make many areas of Nigeria, farms for the harvesting of dead human bodies. While arguments suffice that the militants' activities are localized to the protection of the "rights" and resources of the various ethnic nationalities that they claim to represent, having been let down by the national government in the area of infrastructural development, the activities of BH have assumed a 'glocalized' (an amalgam of globalization and localization, it ably defines the local and cross border colouration of the terrorist activities of the group) dimension. At the emergence of BH (founded in 2002), a group of Muslim youths who constituted themselves into an Islamic sect whose activities is not only to Islamize the entire Nigeria, but also claimed to hate Western education and civilization. After the death of the group's leader Mohammed Yusuf in the hands of the Nigerian police in 2009 under a circumstance considered extra-judicial killing, BH became radicalized and unleashed terror on the entire North East of Nigeria and the neighboring countries like Niger, Cameroun and Chad Republic (Matfess 9). BH's unrelenting arms engagement with the Nigerian military and that of the neighbouring countries, the abductions of school girls (Chibok girls) and women from their communities coupled with its association with Alshabbab and Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) have combined to make the group an international terrorist organization.

The "Fulani herdsmen" deadly onslaught is being experienced in almost all the areas of Nigeria from the north to the south. As the Fulani herdsmen move with their cattle from the north of the country to the south, unlike what obtained in the past (when they had in their possession sticks and cutlasses alone to direct and cut grasses, now have been replaced sophisticated arms like AK 47), they leave in their wake, tears, blood and devastated crops and farmlands. Discussions among political and security experts capture the dynamics of the

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current Fulani herdsmen as an operation of some BH members who hide within the herdsmen to unleash terror.

As a work of art reflects and represents to an extent the society from which it emanates, "the political and socio-economic problems that bedevil Nigeria are what flesh the country's literature" Julius-Adeoye (4). Nigerian dramatists, represent to a great deal the happenings within the nation's socio-political and religious space in their dramas. In recent times, the Nigerian state has been bedeviled by ethno-religious and communal clashes: militancy, insurgency, and domestic terrorism. Based on the notion of drama as representing life in performance, it is important to investigate the level of representation and appropriation that some Nigerian playwrights have given to the social and political challenges being the materials available to them within the polity. This is because abstract narrative is unpopular among most Nigerian literary critics, scholars and writers. They relate the narrative to the environment, albeit, reality that birth it.

Synopsis and Analysis of *Little Drops*, *Heart of Stone* and *Pari*

The three plays for analysis reflect Nigeria's socio-political reality since the return of the country to democratic government in 1999. The playwright uses the plays as narration of women's coping mechanism under trauma, bereavement, loss of their homes, communities and humanity in a senseless orgy of bomb explosions and government's abandonment. *Heart of Stone* is the first of Ahmed Yerima's two plays on Boko Haram and its activities. The play depicts the life of Musa – a radicalized young man who embrace the Boko Haram ideology of suicide-bombing as a way of elevating his family from the shackles of poverty. The prophecy of early death for Musa as revealed by Kaka - a chief and his grand uncle, only helps to increase his resolve for suicide mission. At the end, Musa's attempt at suicide bombing is partially successful, as more than 70 people lost their lives. He survived with minor injury and the government's forces capture him. In prison, the warder assists him to a quick death through poison as against public execution.

Yerima's second play on BH, *Pari,* is a tragedy sets against the backdrop of the 276 kidnapped female students of Government Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, on the night of 14 April 2014. The play is written around Ama – the mother of the eponymous character Pari – one of the kidnapped schoolgirls from Chibok. As Pari's parents keep hope alive that their only daughter will return to them, death of loved ones, activities of the Boko Haram terrorists, constant displacement from one community to another nudge them to reality. At the end, Pari returns to her distraught mother, not as an innocent 14 years old girl, but as a mother with a baby strapped to her back, and with Ibrahim - a terrorist's commander- that fathered her child, not far behind. *Little Drops…* is Yerima's second of the trilogy on the Niger Delta insurgency, the first being *Hard Ground* (2006), the third is *Ipomu* (2011). As Julius-Adeoye asserts:

> Yerima's *Hard Ground,* and *Little Drops* are based on the social unrest created by oil multinationals like Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Total, Elf, etc, as they carried out exploration activities in the Nigerian Niger Delta. The Niger Delta unrest

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> is one of the major issues that confronted Nigeria at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This unrest which brought Nigeria to the attention of the world as a place for militant activities and social unrest including domestic terrorism, readily becomes material for creative works (201).

*Little Drops…*is set in the hut of Memekize – an old widow that stays as all by herself by the creek in the middle of the fierce battle between the Nigeria's Military Joint Taskforce (JTF) and the many Niger Delta Militant Groups. In this location, four women fleeing from the armed confrontation between the Niger Delta militants and the JTF in the area, converge to narrate the traumatic experiences they are escaping from. Towards the end of the play, a young militant fleeing the battle on his way to Lagos meets the women, makes their acquaintance and offers to take them along on his journey. The plays are violent both in language and description. For example, the five women in *Little Drops…* narrate their traumatic experiences one after another by using language to depict the violence each of them encounters in the hands of either the militants or the soldiers. Memekize, in her own case seems to be immune from the present violence around her having lost her family (Husband and the male children) during the Nigeria-Biafra war. She recounts her ordeal with a gory description of how all her family died in one day as a poor fishing family in the swamp of the Niger Delta during the Nigerian- Biafra War that claimed over two million people in thirty months between 1967 and 1970:

> Memekize: All my blood. My husband and two sons. They all perished the same day. During the Biafran war ...unknown to us there was a war. How were we to know in this swampy bush? As they jumped in and out of the river, diving...checking the nets ...*dugum*! A shell. It tore them to pieces. I never picked one complete. I found a head there ...a limb here ...a toe ...a finger ...a manacled trunks. In the rain, I picked each piece until I had each wooden box full (Yerima 34).

Memekize's violent language reaches its climax at this point of her description of how she singlehandedly buried the family in a shallow grave behind the hut. The Nigeria-Biafra war is part of Nigeria's social and political history, and there were many women who suffered the fate similar to Memekize's during the period. The newly married Mukume becomes fearless and desirous of death after series of traumatic experiences shortly after her wedding:

> Mukume: Yes. Please I have been raped three times today already. Kill me instead. Shoot me and let me die! (Crying.) No! I will not let another man touch me. Kill me first. (Slowly, she raises her hand.) I shall die first, not one more finger on me (Yerima 10).

The experience of Mukume in *Little Drops* is not far from that of the young teenager *Pari*. Herself and other abductees numbering more than two thousand girls and women were not only raped and forced to marry their abductors, but

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were also forced to become girl-child mothers to the terrorists children. Those girls who refused to comply are summarily killed:

> Pari: Hell broke loose. We were really scared, and the hooded men melted our very resistance. Then one day they said we all had to get married. We resisted it. One girl who screamed her refusal was blindfolded and before our very eyes, she was killed. Petrified, we gave up everything. Then they started to rape us. Some of us died from the pain. Some died from the air raids, and some just died of heartache and pains. Those who lived or survived like me were living carcasses from the world beyond (Yerima 36).

Rape, torture, and death are contained in different media reports on the BH activities in North East Nigeria. According to a report, out of the 276 girls abducted by BH in Chibok in 2014, the number of those who escaped from their abductors and or released is around One hundred and sixty-one (161), and some of them are with babies. Yakubu Mohammed (2024), reports that between 2016 and 2023, only 128 of the captured girls either regained their freedom or escaped captivity, but Thirty-four (34) of them are with babies. The rest are either with their abductors or dead from the aerial and land bombardment of the terrorists' hideout in Sambisa forest by the Nigerian military forces. It is intriguing to not that there is de-radicalization programme introduced by the Borno State Government that provides a window for the terrorists to be reintegrated back into society. More than 160,000 ex-terrorists have taken advantage of the amnesty (Mohammed, 2024). In spite of the amnesty extended to the terrorists, spate of kidnap, killing and displacement of the indigenous people of many towns in the northeast of Nigeria have continued unabated. For instance, in November 2023, BH was responsible for the killing of at least 20 people who were on their way home in Yobe state after attending a funeral service in a nearby town. It is recorded that the attack followed the killing of 17 people who had refused to pay harvest tax imposed on them by BH group (BBC, n.p). Therefore, it is safe to state that BH has become emboldened to the extent of forming a parallel government in Nigeria's Northeast, in spite of the operation of the nation's military actions to eliminate the group for almost 15 years.

Some protest groups sprang up to draw attention to the plight of the kidnapped Chibok girls, and those kidnapped by BH after. One of the groups is #Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) headed by Dr. Obi Ezekwesili - a former Minister of Education in Nigeria. Since the radicalization of BH, more than two million people have been internally displaced in Borno State alone with more than One hundred thousand (100, 000) deaths (Onyeji, Owoeye, Adebowale online). Initially, the attacks were targeted at non-Muslims, but it later escalated to involve Muslims that are considered 'not Muslim enough' for not following the ideology of Wahhabism which the group believes to propagate the authentic Islamic teaching. The words of Paris's mother, Ama, re-echo the plights of many of the mothers of the kidnapped Chibok girls and Nigerians:

> Ama: Indeed, poverty is a curse from the gods. Since I got married to my husband twenty years ago, it has been one

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> suffering after the other. Not a day of happiness. I never liked the cheap school, you know? But for my husband, it was cheap enough for his pocket. I wanted my only child to go to one of those schools where there is so much security, even the angels of God would struggle to enter. Not to that cheap dark school with dark environment, so that dark gun-tottering souls can just drive in trucks in the darkness of the night where children fall prey to them as animals … forcing them into slavery. This country is dying … gradually, through corruption everywhere. I tell you, someone somewhere is benefitting from all this madness. And I … we the poor in soul and pockets, are the ones suffering for their greed. (She starts crying.) How can God just turn His back on us? What did we poor mothers ever do to Him? Why won't He just let us smile for one second of our miserable lives? Where is God's compassion? …(Yerima 31).

Many scholars argue that BH whose real name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda' Awati Wal Jihad (the Sunni Community for the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) at formation was under the patronage of Borno State government as political thugs against perceived opposition, after the government consolidated its hold on power in the state, it abandoned the group to itself (6). This argument supports the statement of Ama above that "someone somewhere is benefitting from all this madness." Her position on poverty and "cheap dark school with dark environment" is in tandem with the arguments that the Nigerian government pays lip service to education but never adequately fund the system to the level of making the public school attractive to the people. Only the poor who cannot afford to pay for private school, sends their children to the public one.

In *Pari*, the abducted girls are force to convert to Islam or be killed. The play highlights the many ethnic nationalities and religious diversity prevalent in the North Eastern area of the country where BH operates have become fluid in recent times as they carry out their activities even among every groups but more serious among non Hausa-Fulani and non-Muslim. Ama patronizes the three dominant religions (Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Belief) to seek help for her daughter's safe returns. To draw parallel between the world of literature of insurgency and the Nigerian reality, it is expedient to state that distinction is becoming blurred. As Pari is one of the victims of terrorists' abduction in Yerima's *Pari*, hundreds of young girls are abducted both by BH and the "Fulani Herdsmen" on constant basis. Nnedinso Ogaziechi writes that on February 2018, 110 school girls aged 11-19 were abducted by BH from the government Girl's Science and Technical School, Dapchi, Yobe State. This was 4 years after 59 students of Federal Government College were killed in the schools' dormitory, Buni Yadi, Yobe state (2023, n.p). From the number of students abducted in Dapchi only one of the girls - Leah Sharibu, Christian girl is still with BH.

The exchange between Musa and Warder in *Heart of Stone* is synonymous to the media reports that followed the BH's bombing of St. Theresa Catholic Church in Mandalla, near Abuja on 25 December 2011:

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> Warder: Oh. Don't sound like that. Eighty people died in that church. Only you survived in a manner of speaking. No one will shed a thought of kindness on your body. The Superintendent's uncle was one of those who died. He has brought out the acid bottle. Even your bones will be dissolved by noon tomorrow. Just prepare to meet your God.
> Musa: Which God? I was not supposed to be alive. I was told it was all to be in a flash. I call God, a flash, a loud bang, and stillness in tattered shreds. Fast as a flash. Now which God do I face when bullet touches my skin, and pierces my heart? Which God will come to receive me? Um?

In reality, the 2011 Christmas Day bomb attack on the Catholic Church recorded a death toll of 37 people and 57 others sustained injury of different degree. Kabiru Sokoto – a commander of BH who had masterminded many incidents prior to that one, was arrested for the attack and later sentenced to life imprisonment (Eboh, Cocks, Russell online).

Conclusion

In this article, parallel has been between the act of insurgency that has become a recurring event within the socio-political space of Nigeria, and its representation in Yerima's *Little Drops*, *Heart of Stone* and *Pari*. The three plays studied, enhance the argument on the relevance of dramatic texts in the discussion of both historical and socio-political events. The texts discussed in this paper use language in the construction and depiction of both psychological and physical trauma that victims of rape, kidnap, terrorism, and bereavement suffer. Both *Pari* and *Heart of Stone* subtly raise the issue of ethnic diversity in the North East of Nigeria and the subject of religious intolerance by BH – Muslim Jihadist group who are quick to murder non-Muslim by considering its act as necessary requirement in order for the group's members to be accepted into paradise or Al Jannah. It is important to note that BH has widened their operation to include Muslim alike. On the part of the Niger delta militants, their activities seems to have stopped as many of them embraced the amnesty programme introduced by the government of Musa Yar'dua in 2009. Oluwaniyi (2011, 46-47) states that the amnesty,

> was introduced by the late President Yar'Adua in 2009, against a groundswell of violent conflicts in the region and threats the violence portended for the Nigerian state, including reduction in revenues accruing from oil sales. Amnesty in the Niger Delta region can be traced back to 1967, when the Yakubu Gowon regime pardoned the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) – including its leader, Isaac Adaka Boro – for the insurgency fomented by the group in 1966. However, the unconditional amnesty granted in 2009 embraced not just a group, but all militant groups in the Niger Delta region that participated in militancy. This amnesty encouraged militants to take advantage of a 60-day window (6 August–4 October 2009) to disarm and assent on

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the amnesty register as evidence of their unconditional acceptance of the amnesty, in a bid to build peace in the region.

The same unconditional amnesty was extended to the BH insurgents by President Mohammad Buhari (2015-2023) and many of them who embraced it have been reintegrated into the society as repentant terrorists and some also become members of the Nigerian military force.

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