Ichabod: Reflection of a People's Predicaments in Oyeh Otu's *Shanty Town*

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Abstract

This article studies the reflections of the predicaments of the Niger Delta people as dramatized in Oyeh Otu's play text, *Shanty Town.* Many a scholar has explored the text using criticism but what we have done here is to see the text in the lenses of Sociological and Marxist theories to explore class differences and the social experiences of the people of the Niger Delta region in particular, and Nigeria at large. The social problems in the text reveal that Nigeria is doomed if, at this point of its national realization, it is still being cajoled by and driven by criminal intents and uncouth methods.. The work found that the glory of the Niger Delta has departed; after feeding the nation from the 1960s to date, it still lies abandoned and undeveloped. It was concluded that Nigeria is in total mess as problems rove with the way the nation goes, thereby negating its national title as "The Giant of Africa!"".

Keywords: Ichabod, Predicament, Marxism, Niger Delta, Ecocriticism

Introduction

The leadership question has often motivated African writers. This owes to the fact that the unethical behaviours passed down by African leaders have dehumanized African sensibilities and beingness. We are always faced with the challenge of national crises because those whom we entrusted power to have been bewitched by a demon – corruption. To date, Africa at large and Nigeria in particular has not

regained consciousness from the attacks of this hydra-headed monster.

In Nigeria, corruption manifests in different shades. If it is not abuse of office, it would be negligence of duty; if it is not embezzlement of public funds, it will be subjection of the people to untold hardship and abandonment; if it is not electoral manipulation, it will be impersonation and or forgery; if it is not legislative and judicial failure, it would be rascality of the executives; if it is not nepotism, it would be godfatherism.. All of these and many more have ripped us of our sense of belonging, thereby making it Herculean for the common man to survive. Indeed, corruption has become part of our daily lives, and fighting it is like fighting the system, and it would be a futile journey because those who towed the path of the redemption of our nation have no name today among the living..

When the government is only concerned with what benefits it and neglects the people, what follows is a breach on all fronts, which will aggravate perilous damages to the total lives of the people.. The predicaments of the common people are reflected in the areas they sojourn - shanties, waterfronts, to what they eat and drink – contaminated and poisoned meals, to the kind of work they do. In all of these, it becomes pertinent to state that if a nation like Nigeria cannot, up to date, alleviate the people from poverty and suffering, then where is the glory of this nation that prides herself as "The Giant of Africa?"

The question raised above forms the problem that has always bedeviled Nigeria. With the promises made to us under "Vision 2020," we are still lagging behind with no focus on redeeming our nation. Our leaders are busy escalating policies that only favour them and their inordinate desires to cling to power but have turned deaf to the cry of the masses. Suffice us to say that Onyemachi Udumukwu was right in his assumptions when he said that "Nigeria is not yet a nation" (The Novel and Change … 27). Anthony D. Smith defines a nation as "cultural-political communities that have become conscious of their autonomy, unity, and particular interests" (99). From the above, Nigeria has no autonomy as foreign powers still dictate what she does or does not; her unity has been torn and exemplified in the clashes we hear and read about every day; and as for her interests, the common man is pushed out from such. With these, the glory of our nation has not

materialized. In view of the above, we establish the predicaments of the common man as evidenced in Oyeh Otu's play, *Shanty Town.*

Theoretical Framework

The theories that undergird this study are Sociology of Literature, and Marxism. A blend of these theories shall unmask the work condition as well as social realization of the common men as to appreciate what the dramatist has done.

Sociological criticism seeks to determine the place of literature in society, and the place of society in literature. By this, "Sociology of literature recognizes the elemental interconnection between literature and society" (148). Considering this stand, the sociological approach bothers itself with the problems of society and as it enquires on, it criticizes and brings about a desired change in the system. In the same vein, Udumikww also avers that "The sociology of literature demands knowledge of the interdependence of aesthetic excellence and sociological insight … literary works tell us the most important things about society" (157).

We are focused on the place and function of literature in society. By this we mean how society can be reflected through literary works. The issue of the writer's commitment is focalized here. Chinweizu, et al, observe that a writer's social responsibility manifests itself in that unique marriage between craft and theme that illuminates concerns to his community (252). The social responsibilities entail a writer writes to inform, educate, expose, connect, entertain, criticize etc.

The Marxist criticism posits that literary works can be analyzed from the interactions of class interests, economic pressures and social hierarchies (Amala 131). What this portends is that the interplay between ideology, class struggle, power dynamics in society are dissected. We are further informed thus:

> The Marxist approach seeks to understand low(sic) literary works reflect and critique the power structure of society and how they reflect the struggles of the working class. Marxist criticism tries to comprehend how power, political affairs and money play a role in literary texts and among literary societies and characters (132-3).

These factors interplay and we look at how Marxist texts are used to mirror how economic, political, social power dynamics influence the society.

Marxism underscores class relations and social conflict to bring about social transformation. It works at the following in literary texts: ideology, class struggles, alienation of some, revolution and change; critique of capitalism. These factors are vital for the Marxists.

Reflections of the People's Predicaments in *Shanty Town*

As a play which dramatizes the social experiences of the people, *Shanty Town* is presented to us not just as a reading text but as a reflection on the lives we had lived and offers a ponder on our future. From the opening movement in the dramaturgy, we are presented with the authorial which reveals the essence of our condemnation on the political and social stances of our dear nation. We are told:

> "The acrid stench of sewage and refuse, the putrid smell of rotten animals and plants from the soggy bank covered a film of oil and the swamp across the river conspire with thick dark smoke which billows from refuse dumps to make the neighbourhood a living nightmare" (1).

The description above highlights the precarious situation the people find themselves in a society where the rich only get richer and wants the poor poorer.

The above is an exposition to the harsh and untold dehumanization the common men find themselves in our society. Suffice us to establish that this situation can only lead to the masses perpetrating unholy acts. The characterization of Finecountry, a young unemployed university graduate, will unveil our focus and dissect purpose towards an effectual understanding of the craft of the playwright. The following discourse between Finecountry and his father, Biriye, details:

> **FINECOUNTRY**: … You think I'm wasting my life by looking for my destiny? So you want me to continue living in this hovel, this hole with you… and … sleeping on the floor … you want me to end up like you and my brother who can't provide for your children. God forbid!
>
> …

BIRIYE: … It's amazing how you found freedom in the midst of alcoholics, prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, armed robbers, and kidnappers. That is my wise son's idea of freedom ... (5-6)

This shows exactly what the system has led our youths into. As this goes on, Finecountry appears from grass to grace but the dialogue must be presented for clarity on the death traps to our becoming.

SONYE: Where did you get the money from?

……..

FINECOUNTRY: (Surprised) What is wrong with two of you? So you wanted me to remain in this slum … begging you for food and pocket money? ... (38).

In this, Finecountry reveals that Mr. Biriye and Sony, his wife always preach morality. But the system permeates such morals because we are made to understand that those who embezzle public funds are made kings, chiefs (38).

As the events unfold, Fincountry reveals the source of his wealth and it is only peculiar that we use his dieresis to ponder on the real life harvests in our country:

FINECOUNTRY: Okay, I got a contract

…

FINECOUNTRY: As I was saying, I worked for the party during the last general elections.

…

And we won all the seats from councillorship to governorship positions in the state, and even the National Assembly. Some then I've been fighting for my settlement. So the party gave me a ₦40,000.000 contract last month ... (51-52).

What prompts this is to showcase how the youths are meant to be leaders of tomorrow are being used for thuggery and ballot box snatching in order to rig elections. Finecountry is a victim of such system that suppresses the people into acceptance, and calls such abnormalities a trend. He is happy and thinks he has arrived having got a ₦40,000.000, naira contract to supply drugs and medical equipment to some hospitals in the state (53).

As the state of nation is, contracts only exist on papers and bill boards but they die before they are executed. This is because most of those contracts are compensations to those who worked for the parties as is that of Finecountry. We are directed thus:

BIRIYE: So have you done that? (The supply)

FINECOUNTRY: They're not asking me to execute the contract. It is my compensation. They have taken their cut … (53).

This is the mundane reality of our nation and what follow becomes an eye opener to the detriment of human foolishness.

BIRIYE: Hei! Our people need the drugs. Think of mothers, of sick and dying people. We need good hospitals …

FINECOUNTRY: To hell with what anybody needs (54).

This opens a course on how heartless the rulers are on the predicament of the ruled. But on this, had Finecountry known he would be soon needing the hospital, he would have headed his father's plea to supply the drugs and equipment to restore the people's condition. Finecountry becomes a victim of food poisoning as he ate fresh fish pepper soup at Madam Owigiri's restaurant along reck Road – Remember the fishes died of oil pollution on the river (54).. Now that Finecountry, a representative of the bourgeoisie, has tasted of the junk they feed the common masses, will they still repent and improve the system of things for the better of all? As rhetorical as the question is, let it prick your conscience to do what is right to save humanity?

The national social experiences reflected in this play are critically selected to elucidate the factor which are killing the Nigeria's society at large. From the newspaper headlines, Biriye informs that EFCC is poised to recover $100,000,000,000 looted funds. (8). Our question is, after the recovery, where is this money sent to, what was it used for or was it also re-looted? These questions owe to the fact that we only hear of the recovery but nothing about its usage. Of the issues burning our national interest is the kidnapping which is killing. Biriye, through the newspaper informs:

BIRIYE: Hei! The Fifteen school children kidnapped are yet to be released. Tamara! This is the beginning of the end. The kidnappers are

> demanding a ransom of ₦100,000.00 … (exclaims) Ah! A pregnant woman killed because her husband failed to pay a ransom of ₦ 5,000,000 (throws the newspaper away in disgust…) (8).

This is a quandary of the masses. It is not only in the play that this reflects. The abduction of chibok school girls almost tore Nigeria apart. On 15 April, 2014, 276 mostly Christian School Girsls aged 16-18 were kidnapped by the Boko Haram insurgent group from the Government Girls Secondary School in the town of Chibok in Brno State, Nigeria (Omeni 19).. What follows has been series of school children kidnapping from different areas. Of recent, on the 2nd Dec, 2025, some school students of the Rivers State University (RSU) were kidnapped from the Emohua Campus and on the 4th Dec, 2025, they were rescued (Business day 1). Furthermore, Biriye informs that "Two former governors had been convicted of corruption, money laundering and other related offences" (9). These convictions are only on paper and on news and none of these big wigs had been made to face the music according to the gravity of their offence. Again, we hear of the presidents pledge to eradicate poverty and build an egalitarian society (9), a dream that is hard to achieve. Since Obasnjo's regime to the present, all the presidents have made this same promise yet we are stuck in the ditch and stagnant.

Of importance is the issue of quick and easy access to wealth that the youths accepts. Every shortcut leads to destruction but what becomes the hope of the youth when that is the only way available? Biriye tells us:

> **BIRIYE**: … many young people want quick money. They no longer believe in education and hard work. It is part of the problem … (14).

The situation has become so concentrated that younger generations take up arms, perpetrate all manners of evil against the state and humanity just to get rich. Who is to blame them? The system is a survival of the fittest. Those who command obedience through whatsoever means are allowed to dine with the gods. However, hunger is depicted as a character in this play. It is used to buy obedience, loyalty and acceptance of the people. Is it not poverty that makes the people live in slums? It has become part of the people to the point that the people no longer feel hungry.

SONYE: What else can I say? I don't want war. We can bear hunger, but war is something else … (14-15).

Hunger is part of the people's livelihood and due to its interconnectedness to all areas of their violations and alienation, they no longer feel it. It is this condition of economic deprivation that makes the people celebrate those who could still afford fuel to power their generators. We are made to know this:

SONYE: [They are] Watching TV at our neighbour's. Only God knows how he finds money to buy fuel at the black market (28).

Our refineries have become a thing of the past and only the illegal refineries known as "po-fore" exist and the prices of fuel, diesel, kerosene are on the high.. The adulterated products have effects as seen below:

(As he lifts the lantern on the floor ... Spurting furious red and yellow flames and raging clouds of dark smoke like volcanic ash)

BIRIYE: I thought you had found a solution to the flaring of this our Elene refinery

SONYE: I changed the burner and the wick two nights ago. I hope it's not this adulterated kerosene everywhere … (27-28).

The predicament of the people escalates into lack of infrastructural amenities. What is the condition of our roads? We are told of our East-West road as thus:

BIRIYE: … That East-West Road is in such a condition that it can only best be described as a death trap (28).

By this description, the author intends to create mental pictures of the East-West road which was abandoned for years that any pregnant woman journeying through it could miscarry or have a forced labour before she gets to her destination.

Are we to look away from the theatrical device employed in the play by the playwright? No! The play-within-a play plot arrangement is creatively woven in the play for inference and interpretative excellence. Long-John, Porbeni, Ovunda, & nap are characters through whom, the play realizes this toast. They appear to us as children but through them much is achieved in exposing the social ills

dominant in our society. They begin by giving themselves "nick or guy" names such as Bobonkiti, Ak-47, etc. They first dramatize a robbery scene:

> **OVUNDA**: (Cocks his 'gun') Your money or your life. (Long-John and Porbeni cower and crouch behind their grandfather's deckchair) if you move, I shoot.
>
> **AKPAN**: If you move, I move you, mother fucker.
>
> **OVUNDA**: Your money or your life (16-17)

Again, they dramatize how the poor react due to the redundancy at their companies which results in the loss of work. From Ovunda's mimicry of his father, we can submit that am angry man is indeed a hungry man (17). nap informs us that since his father host his job he has always been at confrontation with the mother (18).

Through the metadrama, we learn of the "Odieshi"- which is a kind of fortification of the human body to avoid penetration of bullets, knife or any sharp object (19). Long-John takes the role of a politician and satirizes the entire political system which had rendered the nation vulnerable to abysmal practices. Long-John who assumes the character of a president gives his inaugural address with conscious Hausa accent and promises of rebranding the Green Revolution, Oferation peed the Nation, MAMSA, SAP … I promise you one hundred thousand megawatts of electricity by the year 2020 … Pree education for all by the year 2020 (21). These programmes are spotted to show that a rebrand of them could raise the bar of this nation as they will create jobs, eradicate unemployment and hunger to an extent. He promises to introduce "a new poverty allebiation frogramme" (23), and "commission Chinese scientists and technologists to froduce flying cars" (22); instead of imforting the the keke nafef.. Such visionary points read by the president could convert this nation and turn her from a consumer nation to a producing nation. We are told also that the cars to be produced would run with water without fuel or diesel (22). The satirical motives of this political representation come to bare as the president leaves excruciating issues and begins to promise national meals and soups (24). We hear him inform us that "I say aeroplane for all Nigerians as dividends of democracy … Four four wife for every man and two two husband for every woman. I no try?" (24). What has these got to

do with the problems of a dying nation? It is high time we left frivolities to chase the crucial and important traits that could redeem us as a nation.

The last metadrama evolving from the quadra is the dramatization of oil explorers/militant attacks. Porbeni becomes a white oil worker supervising nap, a Nigerian drilling for oil; Ovunda becomes a policeman guarding the white man; Long-John leads an imaginary militant gang which opens fire on the trio (25).. This reflects the realization of the people who have been alienated from the same oil which they produce. Historically, Oloibiri is the town that oil was first discovered in Nigeria. But after that contact, hear what remains of it from Biriye who is a native and gives us a first hand witness.

> **BIRIYE**: …. If I leave this small job I am doing here, do you have another one waiting for me at Olobiri, a community raped and abandoned like an empty shell on the shore of a swamp after an oil spill (30).

This abandonment has negatively affected the town and the entire Niger Delta region. This makes Biriye asks rhetorically, "is Oloibiri spared the plague of poverty that turns many innocent people towards crime?" (30-1). No. this allusion draws many events in the play and tie them to the guest for resource control by the natives of the Niger Delta's. Tombari sums the unparallel power display in the society:

> **TOMBARI**: What special skills do all the strangers working in those companies and parking away our money have? We are simply marginalized and exploited. Don't let anybody deceive you. (44)

These exploitations result in the feud between the youths of the region and the security operatives of the Nation. We can hear it thus:

> **SONYE**: Militants and policemen and soldiers are exchanging gunfire. That's what kept me at the market (13).

This cold war made many victims – many wounded, some died, destruction of facilities, kidnapping, armed robbery, pipeline vandalism. All these are done due to the fact that the people feel abandoned and excluded from the sharing of national dividends accruing from their toiling and production. The vandalism propel the oil spill on water and lands which at the and become our peril. See how

Finecountry ended eating the fish which died of pollution – this is the fate of the common man. This description negates the pristine nature of the region as told by Tombari who avers "Have you forgotten our childhood days. Life was good then. The river was everything to us. It was our good drinking water, it gave us different varieties of fresh fish, it was our playground … (48)

Narrating how the common people are robbed off by the upper class, Tombari submits thus: "… We are robbed by a combined criminal gang of the government and oil companies. Go to ino land and see what they have done to us" (42). The motive for pulling out the fight for resource control is couched in the following verdict:

> **TOMBARI**: … Every war produces casualties. But at the end we shall be victorious and the oil wealth from Oloibiri to Bakassi Peninsula, from nebu to the Island of the forcados, Fom Bomy Island to Etche, from Escravos to Ilaje will be ours and life will be good for everyone (43)..

This vision may tarry but it will surely be realized because the fight is a just one as prescribed by Marx and Engels.

Ichabod: Where is the Glory of the Niger Delta?

This thematic question undergirds our study. From the texts, *Shanty Town*, as lenses, we have seen and witnessed the fall of the oil rich region. Oil, which is one natural mineral reserve bettering other regions of the world where it is found, has continuously became the content of frustration, betrayal, negligence, crises, destruction and above all, youth restiveness, and has often triggered militancy, protests, and leadership quagmires as evidenced in the Niger Delta.

Suffice us to state herein that just like the biblical statement made in the book of 1st Samuel 4:21-22, "the glory of the Niger Delta has departed!" This signifies a catastrophic spiritual and national crisis for the region. By infusing this term , Ichabod (where is the glory or the glory has departed), being a name given to Eli's grandchild to mark the loss of the Ark of God, into our writing, we are suggestive of the fact that the transformative and developmental potent of the oil have been

confiscated by the powers that be – be it the government, the multinationals, or those entrusted by the communities with leadership mantra like Finecountry.

This strangulation is what results in the constant militant actions, and or the protests which are in tandem with the resolute decision to resist further exploitation of the people, and the degradation, depletion of the environment, as well as the destruction of our flora and fauna, thereby keeping the region underdeveloped.

Conclusion

Considering the menaces, the author hinted on in the play, we must uphold that truly, the glory of the N'Delta has departed and that the region is abandoned just to keep it below the mark. As a nation, development ought to begin from the region but such experiences of the people of the region amount to the predicament of the entire nation which has kept the nation stagnant. We shall hold sway the verdict of Biriye to summarize the article: "Anarchy. Armed robbery. Criminality. Failure of leadership. Call it whatever you like. The bottom line is that we are in trouble" (30).

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