

## Historical Representation in Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*

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### Abstract

Literature and history are interwoven because the former is a product of the latter. Also, they have always shared a close relationship as portrayed in writers' works down the ages. Moreover, studies have shown that African literature thrives on historical happenings, either present, past or future; hence, historical representation is no new study. However, while much emphasis has been laid on prose and drama texts as narratives of history, little attention has been paid to poetry as historical narrations. This paper therefore, is a critical close reading of Ikiriko's poetry as a historical chronicle. It is born out of a need to recount the past which has affected the present, and threatens the future of the Niger Delta region. This paper employs new historicism as a theoretical model which emphasises that knowledge of the material and historical circumstances of the production of a text is essential to comprehending that text, because of its connection to the world that produced it. Therefore, a work of literature cannot be read as an autonomous entity. This paper is an attempt to establish literature as recourse to history. In other words, this paper aims at systematically investigating poetry as a representation of historical events.

**Keywords:** New historicism, historical representation, Ikiriko, literature, history

### Introduction

Literature and history have always shared a close relationship. Interestingly, literature is a by-product of history. As a result, African literature does not applaud arts for arts' sake, because it reflects societal happenings, either past, present or future which is history in itself. Previous studies on Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* have been preoccupied with themes on resource conflict, ecological devastation, alterity and marginalisation (Gomba, 2016; Ayinuola & Eugenie, 2016; Bie, 2017; Okunoye, 2008) etc., but little attention has been paid to the work as a historical representation. Moreover, studies on historical representation have focused more on prose fictional works and drama texts. Therefore, this paper interrogates Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the*

*Delta* as a historical account, using new historicism as a theoretical model and method for a close critical reading and analysis.

From the beginning, new historicism has challenged the principles of several movements that preceded it. New historicism is a term that was coined by the American critic, Stephen Greenblatt in his book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980). According to Barry (1995: 174), new historicism is “a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period.” In essence, new historicism does not privilege the literary text over the literary ‘foreground’ and a historical ‘background’. It gives literary and non-literary texts equal weight, and both constantly interrogate each other (172). Hence, for a new historicist, a literary text is analysed by placing it within the structure of a text which is not literary, for it privileges the juxtaposition of the literary and the non-literary in the analysis of a literary work.

More so, new historicism was also said to be based on the theories of Foucault where he avers that “history cannot be divorced from textuality” (Lai, 2006: 2). Consequently, new historicism privileges the historical context of a text, unlike the new critics who see literary texts as universal and timeless. In new historicism, there is a continual move from the textual matrix to the contextual matrix. To the new historicist critic, knowledge of the material and historical circumstances of the production of a text is fundamental to comprehending that text, because of the connection to the world that produced it.

Spiegel (1997: 190) asserts that;

New Historicists point to the culturally specific nature of texts as products of particular periods and discursive formations, while viewing reality-history-as itself mediated by linguistic codes which it is impossible for the critic/historian to bypass in the recuperation of past cultures (cited in Lai, 2006: 4)

Hence, the literary work cannot be read as an autonomous entity because “... the present can stand up only when the past provides it with a solid ground. In other words, the present (the Self) can only be understood in the light of the past (the Other). Similarly, “the past (the Other) can only be interpreted in the light of the present (the Self)” (Lai, 2006: 13). New historicism involves a close reading technique of such non-literary text. This approach treats “literature as a participant in a dynamic, changeable culture, not “as a static, reflective artefact of a definable culture” (Dobie, 2009: 180). This suggests that literature has a part to play in the reformation of the society, because of its potentiality to enact change. Through it, the organisation of power can be restructured and the marginalised recognised. Moreover, “the past indeed needs to be constantly re-figured and re-presented for the life of the present and future” (Lai, 2006: 25). Literature (poetry) comes as an appropriate means for sustained re-figuring and re-presentation of the past.

### ***Oily Tears of the Delta: A Historical Chronicle***

The Niger Delta region is blessed with an enormous amount of mineral oil and gas, and Nigeria's economy hinges a great deal on these resources; consequently, exploration and exploitation thrive. Francis *et al.* (2011:5) substantiate this claim; "oil and gas reserves are concentrated in the southern part of the country, known as the Niger Delta". As a result, this region is betokened by expropriation and underdevelopment (5). Besides, this region has been a breeding ground for all manner of resource conflict. Bie (2017:526) also describes the region as "... the eco-region of Nigeria because of the presence of distinct biodiversity of flora and fauna from which the country taps her revenue".

This statement affirms the veracity of the fact that this region holds Nigeria's source of mammoth wealth. However, oil and gas has become and still seemingly is the bane of the Niger Delta region, because the situation of the Niger Delta is miserable and one that calls for immediacy of action. What is more, human existence is hinged on the survival of nature and vice-versa. Consequently, a parasitic relationship between man and the environment where humans prey on nature will not only be injurious to the environment, but also man as well. Ibiwari Ikiriko, a poet who hails from the Niger Delta region, engages his poems in such urgent plea because besides the aforesaid reason "... until date, there has been no viable, visible gleam of development in the region" (525).

Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* is a collection of thirty poems. The poems chronicle the harsh realities that characterise the Niger Delta region where "the oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta. The doom is now beginning to burst in blood" (Ikiriko, 2000:7). Hence, these poems "... are a witness to the depredations of the Delta and a support for the claim of courage to halt the village" and "... a great majority of poems in this collection ought to assist the staunching process if ever it will come" (7).

In the poem "Oily rivers" (20), the poet apprises the reader that he is a native of "the base Delta", thereby authenticating the historical information to be given as first-hand which as a son of the soil, he has been privy to. He hails from the Niger Delta region "where things are made base"/and beings become base" (5-6), as a result of the "powered policies/crude as petroleum" (8-9) which were put in place by the top echelons at the helms in the nation. The poet, in stanza two (2), further underscores the veracity of his facts to be given in this collection of poems when he asseverates; "I am of/ the Oil Rivers/ where rivers are/ oily" (10-13). The poet bemoans this loss and the tone of the poem is "...downright plaintive, perhaps despair is the word" (Gomba, 2016:139). Moreover, the use of capital letters for the initial letter of "Oil Rivers" can purportedly be said to be an index of the shared name the states under the region have acquired based on the deleterious oil activities carried out on their rivers. Besides, this collection of poems was first published 2000. Therefore, amongst other oppressive policies, the policy of dispossession entrenched in Section 44 (3) of the 1999

Constitution can be inferred to be one of the “powered policies” which the poet decries:

... the entire property in and control of all mineral oils and natural gas in, under or upon the territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone of Nigeria shall vest in the government of the Federation and shall be managed in such a manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly (Nigerian Constitution, 1999).

Thereby, the possessors are dispossessed of their wealth and right to such wealth. There were other legislative restraints against the exercise of resource rights, contradicting the expected that the communities and people where these resources are found are the bona fide owners, as such; they should be in control as to how it is explored and utilised. In essence, the law empowered the government, granting them the will power to arbitrarily hijack the ownership of mineral oil and gas, thereby dispossessing and denying owners of this wealth which is their fundamental right through the enactment of such draconian and oppressive laws. These policies, the poet describes to be as “crude as petroleum”, using imagery to create a mental picture of the vicious nature of the legislatures of such laws and the laws themselves, respectively. These laws have only succeeded in oppressing, subjugating and relegating the occupants of such region. Their lives have been devalued, pristine life ruined with their lands ripped of its resources, and their rivers have been turned into a meld of oil and water “and can/ neither/ quench my thirst/ nor/ anoint my head” (14-18).

The poem “Oloibiri” (30) speaks volume of exploitation at its peak. The community houses the first oil well in Nigeria which saw its beginning on February 1956 and was christened after the community, “Oloibiri Oil well”. The oil well has been sucked dry and abandoned by Shell. The poet mourns this unfortunate loss;

Oloibiri streets  
Would have been tarred  
With gold if ours  
God’s own Country were” (1-4).

The community has nought to show for being the first home to Nigeria’s source of massive wealth, no tarred roads or basic amenities. Historically, the occupations of the inhabitants of this community have always been mainly farming and fishing; and the incursion of the oil companies brought about a colossal loss of their environment which ensured their daily needs, because of the activities carried out on it which were inimical to it. Ikiriko (2000:7) reiterates this; “down the Delta, in the fountain of oil and gas, the natives wake up bereft of their traditional means of livelihood”. This is ensuing from the egregious activities on the environment and their rivers such as oil spillage, gas flares, waste disposal etc. Moreover, this is done without due consideration and reparation while pressure is incessantly mounted on the environment. Laying emphasis on the non-compensational attitudes of these oil companies, Gomba (2016:3) corroborates that “the pressure comes from oil facilities that have upset traditional means of livelihood and created no alternatives.

The Niger Delta bears the pressure of Nigeria's economy, and the economies of allied nations". However, such communities have nothing tangible to display as producers of Nigeria's wealth. Obviously, "the delta's abundant and natural wealth stands in stark contrast to its palpable underdevelopment" (Francis et al., 2011:9). Rather, what is obtained is that "the mineral/Is tilled and used/To lubricate sex/And crime and bigity/Everywhere else" (7-11).

"For Ken" (38) reminds the reader of the Niger Deltan activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who in the course of fighting and advocating for the rights of the Ogoni people, lost his life. Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa hails from Ogoniland, an ethnic minority in Nigeria, Niger Delta region, Rivers State. A land that has suffered from extreme environmental damage in the hands of oil companies for several decades, as such, Saro-Wiwa could relate with the plights of his people. In the words of Corley et al. (2014:46);

Ogoni are only one of several affected populations in this large and ethnically complex area. Such populations have truly been cursed by oil and gas: the vast bulk of Nigeria's GDP and virtually all of its export revenue is generated here, where less than a quarter of the population live, and they are thus caught between the multinational energy companies—some of the world's most powerful actors—and the national state.

Oil became malediction for the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa championed the course of his people which amounted to challenging the existing status quo. Having had their source of livelihood snatched by the greedy oil companies and gluttony government, the owners of this wealth languish in poverty and underdevelopment. Francis *et al.* (2011:21) reiterate this; "the region's abundant natural resources, especially its oil, offer a potential foundation for development and prosperity. Instead, while providing Nigeria most of its wealth, the delta remains underdeveloped and afflicted by conflict and violence". As a result, the Ogoni people, with the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa, demanded for justice and equity. They had had enough of this callous treatment. Darah (2014: 23) comments, "under Ken Saro-Wiwa's leadership, MOSOP [Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People] submitted a memorandum to the Babangida administration for autonomy over their oil resources, the payment of \$30 billion reparation, and the clean-up and remediation of their degraded environment".

Despite the fact that the movement (MOSOP) was a non-violent one, the response was characterised with a lot of brutality. Neocosmos (2011) records this; "MOSOP - the movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People- was unusual in the history of resistance to this process in that it was determinedly democratic and non-violent; a truly popular mass movement aiming to secure popular control of this wealth, which did not simply reproduce the state's own practices of violence". Although, Ken Saro-Wiwa's struggle was for a just cause, it was reciprocated with a brutal retribution. He worked sedulously to save his community even if it would cost him his life, which it eventually did. The poet bemoans this injustice;

Compressed giant,  
This loss, proportioned  
More than the cause,  
Is larger than you  
In size (Ikiriko, 2-6).

Sadly, Saro-Wiwa's death "... is equalled only/By the daily departures/in turns and scores/of the famished and fed-up" (7-10) to urban areas in search of livelihoods, regardless of their large oil revenues. Despite Saro-Wiwa's struggle, many years after his judicial murder, the people are still languishing in poverty, yet to benefit from the oil revenues. The prime conditions of intense deprivation and depredation of the environment have remained unchanged. The land is one that has become overtaken by sorrow. The struggle seems unending while the people writhe in pain. In all these, Ken's death is referred to as a metaphoric manuscript which serves as a reminder to the poet "of the deeds/Left undone" (17-18).

"Remembering Saro-Wiwa" (39) reads like a follow-up to the aforementioned poem. The poem is a reminiscence of the life and struggles of Saro-Wiwa. History says that Saro-Wiwa was not only an environmental activist and television producer; he was also a Nigerian writer. He wrote his way through the struggle. His writings were focused on righting the wrongs in the society, particularly, in his community and region at large. This calls to mind Niyi Osundare's epic book, "The Writer as a Righter" where Osundare asserts that it is "only when a writer is positively committed with its practical, and often harrowing demands, only then can the writer be on the way to being righter" (2007: 38). The poet emphasises Saro-Wiwa's status as a writer-righter by way of repetition in his poem;

Let's not forget  
that Saro-Wiwa  
was a writer  
a writer...  
a righter (Ikiriko, 1-4, 9)

Saro-Wiwa employed several media to stand up to the heartless treatment meted out to his people. He was an ardent critic of the Nigerian government. However, the poet bemoans the fact that the cause for which Saro-Wiwa was executed by "...hanging/is still clinging/to the bottom of oil wells" (13-15).

The poem, "Ogoni Agony" (40-42), awakens memories of the massacre of the people of Ogoni land. The 1990s were the years that saw the uprising of new nationality movements of agitation. In 1990, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in Rivers State, Boro movements, Southern Minorities Movements and the Ijaw National Congress (INC) for all 500 Ijaw communities in Nigeria were established. MOSOP advocated radical changes in the operation of the oil industry.

In over 30 years of oil production in Ogoni community, the land suffers a "...long/ neglect/ And injustice..." (4-6), while poverty is distributed amongst the

inhabitants, rather than wealth, “silencing the sound of suffering servility (17)”. This height of injustice kindled the fire of revolt amongst the inhabitants with “... a compressed giant.../A wordsmith broadcast” (8, 11), in person of Saro-Wiwa, a man Nnimmo Bassey describes as a “man of letters”, who charged “... the blood in the barometer of the mass mood/ A merchant of fun/ turned merchant of protest/ against merchants of injustice” (13-16). Ken Saro-Wiwa would not turn blind eyes or deaf ears because in his words “...while the land is ravaged/ And our pure air poisoned/ When streams choke with pollution/ Silence would be treason” (Corley et al., 2014: x). As a result, silence is no alternative. This is genesis of revolution:

And servility yielded place to assertion  
And clamour enveloped silence  
And bon-fires replaced gas flares. (Ikiriko,17-19)

Their mediation challenged the existing status quo in the “political economy of the oil industry by demanding sovereign rights over natural resources” (Darah, 2014: 24-25). A non-violent protest by the MOSOP was part of the interventions, and this resulted in the closure of the oil facilities in Ogoni, Rivers State. This was to affect Nigeria’s economy since oil was the major means through which the country was sustained. Amongst MOSOP’s agitations was the demand for “economic and environmental justice to the United Nations and other global theatres of democratic politics” (25). This was taking the fight beyond the shores of the nation:

Forward it was moved past national  
Boundaries to the centre stage  
Of international understanding (Ikiriko, 32-34).

The government under the administration of General Sani Abacha greeted the revolt with retaliation, because they saw these campaigns as incriminating as it revealed to the world, Nigeria’s awful records of the abuse of the human rights. Consequently, the junta took radical measures to smother this protest, by the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his Ogoni compatriots on November 10, 1995, adding up to the number of the four Ogoni nationalists which were earlier killed in 1994 as a result of the ruckus. Ogoni land was thrown into mourning. However, the people of Ogoni land were not going to give up without a fight. A massive outburst of angst, and hue and cry “greeted Abacha’s blood-thirsty terrorism and Nigeria regressed into more anarchy and instability” (Darah, 2014: 25), which resulted in the suspension of the nation from the Commonwealth of Nations, and an exclusion from the international scene.

“Ompadec” (45) is a poem that calls to mind one of the commissions instituted by the government in response to the persistent disturbance of activists from the oil mineral states (Niger Delta Region) to the existing government at that time (General Babangida’s regime). Darah (2014:23-24) records this:

In 1992, Dr. Ibru’s Association of Minority Oil States (AMOS)  
and Chief Anthony Enahoro’s Movement for National  
Reformation (MNR) were floated. These bodies demanded a

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more equitable federal system in place of the centralized, unitary arrangement under the military regimes. The political and economic reforms advocated by the groups were to favour the mineral-rich states. General Babangida responded to these pressures by setting up the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992.

This commission was “a jungle gesture belated/Token justice delayed” (1-2), yet, it was “given and withdrawn at will” (3), because it was short-lived. Three percent of the oil revenue was meant to fund the activities of this commission. However, by the end of almost a decade, only a minute percentage of the whole statutory budget was given to the commission. This underfunding grounded the commission. The poet’s lamentation progresses as he bewails such depressing state of his people where the very owners of the wealth “...are not given a gift/Of their own thing” (5-6). In the end, the creation of OMPADEC which the government supposedly commissioned to bridge the gap between them and the owners of the wealth, and grant some level of autonomy to the former, ends up like one of those government abandoned projects.

The poem “Odi” (63), represents the massacre that took place in Odi village in November 20, 1999. This happened after the attack by the soldiers on Ijaw youths in Kaiama, Bayelsa State, 1998, resulting in the death of an unknown number. This attack was to be a run-through for November 20, 1999 (Darah, 2014:35). The massacre was as a result of the order given by the President (President Obasanjo) to the army to raid Odi town in Bayelsa State, where they claimed that the killers of some police officers in the state were taking refuge in Odi. Nevertheless, this act “...did not justify the scale of destruction inflicted on Odi” (Gomba, 2016:140). The President gave an ultimatum of a week to Governor Alamieyeseigha (the governor of Bayelsa State) then to choose between fishing out the suspected killers or a counterstroke. In a bid to arrest the supposed killers of the police personnels, Odi town was raided and reduced to ashes. The poet in a rhetorical sense laments:

Did Odi do the deed  
That caused the casus belli  
For such massive arsenal assault? (Ikiriko, 7-9)

The rest of the natives were rendered “...homeless and borrow villages/To mourn the dawning millennium? (12-13)” From that moment onward, “skirmishes and clashes between the military and angry groups became frequent” (Darah, 2014:36). The resultant effect of that move was the beginning of the seemingly unending battle between the militants from the Niger Delta region and the soldiers until the administration of Yar’adua, where the former was appeased. That heinous deed has been described by Gomba (2016:140) as “a grievous example of state extremism in the Niger Delta area. For a government in search of purported criminals to destroy an entire community is as crazy as a man who burns down a house full of people just to get at rats”. In spite of this colossal wreckage, the poet croons of hope. Using biblical allusion to Jesus Christ’s (Son of God) resurrection, he says; “So will Odi rise again/

Like the Son on an Easter morning/ And lighten this darkness wreathed Delta” (28-30).

## Conclusion

Literature is an offshoot of history, as such, “the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by, history” (Ngugi, 1972: 47). Ikiriko exemplifies this by using his collection to reflect the struggles of the people of the Niger Delta region from the past reaching forth to the present. Despite the ruthless system and the oppressive instruments employed against the people of the Niger Delta, they have still been resolute in their fight to reclaim their bona fide rights. Their resistance is an “advocacy for positive, participatory and inclusive change” (Nnimmo, 2013:131). Moreover, taking to arms is no better option, because in times past physical combats against the government were greeted with pains and loss of loved ones, properties and lands by the affected communities. Hence, “youths, social groups, pressure groups and writers turn to their pens as weapons against the excessive arrogance of the heartless federal government of Nigeria and her collaborators- multinational oil companies carrying out oil prospection and exploitation in the region” (Bie, 2017:525).

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