

TOWARDS REHABILITATING THE VIOLENT MILITANT AFRICAN YOUTH: A PSYCHOANALYSIS OF THE DISTRESSED NIGER DELTA MOTHER IN AHMED YERIMA'S *HARD GROUND*

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Abstract

Considering the spate of violent conflicts across African countries and the involvement of the youth in the conflicts, there is an inevitable clash between the social values that children should imbibe in normal socialisation processes and the belligerent tendency that their warlords spin into their heads. As the primary roles of parents become inevitably eroded, it would be intriguing to investigate the apprehensions and reactions of the mother figure that has been left alone by an indifferent father to rehabilitate their violent militant child. This article examines the representations of the social tensions and disruptions of Nigeria's Niger Delta conflict, not at the battle field but at the domestic front where intense family relationships are exposed beyond the familiar reports of violence suffered by women in times of conflict. It applies psychoanalytic literary criticism to unpick the unresolved internal conflicts and maternal desires of the distraught mother that contends with the most traumatic experience of losing her only child to youth militia struggle. It stylistically analyses the discursive practices of socialising the 'lost' child and highlights the instructive interventions that the mother figure offers the rebellious child while prescribing socially acceptable conflict management strategies.

Key Words: Mother figure, Niger Delta, socialisation, violent conflict, youth militancy

Introduction

The incidence of conflict in human society may be unavoidable but the spate of violent conflicts in Africa has been a most disturbing picture of the African world. According to the (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 1999: 6), '[s]ince the era of African independence in the late 1950s, only a handful of 53 countries has not experienced large-scale conflict, civil unrest or military coup d'états'. Also, (Nzomo 2002: 3) observes that '[m]ore than one African in five lives in a country that is fighting a war, and nearly 20 countries have experienced war since 1960'. Certainly, the intensity and duration of the widespread conflicts would have taken their toll on human lives, economies and social structures in unimaginable and unquantifiable proportions.

Although it is men that actually go to war, it is the women, children and the elderly that are left to face the destructive consequences of war. In some very extreme conditions, however, women and children have been conscripted to join the army, playing very dastardly roles which, ordinarily, people in these classes would not have been expected to play. The (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 1999: 1) reports:

Women experience conflict in various ways. Many women and children are drawn into direct participation in the fighting, in intelligence gathering and in supplying fighters with food and basic necessities. Some willingly join combatant forces and risk their lives alongside the men. Others fully participate in committing atrocities, as was the case during the genocide in

Rwanda. In that situation, it was noted that women too drew up lists of people to be killed and sometimes encouraged their children to assist in the killing.

Such a representation is against the ideal image of women as peace-loving. Nevertheless, when men go to fight and eventually die at the battle front, the vulnerability of women to the violent acts of peace-keeping military men is pathetic.

According to (The Sixth African Development Forum 2008: 1), citing the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), violence against women (VAW) is defined as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’. As regards the Niger Delta conflict and the plight of the womenfolk, (Akubor 2011: 28) reports:

Available evidence indicates that women in the area were subjected to all kinds of violence, sexual violence such as rape, physical violence such as beatings, maiming and murder, as well as destruction of their properties [sic]. They have suffered unimaginable human right abuses for which redress is unattainable because their husbands and sons have been killed or maimed in the conflict and women have had to assume burdensome responsibilities as heads of households.

Notwithstanding the image of the victimised that is generally painted of women during violent conflicts, women actually have interventionist roles to play in conflict prevention, management and resolution, hence the need to include women in conflict transformation and peace-building processes. According to the (Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars 2003: 1),

Women represent an untapped resource in peace-building. Stereotypical images of women as passive victims of war overshadow their agency and contributions to peace-building and belie the complex reality of women’s experiences in conflict. Women are victims, but they are also fighters. Women are survivors and they are protectors. Women are peace-builders.

(Omotayo 2005: 4) argues that ‘[r]esearch into and historical analysis of the African traditional society has shown that if women do not have a voice or say in matters involving peace, there will be no sustainable cross-gender resolutions of the problem of war’. My preoccupation in this study, therefore, is in line with the traditional role of women in pre-colonial African societies as peace-builders manifested through their ‘positive childcare, responsible mothering and nurturing of children in ways that prepared and socialised them towards peaceful co-existence’ (Isike and Uzodike 2011: 42).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the dramatisation, in Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*, of the interventionist role of an archetypal Niger Delta mother in rehabilitating her belligerent child, as I intend to achieve the following objectives: (i) to psychoanalyse the archetypal mother figure faced with challenge of rehabilitating her belligerent child; (ii) to analyse and describe stylistically the discursive practices she deploys in giving expression to her values, desires, wishes, apprehensions and alternative propositions in conflict management; and (iii) to examine the place of women in working out realistic conflict

resolution strategies from the home front.

After this introductory background, I organise the rest of the study in the following sequence. I devote the next section to the question of violent youth militancy in the Niger Delta after which I offer an insight into the enactment of the social malaise in Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*. Following this section is an explication of the theoretical framework after which I try to psychoanalyse the distraught mother figure.

Violent Youth Militancy in the Niger Delta

For clarification purposes, I will quickly shed light on the concept of 'militancy'. According to (Imokoba and Imbua 2010: 102), '[m]ilitancy could be defined as an aggressive and active behaviour geared towards the defence and support of a cause (mainly political), often to the point of extremism'. (Imokoba and Imbua 2010) identify three types of militancy: intellectual militancy which believes that a cause should be ideologically driven based on peaceful dialogue; mobilisation militancy which believes in enlightening and conscientising people; and violent militancy which believes in the power of the barrel of the gun.

(Osaghae *et al* 2008 : 33) argue that in the Niger Delta, the term 'militants' refers to 'gunmen who make political demands, including the release of imprisoned leaders, cash reparations for communities, change of electoral candidates and a greater share of oil revenues, among other issues'. Of a truth, it is the political demands that distinguish them, though tenuously, from criminals who simply kidnap people for money. (Osaghae *et al* 2008: 33) also argue that '[m]ilitants are also distinct from disaffected communities, whose people may perform kidnappings or attacks in the hopes [sic] of getting a clinic, school or cash, by [sic] have no overall political aims'. Thus, (Osaghae *et al* 2008: 33) characterise the Niger Delta militant youths thus:

- a) They are youths
- b) They operate surreptitiously and clandestinely in cities and towns
- c) They are sometimes known as activists
- d) Are based in camps during the weekdays but return to towns and cities during the weekends
- e) Their camps are established far from towns and cities, deep in the mangrove swamps
- f) The camps are owned and controlled by "bosses/commandants [sic]
- g) The camps are numerous and each may comprise of [sic] 2000 or more youth
- h) The commandant obtains resources by extorting from the state and government using security threats. [sic]
- i) They carry sophisticated arms such as machine guns, explosives and cluster bombs
- j) They abuse alcohol (local gin) and Marijuana

Consequently, (Imokoba and Imbua 2010: 102) argue that the militancy in the Niger Delta world that is giving Nigeria a negative image is the rise in violent insurgency 'which has been corrupted and infiltrated by criminal minded individuals and gangs'. (Joab-Peterside 2007: 2) underlines the reaction of the international community to the security challenges by 'designating Niger Delta as a dangerous and insecure place inhabited by criminals, vandals, hostage takers, kidnappers, restive youths, oil thieves and terrorists'. In view of this negative assumption of the cause of militancy in the Niger Delta region and the role played by the youth in the struggle, (Chukuezi 2009: 99) is quick to emphasise the ambivalent status of youth in society:

They can constitute a reservoir of energy and dynamism for any national struggle or campaign if they are correctly guided, mobilised, and fully integrated into the social fabrics of the nation. They may also constitute a threat to national survival and stability if they are allowed to drift, are unemployed, undisciplined and morally bankrupt.

Thus, in Nigeria's political landscape and history, the youth has assumed a transitory status determined by certain social forces. (Chukuezi 2009) goes down the memory lane, recounting how in the past Nigerian youths were perceived as heroes of the nationalist movement. However, the presence of and exploitation of oil resources in Nigeria have redefined the mentality of the youth and their role as agents of political processes. (Ibaba 2008: 12) harps on the paradox of the Niger Delta region which is 'evidently blessed with numerous resources' but is 'an example of extreme poverty'. (Paki and Ebiensa 2011: 140) sum up the predicament of the Niger Delta people thus: '[...] the unabated marginalisation, disempowerment, segregation, suppression and repression of hitherto peaceful agitations by the people for decades made violent oil agitations inevitable, hence the militancy that presently characterise the region'.

(Ibaba 2011: 25) notes that '[m]ilitia activism was preceded by the mobilisation of a number of civil society groups who used enlightenment, declarations, dialogue, rallies and protests as their strategies'. What, however, marked the watershed to the civil struggle of the Niger Delta cause was the 1998 Federal Military Government's violent response to the Kaiama declaration – a ten-point resolution document produced from a meeting held by Ijaw youths in Kaiama, Bayelsa State who met to discuss the survival of the Ijaw nation in Nigeria. This state repression led to violent confrontation between the youths and security forces and consequently provided the setting for the transformation of youth groups into militia organisations.

By engaging in violence and insurgencies to match state repression, the Niger Delta youth have exhibited 'negative youth culture' that African youths are notorious for in reaction to some systemic failures in the polity. (Ikelegbe 2006: 89) comments on the image of the African youth in this circumstance thus:

[...] the youth in Africa can be described as a social category in crisis. They have been characterised as excluded, marginalised, threatened, victimised, abused, problematic, frustrated and violent. The anger, frustration and bitterness resulting from the multifarious crises and the ensuing negative orientations are compounded by their constituting a large pool that is amenable to all sorts of manipulations by political, cultural and other elites and the fact that they can easily transform their bitterness and frustration into violence.

It would be intriguing, therefore, for us to know how such representations are captured in a dramatic text.

Yerima's *Hard Ground* as Dramatic Response to the Niger Delta Violent Youth Militancy

The play enacts conflict of values between Nimi, the militant youth, and his anxious

mother named Mama with some other characters like Inyingifaa and Father Kingsley who always calm Mama down and condemn Nimi's altered values in moments of intense exchanges between the worried mother and the belligerent child. The play starts with Nimi's escape from the camp where some killings have been traced to him and his 'boys'. For this reason, the commandant at the camp places a death sentence on him but with a ransom raised and paid by the family, Nimi escapes from the camp and faces a family trial where the members of his family try establish the veracity of the allegations levelled against him.

Despite widespread condemnation of the violent acts of the militant youth, Nimi never shows any remorse but longs to return to the camp to perpetrate more violent acts to save the land and the people from the 'enemies', not minding if he loses his life in the process. In fact, he sees dying for the land as a worthy cause, as that would make him and his other militant youth 'true warriors of the land' as opposed the self-acclaimed leaders (elders) of the land who live in the cities and have compromised the Niger Delta cause, having fraternised with the oppressors. Mama resists vehemently Nimi's violent militancy option, evoking some socio-cultural values and her personal emotional challenges that would not permit Nimi's 'stupid' strategies and 'dream' towards resolving the Niger Delta debacle.

So, she assumes the role of the custodian of family and community values in finding socially acceptable means to conflict management. Meanwhile, Nimi's father called Baba appears very apathetic to the Nigeria Delta cause, a disposition which earns him the label of a 'coward' not only within the family but also in the whole community. Baba's disposition infuriates Nimi who swears, like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, never to be like his effeminate father. It is not only the Niger Delta issue that Baba appears indifferent to; he also appears very passive when it comes to making Nimi realise the right values to imbibe in pursuing the Niger Delta struggle. This is another grave challenge for Mama at home, as she is left all alone by Baba to face the herculean task of socialising the belligerent child. Unknown to both Mama and Nimi, however, Baba that is rather lethargic is actually the commandant at the camp who has been directing the activities of the militant youth. This revelation comes at the end of the play when the commandant (the Don) comes to visit Nimi's family and Nimi stabs him to death in revenge for the Don's having ordered the execution of Nimi's girl-friend named Pikibo with his unborn child at the camp.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of applied psychoanalysis, a science concerned with the interaction between consciousness and unconscious. Although some scholars had discussed the unconscious before Freud, it was Freud that developed the concept most thoroughly. His most important contribution to the study of the psyche is that what lies in the unconscious mind has been put there by consciousness, which acts as censor, driving underground unconscious and conscious thoughts and instincts that it deems unacceptable. Repressed to an unconscious stage, censored materials emerge only in disguised forms such as dreams, slips of the tongue or pen, forgetting of names, bungled actions and similar 'accidents'. Freud postulated that censored materials often involve infantile sexual desires, a postulation that he developed rather elaborately.

Neo-Freudian scholars have, however, disagreed with Freud over his emphasis on sexuality. (Eagleton 1983: 179) notes: 'Psychoanalytical criticism [...] can do more than hunt for phallic symbols: it can tell us something about how literary texts are actually formed, and reveal something of the meaning of that formation'. (Eagleton 1983) argues that

psychoanalytic criticism can be broadly divided into four kinds, depending on what it takes as its object of attention. It can attend to the author of the work; to the work's contents; to its formal construction; or to the reader. Thus, earlier approaches to psychoanalytic criticism would seek to show how the author's own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such are traceable within the behaviour of the characters in the literary work.

The more contemporary approach would focus more on how the characters' childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, etc. shape their behaviour within the literary work. In either case, psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as 'symbolism' (the repressed object represented in disguise), 'condensation' (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and 'displacement' (anxiety located onto another image by means of association). Hence, I examine the constant return of the repressed from Mama's unconscious, as she faces the harsh realities of her son's drifting away from acceptable social norms.

Neo-Freudian critics have also shifted attention to language issues. Jacques Lacan treats the unconscious via language. According to (Barry 2009: 105), Lacan pays allegiance to the intellectual dominance of language studies, asking rather rhetorically: 'how could a psychoanalyst of today not realise that his realm of truth is in fact the word?' Language, then, according to (Barry 2009: 105) is 'central, and this is so because in investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both using and examining language [...]'. In discussing the unconscious in the present literary text, I engage linguistic analysis, focusing on Mama's use of repetition, euphemism, symbolism and allusion which make manifest the content of the unconscious, thereby validating (Brooks' 1987: 348) view: 'The detour through psychoanalysis forces the critic to respond to the erotics of form, that is, to an engagement with the psychic investments of rhetoric, the dramas of desire played out in tropes.'

Maternal Worries and the Discursive Practices of Socialising the Violent Militant Youth

Nimi's belief in and commitment to the cause of the Niger Delta struggle to the point of resolving to paying the supreme sacrifice along with his 'friends' and 'brothers' who share the same 'dream' with him gives him the impression that they are 'the true warriors of the land'. But Mama who serves as the agent of social change from the family unit replies Nimi:

MAMA: (Chuckles) Brothers... warriors my foot. I have only one child, Nimi, only one child. And now you must curse me to tears by your stupid words and dreams.

(*Hard Ground*, p. 9)

Mama's use of the minor sentence 'Brothers... warriors my foot' is a laconic outright condemnation of Nimi's warped sense of judgement about how to pursue the Niger Delta struggle. With the terse expression, she minces no words in a bid to make Nimi know that his actions are not socially acceptable. The utterance is not just a declarative statement but a verdictive statement that typifies the society's outright assessment of the violent militancy embarked upon by Nimi and his fellow war mongers. Her assessment is further summed up in her use of the adjective 'stupid' to qualify the nominal head 'words and dreams', which encapsulates the totality of Nimi's actions and goals.

Mama would not ordinarily feel bothered even if her only child is pursuing a path of

honour such as embarking on intellectual militancy which society would approve of. But the fact that he chooses the dishonourable path that portrays him as ‘a breaker of social norms’ makes Mama most anxious, as she stands the risk of losing the only child she has. In the Western world where some couples could even decide not to procreate or would limit the number of children to just one or two, having only one child may not have any socio-cultural implications. But in the African world, the number of children a woman has determines the extent to which she is matrimonially stable and what she and her children stand to benefit from the will of her husband when he eventually dies.

So, having only one child is like having only one arrow in one’s pouch which one cannot afford to shoot aimlessly else one becomes stranded. In fact, if Mama were to live with other co-wives with a greater number of children under the same roof, one could imagine the mockery and the torment she would experience day-in-day-out, as she could even be labelled a witch whose witchcraft has sealed off her womb from further procreation. If co-wives do not torment her, her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law or possibly brothers-in-law could pester her to give their son and brother more children or pack out of the house for a woman whose loins are full of children to come in and bless the home.

Given these socio-cultural constraints Mama faces on account of having only one child and the taunt she would face if she takes any chances and loses the child to the Niger Delta struggle eventually, one could imagine her unfulfilled desires which she must have repressed or forced into the unconscious but which Nimi’s belligerency now forces back into her consciousness. So, her repetition of the structure ‘only one child’ is instructive. Certainly, there is some sense of maternal glee Mama is supposed to derive from seeing Nimi growing up and bringing glory to the family in his educational or vocational pursuits in life. But with Nimi’s departing from this path of honour, Mama needs to constantly drum it into his ears: ‘Nimi, you are my only child, my source of joy [...]’ (*Hard Ground*, p. 10). Mama’s emphasis of the number of offspring she has is contained in her use of the adjective ‘only’ to qualify the noun head ‘child’. She then goes ahead to use an appositive structure – ‘my source of joy’ – to underline what Nimi means to her. In fact, her use of the possessive adjective ‘my’ suggests the sense of attachment and unequalled maternal glee she derives (or she should derive) from having Nimi.

Although Nimi acknowledges this fact, he feels that he has come of age, having attained the age of maturity (eighteen years), saying: ‘So you see why you should not fear for me?’ (*Hard Ground*, p. 27). Nevertheless, Mama still entertains a lot of fears, retorting:

MAMA: I fear because you are all I have, son. Eighteen years... and to me you are just a child. Now I regret not having two of you. Maybe I will be less worried now. Knowing I will have one at each side.
(*Hard Ground*, p. 27)

From Mama’s utterance above, some crucial social issues that heighten her sense of internal conflict could be deduced. First, the use of the signifier ‘child’ is a social semiotic that Mama invokes in her interaction with the wayward child to make him realise that no matter the age he attains in life, he should be ever subordinate to the counsel of his parents. It is believed in the African world that the words of the elders are the words of wisdom that no child, man or woman could just wish away if they are to make meaning of life.

Still from the extract above, Mama’s sense of having lost the other child in whom she

could have taken solace even when Nimi is drifting from acceptable social norms is emotive, as she wishes the other child could have lived to be a promising child that would act as a foil to Nimi. Ordinarily, such a memory could have undergone the psychic process of sublimation – promoting the repressed material into something grander in the form of rearing Nimi and his responding to it in the most acceptable social manner. Regrettably, Nimi becomes a belligerent child and heightens the psychological strain that Mama undergoes.

Left with no other option, Mama exhorts Nimi to depart from his chosen path of perdition so that she could have joy. She exhorts: ‘Nimi, don’t die before your time. Don’t let them kill you for me. You are all I have, Nimi, you are all I have’ (*Hard Ground*, p. 15). In exhorting Nimi, Mama uses the persuasive imperative structures: ‘don’t die [...]’ and ‘don’t let them kill you [...]’. The use of negation evidenced in the negative particle ‘not’ following the auxiliary verb ‘do’ forbids Nimi to take either of those actions which Mama considers horrendous. Contrary to Nimi’s conception that even if he is killed, he will die ‘for the sake of the land’, Mama sees herself as the one that will suffer the loss of Nimi’s death with her use of the first person singular objective pronoun ‘me’ after the preposition ‘for’. So, while Nimi thinks only of the cause of the struggle without considering the plight of his parents, Mama beats him back to track, as shown in the exchange below:

NIMI: Mama, this was for the land, our nation state.

MAMA: What about us? What about our state of mind? Your father and I. Did you think about us? Did you, son?

(*Hard Ground*, p. 12)

Mama’s deployment of a series of interrogative sentences is not necessarily to make an enquiry but to subtly guide the straying child and affirm to Nimi the germane issues he ought to bear in mind while pursuing any cause in life.

Before Mama could be so worried about Nimi’s taking to negative youth culture, one may be curious as to the socialisation processes she put in place while Nimi was growing up to ensure that he would be a socially responsible child. Convinced that she has played her part as a responsible mother, she reminds Nimi: ‘We sent you home to learn the language, to be properly brought up in our ways [...]’ (*Hard Ground*, p. 10). As is characteristic of some young mothers in African societies who would wish that their children are well grounded in their cultural values, one is given the impression that Mama sent Nimi home as the tradition could have demanded. In fact, her harping on the reason for sending Nimi home: ‘to learn the language’ is instructive. The signifier ‘language’ evoked by Mama in her utterance embodies the totality of the people’s culture, mores, values, and customs which are at variance with Nimi’s debased values as a violent militant youth. This divergence of values is underlined with her use of the adverbial element ‘properly’ to modify the verb ‘to learn’, showing that ‘our ways’, not the ways of the violent militants, are the socially acceptable ways.

Recall that I suggested earlier that Mama’s sending Nimi home could have been born out of her wish to conform to the prevalent tradition in her community. But when she becomes highly depressed on account of Nimi’s belligerency, the repressed memory of her having a health challenge which necessitated the move found its way back to her consciousness, as she recounts:

MAMA: You don’t know much, do you? But you are a man now. I sent you home after I fell in the market. You remember, when you were eight. The day

we went to the market and I fell to the ground panting. And you cried until I woke up? That was when I knew I had the sickness of grip. (*Hard Ground*, p. 29)

Although Mama sounds euphemistic by referring to her health challenge (epilepsy) as ‘sickness of grip’, the traumatic experience she must have had in living with the sickness and in her recounting this could be most unbearable. Worse still, she feels most unfulfilled in life because of Nimi’s compounding her woes by making a mess of the alternative socialisation institution she arranged for him on account of her failing health, hence her lamentation:

MAMA: It was not your fault. It was nobody’s fault. But I knew I did not want you growing up and seeing me in that weak state. That was why we sent you home. Now I blame myself for all this. First, your father finds another pebble by the river, and throws mine to the bottom of the river for little crayfish to play with. And now as if that is not enough, you ... want to, determined on a mission of death, to die before your time. (*Hard Ground*, p. 30)

From Mama’s lamentation above, we have a glimpse into another terrible memory that she must have grappled to force into her subconscious for good: the challenge in her matrimonial home whereby her husband failed to stand by her in her illness but chose to marry another woman instead. While she tries to be euphemistic once again, using the imagery of the pebble thrown into the bottom of the river to express the sense of abandonment that she suffered, one could imagine the sense of betrayal of trust that she suffered from a husband she would have depended upon for support in sickness and in health. And to add salt to her injury, Nimi, who could have given her consolation, is ‘determined on a mission of death’, to die before his time. This is double tragedy for the poor woman!

Further, Mama engages in a Freudian slip again, recalling her traumatic pre-marital experience which marked a tragic turning point in her childhood:

MAMA: [...] We were young and, he was in the Army. Always, he boasted he would rub my body one day in the mud. That was exactly what he did. He waited for me by the stream, and in one swift move, he captured me...forcing himself...forcing me... and I took in. (*Hard Ground*, p. 28)

Mama’s traumatic experience recounted above bears upon how she was raped by Nimi’s father who was then a young soldier, resulting in Nimi’s birth. Apart from the personal emotional torture, the stigma she would have borne in the family and in the community as a victim of rape was enough to ruin her joy in life as a proud marriageable lady that was able to keep her virginity till marriage. As a form of repressed conflict which returns at the point of social pressure, she deploys euphemism again: ‘Always, he boasted he would rub my body one day in the mud. That was exactly what he did’. Although Mama sounds picturesque enough in her description, capturing the experience exactly in the actual society conception of it as ‘rape’ would have been most devastating for her to bear. Therefore, her painful memories are further conveyed in her hesitation depicted with the use of elliptical marks ‘he captured me ... forcing himself...forcing me... and I took in’.

If Mama had striven to lay the foundation for socially acceptable behaviour for Nimi,

it is somewhat strange that some other social force(s) would snatch him away from Mama's hands or make him derail from socially acceptable norms. Nimi's sense of allegiance in the violent conflict situation has reprehensibly shifted from his parents – the primary agents of socialisation – to another figure in the conflict situation as revealed thus:

NIMI: I was eager to please the Don...

MAMA: The Don? That name ... the Don.

NIMI: The head of everything. Everybody. The man. At least he heads our part of the creek. He is the Supreme Commander.

(*Hard Ground*, p. 14)

Nimi's blind loyalty to 'the Don' as opposed to pleasing his parents is most worrisome. After all, it is said that 'charity begins at home' and so the home and his parents should be the focal points of socialisation in life and not 'the Don' who 'heads our part of the creeks'. In fact, the imagery of 'the Don' and his habitation as depicted in the spatial deictic element 'the creek' are signifiers for the loathsome influences in society during a conflict that could make a child depart from socially acceptable ways.

In fact, upon Mama's condemnation of this warlord figure: '[...] I say what sort of useless man? (*Hard Ground*, p. 14), Nimi's adoration of the Don and what he typifies for the militant youth suggest the level of degeneracy he has undergone:

NIMI: A real man, Mama. The one who knows what the children need for the future. A man of God, Mama. A man sent as our Messiah. The Don is god in our part of the country. He feeds and clothes us, he is not like some men that we know, who stay in Lagos and do nothing about the future of their land or children.

(*Hard Ground*, p. 14)

Nimi's seeing the Don in the image of a Messiah and equating him with a god all because he feeds and clothes them is evidential of the level of poverty and frustration of the youth in the Nigerian society, their value of living only for the immediate, and their status as either unemployed or unemployable youth as result of which they are easily pliable. Worried by Nimi's favouring the Don's counsel and 'plan' for the youth as opposed to what parents have to offer their children, Mama laments:

MAMA: I need to know what happened to my son. When I lost him. At what point did my voice become noise to his ears, and the wise counselling of his uncles and big oil chiefs become wise sayings and music to his ears? When? Heen? At what point?

(*Hard Ground*, p. 15)

Harping on the clash of values in the Niger Delta world as it affects the youth, Mama uses the imagery of noise to capture the way her counsel sounds to Nimi and the imagery of music to depict how the indoctrination of the warlords sounds to the militant youth. Mama's invocation of the auditory imagery of 'noise' and 'music', where the former is undesirable and unpleasant to the ears and the latter, desirable and pleasant to the ears and soul, underlines the deplorable reversal of roles between the family institution as an agent of socialisation and the warlords as culpable agents of social disorder. To rebuke Nimi's opting for the wrong course, thinking that he is right, Mama uses ironic sarcasm by referring to the

counsel of the warlords as ‘wise’, suggesting that Mama’s own would be erroneously but perilously taken for ‘foolish’ counsel.

One is not surprised, therefore, to see Mama condemn Nimi in unmistakable terms for insisting on treading his childish way in pursuing the Niger Delta struggle: ‘You are really a bloody fool. Bloody stupid young fool’. While it may appear that Mama uses this utterance to sum up Nimi’s shallow sense of reasoning, the utterance is actually a challenge to Nimi to refocus his life so that he could have the right sense of judgement. Such a warning does not go without Mama’s slipping again into a traumatic past experience which she couches in the form of a historical allusion:

MAMA: Those were his very words, until that day when he was snuffed out at his twilight, all we have are dark memories. And sometimes, the naked truth that we may mourn another one so soon after. Nimi, please!
(*Hard Ground*, p. 16)

Her allusion in the above utterance is to the killing of her brother who was also a violent militant as Nimi is now but did not survive to tell the story of his foolhardiness, as Mama bemoans his loss to the struggle:

MAMA: I have lost a brother. Ten years ago. His blood is still splashed on the doorway of my family house when he was killed trying to run into the family compound. He was butchered like a dog by the same men who played with him as a child and fed him as a man. To date, we never saw his body...not even a finger or a toe. All we have of him are memories, and a splash of dried blood on the doorway.
(*Hard Ground*, p. 15)

In this regard, Mama, assuming an authorial mouthpiece, sells a viable proposition not just to Nimi but to every violent militant youth:

MAMA: School. I want you to go back to school. With education, you can still fight. That time more people will listen to you. People always believe these days that people who did not go to school should not be believed. Poverty tastes sour in the mouth. School, son [...]
(*Hard Ground*, p. 29)

In the above utterance, Mama uses some striking stylistic features to drive home her message. First, her foregrounding of the subject of the discussion in the minor sentence ‘School.’ as the first sentence in the utterance is significant. The thematisation of the subject highlights its centrality to the message of redemption that Mama has for Nimi. That the word stands alone in the minor sentence without any other elements therein shows the sense of immediacy that warrants Mama to use it. Then, the statement that follows: ‘I want you to go back to school’ is an example of a directive as an act performed by Mama in saying the utterance. She also makes it known to Nimi that going to school would not put paid to the militant struggle for the emancipation of the Niger Delta people.

Therefore, her deployment of the stylistic device of focusing whereby the prepositional phrase ‘with education’ coming at the sentence-initial position instead of at the sentence-final position as in: ‘You can still fight with education’ underlines the significance

of the message as a result of which she cannot afford to delay the theme to the sentence-final position. Still employing the same stylistic feature of topicalisation, she emphasises the turning point when Nimi's revolutionary song would be meaningful to the outside world, using the temporal deictic element 'that time' at the sentence-initial position instead of deferring it to the sentence-final position where its significance would have been watered down. For Nimi's crusade to be socially acceptable, he needs to part with the stigma expressed in the qualifying element 'who did not go to school' which is used as an adjectival clause to qualify the noun 'people'. Giving no other useful option, Mama, with a tone of finality, uses the laconic minor sentence: 'School, son', still highlighting the important subject 'school' instead of saying 'Son, school'. Generally, the reiteration of the lexical item 'school' four times shows the significance of the subject in the discourse. And in a swift response to Mama's emotional outbursts and reasonable propositions, Nimi commits himself, pledging to turn back from his socially unacceptable ways:

NIMI: Not any more, Mama. I understand everything now. I am sorry.
(*Hard Ground*, p. 30)

It would interest us to note that Nimi does not just give Mama information in this utterance but actually performs some notable acts: (i) assertive – a speech act that commits him to the truth of the expressed proposition; (ii) commissive – a speech act that commits him to some (positive) future action; (iii) expressive – a speech act that expresses his attitudes and emotions towards the proposition (giving his apologies); and (iv) declaration – a speech act that changes the reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration (pronouncing a change of heart).

It is noteworthy that in the course of Mama grappling to tame her belligerent child, Baba who is the father figure in the house never gives her any chance of success, as he often discourages Mama's strategies of going about her rehabilitation bid. Never for once do Baba and Mama speak with one voice in the task of parenting the violent militant youth. More often than not, Baba disparages Mama, using very denigrating tags to devalue her role as a useful agent of home building, particularly when it comes to the question of reclaiming the violent militant youth from the hands of the warmongers that have completely bought his mind over. Some of Baba's utterances in moments of confrontation with Mama include: 'Woman, control yourself, this is not how we want to handle this matter'; 'Woman! Go in, we shall call you when we need you'; and 'Not now. Woman, go to sleep'.

Baba's preferred address tag, 'woman', in these utterances or just 'wife' in some other utterances resonates with that denigrating label in a chauvinistic African world with which the men trivialise the role and voice of women in resolving serious social problems within the family not to talk of in the larger community. That Mama knows what is at stake in this context and could stand her ground by resisting the suppressive force is the kind of spirit that women need to survive in a men's world, for she insists: 'I shall not go in. I shall wait and hear what woes my son has brought to this family'. But for her insistence, the belligerent child in dire need of rehabilitation would have been lost. In fact, on one of the occasions when she needs her husband to join forces with her and the man is not responsive, she charges:

MAMA: [...] Don't just sit there and do nothing. Beat some sense into the thick head of this child who understands the world upside down. Husband, get up and be a man for once in this house. Do something!

(*Hard Ground*, p. 18)

For Mama to have lived with these very impulsive characters as son and husband in a society where the mother figure needs support and protection from the husband and maternal glee from the son's towing the path of acceptable social norms, one cannot but imagine the internal conflicts she must have experienced as a vulnerable mother in armed conflict situation. Even though she more often than not lets off the repressed memories of her health, pre-marital and marital challenges in disguise by using the psychoanalytic techniques of 'symbolism', 'condensation' and 'displacement', the palpable tension that Nimi's belligerency and her husband's irresponsibility cause her intensely portray the yoke of a violated African woman in a violent conflict situation. It is then apt to bring to bear the very penetrating comment on the blurb of the dramatic text culled from the judge's citation during the NLNG-sponsored The Nigeria Prize for Literature, 2006 award which the dramatic text, *Hard Ground*, won:

"... *Hard Ground* is a powerful and psychological wrenching tale that draws on the sad history of the Niger Delta as well as its contemporary, real-life political drama. It also gives us the occasional but telling glimpse into the pathos of personal relationships and the drawn-out psychological suffering of its most vulnerable characters But above all this, what the play effectively presents, as the valuable lesson of this war is the impact of the crisis on private lives...."

Conclusion

This study has focused on the social issue of parenting the African child, taking into cognizance the phenomenon of violent social conflict as it constrains the usefulness of parental values in rehabilitating the growing population of violent militant youths in Africa. Consequently, my attempt to psychoanalyse the distressed Niger Delta mother vis-à-vis the challenges she faces in rehabilitating her belligerent child raises some issues. First, the engagement of women in conflict management and resolution need not begin at the point at which they seek equal representations with men in peace-building delegations. Their engagement should realistically as shown in this study start with their holding the fort at the family unit as home builders. From there, they would have laid the bedrock for advancing their cause as agents of social reconstruction.

Further, the challenge of rehabilitating the violent militant youth is quite daunting. But with wisdom and tact born out of women's exhibiting their God-given virtues as home tenders, the feat is after all attainable. From Mama's adoption of what I call 'confrontational dialoguing' interspersed with 'subtle persuasiveness' with the child, she is able to raise cogent social issues which she drives home with superior argument. Employing a series of lead questions, repetitive structures, entreaties, and directive and verdictive acts, she is able to play an appreciable role as a responsive and responsible mother that is alive to the challenges of social reconstruction in a despoiled society.

It is my contention in this study that reconstruction bid in conflict and post-conflict situations should not just begin and end with policies and structures but should equally attempt to restore human minds and values that have been perverted in the course of violent conflicts. And women as home builders are at a vantage position to act in that capacity for realistic conflict management strategies.

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