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OIL WEALTH, CORRUPTION, AND THE MULTIPLE F(PH)ACES OF INTERNAL COLONIALISM IN AHMED YERIMA'S *HARD GROUND*

Abstract

This paper explores Ahmed Yerima's play *Hard Ground* (2011) to show how Yerima employs dramatic elements to interrogate manifestations of corruption and internal colonialism engendered by violent struggles for oil wealth in the Niger Delta region. Some scholars from the Niger Delta region have alleged that Yerima's *Hard Ground* falls short of being a "realistic" portrayal of the oil crisis in the Niger Delta. Their claim suggests that the play is an exercise in the service of the establishment. However, this study contends that Yerima's representations of corruption and internal colonialism in the crisis are meant neither to underestimate the role of the establishment nor to overlook the suffering of the people in the region. The playwright's portrayals of corruption and various forms of internal colonialism generating the oil crisis are informed by postcolonial, multiple, contradictory, and complementary realities/truths, which often reveal the complexities of socio-economic and political crises in the postcolonial African state. The study reveals that leadership egoism and

failure are among the key factors that aggravate violent crises which recur in the region. In its conclusion, the paper asserts that the multiple insights that Yerima's *Hard Ground* offers on the oil crisis call for collective efforts within the Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria as whole at finding lasting solutions to the region's crises orchestrated by the violent struggle for oil wealth.

Keywords: alienation, corruption, internal colonialism, Ahmed Yerima, *Hard Ground*, the Niger Delta, Nigeria, oil, postcolonialism

Introduction

The Niger Delta region is considered the largest wetland in Africa and the third largest in the world. It covers an area of about 70 000 square kilometres (Obagbinoko 173). There are diverse definitions of the political geography of the Niger Delta, depending on who is defining it and the context of definition. Anifowose notes that the Niger Delta is synonymous with the old Eastern region of Nigeria (284) and explains that, in Nigeria's present-day political geography, the Niger Delta refers to the oil-bearing states of Southern Nigeria: Abia, Bayelsa, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers, and Ondo (284). The region is a site of massive oil and gas deposits, which have been exploited since 1956. According to Aghalino, "oil has generated an estimated \$600 billion since the commercial exploitation of oil in Nigeria" (1). Despite this, the majority of the oil-bearing areas of the Delta are distinguished by their poverty. As a result of the pollution from the activities of multi-national oil companies operating in the region, the Niger Delta peoples have remained the victims of socio-economic and environmental degradation.

For peoples whose living conditions are anchored to their environment, the activities of the oil companies pose a threat to their well-being. Although the struggle for resource control in the Niger Delta is as old as the Nigerian state, since the mid-1990s there have been recurring violent uprisings in the region with persistent agitation for self-determination and local control of oil resources. Often characterised by kidnappings of oil workers and sometimes the destruction of oil installations, the oil crisis has escalated over the years. In an effort to confront the Nigerian state, its agents, and multi-national oil companies that are considered as major collaborators in the perceived exploitation and marginalisation of the Niger Delta peoples, there appears to have emerged a new "distinctive regional consciousness" in the region. This distinctive regional consciousness is what Okunoye termed the "Pan-Niger Delta consciousness" (3).

Although the “Pan-Niger Delta consciousness” appears relevant to the analysis of the suffering and struggle of the Niger Delta peoples, it seems “unrealistic” because it does not account for the internal contradictions within the region. To limit the oil crisis in the Niger Delta region to a struggle between the Nigerian state, its agents, and the oil companies, on the one hand, and the peoples of the region on the other is to ignore the internal contradictions that have come to play a role in the crisis.

Studies by social scientists such as Danjibo, Umukoro, Nwiline, Otite, Omotola, Anifowose, and others have shown that internal contradictions are among the major factors responsible for the increasing rate of violence in the oil conflict in the Niger Delta region. However, sufficient attention has not been given to dramatic representations of the crisis despite the fact that some Nigerian dramatists have engaged and continue to engage in the crisis through their works. For example, J.P Clark-Bekederimo’s *The Wives’ Revolt* (1991) and *All for Oil* (2000), Ola Rotimi’s *Akasa You Mi* (2001), Ben Binebai’s *Drums of the Delta* (2010), Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* (2011), and Ahmed Yerima’s *Ipomu* (2011) and *Little Drops* (2011), among other plays, have addressed, in different ways, the oil conflicts in the region. These dramatic texts and others like them deserve more scholarly attention than they are being given at the moment because they offer fertile soil for the inquiry into numerous factors that generate the recurring crises in the Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria at large. Adebani underscores this point when he asserts that

[m]odern African writers remain some of the continent’s finest social thinkers. The works of African writers constitute potential sources for the analysis of social thought and for constructing social theory in the continent. African writers offer the kinds of abstractions, comparisons, frameworks, and critical reflections on the African lifeworld – and the place of the African in the global context in the *longue duree* – without which it will be impossible to fully account for the nature of being, existence and reality and the nature and scope of knowledge in the African context. (405)

Adebani’s view implies that discourse on Africa’s socio-political and economic conflicts (including that of the Niger Delta region) requires in-depth explications of works of African writers in order to fully apprehend various predicaments confronting the continent. It also suggests that an inter-disciplinary

approach is required in order to proffer practical solutions to many challenges of development confronting the postcolonial African state. Hence, this study investigates Ahmed Yerima's engagement with various forms of corruption and internal colonialism in the Niger Delta oil crisis as captured in his play *Hard Ground*. It contends that Yerima's engagement with the Niger Delta oil crisis as depicted in *Hard Ground* is neither borne out of his complicity with the establishment nor engendered by an attempt to overlook the suffering of ordinary people in the region. Rather, the playwright's interrogation of the issues of corruption and internal colonialism in the region is informed by postcolonial, multiple, contradictory, and complementary realities/truths which often capture the complex nature of socio-economic and political conflicts in postcolonial Africa.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, postcolonialism is employed to interpret how Yerima's *Hard Ground* portrays corruption and internal colonialism that characterize the struggle for oil wealth in the Niger Delta region. Postcolonialism is a reaction against all forms of colonialism and neocolonialism. It is a theory that interrogates the underlying assumptions, distortions, omissions, and silences regarding colonization, neocolonialization, and all kinds of domination that occur in former colonies. It is a theoretical tool used in decolonizing "othered" societies from dominant structures. The term is also used to cover "all the culture affected by the imperial processes from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 117).

Tyson asserts that, as a theoretical framework, postcolonialism "seeks to understand the operations – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically – of colonialists and anti-colonialist ideologies" (418). He contends further that "a good deal of postcolonial criticism analyses the ideological forces that, on the one hand, pressed the colonised to internalise the colonisers' values and, on the other hand, promoted the resistance of colonised peoples against their oppressors, a resistance that is as old as colonialism itself" (Tyson 418). Tyson's view indicates that the issues of colonial domination and resistance are central to postcolonial theory.

Simon During conceives of postcolonialism as "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images" (125). He thus suggests

that postcolonialism is not only a tool of cultural difference but also a vehicle of resistance that is used by colonized people to free themselves from Western hegemony and its dominant discourse.

In spite of the foregoing definitions, postcolonialism is open to many theoretical and cultural interpretations, implying that postcolonialism defies a univocal meaning. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “the term ‘postcolonial’ is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of many cultural experiences it implicates” (*The Post-Colonial Studies Reader 2*). Thus, using the concept of postcolonialism as a mere historical marker for a period after the former colonies have attained flag independence seems inadequate because the majority of the former colonies, years after flag independence, are still confronted with one form of colonialism or another. Hence, postcolonialism encapsulates a wide range of issues such as colonialism, neocolonialism, decolonization, race, gender, geography, nationalism, identity, ethnicity, and class. It is a practice of de-centering the dominant ways of interpreting the world and representing reality in ways that do not replicate hegemonic or colonialist values.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon offers a critique of the violent character of colonial rule. He contends that colonialism is inherently a violent enterprise, as the colonialists use violence to exploit raw materials and labor from the colonized people, and shows that the colonialists stereotype the colonizers as savages and barbaric human beings in order to justify their colonizing agenda. Fanon also indicts the African political elite for their complicity with the colonialists and attributes the collapse of national consciousness in many post-independence African countries to the failure of the national middle class to dismantle the colonialist political structures. The national consciousness thus degenerates into petty identity politics because the African political elite, like the colonialists from whom they inherited power, are concerned with their selfish economic gains to the detriment of the masses.

The notion of “post-Negritude” is equally important to this study. In “Theatre and the Rites of ‘Post-Negritude’ Remembering,” Osofisan thus questions the ways in which some Western postcolonial critics, such as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, continue to privilege the imperial center, Euro-America, at the expense of the Third World, which is supposed to be the “Centre” of postcolonial discourse. He rejects the assumption that contemporary African drama, like that of its Negritude predecessors, is preoccupied with the deconstruction

of racist myth imposed on Africans by Western colonialists. Although he acknowledges the cultural disorientation caused by Western colonialism, Osofisan contends that contemporary African drama, produced by African playwrights based in Africa, is more concerned about internal socio-economic and political crises engendered by failure of leadership than about a war of racial identity. Contemporary African dramatists are much more concerned about how the corrupt African ruling elite undermines the progress of the continent than how Europe underdeveloped Africa. Placing Africa in the center of African literary and political discourse, Osofisan revises the concepts of the “Centre” and the “Other”:

If we have a great battle to fight for survival at all, the first place to start *must be on the home front*. While the target of *Orientalism* – and postcolonialism, its offspring – is the West, the target of our battle must be, and has been, *ourselves*. There are two points to note therefore in this regard. The first is that when postcolonialism talks of the “Centre,” and locates it in the West, our own “Centre” is on the contrary Africa itself, while the West is the Other, with its concerns being totally marginal to us African writers based in Africa. The second point is that . . . there are in fact not just one, but two categories of the Other – one constituted by the white world, and the second by our own brothers and sisters in exile in diaspora. For the assumption has always been erroneous, that simply because we share the same color of skin, and the same ancestral backcloth, those of us who live on the continent, and those who live outside, must necessarily share the same pains and the same priorities. (5, italics in the original)

Osofisan further states that post-Negritude does not repudiate the African past. Rather, it seeks to take “a critical attitude to the exhumation of African heritage in a way that such remembering will not present African culture as a static, nostalgic monument, but rather as a dynamic process, hybrid, and sometimes even self-contradicting” (Osofisan 10). Hence, he concludes with a vision of “urgently turning away from the glamour of postcolonialism, into the grit and dust of post-Negritude, in order to have a proper apprehension of the present reality of the African continent” (Osofisan 10).

Although this study acknowledges the validity of Osofisan’s idea of post-Negritude, Osofisan’s call for the rejection of postcolonialism suggests that his notion of post-Negritude is prescriptive. By enjoining us to “urgently turn away

from the glamour of postcolonialism, into the grit and dust of post-Négritude” (10), Osofisan implies that postcolonialism is no longer relevant to contemporary African literary discourse and that post-Négritude is the more appropriate theory to interpret African drama produced by African playwrights living on the continent. Osofisan’s repudiation of postcolonialism would thus amount to throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This is because his logic of post-Négritude, despite its revisionist stance, is itself rooted in postcolonialism. For example, post-Négritude’s agenda of placing Africa at the “Centre,” especially in terms of thematic and aesthetic concerns, subverts the universality of Western literature, which is not totally different from the agenda of postcolonialism. By giving voice to contemporary African writers and critics living in Africa, post-Négritude, like postcolonialism, resists the marginalization of African literature by Western literary “establishments.” Thus, contrary to being a “distinct” theory, post-Négritude, in the context of this study, is viewed as a “strand” of postcolonialism, which offers a space for contemporary African writers and critics living in Africa to address their internal, existential problems based on their unique experience.

While this study shares Osofisan’s concepts of the “Centre” and the “Other,” it contends that there are multiplicities of “Centres” and “Others,” especially in the discourse of corruption and internal colonialism in Nigerian/African drama. Even when Africa is taken as “the Centre,” the “Centre” is not always homogeneous in nature. This is because the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is not different from that of the colonizers and the colonized. Also, the recurring violent struggle for power and wealth among the ruling elite in post-independence Africa signifies that the Centre is characterized by many contradictions.

Despite its perceived “weaknesses,” this study contends that postcolonialism is appropriate as a theoretical framework for studying various dimensions of socio-economic, political, and psychological crises in contemporary Nigerian/African drama. Rather than being a limitation, postcolonial theory’s flexibility and multi-dimensional perspectives serve as its major strength. Hence, postcolonialism is not only useful in analyzing external colonialism; it is also appropriate in dissecting internal oppression. In an interview with Adeoti, Osofisan acknowledges the significance of postcolonialism to the Black African writers and critics when he asserts that “we [black Africans] are not free. Colonialism is still much with us. It is in the post-colonial criticism that we try to make a

space for ourselves, to insist that we are still part of the world which merit to be discussed” (35).

From the foregoing view, internal colonialism, as used in this paper, refers to the shift from colonialism of the centres represented by the multinational foreign oil companies operating in the region and their collaborator, the Nigerian state, to colonialism of the margin – the Niger Delta region. Corruption, in the context of this paper, is considered an essential element of internal colonialism. Corruption involves a deliberate breach of trust and the misuse of positions of authority for selfish gains, a conscious violation of established rules, norms, and principles for self-gratification. Although corruption is often considered a universal phenomenon, its occurrences, manifestations, and definitions vary from one society to another. Because it is meant to satisfy the parochial interest of its perpetrators and their collaborators at the expense of the collective good, corruption is inimical to human society. Ajila and Adekoya observe that corruption is “a social malaise, an integral part of poor governance and the symptom of the moral indiscipline and the moral decadence of the society” (116). According to Aluko, “corruption includes such acts as the use of one’s office for pecuniary advantage; gratification, influence peddling; insincerity in advice with the aim of gaining undue advantage, less than a full day’s work for a full day’s pay, and tardiness and slowness” (22).

Despite the considerable amount of research on the Niger Delta oil crisis, what has not been sufficiently interrogated in the accounts of the Niger Delta peoples’ revolt is how the struggle is bound with various dimensions of internal contradictions such as corruption and multiple acts of internal subjugation in the region. As will be shown in the analysis of Yerima’s *Hard Ground*, the tenor of discourse on the contemporary Niger Delta oil crisis is not so much how the Nigerian state and the multi-national foreign oil companies under-develop the region; rather, the emphasis is on how the Niger Delta ruling class and their collaborators under-develop and impoverish ordinary people in the region. Yerima shows that the region is not a monolithic socio-economic and political space, but a region of diverse, polarised, and contradictory interests with a multiplicity of competing “centres” and “margins.” In spite of several efforts of agencies such as the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Ministry of Niger Delta to alleviate the crisis by engaging people in developmental programmes, the oil crisis rages on, unabated. This is the insincerity of some elders and polit-

ical elite within the region, and the lack of political will on the part of Nigerian State and its agencies. As the analysis of Yerima's *Hard Ground* will demonstrate, the region, like a snake biting its own tail, is a replica of postcolonial conditions with external pressures, yet full of self-inflicted contradictions.

Oil Wealth, Corruption, and Portraits of Internal Colonialism in *Hard Ground*

In discussing Yerima's engagement with corruption and the multiple dimensions of internal colonialism in the Niger Delta depicted in *Hard Ground*, it is pertinent to examine the criticism some scholars from the region direct at the play. Akpos Adesi, for instance, dismisses *Hard Ground* as a "lack-lustre crafting" that is littered with "obvious contradictions and warped characterisation" (qtd. in Uka 228). To Adesi, the effort of the playwright "defies the context of social vision and relevance. The setting of the play is shrouded in uncertainty" (qtd. in Uka 228). He questions Yerima further: "The characters being portrayed in . . . *Hard Ground*, are they the same people or fictional representations of the Niger Deltans that I know?" (Adesi qtd. in Uka 228).

Although the foregoing ideological perspective of Adesi is well understood, his inclination for totalities in his understanding of the Niger Delta people and his monolithic interpretation of the oil crisis are circumscribed by hybridity and ambivalence. Bhabha explains that hybridity is "a third space which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew" (37). He further asserts that there is an "in between space" that allows the colonizer and the colonized to interact as it not only engenders resistance but also ensures collaboration between the colonizer and the colonized (Bhabha 1–2). The relations between the colonizer and the colonized are always ambiguous because the colonized subject is not completely opposed to the colonizer. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, complicity and resistance exist in a flaunting relation within the colonial subject (*The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 10). Ambivalence is also present in the way in which colonial discourse relates to the colonized subject, for it may be both exploitative and nurturing, or represents itself as nurturing at the same time (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 10). Aside from the fact that Adesi's views on the crisis and the Niger Delta people negate postcolonial realities, a position which rejects a homogeneous view, they also undermine the diverse voices of ordinary people who are victims of

the crisis. Thus, Adesi's knowledge of the Niger Delta people and the oil crisis is limited by other extant realities, especially the widespread corruption and internal oppression among the ruling class in the region.

Asagba, much like Adesi, asserts that "most of the incidents and events in *Hard Ground* are either not fully developed and explained, or characters . . . are not credible in the context of the roles and responsibilities designed for them by the playwright" (52). He further contends that

Hard Ground is a very simple and unconventional play devoid of complex settings. . . The storyline is rather too thin and highly contrived in most places. The implication is that it lacks depth and credible attributes which should have given the work a unique status in the context of the drive for a new vision and approach to the practice of theatre in Nigeria in the 21st century (Asagba 53),

thus calling for an elaborate (re)structuring of its plot (Asagba 52). Asagba's views are similar in relation to the character of Baba: "Apart from the fact that . . . [Baba] does not appear a rounded character, he does not come out as a credible figure in the scheme of things. He is more of masquerade in sheep's clothing" (53).

Asagba's argument is crucial because it shows, considerably, the pitfalls of critical perceptions of postcolonial African/Nigerian critics who continually approach Nigerian/African literature from certain pre-conceived and universalist political, ideological, and aesthetic standpoints. Asagba's claim that the characters in *Hard Ground* are not credible is premised on the critic's universalist dramatic code, which insists on a fixed principle of characterization in postcolonial drama. Apart from being an attempt to foist Western dramatic traditions on Yerima's dramaturgy, Asagba's view on the play is an attempt to substitute a work of art for an objective reality. Asagba invokes the mantra of credibility (or does he mean objectivity?), but his statement that "Baba does not come out as a credible figure in the scheme of things" (53) is not really clear because characters in a "drama of crisis" like *Hard Ground* often exhibit diverse traits that always reflect the complex nature of conflicts in the postcolony. Contrary to being an objective reality, a work of art, especially in contemporary Africa, is a slice of multiple, contradictory, and complementary realities which are meant to offer diverse and alternative insights into the socio-political and economic crises on the continent. Hence, it is not complete in itself.

It is equally pertinent to note that postcolonial Nigerian/African drama is radically fluid and dynamic. It is not constrained by the elaborate plots and all-pervading “round” characters that are evident in classical and neoclassical drama. Its simple setting, thin and highly contrived storyline, and Baba’s lack of being a round character, as claimed by Asagba, do not undermine the depth of the play. Rather, they enhance it because the remarkable feature of postcolonial drama (and postcolonial literature in general) is its deliberate violation of hallowed conventions of literary compositions. This occurs because the nature of socio-political and economic conflicts such as the Niger Delta oil crisis thrives on the violation and subversion of rules. Thus, the issues of corruption and internal oppression in the Niger Delta oil crisis depicted in *Hard Ground* require deeper interpretations than the popular accounts of the crisis.

Divided into five parts through the use of lights and the entering and exiting of characters, *Hard Ground* rejects the notions of the “conventional” act and scene structure. In the plotline, the conflict centers on Nimi’s family, which includes members of the elite and the oppressed. Yerima situates the conflicts between Baba and Mama on the one hand, and Nimi, his father (Baba), and Inyingifaa, Nimi’s uncle, on the other hand. The play also hints at the intra- and inter-group conflicts among the militia or “freedom fighters.” For instance, the audience is informed that the Don, Nimi’s hero, with other militant youths, confers a death sentence on Nimi, who is suspected of having leaked the group’s secret to the police. Nimi also discloses that his boys engage the Canoe Boys in a shoot-out. Similarly, an attempt is made on Nimi’s life by those who pay him a visit at home. Mama’s brother and Pikibo are killed by the Don, and Nimi eventually kills the Don, who turns out to be his father. The play, thus, ends in an unresolved conflict. Unresolved dialectics (or open plot structure) is a device that leaves the conflict/crisis in a play unresolved. Here, the resolution of the play is constructed in such a way that the playwright leaves it to the audience to decide about the last crisis or conflict because they are the final arbiter.

The use of unresolved dialectics in *Hard Ground* is important because the audience is prompted in a strange way to re-examine not only the external factors but also the internal contradictions that inform the crisis. With the way the play ends, the audience is compelled to pose questions such as: Who are militants and their leaders? For whom do they fight? Why do few people have more than enough while the majority are wallowing in abject poverty in the same *Hard Ground* (metaphor for the Niger Delta region)? By asking these questions, the

audience is not only interrogating the Nigerian State and the multi-national oil companies but is also digging deep into the region to locate the enemies within who conspire with outsiders to enslave ordinary people. Not only is Yerima drawing attention to the internal factors in the oil crisis, but he is also indirectly opening up debates on the root causes of the perennial socio-economic and political crises in postcolonial Nigeria in general. He is prompting the people, right from the family unit, to re-examine the leaders and their roles in society. The resolution of the play, therefore, challenges the leaders and the followers in the region in particular and in Nigeria at large. Hence, the use of unresolved dialectics in the play is a starting point for further actions in society.

Contrary to the common view that the oil crisis in the Niger Delta region is essentially informed by external colonialism, *Hard Ground* captures the internal colonialism that engenders it. In the play, an instance of internal colonialism is intra-family oppression brought into being by various forms of corrupt actions. Yerima shows that the struggle for oil money has brought about oppression within the family set-up. Baba, Nimi's father, not only dominates Mama but also colonizes her and her son. In an attempt to satisfy his greed for oil money, Baba ostracizes Mama, engages in hostage-taking, the bombing of oil pipes, and other criminal activities. The welfare of his home is sacrificed and neglected as a result of his pursuit of money. Mama discloses that Baba put her in the family way through rape, which reveals that she is not just a victim of the crisis but also a victim of the ruling class in the region. Mama is thus perpetually silenced by native colonizers who claim to represent her interests.

Intra-family oppression generated by the insatiable quest for oil money is not restricted to the relationship between husband and wife; it also finds expression in the relationship between father and son. To get rich, Baba recruits his only son, Nimi, into militancy by making him believe that the struggle is for the liberation of ordinary people. He sustains the oppression of his son and other innocent children with brutal tactics such as threats, bribes, and *incognito* actions. He fuels the embers of hate and orders teenagers to engage in a war of self-destruction.

Other members of Nimi's family are no better off. A notorious gun-runner, Inyingifaa, is a dare-devil uncle who makes guns available to teenagers, including his own nephew, to maim and kill in order to advance his own economic gains. As he trades in arms, Inyingifaa does not want the oil crisis resolved. In

fact, the raging of the crisis boosts his profits. Businessmen like Inyingifaa would do anything, including entering into conspiratorial alliances with the militant leaders, to sustain their lucrative but oppressive business. Mama thus describes Inyingifaa as “a traitor” who will “sell his own blood if the price is good” for “he measures everything in terms of money” (Yerima 33).

The local colonizers also use alienation to oppress common people in order to maintain the *status quo*. In *Hard Ground*, Yerima depicts alienation employed by the local colonizers as a means of fueling the crisis to preserve their socio-economic interests. Nimi thus joins the violent struggle not because he loves the land or the voiceless people like his mother, but out of a palpable sense of alienation. Motivated by egoism and avarice, the elders and politicians sell the region’s patrimony for their selfish interests. Now hopeless and hapless, the children see militancy as means of survival. Yerima bemoans this sense of estrangement that drives children to violence through Nimi, who laments the socio-economic and psychological alienation inflicted on children:

NIMI: The school you sent me to was made up of waste land and poverty. And even as a child, you smell it and you quickly learn that nothing is free, unless you ask for it, and when they refuse to give you, you grab it, and that is what we are doing. Boys first growing up fighting for bean cakes and puff puff. Then, gradually, we were forced to become men overnight. Asking for our rights. (13)

Through Nimi’s assertion, Yerima makes a critical point about the origin of the crisis: parents, especially fathers, have failed to take care of their children’s basic needs such as food, which is not only essential but also indispensable for the physical, emotional, and mental growth of the children. The children, however, are estranged; they have to use force to eke out a living. This is indicated in the way Baba abandons his home to pursue oil money in the creek of the Niger Delta. This also shows that the crisis is both externally motivated and informed by internal contradictions.

Other stakeholders in the region have equally failed to provide the basic facilities needed to make life worthwhile for the children. In schools, the basic facilities are either lacking or are in short supply not because there are no funds, but because the leaders in the region enrich themselves with the funds meant to provide infrastructure for the children’s future. Yerima captures this through Nimi’s view on politicians, who, instead of using their positions to build a bright

future for the youths, use the youths as political mercenaries, only to estrange them when they get into power:

TONYE: (*Pours him another glass*) The politicians.

NIMI: They created us. They gave us the reason to find our place. . . . First, we were errand boys, and so we got guns and money. We started to ask questions, they had no answers. We all knew what they looked like before they got into power. We dumped them. They gave us no respect, because of the crumbs they gave us while they keep the chunk. . . . We fight only for ourselves. Our lives in our pockets. Our songs are for ourselves. (39)

The ongoing dialogue shows the palpable sense of alienation inflicted on the youths by the local elite. Apart from the fact that the politicians use the youths as thugs to manipulate elections and estrange them afterwards, they also embezzle funds meant for developmental projects in the region:

Despite the increase in the amount of money that accrued to these states of the Niger Delta region, sustainable development that is needed in the area is yet to manifest itself because of the corruptive attitude of the elite class that are more concerned with their various selfish gains than what comes to the people [the masses] . . . and because of this, the elite class ends up stealing, misappropriating and outright looting of the different state funds. (Otite 164)

Equally guilty are local businessmen and elders represented in the play by Chief Tomfort, a petty bourgeois, who enriches himself with communal resources and employs selective generosity to obtain cheap fame. Chief Tomfort is a middleman who uses his position to feather his own nest rather than taking care of the people. In the play, Tonye reveals that Chief Tomfort “built his own army. He bought guns and gave them to small children while all his children were sent abroad” (Yerima 36).

Another element of internal colonialism fuelling the crisis is inter-generational oppression. Instead of being agents of socio-economic development and peace, some elders instigate the crisis by singing war songs into the ears of teenagers. While they divert funds meant for developmental projects into private use, they externalise the crisis by holding the Nigerian State and the multi-national oil companies responsible for the recurring crises. Through Nimi, Yerima

reveals the deceptive means employed by the elders to conscript children into the violent struggle:

NIMI: Why does Mama cry? There are younger boys and girls than me in the struggle. Children who believe in the cause. First, you listen to what the elders say about the struggle. Even when in primary school. . . then it sounds right to join the struggle, first as a boy of a group, then as the eye or a spy. By the time you are halfway through primary school, you carry guns for the boys, and by the time you are eleven, these days of automatic guns, you become an expert. (18)

The same elders who externalize the crisis (Baba [the Don], Chief Tomfort, and Inyingifaa, the arms dealer) are also the ones who meddle in oil, trade in guns, and function as militant leaders. Yet they claim to speak for the oppressed in the region.

Deceptive heroism, in which the leaders of “freedom fighters” provoke the crisis to foist themselves on ordinary people as their heroes, operates as a further dimension of the crisis. For instance, the Don incites the youths to break pipes, kidnap, maim, and kill; yet, he himself does not go to the battlefield and lives comfortably in the city. The Don exploits the ignorance of his society to deceive the people, especially the youths. He uses bribes to becloud their reasoning in order to secure their absolute loyalty to him and his interests. In this way, he colonizes the children through bribes to keep them in the struggle in order to enrich himself. His “disciples,” like Nimi, regard him as a hero. Nimi’s eagerness to satisfy the Don shows that children like Nimi, who are lured into militancy, do not understand the underlying interests of the war they are engaged in. The Don also kills whoever goes against his instructions. This is evident in Mama’s revelation that the Don was the one who ordered the butchering of her brother ten years earlier.

Violence is another major tool that local colonizers often adopt to suppress common people to advance their socio-economic and political status. In *Hard Ground*, Yerima argues that the violent struggle by the “freedom fighters” in the oil crisis is meant to boost the economic interest of the local elite and their protégés, the militant youths. Contrary to the claim that the armed struggle by the militias represents the interest of the oppressed, the play demonstrates that the kidnapping, the destruction of oil pipes, wanton maiming, and murder are motivated by egoist struggles for supremacy among the contending forces

within the region. This is revealed in Nimi's reference to the Canoe Boys (Yerima 15). The violent struggle between Nimi's group and the Canoe Boys is not for the benefit of the common people but to promote the economic gains of the leaders of the two militant groups who use the crisis as an avenue for getting cheap fame and power. Therefore, the intra- and inter-group rivalry in the crisis is anchored in egoism and materialism. This also validates the notion that the so-called freedom fighters in the region are not homogeneous as some critics tend to claim. Their interests are not only contradictory but are also far from the liberation of the oppressed.

Moreover, the quest for oil money often causes family disintegration. In a moment of crisis, it is expected that the members of the same family should collectively protect one another. In Yerima's play, family distrust and dislocation, however, replace family cohesion in the oil crisis:

INYINGIFAA: My business stopped. My shipment could not pass through. No one wanted my guns. I was told that the big men had established another route and another source. My men were killed. Paraded on television that they were caught bunkering. But I never meddle in oil, only gun. Now the lives of my boys must be avenged. (*He brings out a dagger, moves towards Nimi, determined to hurt him.*) (24)

The stage direction shows the extent of collapse suffered by the family as a result of selfish economic gains, which motivate the crisis. Because Inyingifaa cannot sell his guns and his men, whom he, like the Don, uses for his materialistic ends, are arrested or killed, he attempts to stab his nephew to death without recourse to family ties between them. Although Inyingifaa rescues Nimi from the camp where his life is under serious threat, he does this not to save Nimi, but to get a situation report about the camp so as to further his gun-running business. On the other hand, Nimi also frantically attempts to stab Father Kingsley to death on the suspicion that he is leaking the secrets of his group about blowing up pipes to the police, which results in a number of his boys being killed by the Joint Task Force soldiers.

The Western powers are not only interested in the oil exploration but are also responsible for the proliferation of arms in the region. Inyingifaa's shipment contains nothing but guns and bullets as African countries, such as Nigeria, the Central African Republic, and others where violent crises have almost become a normal way of life, are the markets for these dangerous weapons. However, the

play shows that the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta (as well as in other parts of Africa) is not without the collaboration of some members of the elite in the region. This is the reason why characters like Inyingifaa who trade in arms do not want the crisis resolved. Similarly, “the big men” Inyingifaa refers to are not only businessmen outside the region but they also include those within it who make money from the crisis by selling arms to the militant leaders.

The setting also captures the internal contradictions and dislocation that have become the recurrent features of the crisis. *Hard Ground* is set at Baba’s home in Lagos, far away from the theatre of violence in the Niger Delta region, in contemporary time. Nimi has just been rescued from the militant camp in the Niger Delta region by his uncle, Inyingifaa, and brought to Baba’s home in Lagos. In spite of this, there is an evocation of the fauna and flora of the Niger Delta region, especially in Nimi’s anger-laden outbursts. For instance, Nimi talks of the “muddy land of periwinkles and mud-skippers that glide every day searching for food,” “soft marshy ground,” “deadly swamp,” “murky water,” “little villages separated by salty water,” and “black oil under the ground” (Yerima 15). Some of the events that crystallize into the present situation in the play are reported on stage. For instance, Mama reveals that Nimi, who had been sent home ten years earlier to learn the language and culture of his homeland, has turned into a monster. She also informs the audience that her brother was killed by the Don ten years earlier. Also, the audience is told by Nimi about some events that took place in the camp, which led to his sudden rescue by his uncle.

A superficial reading of *Hard Ground* may suggest that its setting (Lagos) is “shrouded in uncertainty,” as claimed by Adesi (qtd. in Uka 228), and, therefore, irrelevant to the afore-mentioned themes. A closer reading of the play, however, shows the significance of the setting to its thematic considerations as it proves the internal oppression and duplicity that give impetus to the crisis. While the militant boys are in the swampy forests engaging the Joint Task Force soldiers in gun battles, their leaders, the Dons, who incite them to violence, including the arms dealers, are in cities like Lagos enjoying themselves. Yet, from the comfort of their homes, they fuel the embers of hate and discord and issue orders of death. In postcolonial societies, many who call themselves revolutionary leaders merely use the struggle to enrich themselves. While they feed the consciousness of their ignorant followers with the opium of violence, they escape to the big cities to wine and dine with their allies in oppression. This is also true of the contemporary Niger Delta region, where many community leaders, the Dons and

politicians, luxuriate in cities like Lagos and Abuja. Yerima uses Baba's home in Lagos to accentuate the effects of the oil crisis on private lives on the one hand and to depict the duplicity of militant leaders like Baba on the other. In addition, the use of Lagos as the setting also shows that the oil crisis is beyond being a regional problem because the crisis will, in the long run, have ripple effects on the country at large. Rather than being the concern of only the people of the Niger Delta region, the crisis is a collective burden on the Nigerian state.

In terms of characterization, irony is infused with paradox to reveal the corruption, internal oppression, and family dislocation in the crisis. Nimi, as revealed by Mama, is sent home to learn his homeland's culture and language as he is expected to grow up into a thorough-bred, cultured, and roundly educated young man. Nimi, however, loses touch with humanity and becomes an embodiment of the anger and violence generated by internal colonialism, oppression, and marginalization in the region. The postcolonial Niger Delta region, in which Nimi grows up, is a world that is ruled by all manners of violence. Nimi is not just a sad hero; he is also a victim of the postcolonial anomie in the region. As a child, he is neglected, exploited, and oppressed. With the stupendous wealth associated with oil in the Niger Delta region, one expects youths like Nimi to be given a good education. Ironically, the reverse is the case. Yerima thus uses Nimi's character to make a critical point on the failed leadership in the oil-rich region because people like Baba and Inyingifaa, who are supposed to nurture Nimi, only exploit him to advance their own economic interests.

Nimi's character also relates to the Weberian concepts of affective and traditional action. An affective action is an action that is taken due to one's emotion to express one's personal feelings and is marked by impulsiveness or a display of unchecked emotion (qtd. in Emirbayer 186). In the play, Nimi's commitment to violence is informed by a combination of uncontrolled reaction and emotional tension. His unrestrained reaction makes him less inclined to the feelings of others. For instance, when Kingsley persuades him to forgive the Don, Nimi responds negatively. Even though forgiveness is the law of God, he insists that he must bite the Don's throat because the Don, he, and other militants operate according to the law of the jungle (Yerima 53). Nimi's emotional tension could be said to emanate from his belief that he is denied opportunities to attain his aspirations through non-violent means. When an individual's aspirations are not fulfilled, there is internal unrest in the individual, especially in a youth like Nimi. Nimi expresses this reality when he asserts that "You cannot grow up in

our ways . . . and not feel what I now feel, unless you want to . . . pretend that all is well” (Yerima 13).

A traditional action is one where a person’s behavior is determined by habits or longstanding customs as it contends that an individual’s conduct is shaped not by a concern with maximizing efficiency or commitment to an ethical principle, but rather by unreflective adherence to an established routine. Hence, Nimi’s violent conduct is not only determined by affective action but is also orchestrated by traditional action because violence has become a “normal” way of life in the region and in the country at large. Members of the ruling class, such as chiefs, politicians, fathers, and uncles, who are supposed to promote peace in the region, encourage violence at the home front and in the public domain. For example, the audience is told that Mama is raped by her husband Baba. Her rape leads to an unexpected pregnancy, which results in the birth of Nimi. Hence, Nimi is not just born and reared in a violent home and society; he is also an inherent product of violence. He justifies his involvement in violence in the oil crisis when he asserts that “There are younger boys and girls than me in the struggle. Children who believe in the cause. First, you listen to what the elders say about the struggle. Even when in primary school. . . then it sounds right to join the struggle” (Yerima 18).

From the foregoing, the audience can deduce that Nimi’s participation in the armed struggle is informed by the “routinization” of violence in the region as the elders, the class of people that are regarded as custodians of traditions and mores, are the ones who encourage the armed struggle and provide justification for youths like Nimi to see violence as the only means of survival. By involving himself in the violence, Nimi, therefore, cannot be said to have committed any crime because he is just exploring the established means of power to achieve his personal ends.

Like Nimi, Baba’s character relates to another Weberian concept – that of charismatic domination. Weber defines charismatic domination as the authority that rests on the personal character of the leader (qtd. in Shortell 1). Through various means, such as inspiration, communication, coercion, and leadership, a particular individual may succeed in occupying a central role in the planning and coordination of social action (qtd. in Shortell 1). This type of domination emerges in a time of social crisis when people lose confidence in the existing form of authority and the charismatic leader takes advantage of the situation to

perpetuate himself in power (qtd. in Shortell 1). Thus, the emergence of Baba as the militants' leader (the Don) cannot be divorced from the broken trust the youths have in the Chiefs in the region. Because of the use of , intrigue, and coercion, it is therefore not surprising that militants like Nimi have more confidence in the Don than any leader in the region. This is another instance of leadership failure because, if the existing authorities had not betrayed their people by using the crisis to advance their personal interests, the youths would not have reposed their confidence in Baba (the Don) as they do.

Unlike the Don and to some extent Nimi, who possess at least some kind of agency and power, Mama is the most oppressed character in the play. She represents the common people whose voices have been silenced by the native oppressors. She suffers not only from being raped but also from illness, when she catches influenza. Mama has lost almost everything that can guarantee her happiness: she loses her virginity to a rapist husband; her brother and son's pregnant "wife" are brutally killed by her own husband; Nimi, her only son and source of her happiness, turns into a monster in the raging crisis.

In *Hard Ground*, Yerima also appropriates the elements of classical tragedy. For instance, except for the killing of the Don, all the tragic events in the play are reported by the characters who witness them. Even the killing of the Don by Nimi is done under the cover of darkness so that the audience cannot witness it. Yerima's tragic vision in the play, though, is encapsulated in the African/indigenous concept of tragedy. The African concept of tragedy is communalistic, that is, every individual in the community bears the consequences of any tragic event. The community suffers collectively even with the condemned protagonist, and the retributions are shared. Unlike the classical tragedy, in which heroes are members of the noble or warlord class, the hero in African tragedy is the community. The tragedy suffered by Nimi's family, therefore, is not a personal or mere family tragedy. Rather, it is also a collective tragedy and, by extension, a regional and national tragedy. This is even truer when one considers the character of Baba. He is a retired soldier. By the nature of his profession and experience, he is supposed to be an agent of peace because he has probably been on many war fronts. He is supposed to know the negative effects of war. Yet the reverse is the case. He promotes violence for his material interests, and this situation is thus a replica of the tragedy of failed leadership in the postcolonial state. Nimi and his mother become another burden on the society. Hence, in a broad

sense, the oil crisis in the region is a collective tragedy of the Nigerian state. It is limited neither to a single family nor to the region.

The technique of traditional African total theatre is also evident in the play. This technique encapsulates the use of (all) artistic elements associated with the African mode of performance, such as masquerading, song, music, dance, and folktale. For instance, the stage directions stipulate that “*the sound of Ikoro is heard as Tingolongo, a fearsome masquerade, dances into the stage*” (Yerima 46). Apart from the fact that this symbolizes the reality of wanton deaths that are recurring features of the oil crisis, Yerima uses *Tingolongo*, the fearsome masquerade of death, to interrogate the ruling class and their protégés in the Niger Delta region. Confronted with the dreaded masquerade *Tingolongo*, Nimi discloses the egoistic and local colonialist interests that urge the crisis:

TINGOLONGO: Are you sincere to each other and the cause? Are you sincere to the people?

NIMI: Huum?

TINGOLONGO: (*Chuckles*) The people have to die. For whose cause? Yours or theirs?... you have become a disease which robs the children of the swampy fields of their future, instead of giving them life. (Yerima 50)

This dialogue reveals the deceit and egoism that inform the militants’ struggle. Nimi’s failure to respond to the pertinent questions posed by *Tingolongo* shows that the struggle is not really for the interests of the people. Interrogated further by the fearsome masquerade, Nimi discloses that the struggle is meant to serve the interests of the local elite like the Don and their protégés:

TINGOLONGO: You killed two men in my shrine. They came to me for protection and in your madness, you chased them into the shrine, and burnt them alive.

NIMI: Forgive me, great one, it was my boys . . . it was the struggle. We were ordered to kill them.

TINGOLONGO: Who ordered you to defile the gods?

NIMI: The Don. (Yerima 47)

Nimi's revelation confirms that the crisis is motivated by the selfishness of the local elite in the region as even the teenage militants like Nimi do not really know why they engage in the violent struggle.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the issues of corruption and internal colonialism in the Niger Delta oil crisis as depicted in Ahmed Yerima's play *Hard Ground*. Through the analyses of thematic and dramatic elements in the play, we have shown that corruption and various dimensions of internal colonialism impel violence in the oil crisis. Thus, Yerima's engagement with the Niger oil crisis is not an exercise in the service of the establishment. The analysis has established that leadership egoism and failure are among the major factors responsible for the violent crises that are recurrent in the region. Consequently, the multiple insights that Yerima offers on the oil crisis call for renewed and concerted efforts within the Niger Delta region in particular and in Nigeria as whole at proffering permanent solutions to the region's crises generated by the violent struggle for oil wealth.

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NAFTNO BOGATSTVO, KORUPCIJA I MNOGOSTRUKA LICA/MNOGOSTRUKA FAZE INTERNOG KOLONIJALIZMA U DRAMI *HARD GROUND* AHMEDA YERIMAEA

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Ovaj se rad bavi analizom predstave *Hard Ground / Tvrda zemlja* (2011) Ahmeda Yerimaea da bi pokazao kako se autor koristi dramskim elementima u ispitivanju manifestacija korupcije i unutarnjeg kolonijalizma potaknutih nasilnom borbom za naftnim bogatstvom u regiji delte Nigera. Neki znanstvenici iz regije tvrde da Yerimaeova *Tvrda zemlja* nije „realističan“ prikaz naftne krize u delti rijeke Niger i da je to samo predstava u službi establišmenta. Međutim, ovo istraživanje pokazuje da Yerimaevo predstavljanje korupcije i unutarnjeg kolonijalizma u krizi nema svrhu ni podcijeniti ulogu vladajućih elita ni zanemariti patnje ljudi u regiji. Dramski prikazi korupcije i različitih oblika unutarnjeg kolonijalizma, koji generiraju naftnu krizu, prikazuju postkolonijalne, višestruke, oprečne i komplementarne stvarnosti/istine, koje otkrivaju složenost društveno-ekonomske i političke krize u postkolonijalnoj afričkoj državi. Studija otkriva da su egoizam i neuspjeh upravljačkih struktura među ključnim faktorima koji pogoršavaju strahovite krize koje se javljaju u regiji. U zaključku, rad tvrdi da različiti pogledi o naftnoj krizi koje donosi *Tvrda zemlja* pozivaju na zajedničke napore posebno unutar regije delte Nigera, ali i Nigerije u cjelini, kako bi se pronašla trajna rješenja za krizu orkestriranu silovitom borbom za naftnim bogatstvom.

Ključne riječi: otuđenje, korupcija, unutarnji kolonijalizam, Ahmed Yerima, *Tvrda zemlja*, delta Nigera, Nigerija, nafta, postkolonijalizam