

“POLITICS, REBELLIOUS AGITATION AND THE NIGERIAN FICTION: AN OVERVIEW OF ISIDORE OKPEWHO’S *TIDES*”

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Abstract

*The nexus that exists between politics and literature cannot be wished away; it has remained timeless. Within the domain of Nigerian fiction, writers for several ages have crafted their narratives using diverse elements of political events in the society. Isidore Okpewho in *Tides* is certainly not different. The focus of this paper is Okpewho’s creative ingenuity in addressing the painful and ever present injustices the people of his homestead, Niger delta region of Nigeria have suffered in the hands of the foreigners working for the oil exploration companies in collaboration with the local leaders. In doing this, the writer exposes the insensitivity of these oppressors to the plights of the poor fishermen and farmers who are daily physically and psychologically assaulted by the enemies of their wellbeing. The Marxist literary theory is found germane in discussing the nitty-gritty of this prose fiction. In conclusion, the inevitability of political events influencing significantly the corpus of Nigerian fiction is affirmed*

Keywords; politics, rebellion, agitation, Marxist, fiction.

Introduction

There is no gain saying that late Isidore Okpewho, scholar, author and literary critic lived and died as an accomplished individual of immeasurable academic achievements. With a first class degree in English and Classics in 1964 from University of Ibadan (the only one of its kind), subsequently obtaining a doctorate degree in Comparative Literature from University of Denver, Colorado, USA and a Doctor of Literature degree from the prestigious University of London, Okpewho received the grooming he needed to excel in scholarship and teaching. With this duo engagement, he exerted himself to the fullest.

In his landmark books and scholar articles in Orature and African Literature, he displayed a reservoir of robustness of intellectualism. In *Tides* and *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, a keen discernment of his large coast of multidisciplinary brilliance is easily observable. In *Call Me ByMy Rightful Name*, he “examines the important issues of racial memory and the search for one’s roots among the Africans in Diaspora from two different perspectives: Western...and African...”(Okafor, 28). In *Tides*, Okpewho treats ambivalent complexes that include; the fight between the economic interest of an ethnic group as against a national economic agenda, the quest for personal gain as shown in the attitudes of the officials of government and the agents of the foreign oil prospecting companies against the environmental degradation of the coastal towns of the Niger Delta. His other prose fiction, *The Last Duty*, is the writer’s own account of the activities that transpired during the Nigerian-Biafrawar. This research focuses attention on the interplay between politics, and rebellious trepidation amongst the protagonists in *Tides* with the aim of identifying one central character of prominence.

The link between politics and fiction is evergreen. Also, restiveness is a human trait which features frequently in most political engagements. The word politics is derived from the Greek word ‘polis’ which refers to a city state. After a thorough analysis and considerations of all ramifications of human engagements,

Dabl and Stinerbrickner arrive at the conclusion that politics is simply “the exercise of influence” (24). This can be an influence borne out of selfishness or activities beneficial to the greater number of the people. Taking a cue from this, an African writer Ayikwe Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* addresses the negative practice of politics in perpetuating corruption in post independent Ghana. Closer home, Chinua Achebe uses the political motif in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* to detail the corrupt habits of the leaders of Nigeria after political independence.

However, it has not been only the voices of the prose fiction writers that have remained vociferous on the interaction between politics and literature. Nadine Gordimer, a renowned literary critic, in his intellectual discourse establishes a nexus between fictional narratives and political events in a society. He thinks that prose writers cannot divorce political topics from their works. He asserts and I agree that there exists writers “whose imaginative powers are genuinely roused by and involved with the spirit of politics as he or she personally experiences it” (118). In using his native country South Africa for illustration, he establishes a bond that exists between politics and fiction. On the basis of this, he arrives at the conclusion that there is a binary classification of South African literature into anti-apartheid and post-apartheid based on the time the work is written. Bernth Lindfor agrees with him. In his own submission, he argues that the creative writers of Africa who have written their prose narrative in the colonial languages of English and French have “been propounded influenced by politics” (22). He sees these writers as recorders of co-existing political activities in addition to being “advocates of radical social change” (22).

This paper is fundamentally concerned with the social transformation the protagonists in *Tides* have brought in their communities through their restiveness. These agitators against social injustice in their homeland join forces to assault the obnoxious work ethics of the foreign oil prospecting companies and their local affiliates. Many literary critics have however addressed the ecological damages the activities of these individuals have caused the environment of the coastal communities and the infringement on the sources of live-hood of the local people. This is not however the interest of this literary critical discourse. Of peculiar attention is the author’s use of the epistolary style of creative writing. In doing this, he follows the footsteps of Samuel Richardson, the 18th century writer who published the pioneer epistolary novel titled, *Pamela*. Subsequently, other writers like Tobias Smollett and Fanny Bunney published the *Humphrey Clinker* and *Evelina* respectively. The famous French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau applied the technique of the epistolary to pass across his ideas on education and marriage in his landmark book titled *La Nouvelle Heloise* (Wikipedia.com). In the novel *Tides* Okpewho uses the same literary style to expose the evil effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and the radical responses of the protagonists in the novel.

In addition, the literary criticism of this prose fiction deserves to be prefixed with a literary theory for appropriate dissecting of the tortuous engagements of the troika protagonists in it. Mao Tse- Tung has a view point on literary criticism that can be assumed to be appropriate and decisive. OnogeOmafume cites Mao who holds an opinion that “in the world today... all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. (Onoge, 433). Same Mao in ‘Talks at the Yenan Forum’ as cited by Onoge raps up what he thinks literature is:

Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward. For example, there is suffering from hunger, cold and oppression on the one hand, and exploitation and oppression of man by man on the other. These facts exist everywhere and people look upon them as commonplace. Writers and artist concentrate such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment. (Onoge, 471)

From the above, it becomes obvious that a writer like Okpewho in his novel *Tides* should use protagonists as a motif to awaken the fighting spirit in the oppressed locals to rise up and fight for their collective survival. From the foregoing, the Marxist literary theory of criticism is germane in this academic paper.

In Ann Dobie’s conception “the principles of Marxism were not designed to serve as a theory about how to interpret texts (86)”. The original proponents of Marxism used it to establish an order where equalitarianism

shall prevail in every human society and that its absence will lead to a state of anarchy. Karl Marx originated the Marxist theory as an instrument of political, economic and social interaction between individuals. His effective collaboration with Friedrich Engels made the theory a global barometer to access the equitability of the relationship that exists between individuals in a society. The ideas of these men “were expounded in the Communist Manifesto, in which they identified class struggle as the driving force behind history and anticipated that it would lead to a revolution in which the workers would overturn the capitalists, take control of economic production and abolish private property by turning it over to the government to be distributed fairly (Dobie, 87)” This concept recognizes two groups of people cohabiting in the society – the workers are the poor, and the capitalists are the rich and owners of the means of production. The kernel of this political philosophy therefore is that the class struggle between the individuals of these dual groups will lead to a revolution in which those in the lower category will overthrow the capitalists and be in charge of the means of production. What is important in this literary criticism is the adaptation of the principles of this theory in the critical discourse of works of literature...

. In this regard, many Marxist literary critics have emerged over the decades. The first of them is George Lukacs of Hungarian descent who is generally regarded as the pioneer. He originated the reflectionism variant. This type which is also known as Vulgar Marxism tries to discuss how the characters that are in a novel reveal the class conflict in the larger society. Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton are also globally acclaimed scholars in the area of Marxist literary criticism. Each of these scholars expound his own view on the issue in question, but there is a convergence on the idea that works of fiction can be subjected to interpretations along the line of a class struggle between the poor and the rich, between those occupy positions of authority and those occupying the lower ladder of the society. In this literary critique of *Tides*, there is a convergence of view models as encapsulated by Terry Eagleton, George Lukacs and Mbah. Terry Eagleton’s illuminating idea that there exists “interactions between ideology and literary form (Dobie, 88)” is germane for this critical effort. Also George Lukacs authoritative statement “that a text will reflect the society that has produced it (Dobie, 87)” is also relevant in dissecting Okpewho’s *Tides*. Finally, Mbah and Mbah in their jointly held opinion assert that “one of the strengths of Marxism which makes it appealing even to its opponents is that it has potentiality for universal application (Mbah, 209)” The views of these scholars justify the choice of the Marxist literary theory for this academic exercise.

II

Even though “the project” (Okpewho, 2) is the writing of a book, that will” long remain an authoritative testimony to the plight of our people “(3), it is used by the author to introduce the various conflicts in the novel. Piriye Dukumo is the initiator of this revolutionary enterprise, who has to initiate a friend into this assignment. From the onset of the fiction, Okpewho lays bare the major sources of conflagration: the construction of the Kwarafadam that reduces the flow of water to the Nigeria River, and the spillage of crude petroleum product that flows into the rivers and destroy aquatic lives that generate income for the natives. The combination of these two will wreak havoc on the financial wellbeing of the coastal Beniotu people. Anything that impinges on the sources of livelihood of any group of persons will lead to acrimonious agitations. Okpewho wastes no time in identifying the three personalities who have volunteered to bear the burden of using rebellious agitations to play the politics that will rescue the ordinary people of the coastal localities from the shackles of oppression. These individuals; Piriye Dukumo, Tonwe Brisibe and Ebika Harrison aka Bickerbug, offer themselves in various degrees as the sacrificial lambs who must experience torture and harassment in the course of their messianic assignments. Hardly any political restiveness takes place in this region without reference to Isaac Boro, the progenitor of civil right struggles in the Niger Delta. The author compares Harrison to this late Ijaw leader in whom the people of his tribe are well pleased with when he makes reference to “his association with Isaac Boro in the struggle to liberate the Niger Delta... (3)”. In doing this, Okpewho aligns this work of fiction to a historical figure and by so doing confirms the timeless intercourse between fiction and current or immediate past historical political events.

The political intrigue in the country and the marginalization of some people that come with it is one major issue of concern in this prose narrative. To stir up the spirit of revolution in Priye and Tonwe, Okpewho subjects them to the agony of suffering from ethnically induced prejudices which cause them to be retired from the *National*

Chronicle newspaper because they are “two minority people (4)”. From this stand point, the writer infuses in these characters the spirit of Beniotu nationalism which subsequently makes them restive and determined to fight all forms of perceived injustices against their people. Thus, the underbelly of the trepidation is not the universal quest for an egalitarian society for all oppressed people, but a fight to liberate their native people from injustice; an injustice displayed by the white engineer working for the international oil company whose enthusiasm for the destruction of the legitimate source of live hood of the people is openly displayed by him. “He was fed up... with these agitations and representations from illiterate natives who knew nothing about what the oil industry was trying to do for them (12), is his reply to a request by the local fishermen that the search-lights from the oil rigs “trained on the waters from dawn to dusk (12)” are scaring away the fishes “when the fishermen were engaged in fishing (12)”. After all, “what... did the inconveniences suffered by a few surveying fishermen matter to the general prosperity which oil had brought to Nigeria, “(12) queried the white engineer? The politics of crude oil production in Nigeria has always provided a platform on which the foreigners and their local collaborators constantly assault the natives despite destroying their fishing occupation and polluting the water that sustains their lives. The scale of this environmental, economic and cultural degradation is mind boggling. These include: “deforestation of on-shore sites, desecration of traditional shrines, evacuation and tearing up of whole villages and farmlands, vast areas of oil spillage and great quantities of aquatic life destroyed... (8)”. Therefore, these provide enough ingredients needed for the people to rise up against physical and psychological oppression. But the twosome of Piriye and Tonwe need Harrison to complete the tripod of resistance to “the inhuman devastation which policies formulated by corrupt officials here in Lagos have constantly brought about (21)” ; Lagos being the national capital of Nigeria when the novel was written. Okpewho positions the third individual in this triad, Harrison, as the rebellious character of grand proportion who plays out a crucial role and bears the brunt of the fight against the sufferings of the people of their Beniotu homeland.

Harrison is not new in this struggle. He continues from where his forbearers stopped. As an operator from the leftish ideological slant, he is prepared to pay the supreme sacrifice in this human conflict. The “unfolding drama (22)” involving this character becomes the chauvinism the writer wants to use to detail in full Harrison’s tortuous career which is “the principal factor (23)” in the subsequent events of this narrative. But in his crusade for a clean environment and against the destruction of the legitimate source of livelihood of the people of his native creek, he exhibits the ethnic jingoism that the leaders of the Nigerian nation are being accused of. His focus of attention in this struggle is the Beniotu clan and Delta rather than a struggle for the larger human society. This does not however belittle the importance of his perturbation and deviance to the authorities of oppression. His temperament is what is perhaps required to see the people out of the woods of oppression. While his fellow comrade, Tonwe can vasing for a pacific engagement with the oppressors and their agents, yields nothing positive. His visit to the military high command in Warri to complain about the ill treatment Opene and his fellow fishermen are subjected to in the lands of the soldiers receives a most offensive response from the military Commander Adetuji. The implication of this is a fore closure of a peaceful interface. Harrison’s approach of intellectual appointment with the authorities in Lagos becomes initially the prima face method to use in achieving the required result. Therefore, addressing the members of the public at Campos Square for instance, becomes his means of seeking for and getting approval of public opinion for his course of action. In doing this also, he like his compatriot Tonwe, initially appeals for peaceful approaches to the seemingly lock jam in the relationship between the government agents and the oppressed people. The duo suffer from the same frustrations in their quests for the liberation of their homestead.

But their frustrations know no bound when they identify moles within their ranks. This is expected of all revolutionary activities of this nature. As the elements of positive change are strategizing on ways of achieving success, the oppressors of the rural people are equally mapping out plans to defeat them in the battle front. These enemies of the people infiltrate the group of liberators and cause disaffection and rancorous moments amongst them. Harrison experiences this when his associates decide to jettison their struggle and collaborate with the Minister of Petroleum for pecuniary gains. Also, Opene, an active personality in the struggle jumps ship and accept crumbs from the table of the agents of injustice. Chief

BeyeZuokumor, a tribal leader of the Delta people is another saboteur of the good of the common people and “a paid fool (146)”. But Harrison fails to yield to diversionary antics like these. What makes his sacrifice intriguing is that he is “a bloody half-caste (38)”. By implication, he is not a full blooded Beniotu man.

In every situation Harrison is regarded with awe. In the larger world, his compatriots respect him immensely. As a time fighter for the common good he has to face arrest and harassment in the hands of the security agents. He gets arrested, incarcerated for “denouncing the government calling everybody names... The most disturbing aspect of it all is the ethnic character of his agitations (57)”. It is therefore not surprising that it is on his shoulders that the mantle of the resistance to oppression rest. He it is who must take the most difficult and dangerous adventures in the cause of this fight. “The toughness of character “(100) has always been his hallmark. His “organizational power “(104) places him way ahead of his co-tenants of the detention camp who cut across various strata of the society; many better educated and highly placed in the society than him. In this detention, there is a full realization of his being. Here he wears the toga of a “charismatic leader of men “(105) who as usual expounds the virtues of freedom of expression, a right to education, equality before the law amongst other inalienable rights of the individual in a free society. In all of these, the writer temporarily elevates him to the status of an advocate for universal human right rather than a parochial leader of his Beniotu homeland.

He remains the nexus that binds the three protagonists together. His temperament, however, is not as volatile as that of Harrison but the writer imbues him with the qualities of that individual who is at home with the different tempers exhibited by the other two protagonists. Notwithstanding, Piriye and Tonwe collectively represent one shade of the “agitations over the problems of the Delta, both in Lagos and in the Delta itself (77)”, while Harrison singularly acts as the robust co-coordinator of the radical events in Lagos and the Delta creek concurrently. The two other protagonists, Tonwe and Piriye can't be said to be chicken hearted individuals. Each is assaulted in one way or the other by the agents of government. Piriye is detained in the same detention camp with Harrison even though he is mildly treated by the officials of the security agency. Tonwe receives his dose of ill treatment in Warri and Benin in the hands of offensive government officials, one a military man Adetunji and the other, his personal friend Batowei, the Commissioner for Health and Environmental Affairs. Piriye shares the skill of intellectualism with Harrison. He reads books of leftist ideology like: *Marxist Ideology, Revolutionary Politics, The Thoughts of Mao Tse Tung, The Wretched of the Earth* amongst others. In the choice of these books, Okpewho gives the reading audience of *Tides* an unambiguous direction of the ideological postulation of these protagonists; they are individuals who share the views of renowned Marxist philosophers.

From their interactions in detention, Piriye confirms that Harrison will occupy the preeminent status in the fictions book project being planned by himself and Tonwe. A chapter in the book will be titled “The Bowel of the Beast”, which will be devoted to the antics of Harrison. As the centerpiece of “the morbid counter play of power “(116), Piriye confirms that Harrison is the most important and violent individual amongst the tripod. “Bickerbug (Harrison) is tougher than I am (114)”, Piriye confesses. On his shoulder rests the ultimate resistance to the oppression of the people of the Delta in the hands of the agents of governance, and their collaborators in the intentional oil and exploring companies. While faced with the full picture of the imminent violent eruption that Harrison intends to precipitate in the nation, Piriye seems not to be part of it. In his words “I don't want to be part of any such plan. He does not have my support for whatever action he seems to be planning (156-157)”. Even with his incarceration Piriye is not inclined towards violence. Tonwe's agitation for the rights of his people is tailored towards non-violence. “There was nothing that could not be solved by constructive negotiation; there were bound to be obstacles along the way, but these would be overcome if men exercised due patience and discretion (162)” are his ideas of constructive engagements. He sums up his opinion that “anybody who resorted to violence should expect to face the force of the law (163)”. Thus, these two individuals show clearly that their resistance to oppression does not involve violent responses.

Different in world view from these fringe individuals is Harrison. Harrison displays the sagacity of a modern day revolutionary element who equips himself with adequate education to enable him understand the

divergent components of his crusade. He acquires self education in the areas of engineering, petroleum engineering, construction of dams and bridges, environmental pollution and petroleum law. The totality of this education makes him understand the intricacies involved in the two problems confronting the Delta people. As the central character of this rebellious excitement, he must be conversant with the politics and current events taking place in his geo-space of interest. This gives him a ubiquitous status of having on his finger tips occurrences taking place everywhere and even in private homes like the matrimonial discord between Piriye and his wife Tonye.

Does Harrison have any personal reason to be all out to confront the immoral fabric of the government of the nation and its corrupt agents? Yes. In detention, he is subjected to a most inhuman treatment. The inhuman physical assault he receives is clearly shown in the “dark brown patches and blotches around his eyes, a welt blow, the left brow and a scar across the bridge of his nose between his eyes (151)”. Not only these evidences of torture, there also exists “welts, slashes and cuts, only recently healed (151)” all over his body. He describes his excruciating agony in the hands of Yelwa’s men while in the camp thus; “I screamed at the top of my voice as the pain of their blows cut through my skin. After a time, I was thoroughly weakened by the pain, and I fell down... they resorted to punching and kicking on my face, my sides, my balls, everywhere... I passed out (152)”. As the topmost freedom fighter, he has to experience so much torment in physical and psychological flavours to prepare him for the messianic role of bringing his people out of their woes. It is with this agonizing pain that Harrison resolves justifiably with his entire being and soul that “this country will pay for every single blow and every cut they gave me in that camp... and pay dearly (153)”. At this critical point in the struggle, Harrison recognizes his loneliness and the imperative for new alliances. He recruits new friends and establishes an intellectual space between himself and former allies like Piriye. With his ever-present quality, he seems to have gotten the information that Piriye has been commissioned as a spy to watch over him and his activities. He considers Tonwe on the other hand as a “damn conservative asshole (169)” and also “a drag on our cause (169)”. At last, the much awaited moment comes. “Oil installations in the Delta (are) been destroyed by bomb explosions (178)”. In addition, offshore rigs and storage tanks for crude oil are blown up. The natural suspects for these are Harrison and co-travelers known to the authorities- Piriye and Tonwe. “I was determined now to nail Bickerbug (Harrison) if I spied him anywhere (187)”. The destruction of the Lugard Bridge in Lagos by the same individual and his group compounds the loss of the nation. The explosions at Delta and Lagos have taken place at the same time. They underscore “the cold blooded neatness (181)” of Harrison’s dexterity and the importance he attaches to the two locations “in his scheme of revenge (181)”. Harrison’s moment of anger fails to abate. The blowing up of the Kwarafa dam which Piriye and Lati had predicted becomes grandiose. After this explosion, he completes his self-imposed assignment of avenging the ill treatments his native people have suffered in the hands of well-known agents of oppression. Two of the three destroyed installations represent the fulcrum of his anger and rebellion. For him, his actions represent victory for his people. For him “our people have won... The water is flowing again full stream. The tides are here again. Soon there will be plenty of fishes swimming again (198)”. On his arrest however, Harrison fails to show maturity as a true revolutionist. When he informs Piriye “don’t forget to join soon okay (199)” gives the reader the impression that he intends to beginning ‘singing’ as soon as he is detained in a security confinement.

III

In *Tides*, Okpewho has highlighted burning issues that have remained reoccurring in the history of Nigeria. The issues of the pollution of the water in the sea that destroys the fishing activities and contaminate the sources of drinking water of the people by the workers of the oil prospect companies occur till date. The title of the novel *Tides* is the novelist’s attempt to encapsulate all of the experiences of the three protagonists in the prose narrative. *Tides*, the plural form of tide (the change of the sea level) stand for the multiplicity of situations of conflict that are contained in the novel and are still present in modern day Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The interactions between the natives and the other agents have remained turbulent till date.

Therefore, this tumultuous interface has remained timeless. The writer as an indigene of this locality has used this novel to draw global attention to these reoccurring conflicts in his homestead. KwawisiTekpetey believes the author's action is appropriate when he states that a creative artist "has a social mission to fulfill (and)... should be deeply rooted in the socio-political reality of his people which must be reflected in his work (32)" In addition to this, Kwawisi strongly feels that "the function of art is that it should raise questions, deliver messages for social and political awakening, and demystify the oppressed and exploited (58)". Okpewho in this novel has used the plot of this fiction, an inherent part of art, to raise an alarm on the social, political and economic maladies confronting his people. Charles Nnolim on his part, highlights the nexus between politics and literature when he offers the opinion that "politics... enters literature...when the writer's concern with the public welfare is important, especially when the writer's concern extends beyond destinies of single individuals to encompass the collective destinies of ... the masses (226)"..The author has used this novel to achieve all of these and more.

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