

**International Journal of Arts and Humanities
(IJAH)
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia**

Vol. 4(2), S/No 14, April, 2015:97-106

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v4i2.8>

Politics of Resistance and Emancipation in Obari Gomba's *The Ascent Stone*

Akani, Julius Nsirim

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Choba, Port Harcourt

Tel: +2348038746350

E-mail: quejul4god@yahoo.com; julius.akani@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examines Obari Gomba's position, as expressed in his collection of poems, *The Ascent Stone* on the myriad of problem facing the people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. To him, there is a consistent pattern of upheavals that will remain for a long time, and so he suggests, through his poems, that the people should reject and resist every form of social and economic oppression. He has shown through his poetry that to overcome the myriad of problems that the nation has encountered since it gained political independence, *videlicet* corruption, coups d'etat, the Nigeria-Biafra war, Oil theft, and Boko Haram, amongst others, rebellion against the "hunters" remains the only option. The hunter can be the hunted. Gomba's masterly new voice has spoken well enough for one to understand that these problems that have remained from the time of the British maladministration of the nation, Nigeria can be solved by our current leaders. The leadership must sit up and work. The led too must do everything to urge the leadership on to doing the right thing. Our study reveals that time is of the essence here; the oppressors have started to "even spin God to the

side/of oppression.” They must be resisted before the entire house becomes “A House of Thieves.”

Introduction

Politics of resistance and emancipation, as issues raised in Gomba’s *The Ascent Stone*, can be properly situated through the use of the New Historicist and postcolonial literary theories. New Historicist and postcolonial literary theorists operate under the wings of cultural studies. Whereas the New Historicist uses his literary work to counter the belief that what happened at a particular point in time is the exclusive preserve of one person (Buchanan 340; Dobie 176), the postcolonial theorist, on the other hand, gives his readers the opportunity to read about how the once-colonized *others* have been able to wipe off every attempt by their erstwhile colonizers to cast their reflection on other people (Boehmer 29).

As a literary theory, New Historicism does not enjoy much currency in the criticism of creative works by African writers. Most critics do not use it as a tool in their analysis. It is seen by most critics as a movement. This is not unconnected with the fact that in the late 1970s and early 1980s when it first began, it was only used to analyze Shakespeare’s works, as a way of pointing out other ways of reading Shakespearean plays (Buchanan 340). With time its horizon became widened, and critics began to see that New Historicism and postcolonial theory are interconnected. Going forward, it is important that we point out here that the New Historicist as a critic is interested in close reading of texts (Rice and Waugh 253). This is done as a way of establishing that the past is made available to us through the texts that we read, even though the primary objectives of these texts are mainly their interest with the present and how to better the lot of the common man in the present society, any given society--the society where the text emanates from. The New Historicist believes that the history of a people can be studied or examined from different angles, even from his own angle. Hence his belief that what happened at a particular point in time cannot be narrated through only one person’s view, as we have hinted earlier. This is in line with what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has identified as “The Dangers of a Single Story”. Writers, as story tellers, like to tell their own stories, even if the author and perhaps the reader are not consciously aware of what purpose those stories serve. In the same way too, different readers understand a work of art from different positions; and this leads to “multiple interpretation that are affected by changing cultural movement and evolving understanding of the time and place of production” (Dobie 191). There can never be a single story or a single world view.

Postcolonial literary theory, as hinted earlier, is used to analyze literary texts about “the empire” and the ones that have been used to supplant them. In most cases, texts that are used to supplant earlier texts do one thing: they try to expose the dangers of a single story. Postcolonial literary theorists believe that if you tell a

particular story about a people for over a long period of time, whether these stories represent the true position or not, it becomes the only story that is known about those people. Perhaps, this explains why recent critical essays that are anchored on the postcolonial literary theory always tend to resist colonialist angles to issues that deal with the colonized people. This is what Gomba does in *The Ascent Stone*. He tells the story of a people in a particular society and does not fail to mention the names of the towns or places that he writes about: Ogoni, Oloibiri, Odi, Umuechem, the Niger Delta, Nigeria, etc.

To underscore the reason for this politics of resistance and emancipation in Gomba's poetry, we may need to touch on the historical angle. The persistence of oil-related conflicts in Nigeria can be linked to the failure of the Nigerian state "to address longstanding agitation by oil producing communities for resource control" (Kiaale Nyiayaana 88). These oil-producing communities have continued to oil their resistance and agitation, through the unabated flow of arms and ammunition into the Niger Delta. This is as a result of the activities of the same multinational oil companies who do everything possible to perpetuate their control over the oil wealth of the people. They do this through the use of the divide-and-rule tactics.

Two main reasons why the communities of the Niger Delta will continue to resist attempts by the Federal government and the multinational companies to have things easy have been put forward by critics. The first reason is that the different ethnic nations that make up the Niger Delta, as it is constituted at the moment, will continue to make claims as to who really owns much of the oil. This has resulted in such categorization as core and peripheral/marginal oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. The second reason is that the people do not always feel comfortable when they read of news reports that suggest that the Niger Delta contributes over 40% of Nigeria's GDP, 90% of total annual earnings and about 80% of the national gross income (Nyiayaana 96). Against the backdrop of the region's lack of development by the government of the centre, nobody can really blame the people for the persistence of conflict in the region. Perhaps, this explains why we have had groups like the Ijaw Youth Council, the Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Chicoco movement, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, Niger Delta Volunteer Force, etc, all as attempts by different ethnic nationalities to represent the interest of their peoples. This is what has led the International Crises Group (ICG) to describe the Niger Delta as a "swamp of insurgency" (Nyiayaana 99). It is evidently clear that from this swamp of insurgency, the Niger Delta is beginning to witness some form of enhanced political ambition. Maybe, the region should continue to remain a swamp of insurgency.

Literature Review

Published by Pearl Publishers in 2014, *The Ascent Stone* marks the coming of age of Gomba, as a poet. We say coming of age here because it is with the current publication that Gomba attempts to do an appraisal of his poetic output. After years of hard work and remaining loyal to the muse, Gomba decides to assess his contribution to African poetry. He has been able to put together the volume under study, *The Ascent Stone*. This volume is a marriage of *Length of Eyes* (2012) and *Pearls of the Mangrove* (2011). Apart from this review or self appraisal, that produced this union (of *Length of Eyes* and *Pearls of the Mangrove* as), *The Ascent Stone* (2014), we shall review what other critics have written about Gomba.

Admittedly, Gomba's *The Ascent Stone* is yet to receive enough critical attention from critical theorists and writers but there are reviews of *Pearls of the Mangrove*, as a separate text, and on *Length of Eyes* too. Dami Ajayi's review of *The Ascent Stone*, published on *worldpress.com* and later by *The Sun* newspaper, seems to be the first major attempt by a critic/writer to write on the book. We shall examine his paper and other comments made on Gomba, under "Praise for Obari Gomba's poetry" on the blurb in this section.

Let us begin with the comments on "Praise for Obari Gomba's Poetry." According to Lindsay Barrett, "Obari Gomba's poetic voice is refreshing as he expresses the spirit of a new generation of Nigerians in vibrant language." The focus of this comment is on the freshness of Gomba's poetry. The critic does not fail to point out that Gomba belongs to a new generation. This is the same issue that Odi Ofeimun lays emphasis on. As he has written, "Obari Gomba's poetry has the freshness of an insurrection". For Tanure Ojaide, "the poems are strong and well crafted." Martin T. Bestman also highlights the angle of freshness in Gomba poetry: "...he strings words together like beads, with refreshing divinatory resonance." All these are not full-length criticism of Gomba's collection of poetry but mere "praises for Obari Gomba's Poetry."

Dami Ajayi, in his "Violence and Victories: on Obari Gomba's *The Ascent Stone*," raises a lot of issues too, as they are examined in Gomba's text. Again, in this review-article, we do not read much about the politics of resistance and emancipation. His first comment on Gomba's poetry is that it reveals Gomba as "a poet with an obsessive fascination with human anatomy, couplets and the Niger Delta." (2) Ajayi examines Gomba's interest in the human anatomy and raises the discourse to another level as he writes that "the Niger Delta [is] a woman." (2) The "lucid image of a woman as a grand metaphor [in Gomba's poetry is such that] one cannot run out of ways of violating the Niger Delta." (2) As a result of Gomba's use of woman as a grand metaphor, it is not out of place for readers to encounter such words as "rape,

pussy, menses, pain, suffering, ashes, fears, wounds...violence all drowning in endless murky waters with a thin skin of crude oil atop as veil." (2)

Finally, Ajayi is basically of the opinion that Gomba uses his poetry to confront some disturbing issues militating against the Niger Delta. For Ajayi, Gomba has to do this because "militancy is inevitable in the natural history of the Niger Delta [as]...mindless rape, wreckage...cannot persist without some sort of confrontation and resistance." (3).

As hinted earlier, critics have not been able to do an in-depth and full analysis of this volume of poetry. And of course no adequate attention has been given to the perspective on resistance and emancipation in this book. This study is indeed path-breaking as it is meant to open up discussion on this collection of poems.

Politics of Resistance and Emancipation

Poets who make the most significant contribution through their poetry tend to be challenged instead of threatened by the miscellany of issues that need to be addressed in their society. Gomba seems to have taken advantage of a situation where there are a lot of issues to be addressed in Nigeria and the Niger Delta in particular by using his corpus of militant poems to address issues of politics, resistance and emancipation in the region. We know this because critics have already stated that what is most important when one reads a poem for the first time is that one must ask questions; and I will be asking myself the following questions about Gomba's poetry: Who is the speaker in *The Ascent Stone*? Who is the speaker addressing? Is there a specific setting of time and place? And, what is the main subject of Gomba's *The Ascent Stone*? In answering these questions, emphasis will be on "A House of Thieves," and "We shall look the Hunters in the Eyes."

The tone of the speaker in the first line of "A House of Thieves" suggests that he is a much younger person than "elder JP Clark of the Delta" (127). This is shown further, in the second line: "someone should have warned us that bandits/will never let us be. Someone should have/Taught us to carry the blackgold in our thighs." (127) It seems that the speaker, being a much younger person than J.P. Clark, expects to receive instructions from elders. But he will never make this possible. He refuses to hand over the communication baton to the older man. Even if one would like to refer to "A House of Thieves" as a poem in the mould of Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation," the problem is that there is a lack of communication between the elder poet and the younger speaker in the poem.

Gomba's "telephone conversation" with "elder-poet, J.P. Clark" (128) raises a lot of questions. The elders do not seem to be interested in talking or giving advice to the younger ones. If they were "someone should have warned us that our children/will join the thieves even when they proclaim/on mountaintops that their

love for the land/fills ten million barrels per day” (127). One point is clear in the poem: the elders have done their bit and did not succeed in stopping these oil thieves. They did not succeed in stopping all of them-- the ones at Abuja, the governors, militants (miscreants) and kidnappers. Indeed, it is difficult to detect “the borderline between militants and miscreants” (128) as the speaker wonders. Again, note the most salient point in this conversation: The elder-poet did not say a word. The conversation is more of a one-way traffic, from the side of the obviously youth-poet.

Apart from the internal audience of “A House of Thieves,” the speaker addresses the readers on the plethora of problems that oil has brought the people of the Niger Delta. We are informed by the speaker that our leaders only claim to love us; in the actual sense they do not love us: “The governors love us/to that we all swear. So each time they reclaim/some wads from the thieves in Abuja, they keep/the money safe in their own leaking pockets” (127). Our leaders are insensitive to our plights. They have refused to utilize the monthly allocation from Aso Rock judiciously, in the development of our states.

It is clear that the people of the Delta are called to action as the speaker challenges all to “question our collusion with those who pillage and murder us/Someone should teach us to purge ourselves of greed” (128). The greedy attitude of the people is shown in the phrase “internal dogs” (128). The people of Niger Delta are advised by the poet to ask themselves one important question: “Amongst the loudest voices in the struggle, how many/Are loud for their own bellies?” (128) As a problem shared is a problem *halfed*, providing the answer to this question means that the people are now ready to purge themselves of greed. The phrase “internal dogs” conjures up an image of a struggle that is half-hearted. And the desired emancipation from the “vultures who have come from far and wide”(128) will not be achieved if the level of resistance is not strong enough. Of course, the militants would not want to forgo any little privilege in the interest of all.

The setting for “A House of Thieves” can be traced back to 1999 when *Pearls of the Mangrove* was first published. We can also move the temporal setting of this poem to 2011. It is around this time that the poet republished the third edition of the volume and he made it clear, while introducing the volume, that fourteen new poems are added to the original volume. It is clear to us that the culture of oil theft and greed has become a popular one among the people of the Delta. In the Niger Delta, “we fete the village-king.../the lucky cow/in shell’s service against the people, the lean cow/who swallows the land” (128). This has not always been the case. Time and space constraints will fail us if we attempt to recount the heroic deeds of Niger Delta kings who stood on the side of the people. The treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, for instance, was not and cannot be signed by a village-king in the service of a multinational company.

Gomba's "A House of Thieves" is about the Niger Delta and its fight to reclaim control of its oil wealth. The poem suggests that the fight is still far from being won because the people are yet to purge themselves of greed. As the title suggests, the thieves in the house must be thrown out first for the fight to be effective. The fight cannot be won when our children have joined the thieves.

In "We shall look the Hunters in the Eyes" the speaker speaks of issues of oppression, suffering, poverty, wanton destruction and brutality against the Niger Delta. The tone of the speaker, in this twelve-part poem of ten couplets each, suggests that the speaker is defiant. In his defiance, he calls the people of Niger Delta--Kaiama, Umuechem, Ogoni, Jesse and Odi--to action (163). While calling on the people to emulate [Isaac Adaka] Boro and [Ken] Saro-Wiwa, he reminds them that they must fight to protect what belongs to them: "This land is ours; the waters are ours/we shall keep our grip firm on our rights" (163). The title of the poem, the ninth and tenth (last two) couplets of the first part of the poem are clear indications of the speaker's defiance:

WE SHALL LOOK THE HUNTERS IN THE EYES

We shall look each hunter

In the eye

We shall fight them all

Until they run (163).

The speaker maintains his defiant approach all through the poem. Examples abound. In part two, he restates that even with "guns point at our heads" we will not be cowed; we shall tell them, we shall look the hunters in their eyes and tell them "that they are guilty/of theft and with murder/...they have wasted/our wealth and our blood." (164) Examples can also be found in part three where he says that "the hunters are thieves: the tree/of their guilt blooms" (165). In part four, the speaker calls on the people to march out against the hunters until they (the hunters) become the hunted. Being that the people, the poor masses are more in number than the hunters (looters of the people's God-given wealth), the speaker urges the people to deal "a thousand blows/for every hunter" (166). These hunters must be resisted because they "are thieves/ they are evil as hell," (166) he further asserts in part five.

The speaker addresses the people of the Delta. As we read in part five, he is not interested in niceties, he calls the people to shun prayers and move into action before it is too late. It will become too late by the time the people come to demand their rights, what rightly belongs to them, and they will be termed "trespassers" on

their own land (167). It is in deceit that, the hunters tell us to turn the other cheek, we hear the speaker informing the people of Niger Delta in part six.

The perfect term to use in referring to what the hunters are doing to our land is “plunder” (168). They must be stopped from exploiting our land. This is more so because “we know the hunted/cannot be free/until they hunt/the one who hunt them” (169). The call on the people to resist the hunters is further reinforced in part nine where the speaker reminds the people that “freedom does not come/from the barrel of silence/freedom comes from the sweat/of agitation” (170).

In terms of specific setting of time and place, we know that the most inhuman form of oil exploration and exploitation is still being done in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region in this present age. Whereas in Europe, the Americas and others parts of the world where the people’s right and opinion are respected, the story is different. This makes the setting, in terms of time to be this twenty-first century. This oil theft, exploration and exploitation of natural resources is carried out in Kaiama, Umuechem, Ogoni, Jesse,Odi and in other nations of the Niger Delta like Ikwerre, Ekpeye, Abua, etc. Of course, some of these places are mentioned in the poem. Put differently, setting in terms of place is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, writ large (163, 172-3).

Gomba’s “We shall look the Hunters in the Eyes” is a call to arms which seek to mobilize the people of Niger Delta for mass action against the “hunters.” This seems to explain why “this song [should] reach forth to Kaiama, Umuechem, Ogoni, Odi and other nations and town in the Niger Delta. The poet specifically calls for action against “the dragons of power” (165) and not against Boko Haram insurgents that will not allow the explorations for oil in the Chad Basin. Those in power know what to do, in terms of exploring other opportunities for creating wealth in our nation. They should do it and stop depending on one region alone to feed the entire nation. This over- dependence has led to the deployment of “gunships and gunboats,” (165) which in the real sense represent the *militarization* of the economy because of the Niger Delta oil wealth.

Finally, the poet’s vision of the entire Nigerian society is that of a land where justice, equity and fairness reign supreme. The oil wealth from the Niger Delta should be used to develop all parts of Nigeria, especially the area where the oil is being taken from. This, according to the poet, is “the truth” (164) that must be told and the other side of the story.

Conclusion

We have analyzed issues of resistance and emancipation, as seen in Gomba’s *The Ascent Stone* through the use of the Cultural Studies theory. As a tool for critical

analysis of literary works, Cultural Studies theory has made it possible for us to understand the poet's view and opinion of events in his immediate society.

This paper aligns with the position of other critics who argue that it is difficult to establish the nexus between the arts and literature, on one hand, and the politics of resistance and emancipation in Nigeria today, on the other hand. The preponderance of issues of resistance and emancipation in Gomba's recent collection shows how the natural resources of the Niger Delta and the politics surrounding these resources can be a major concern to writers, especially those who hail from or reside in the region. We have examined these issues in this paper, having in mind the position of G.G. Darah who maintains that "the radicalization of the Niger Delta space has had its effect on the themes and rhetoric of works by the region's writers, activist thinkers and cultural mediators" (99).

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