



KEN SARO-WIWA AS SYMBOL OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN NIGER DELTA POETRY

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ABSTRACT: *Since the martyrdom of prominent Nigerian writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa by the then military government of Nigeria, the slain activist has attained the status of a symbol of activism in literary works. This paper seeks to explore how selected Nigerian poets engage the name and actions of Ken Saro-Wiwa in representing resistance and in sensitising and rallying the people to demand their rights to basic amenities and safer environments to live in. This is the cause for which Saro-Wiwa lost his life. Three collections of poems have been purposively selected for a qualitative and sociological investigation of the deployment of Ken Saro-Wiwa as a symbol of environmental struggle and of selflessness for the advancement of the common good. The collections are Ojaide's Delta Blues and Homesongs, Ibiwari Ikiriko's Oily Tears of the Delta, and Ogaga Ifowodo's The Oil Lamp. This study finds that while Ken Saro-Wiwa is deployed as a symbol of environmental activism, poets extend what his life and name represent to advance the agitation against the mismanagement of the environment and people of the Niger-Delta region. The study also reveals that Saro-Wiwa is an inspiration for writers to critically commit to advocacy that advances not just the good of society, but their art. This paper concludes that Ken Saro-Wiwa has become a source of inspiration for writers' commitment to the Niger-Delta environment and a symbol to encourage activism against the continued despoliation of the region.*

KEYWORDS: Ken Saro-Wiwa, activism, struggle, Niger Delta, commitment.



INTRODUCTION

The killing of prominent Nigerian writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, by the then Nigerian military junta on November 10, 1995 generated an outpour of reactions in literary works. This is especially so given the fact that the denial of the activist's fundamental human right to life was due to his challenge of the government's and multinational oil companies' indiscriminate despoliation of the Niger-Delta environment, the marginalisation of the Niger-Delta people from their land, and other politically inspired challenges to the Nigerian social order. The reaction of literary artists can be described as yet another affirmation of the functionality of African literary art. The literary artist considers it a duty to react to developments in the society, especially when such developments implicate the continued existence of the society. This duty derives from the indigenous oral literary traditions of many African societies wherein didacticism is fused with entertainment in a holistic and total literary production. Chinua Achebe in *Morning yet on Creation Day* (78) alludes to the imperatives of political, social, cultural and aesthetic consciousness by African writers as a key to writers maintaining relevance within the canon of African literary art.

Thus, in reaction to the hanging of Saro-Wiwa for his activities which were perceived by the then military junta as sensitising and rallying the people to demand their rights to basic amenities and safer environments to live in, both established and emerging writers have taken up the campaign for which Saro-Wiwa was killed. A plethora of poems dedicated to and about the struggles for which he was killed have been published. This present study is an examination of how a selection of Nigerian poets has deployed Ken Saro-Wiwa as a symbol, a rallying cry for environmental activism. The collections are Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Homesongs*, Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta*, and Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*. The collections are purposively selected as they were published after the killing of Saro-Wiwa with a focus on environmental activism in Nigeria's Niger-Delta region, and they have poems which reference Ken Saro-Wiwa either as symbol or in eulogy.

Ken Saro-Wiwa: The Man and His Activism

Ken Saro-Wiwa was from the Ogoni tribe in Rivers State; he led a nonviolent campaign against environmental degradation of the Niger-Delta from the multinational petroleum exploration industry. He was also a vocal critic of the Nigerian government, which he perceived as working hand-in-hand with the multinational companies in the exploitation of the resources of the region without remediation of the environment and the payment of due compensation to the people. He was consistently concerned about the treatment of the Ogoni people within the Nigerian Federation. In 1973, he was dismissed from his post as Regional Commissioner of Education in the Rivers State cabinet for advocating greater Ogoni autonomy. During this period, he built up his businesses in real estate and retail trading and in the 1980s, he concentrated on writing, journalism and television production. He was chairman of the Rivers State branch of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA, and rose to become its National President. In an interview he granted *The News Magazine* in 1993 titled "They are Killing My People," Saro-Wiwa comments against the backdrop of how the then military government perceived his activism thus:



This government is afraid of the ideas I am giving people about their rights, their environment, and their right to the oil. They are afraid it will destroy the fraudulent system they have set up. As usual, when falsehood sees the truth, it tries to hide. Instead of facing the message, they are looking for the messenger. It is easier to destroy the messenger than to destroy the message, so they are looking for the easy way out (335).

Rob Nixon describes Saro-Wiwa in an article titled “Pipe Dreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-minority Rights” as the first African writer to articulate the literature of commitment in expressly environmental terms. Saro-Wiwa wrote and self-published several books spread across the different genres. Prominent among his writings which deal with the ecological disaster taking place in the Niger-Delta region include his collection of short stories, *Forest of Flowers* (1986), and the diary he wrote to record the story of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the events that led to the one month and one day he spent in prison in 1993, and his experience during his incarceration—*A Month and a Day*. Saro-Wiwa also wrote a book, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, which describes the flagrant disregard for standard environmental practises in the operations of multinational oil companies. In the book, Saro-Wiwa writes about how the multinational oil company, Shell Petroleum Development Company, the ethnic majority in Nigeria and the country’s military dictatorship combined to perpetuate the destruction of Ogoni land. It also shows the challenges the people are facing as a result of the devastation.

On November 10, 1995, Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men were hastily tried and hanged by a military tribunal under the military leadership of General Sani Abacha. The US State Department described the trial as “completely lacking in respect for due process” and declared that Nigeria constituted a “classic picture of human rights abuse” (Sisler 55). Since his execution, which sparked local and international outrage, writers have carried on with his vision. Ken Saro-Wiwa has become a source of inspiration for writers’ commitment to the Niger-Delta environment, and a metaphor to encourage activism against the continued desecration of the region.

Ken Saro-Wiwa in Contemporary Nigerian Literature

The literary reaction Nigerian writers accorded the despoliation of the Niger-Delta environment after the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 is seminal in understanding what Saro-Wiwa represents in the context of environmental literature in Nigeria. Even before his death, Saro-Wiwa himself a writer documented his environmental and general social, political and economic concerns. Aliyu (4) points out that Saro-Wiwa’s memoir, *A Month and A Day* “reveals his experience in the hands of his captors, the injustices meted out against his person, against the people of Ogoni land in particular and the Niger Delta in general, and the determination of the minority to resist their continued marginalization from the revenue from the crude oil sourced from their land.” His writings exposed the systematic “ecological genocide” (Nixon 716) against the people of the Niger-Delta region. While Doron and Falola (13) describe his death—along with that of eight other activists—as catapulting the Ogoni plight to global awareness, Sule Egya (243) takes a broader perspective to what Saro-Wiwa signifies when he posits that in spite of the fact that there were other environmental activists before Saro-Wiwa, “there is sufficient ground to assert that the judicial killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa marked the environmental turn in Nigerian literature.”



Although Ken Saro-Wiwa, through the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was championing the cause of only a section of the Niger-Delta, the achievements of the organisation have remained touchstones for the expansion of focus and continuation of the vision. The Ogoni Bill of Rights, which called for the “political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people, control and use of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development, adequate and direct representation as of right for Ogoni people in all Nigerian national institutions, and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation,” and the mass protest-march of January 4, 1993 where Shell Petroleum Development Company was declared *persona non grata* reflects in many creative works about the Niger-Delta region, some of which include Na’Allah’s *Ogoni’s Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria* (1998) and Campbell’s “*Witnessing Death: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Crisis*” (2002). Austin Tam-George in “Ken Saro-Wiwa, The Ogoni Struggle and the Aesthetics of Spectacle” also writes about the way the Ogoni people used street marches and riots near Shell’s production sites as revolts against toxic spills in the region.

Ken Saro-Wiwa in Niger-Delta Poetry

Given the environmental challenges bedevilling the Niger-Delta region, which border on ecological murder, writers across the genres have deployed the image of Saro-Wiwa in their works. Significantly, Ifowodo dedicates four poems to Ken Saro-Wiwa in the section titled, “The Agonist (for Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 8)” (66-67). These poems eulogise the zeal Saro-Wiwa displayed in agitating for improvement in the quality of lives of the people and that of the environment. The poems also describe his activism as rattling the tyrannical General Abacha who is depicted in the dramatic poem titled, “Hurry Them Down” (68) as quailing even after Saro-Wiwa had been murdered: “I see Ken’s/ spirit singing, his pipe now a gun pointed at me/ and I quail with a terror I cannot describe... / hurry! Hurry! And save me from the brave” (68). Ifowodo’s depiction of Saro-Wiwa as a symbol generating fear in the military junta spiritualises the image of Saro-Wiwa and items associated with him. Saro-Wiwa’s trademark pipe is deployed as an extension of the activist, one that also carries the essence of Saro-Wiwa. This exaggerated potency of this symbol serves to engender hope that the activist lives on and continues to affect those truncating the wellbeing of the region and its people.

Ikiriko on the other hand dedicates two poems to the slain activist: “For Ken” (38) and “Remembering Saro-Wiwa” (39). The poem “Ogoni Agony” (40-41) makes reference to the activities of Saro-Wiwa in the sensitisation of the Niger-Delta people. These poems do more than eulogise Saro-Wiwa; they emphasise the need to complete the quest he died for:

Let’s not forget
That the cause
Of his hanging
Is still clinging
To the bottom of oil wells.



And let's not forget
That his hanging
Is still sticking
To the remains of our conscience
Like sludges on mud-flats (39).

The poets' depiction of the influence Ken Saro-Wiwa continues to wield even in death foregrounds that the slain activist has become a symbol for writers who are committed to environmental activism. For every poet and writer who is environmentally conscious, there is a symbolic link to Saro-Wiwa and the unfinished task of advocating for safer practices. As much as there are oil wells and sludges on mud flats in the region, the cause for which Saro-Wiwa died remains inconclusive. By hitching the attainment of environmental sustainability upon the conscience of writers which is also a reminder of the murder of one of them, Ikiriko foregrounds the moral and psychological tie all writers should have with the cause Saro-Wiwa died for. In "For Ken" (38), the poet describes the effects of Saro-Wiwa's death thus:

The injury is written
Deep in my soul
Leaving a manuscript
To remain and remind
Me of the deeds
Left undone

By tagging the effects of the killing of Saro-Wiwa as a "manuscript" which reminds him of tasks undone, Ikiriko captures the significance of the Saro-Wiwa's killing as an enduring motivation for writers to continue the quest for which he died. Ikiriko tags it as a reminder of "deeds left undone." The poet also notes the psychological trauma of the killing by ascribing the deed as "written/deep in my soul". The psychological note which Ikiriko strikes has the effect of emphasising the lasting effect it has on him and by extension other writers with a similar tendency for environmental activism.

The psychological bond the selected poets establish with the slain environmentalist and his ideals about the Niger-Delta could be due to the familial relationships fostered by being members of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA. Ojaide captures the bond that connects writers in the poem titled "Wails" (17-19) where he describes the void Ken Saro-Wiwa's death has created among the association of writers thus:



Another ANA meeting will be called
and singers will gather,
I will look all over
and see a space
that can take more than a hundred-
the elephant never hides.
I ask the god of songs
whether all the singers will come,
but that silent space
that can take more than a hundred
stares at me with nostalgia
and gives me a feverish cold.
I won't find one singer
when another ANA meeting will be called (17).

Ojaide's eulogium of Ken Saro-Wiwa borders on hero-worship. In most of the poems featuring the slain environmental activist, Ojaide depicts him as larger than life. In the excerpt above, Ojaide describes Saro-Wiwa physical absence in hyperbolic terms, alluding to the space he would have occupied as capable of containing "more than a hundred." He names Saro-Wiwa a "favourite son" of not only the people but of the "god of songs" (Wails 18), as tribute to his people-centred agitations and also literary creativity.

Saro-Wiwa's role as an environmental and political activist is also celebrated. This is why in this same poem, Ojaide laments that: "Who will stand in front as the Iroko shield/ to regain the stolen birthrights of millions?" (18) Ojaide identifies later on in this poem that Saro-Wiwa is not the first Niger-Deltan to champion the cause of the region. He mentions Isaac Adaka Boro, a radical individual, who had declared a Niger-Delta Republic in January 1966 to liberate his people from ethnic domination which had subjected them to social, political and economic marginalisation. This was in spite of the fact that the region contributed significantly to the Nigerian economy. Boro's move was short-lived as the revolution was quickly subdued and Boro was captured. He was tried and sentenced to death but would later die in the Nigerian Civil War in 1968, fighting on the side of the Nigerian Federal Government against the Biafran secessionists. Ojaide harnesses the historical fact that Saro-Wiwa continued where Boro stopped to express the hope that another vocal activist would arise and continue the campaign: "After the warrior-chief's fall/ somebody else will carry the standard-/ Boro left for Saro-Wiwa to take over/ the stump will grow into another Iroko" (19). Ojaide's description of the two activists—Boro and Saro-Wiwa—as 'Iroko' enables him to transpose



the attributes of strength, might, and the seeming indestructibility of the Iroko tree to describe the tenacity with which the two Niger-Deltans pursued their vision of the region.

In “Sleeping in a Makeshift Grave” (24), for instance, Ojaide says that “The hanged men are thrusting their fists from beyond,” a sign that their mission will not stop even in death and in “Elegy for Nine Warriors,” the poet says Ken’s name will continue to engender more determined struggle for the emancipation of the region and people:

He forgets he has left Ken’s name behind
& the communal chant of the singerbird’s name
rising along the dark waters of the Delta
will stir the karmic bonfire
that will consume his blind dominion.
Surely, that name will be the rod by which
the cobra will meet its slaughter (28).

This depiction of the slain activist having the capacity to affect the world of the living allows poets to portray Ken Saro-Wiwa as conquering death. They portray his demise as not capable of stopping the mission for which he and eight others were killed, which is the environmental protection of the region, and the emancipation of the Niger-Delta people.

For Ojaide and Ifowodo, they aver through their poems that the symbol of the martyred writer and environmental activist as well as eight others should be the rallying point for all environment-conscious individuals. Ojaide states in “Delta Blues” (23) thus: “Nobody can go further than those mounds/ in the fight to right chronic habits/ of greed and every wrong of power.” Ifowodo says: “And when they rise to spit on our heads the rinse-water/ of their early morning mouths, I remember the dew, / the one thousand and one gone, and what will remain true” (“Cesspit of the Niger Area” 63).

CONCLUSION

Given the commitment of contemporary writers across the genres to push for environmental sustainability, the increased advocacy has brought Ken Saro-Wiwa and his exploits more prominence even more than he was able to achieve while alive. The documentation of his name and ideology in these environmentally committed literary works continue to drive the vision for which he lost his life. As writers eulogise his exploits, Saro-Wiwa takes on a larger than life status, of hero dimensions. As a symbol, he continues to serve the environmental cause of not only the Niger-Delta but of the globe. He represents the enduring spirit who commits all to engendering safer and sustainable environments. He is the symbol of selflessness who paid the supreme price for the sustenance of the environment.



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