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Abstract

The criticism of Niger Delta eco-conscious poetry continues to generate new insights about the plight of the region, but with greater attention to the threnodic sensibility of the poets and the degradation of the environment. This article engages with two eco-conscious collections of Nnimmo Bassey, one of the prominent voices in the campaign against environmental degradation in Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region of the country. With insights from Marxist theory, selected eco-poems from *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood* (2002) and *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (2011) are closely read to demonstrate how the poet's violent tone and resistance thematic inclination imbue the poems with revolutionary temper.

Introduction

The Niger Delta poets have taken it upon themselves to join the ongoing struggle for the emancipation of their region, which has been undergoing steady destruction owing to oil exploration. Some of the poets, such as Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Ogaga Ifowodo, G' Ebinayo Ogbowei, Joe Ushie, and Nnimmo Bassey among others, have lent their voices to the struggle through their poetry. Bassey, an advocate against climate change and environmental desecration, belongs to the third generation Nigerian poets (Adebisi-Adelabu and Aguele 2018). He has been quite vociferous in his campaign against environmental degradation. Indeed, his efforts to make sure that there is a global awareness

of the situation of the Niger Delta is noteworthy. His social environmental activism has been as committed as his literary environmental activism, both of which are geared towards the survival and protection of the ecosystem.

Bassey's eco-poetry invites a close critical interrogation for two reasons. Despite the depth of his commitment to the extremely important agenda of salvaging the environment and, by implication, humanity, the criticism of his eco-poetry has been peripheral. Secondly and more importantly, Bassey is one of the eco-poets whose praxis in the self-imposed task of saving the earth mutates beyond the pages of paper. In addition to being involved as part organizer of campaigns and conferences about the need to save the earth from harmful anthropocentric

activities, he is the Director of Friends of the Earth International, a non-governmental organization that is committed to protecting the environment. As someone whose eco-conscious ideology straddles both theory and practice, the potentials of his poetry to provide us new and practical insights to apprehend the challenge of environmental degradation by exploitative and oppressive multinational oil companies and the strategies of countering the same are quite high. The article at hand hopes to illuminate, in particular, how Bassey tries to counter the hegemonic oppression of the eco-human components of the Niger Delta by the oil multinationals in collusion with the Nigerian state. To do this, the article engages with two of his eco-conscious poetry collections, *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood* (2002) and *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (2012). The former has been described by Obari Gomba (2016) as a “testimonial to unbroken will-power even when the struggle demands the supreme sacrifice” (141), an unbroken will power occasioned by the shared will of the people to put a permanent end to the continued degradation of their environment. Similarly, the latter has been described as a collection executed as a “mobilization of all social forces in the agitation for the protection and preservation of the natural environment” (Ohwarworhua and Orhero 2019, 299).

According to Adebisi-Adelabu (2020), “many poets from the Niger Delta have drawn their thematic afflatus from the disturbing condition of the physical environment of this oil-rich part of Nigeria” (2020, 263). While this truly applies to Bassey, his poetry essentially tries to dislodge the hegemony of oil, which has been heavily imposed upon the people of the Niger Delta against their will. Aside this preoccupation in his poetry volumes most of his non-creative intellectual works have focused on the same subject. *Oil Watching in South America* (1997), *The Nigerian*

Environment and the Rule of Law (2009), *Knee Deep in Crude* (2009), *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and Climate Change in Africa* (2011) and *Oil Politics: Echoes of Ecological Wars* (2016) are some notable examples. The counter-hegemonic tenor of his poetry, to be certain, resonates with that of virtually every Niger Delta poet of the contemporary era. It seems, like the political militants in the creeks of the region, most Niger Delta poets are of the view that the Federal Government of Nigeria and the oil multinationals in the country are into a conspiracy to continue the extraction of oil in the region at the risk of human survival. It is perhaps for this same reason that critics and writers have been either killed or maimed. The most widely known of this is the judicial hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others during the notorious regime of General Sani Abacha in 1995. During the General’s regime, Bassey himself was ‘kidnapped’ by government agents and made to spend many days in detention. His experience at the hands of security agents on that infamous occasion saw him write *Intercepted* (1998), a chronicle of his treatment in the prison while awaiting his fate. It is also a collection that marks the inclination to commitment in his poetry.

To be certain, the African writer has the cause to choose committed writing over idealistic writings because of the amalgam of problems that beset his milieu. As Achebe (1978) tells us, a writer’s commitment is

[a] sense of obligation or a strong attachment to a cause...to particular social aims and the use of his writings to advance those aims. This of course, implies a belief that literature can and should be used as a force for social change, and the writer has the responsibility to do so. (177).

It is this sense of obligation that propels the writer to get involved in the politics of his

time, to become a nagging voice of dissent to a violent or corrupt system. The writer, knowing that he cannot do this on his own, gets the people involved and, together, they attempt to dislodge a corrupt or violent system through protest, dissidence and a call for revolution. In all these, the writer is not just sitting behind the crowd like a coward, hoping his words will do the magic while he waves the wand and see the effect. He marches in front of the crowd as the head of the dissenters. Like Ken Saro Wiwa, this is the path Bassey has also chosen.

Since the poet is an integral member of the society, his voice becomes forceful in the quest to wrest his people free from oppression. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) observes that "every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics" (Preface). We can surmise that there is no hiding place for the writer when it comes to politics. In the case of Bassey, the poet's interest intersects with the politics of land, its mineral wealth and its destruction. Land is a serious subject in Africa for many reasons. Africans are mystically bound to their land (Ojaide 1996). For this reason, any kind of alienation of the people from their land usually leads to cosmic disequilibrium for such people. This conception of land must however be understood as something beyond a physical spatial entity to include all its enrichments, physically and spiritually. A very comprehensive articulation of this understanding is provided by Cajetan Iheka (2018) who observes that "many African societies, despite their complexities and differences, are drawn to an ethics of the earth" in which "certain nonhuman forms, including animals, plants, and so on, are considered viable life forms worthy of respect" (7). In the Niger Delta context, the environment, symbolized primarily by the land, is important to their collective survival as it serves as their source of food, economy,

transportation as well as recreation. Much of these have been substantially lost to oil exploration in the region, leading to disenchantment, anger, frustration and deaths. This is why the poet is committed to making sure that the oil companies and the government leave the land alone so that the people can enjoy the tranquility of living in a toxic-free environment.

In the preface to *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood*, the poet reiterates his mission of forceful retrieval of his people and their land from exploiters' grip by insisting that

[e]very tool must be deployed. A poem may not place food in empty bowls, quench the gas flares of the Niger Delta or halt the downward progress of the Sahara. A poem may indeed not stop a tank and invasion of our territories. A poem may not stop rampaging market forces in their tracks. But we can. Wielding every cultural weapon at our disposal, let's raise our fists, our voices and stamp our feet on the earth, reclaiming our humanity (Bassey 2002, 11).

The quest for this forceful reclamation of the land from the forces of global capitalism is not just an ideological negotiation of freedom as often seen in many African texts. It is what can be described, in Ayi Kwei Armah's (1977) words, as "ideo-praxis", meaning "the translation of ideology into behavior and life style" (2). Ideo-praxis is then the yardstick that separates revolutionary performers from phonies or ideological ideation of freedom (Outa 1988, 4). The poet himself reiterates this in an interview when asked about his thought on environmental commitment, where he said he "found poetry to be very useful in terms of mobilizing resistance, getting people to feel a part of the movement and so some of my poems are not just for people to read quietly, but for people to be part of the reading so that

there are calls and responses; so, for example, when I say “we thought it was oil” the audience responds “but it was blood” (Baird 2011, 39).

The Poet and Praxis Poetry

There has been a deliberate quest for an alternative approach to protest and revolutionary art in African literature. This search borders on the attainment of a genuine practical revolutionary ethos, rather than mundane regurgitations of frustrations on paper. Few poets have successfully crossed the line of literary and poetic idealism to poetic realism. Armah refers to this as “ideo-praxis”. Indeed, for Armah, revolution is rooted in what he calls actual praxis. The praxis is premised on the “the translation of ideology into behavior and life style” (Outa 1988, 2). Niyi Osundare (2007) comments on this type of literature when he affirms that “the call at the moment seems to be more for a literature of praxis, a concrete, activist literature with a clamorous statement about social situation” (8). Such literature of activism seems to be rooted in practical articulation of revolution, where the writer hastens to cause a spark; a deliberate friction that will cause an uproar, but leads to a positive change.

Patrick Naagbanton has noted that Bassey is a “serious poet with a serious message, a message of life and death, respect for human rights, environmental conservation and protection” (par 23). He adds that Bassey’s poetry “does not spare the oil and gas transnational corporations, governments and powerful individuals who threaten the people’s future” (par 23). Interestingly, Bassey does not harbour the thoughts of ecological activism in isolation. In a foreword to *Silence Would Be Treason—Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* (2014), he admits to being heavily influenced by Ken Saro Wiwa who was brutally killed in

a blatant miscarriage of justice during the military junta of General Abacha.

Like many Niger Delta poets, the unjust killing of Ken Saro Wiwa sparked a new creative insight in Bassey who began to write poems that essentially confront environmental desecration and a collective despondency. Of particular interest to this research is his poetic stance of “non-silence”, where the people are urged to speak up against the petrol politics and petrol terrorism in the Niger Delta. Philip Aghoghovwia aptly illuminates Bassey’s uncommon commitment to the fight against environmental injustice by noting that the poet “writes with an insurrectionary fervour as if he were addressing a gathering as on a street live demonstration. Here is a poet with an abiding commitment to the politics of non-silence” (42).

When quizzed about the reasons for which he writes in this manner, his response reiterates the stance of his writing from the viewpoint of the people. For him, since the people are consigned to a politics of silence occasioned by media misrepresentation, intimidation and unlawful arrest, his works must become a weapon to speak on behalf of the people. He writes: “I found that in the struggle it’s essential to take some aspects of performance... I found poetry to be very useful in terms of mobilizing resistance, getting people to feel a part of the movement” (Baird 2011, 40). This call for collective struggle in his poetry has led critics to submit that his poetry is not just a mere composition on atrocities done to the Niger Delta people but an affirmation of resistance and a people’s readiness to defy the odds in their bids to defend their environment. For instance, Oyeniyi Okunoye suggests that the poet is an activist who not only resists oppression but “consistently identifies with the helpless, the violated and the weak, affirming that they would outlive their oppressors” (71). For Sule

Egya, Bassey's poems are saturated with "militant metaphors" that "underscore their participation in the discourse that purports to emancipate the Niger Delta under military oppression" (138).

Inscribing Resistance and Revolutionary Impulse

Armah's notion of praxis is inherent in Bassey's poetry. This is demonstrated in the analysis that follows. In the poem entitled "mobilize...resist...change", the poet-persona asks about how the people can be free from an oppressive and exploitative government and oil companies, and he provides an answer. He writes:

How do you dismantle the monsters?
Ask the ants
How do you down the giants?
Ask the ants
The job is done a bite a time
Together we mobilize
Together we resist
Together we transform
(Bassey 2011, 24).

While the task of reclaiming the devastated land must be borne out of genuine commitment and organisation of the people to fight against the forces of destruction in their midst, emphasis is placed on the unity of not just number, but also of purpose. This is what the metaphor of ants hints at. Equally important like the need for unity is also the need to take action, to attack, mobilise, resist and transform. To mobilise, to resist and to transform are fundamental principles of revolutionary endeavours. However, the icing on such organizational exploit is to attack or act as and when necessary, which the poet-persona calls for in "a bite a time". Although this is supposed to come after mobilising and resisting, the poet-persona's decision to place it first may well suggest the importance

attached to it. After all, it is more common to have people talk, theorise and organize resistance or revolution only to chicken out when it is time for action, the most critical time. The poet-persona takes the agenda of the retrieval of the environment to a new level when he suggests that those resisting exploitation and destruction of the environment may have to match the marauding exploiters and oppressors weapon for weapon, thus affirming Georg Lukasc's (1964) claim that literature must have an element of force, a stance that is not too dissimilar to Armah's ideo-praxis.

Bassey pursues his revolutionary campaign against ecological disaster further in "Facial marks". Here, he launches a transnational campaign that identifies the fraternity of the oppressed across the world by linking the plight and fate of the people of Mindo in Ecuador with those of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. United by the experience of environmental degradation inflicted by transnational "eco-devourers", the people are alienated from their land. Against this backdrop, the poet invokes the revolutionary principle of mass mobilization for a transnational resistance to oppression and ecological imperialism. He rallies:

Come together valiant souls
Drive off evil serpents from our land
Sacred that is our earth
Link those hands across the seas
Let's block these ducts with our
Collective fists.
(Bassey 2002, 54)

Scholars such as Ojaide (1996), Gbilekaa (1997) and Osundare (2007) have established the fact that radical writers often identify with the common people against the oppressors. The ensuing friction between the writer and the oppressive class invariably leads to heightened tension between the two. The

writer often writes to castigate the unhealthy proclivities and activities of the oppressive class, while the oppressive class, having the control of the ideological state apparatuses, uses the same to full effect against the writer. This realization must have prompted this call for transnational solidarity among victims of ecological disaster. Through such solidarity, it becomes easier to fend off new imperialism or internal colonialism. By representing the agents of such imperialism or neocolonialism as serpents, the poet-persona not only underscores their dangerousness, he also underlines the fact that guile is their stock in trade. Through solidarity, “the ducts” through which the wealth of the people is siphoned into private pockets can also be blocked. Obviously, the “ducts” here refers to government contractors and multinational oil companies that are instrumental to oil bunkering and spillage in the Niger Delta.

Most modern African poets have taken up the role of the town-crier and griots, but in a revolutionary manner. They shout into people’s ears the doom threatening their land. However, unlike the ancient town-crier, the modern poet constantly reiterates his stance as an integral member of the masses instead of being a tool in the hands of the rulers. Some of them willfully cultivate revolutionary inclination by moving beyond social criticism to mobilizing and calling for action against the hegemonic forces in the society. Predictably, they incur the wrath of such forces, sometimes at the risk of their lives. Yet Osundare affirms that, despite this reality, there are some African writers who, “confident of the place of art as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle, have been confronting social issues with rare single-mindedness” (26). This conviction about art as a weapon in revolutionary struggle has also been well argued by Egya (2017). Indeed, the Niger Delta poet has a singular purpose of making

sure that the people are rallied against the menace of the petrol politics that is ravaging their community. Therefore, it is not surprising to see in Bassey a poet that is aggressively resisting acts of environmental desecration and oil politics engineered by the government and oil companies in the Niger Delta. Not only is the poet opposed to participating in the desecration of his community, he is also willing to fight with his “fists” or use other means to stop the pillaging of his environment. He writes:

If you privatize my water
 I will confront you with my fists
 If climate means death to me but
 business to you
 I will expose your evil greed
 If you don’t leave crude oil in the soil
 Coal in the hole and tar sands in the
 land
 I will confront and denounce you
 If you insist on carbon offsetting
 and other do-nothing false solutions
 I will make you see red
 (Bassey 2011, 11).

The poet’s outright negation to petrol politics and environmental degradation in the poem is backed up with direct threats of what he intends to do should the oppressors continue their operations unabated. He threatens to employ his “fist”, “expose”, and “not dance” to the beats of environmental degradation being played by the oil companies and the government, using a direct, confrontational but distinct language of defiance. If the tone in these lines is unequalled in defiance and unapologetic in revolutionary temper in the poem “I will not Dance to your Beat”, it is probably because it is the title poem of the collection. It is also the opening poem of the collection. Occupying these significant positions, it is not surprising to find it embedded with what may be described as the

poetic manifesto of Bassey, which is to resist and incite action against environmental degradations, especially those perpetrated by oil companies in collusion with the state. To foreground the fact that this is not an individual but a group's resolve, the writer ends the poem with these equally significant lines, "I will not and/ We will not dance to your beat". However, the poet gives a condition on which he can succumb to the pressures from the oppressors, which is by "walking the sustainable path together", or "accept real solutions and respect mother earth". By this token, it is clear that the poet-persona's resort to call for revolution is a consequence of frustration in getting relevant authorities to stem the tide of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta.

Indeed, it can be argued that, for Bassey, the "fist" is an important weapon. Though symbolically deployed, the "fist" represents an important tool for combating and fighting off threats. The "fist" when pluralized, is foregrounded to reflect defiance and resistance to the oppressor, especially when the "fist" is wielded collectively, instead of a lone one. For Bassey, a lone fist (a lone voice) is a lonely voice without the combination of other fists raised in defiance. In yet another poem from *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood*, "Zoungbodji", the revolutionaries, together with the poet-persona, are presented to us in readiness for action:

We stand together
Barefooted
Fists raised
And demand
Our ecological debt
The sun goes down
(Bassey 2002, 59)

As these lines instantiate resistance and revolt against an oppressive class, the image of barefooted protesters is foregrounded to depict

explicit negation and anger against an oppressive situation. Once again, we find some resonance of "togetherness" in calling the people to a united fight against the oppressor-exploiter. Indeed, for Bassey, victory is only assured when there is a collective force of dissenters and protesters. Perhaps it is necessary to call attention to the semiotic significance of "fist" in Bassey's revolutionary poetry. Whereas "fist" is frequently used in the two collections to underscore what may be regarded as the poet's obsession with a desire for drastic change to ecological despoliation, the cover page of *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* is inscribed with the visual image of a huge fist. This image is very salient, for it tells more than a thousand words would.

However, it is important to note that the image of the "fist" is not the only image of resistance employed by Bassey in his "us against them rhetoric". Similar to the raising of fist is the "raising of voices". The continued silence of the people is sharply criticised by the poet, while calling instead for a loud voice that will overwhelm the oppressor. In the Niger Delta, the stridency of voices on the issue of environmental degradation is represented by claims and counter claims that border on blame game between the people and the government on the one hand, then the oil companies and the people on the other hand. Many a time, the sharp claims of the people are always countered and even muted by the oil companies whose voice, through the mass media, reaches farther than that of barely organised people of the region. Besides, Nigerian law is tweaked in favour of the oil exploiters. For instance, Bassey (2015) reminds us that in "Section II (5) of the Oil Pipeline Act of 1958, when oil-field incidents are attributed to third-party interference, the oil company that owns and runs the facility is absolved of the responsibility to compensate local people who may suffer harm as a result

of the incidents” (8). This is a part of the law that oil companies and the government often cash in on to neglect several oil spills and gas flares that occur daily in the Niger Delta. Sadly, the wailings of the Niger Delta people are dismissed as mere noise, suggesting, in a rather astonishing show of role-shifting, that the people are the perpetrators of every incident of oil spill. Bassey (2015) also reports that one of the multinational oil companies in the region, Shell:

embarked on a sustained media campaign, arguing that illegal refineries and oil theft were the major troubles of the Niger Delta. They backed these comments by flying in foreign journalists and taking them on a literal, if aerial, pollution tour of the Niger Delta, showing them spots where illegal refineries were in operation and the accompanying environmental damage. Their claims would appear strong to any visitor and more so for those looking down from the sky (7).

With the media on the side of the multinational oil companies, the only weapon the people can wield comfortably, if symbolically, is their fist and charged voices against the oppressive forces that are fast closing down on them. In the poem entitled: “Mountains of food, Oceans of hunger”, Bassey writes of “sounding the alarm” and “raising of fist” against the continued deprivation the people suffer on account of their own natural resources.

In “Walking blind”, Bassey takes the rhetoric of resistance to another level through the use of “a stone” to fight the exploiters. He writes:

If greenhouse gases
Were colored red
Would you be angry
enough to pick

Angry enough to pick up a
stone
And talk (Bassey 2011, 38)

From the title of the poem, “Walking blind”, it can be inferred that the blindness of the resistance army suggests that they are not willing to negotiate or compromise. They are blind because they are unable to see the dangers that lurk ahead in any confrontation with the oppressor; blind because they are unable to see the negative news and bulletins that are often circulated to dissuade them as protesters; more importantly, they are blind because they refuse to see any obstacles on their way to fighting. The weapon that the poet offers to these blind protesters is the stone and a voice that will possibly overwhelm the voice of the oppressors. Nevertheless, the cry of the poet urging his people to stand against oppression is hardly surprising given Chukwuma Okoli’s observation that “writers have metamorphosed into visionaries, soldiers, agents of social change, using their writing as a weapon” (cited in Megbowon and Uwah 2020, 14). He adds that writers, through their works, also sometimes “pull off a revolutionary change that leaves society wiser and more progressive” (cited in Megbowon and Uwah 2020,14).

The suggestion to “pick up a stone /And talk” in the poem defies both collocation convention and simple logic. Obviously, there is some disconnect between the two ideas here: picking up a stone and talking. Ordinarily, one would have expected a phrase that combines the idea of picking up a stone and throwing the same, or something else. This is perplexingly not the case. However, if we understand the action of talking here as a metaphorical one, then the perplexity occasioned at the literal level of phrasing or critical appreciation in the lines dissipates. In other words, the poet-persona is simply

inciting his people to speak to the oppressor-exploiter in the language of violence, which is typical of revolutionary process.

As evidence of the fact that the poet-persona is not one who is merely interested in inciting others to resistance or revolutionary temper, while he sits back to watch events unfold, his defiant resolve to engage the oppressor-exploiter as and when necessary is powerfully captured in another poem in the same collection, *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat*. In the poem “I will take issues with you”, the poet expresses his rage and readiness to resist any form ecological destruction that may result from oil exploration in the Niger Delta. He writes:

I will take issues with you
Unless we walk the same path
I will take issues with you
If you step on my trees
I will take issues with you
If you burn up my sky...
(Bassey 2011, 14)

Here, the direct and confrontational tone of the poet is unmistakable. The destruction of the natural elements, expressed in regrettable images such as “burning of skies”, “gulping of water” and piling of “ecological debt”, is hardly surprising given Bassey’s stance on environmental preservation. To him, mineral resources, including oil, should be left in the soil. This stance is understandable because of the wanton destruction of lives and property that has greeted the exploration of natural resources from the Niger Delta in particular and other resource rich parts of the world in general. It is this unfortunate destruction that must have prompted Ogaga Okuyade (2011) to observe that “we are not only in an age of global environmental catastrophe nor do we only live in a watershed moment; the twenty-first century person is in a perpetual state of crises” (101).

Apart from raising fists in the air as a sign of resistance and negation, or the hurling of stone physically or metaphorically, Bassey also makes use of the symbol of the “stamping feet” to depict resistance. In ‘Mountains of food...oceans of hunger’, he speaks on behalf of others as they “stampede the earth with bouncing steps” (Bassey 2011, 27).

In “Oceanic March”, intimations of revolution dominate. The poet makes an observation about a seething but silent rage in the land, as he intones:

This rising tide
Shoots for boiling point
Whose point is it to set it
On fire?
(Bassey 2002, 20).

The tone of revolution is carefully tucked behind the many rhetorical questions in the poem, including these lines. The “the rising tide” refers to a burning desire of the people to revolt against the hegemony of the state and the multinational oil capitalists. Unfortunately, there is no one to lead the march against petrol imperialism in the land. Worse still, the poem ends on a pessimistic note of defeat for the upstart revolutionaries at the hands of the neoliberal who are often violent but silently deadly operators of the oil industry. The people find themselves “in the python’s grasp” while they also experience “spasms of pain” (Bassey 2002, 20). Is the poet disillusioned or merely lamentably ‘realistic’? To be either of the two is to betray ignorance of what revolution, or even passive resistance, entails. It is also to subvert the vision of liberation from the stranglehold of eco-human disaster in the Niger Delta.

However, this is not the case in *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat*, where there is an underlying theme of resistance brought to relief by a tone of cynicism. The poet-persona

calls for revolution, waking the people up from their perpetual slumber to the reality of a crisis that lingers around unnoticed. For instance, in the poem “They charged through the mounted troops”, the poet-persona states that it is “time to dust our cardboard armours and tin can caps /bounce back their plastic bullets, spit in their grumpy faces” (Bassey 2011, 12). In a very bold and assertive tone, he announces on behalf of others:

We’ve reached the crucial phase
when clanging pots and pans
And flying shoes to boot
Must stand for what we know they
should
Time to detach their bloodied fangs
from our bleeding veins

Awoken from our nightmares, it’s
time to dream and to act we
Break the teeth of the blood-sucking
vermin to shake off collective
amnesia
Today we see the reasonable thing is
demand the unreasonable
(Bassey 2011, 12)

Replete with images of resistance, the lines are aptly placed to foreground the continued opposition of a set of people to their oppressor. Cardboards and tin caps are symbolic of people’s own weapon that had hitherto been sheathed. The images of a “flying boot”, “clanging pots and pans” are also used to foreground the discourse of resistance against the oppressor, while the references to “bleeding veins” and “blood-sucking vermin” remind one of the leech, a tiny yet dangerous worm that sucks the blood in bits before killing the host. The oppressor is likened to this worm that kills slowly and thus must be confronted before killing the people.

Clearly, the lines also demonstrate the resolve of the poet-persona and his comrades in struggle to move from theory to praxis. The

bleeding oppressed must free itself from the oppressor, using any weapon within reach. The poem, apparently inspired by the success of the Arab Spring, was composed to also inspire a similar revolutionary action in the people of the Niger Delta. The Arab Spring revolution started in Tunisia in 2010 and spread to a number of other Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East. This popular revolution culminated in the overthrow or change of governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Libya; and provoked the ongoing civil war in Syria. By alluding to this unexpected event in these unlikely places, the poet-persona tries to make the people of the Niger Delta realise that they must rise and fight for the ecological liberation of their region from the devastating grip of multinational oil companies and the complicit Nigerian political elites. It is important to underline the temporal consciousness that undergirds the above lines, given the poet-persona’s repeated use of diction that variously calls attention to time. The use of words as such “when”, “time” in Lines 4 and 5 and “today” in all the contexts of their deployment, must be understood as the poet-persona’s deliberate strategy to decry vacillations and procrastinations of the past, as well as to insist that the time for the revolution is long overdue. If revolution-phobic ones have been doubtful of the reasonableness of revolt, the Arab Spring has clearly confirmed their thought as unnecessary.

In re-affirming his own revolutionary inclination, the poet-persona reiterates his resistance against the oppression of his people, while also calling on the people to join his one-man battalion to form an army against the marauding exploiters who are determined to overrun their community. Indeed, as noted in the Foreword to *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat*, the poet recognises the fact that “a poem may not place food in empty bowls, quench

the gas flares of the Niger Delta or halt the downward progress of the Sahara. A poem may not indeed stop a tank or the invasion of (our) territories” (Bassey 2011, 8). Yet, as the poet is unyielding in his own revolutionary stance, the people might be encouraged to stand by him.

Conclusion

In the two collections, Bassey provides inventories of the destructions visited on the Niger Delta as he calls attention to the fast disappearing naturalness of the environment and its endowments. Similarly, attention is drawn to the ignoble collusion of different exploiters in the infliction of environmental disaster on the Niger Delta. These are not radically different from what many of the poets from the region have also done. In fact, in the foregoing analysis, not much is made of these recurring themes in the critical engagement with the Niger Delta poetry. The focus has been on the tonality that runs through the collections, which is not only unmistakably revolutionary, but also reminiscent of what militants in the creeks of the region engage in. This revolutionary bent is not only foregrounded in the poet’s diction, but also in the imagery he deploys, especially the visual and defiant image of the fist. This imagery is easily identifiable with activism on the streets, rather than pages of printed matter. It is one remarkable thing that distinguishes Bassey’s Niger Delta poetry, and one that comes across as a consequence of his practical environmental activism.

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