

The Hero as Villain in Armed Resistance: A Comparative Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Ahmed Yerimah's *Hard Ground*

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Abstract

An armed situation like a liberation movement is a trying time for the people. It is a time when events are unsettled and lives are at risk. In such situations, there emerges central figures who become the rallying points for oppressed people searching for change. Such a central figure is seen as hero by one side and as villain on the other. Such are the situations graphically dramatized in Ngugi's "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi" and Yerima's "Hard Ground". Against this background, this paper examines the character of the heroes of the two plays against the backdrop of the Mau Mau and the Niger Delta insurgencies in Kenya and in Nigeria, respectively. It seeks to investigate the heroes' actions and motives in carrying out their revolts. In what dramatic tropes have the playwrights represented them in the plays? In what ways do they achieve heroic stature? Working within the Marxist literary theory, we apply such concepts as oppression, ideological underpinning and exploitation to the actions and events of the plays. A close reading of the texts and a rigorous critical interpretation of the character of the heroes reveal that "one man's freedom fighter is, indeed another's terrorist." The paper concludes that, rather than uncritically accepting 'establishment' or 'official' categorisation of leaders of insurgency/ armed struggles as devilish, brutal and bloody ogres, a nuanced understanding of their social and political conditions that necessitated their actions must be

considered. Thus, Dedan and Baba (protagonists in these plays) are innately gentle, committed and caring leaders that are driven by the quest to liberate their people.

Keywords: *Mau Mau, Kenya, Nigeria, Niger Delta Militancy, Heroism, African Drama*

Introduction

This paper sets out to analyse the character and roles of the central figures in the armed insurrections dramatised in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Yerima's *Hard Ground*. Both plays depict events of resistance at different times in the political history of the protagonists' countries. Dedan Kimathi was the historical figure that championed the Mau Mau uprising but the central figure in the Niger/Delta militancy is imaginatively reconstructed in Yerima's play. The paper is interested in the 'establishment'/'official' opinion of armed leaders and what the playwrights envisioned in the two plays. Again, it attempts to analyse the major characters' actions and motives and the ultimate price they had to pay for their involvement in the resistance.

Historical Background

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 partitioned Africa (J. Scott Keltie, 1893) between the European countries in Berlin without the consent of the Africans themselves. Otto von Bismarck, the German Chancellor initiated the conference to settle conflicts over Africa between Great Britain and France. This automatically transferred power from the local and traditional rulers to the colonial masters. Interestingly, both Kenya and Nigeria, as we know it today fell in the hands of the British, heralding a system of British colonial rule in both countries. The political history of Kenya and Nigeria is not the same despite the fact that they were colonised by the British. In Kenya, land was crucial to the people. The colonisers took the agrarian areas and left the desolate ones to the people. There began the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s (see Frank Furedi, 1989) to reclaim the land, people and culture. The people formed themselves into a guerrilla movement and went into the forest to launch an attack against white domination. This is the crux of Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

The northern and southern protectorates were unified as Nigeria in 1914. Movements towards independence were championed by the elites of the three major tribes in Nigeria; Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe. Nigeria got her independence in 1960. Both the regional governments after independence and the current Federal system of government in Nigeria concentrated power at the centre. National resources are often shared among the federating states while the Federal government takes the larger chunk. It was (and still is) the issue of “resource control” and social neglect by the government at all levels that led to the Niger/Delta insurgency that forms the thematic preoccupation of Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*. Nigeria’s main economic power is oil. This oil was found in large quantity in the South/south of the country. Despite this, the environment is poor, their waters polluted by oil and aquatic bodies are dead and the people live in abject poverty. The people resorted to insurgency to assert themselves and demand a change in the sharing formula.

Both incidents are situations of armed resistance. There is the white as coloniser and oppressors on one hand, and the poor Kikuyu people of Kenya on the other hand. Then, the Federal government and the Niger/Deltans locked horns in Nigeria. Both are liberation forces; one to lead to self-determination, the other to lead to better living conditions. Both are asserting their rights to control their resources. In such a situation, there will emerge a figure, a rallying point to coordinate the affairs of the oppressed group. The character traits, resilience, love, and patriotic spirit of such heroes as they pilot the affairs of their people is the focus of this paper. In Kenya, historically, Dedan Kimathi became such a leader. He is imaginatively reconstructed in the play by Ngugi and Mugo as stated by the playwrights (see Preface to the play by the authors).

Yerima has equally, imaginatively reconstructed the figure of the leader of the Niger/Delta insurgency as Baba in *Hard Ground*. It is the way he envisions the character of the group that we encounter in the play. The general consensus of a resistance group is one that is fiery, outspoken, violent, and strong physically, one like a soldier, given to little or no emotion, one devoid of human kindness. This paper attempts to demonstrate how Dedan and Baba fit into the hero-status or figures for their respective people, though viewed as ‘villains’ by their oppressors. It attempts to demonstrate the character of Dedan and

Baba as depicted in the two plays and place this side by side with popular opinion especially from the point of view of the coloniser and the oppressor.

The Concept of the Hero

The hero is believed to be the central, all-important figure in a work of art. According to M. H. Abram, the hero is “the chief character in a plot... the protagonist who is pitted against an important opponent (294). As a hero, the protagonist must demonstrate largeness of heart and must have dignity and power. Traditional heroes are those who show dignity and courage as featured in traditional plays from Ancient Greece to Shakespeare and in most African plays.

Modern drama which started in the later part of the nineteenth century with the works of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Samuel Beckett among others espouses a modern idea of hero and heroism. One major difference between traditional plays and modern drama, apart from the focus on political issues is in the area of characters and characterisation. There is a shift from heroes coming from high estate, from royalty and from the Aristocracy to ordinary men. The focus was no longer on kings and queens but on ordinary people. Arthur Miller’s essay “The Tragedy of the Common Man” is pivotal to the discussions of this shift. In it, Miller argues that tragedy also happens to the poor people. Therefore, the central figures of most modern plays are ordinary people doing ordinary things.

This is also underpinned by the effects of the Second World War, its carnage and massive destructions of lives and properties. The war exposed man to himself and showed that life had no meaning. It was this that made a critic like Martin Esslin to describe plays written after the war as “theatre of the absurd”; a term that best describes the irrationality, illogicality and meaninglessness of life. He noted in such plays as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* or *The Caretaker*, a plot that has no “story” in terms of events not following logic, no cause- and-effect action, language no longer effective as a means of communication and aimless talk on stage.

Our focus is on the characters in Modern drama. In Beckett’s plays, the central figures are tramps, rejects of society as we have in *Waiting for Godot*. In John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, the central character is a failed, unemployed persona in like Jimmy Porter. In

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George Bernard Shaw, the central figure is a prostitute as in Kitty Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Such is the array of ordinary personages in Modern drama. They are ordinary people doing ordinary thing and, in such events, and incidents, they encounter the social issues of life such as unemployment, prostitution and the loss of meaning in life.

The writers use their plays as instruments of social reordering. It is a deliberate act to attack society and call the governments out to those issues with the aim of sanitising the society. It is a deliberate method to ask for change. These plays mentioned above are dealing with social issues and are meant to correct the society. Dramatists such as Osborne employ their plays to express the disillusionment of the youth and attack the Establishment with the sole aim to call for change. What then does a central figure in an armed situation look like? An armed situation such as guerrilla warfare or militancy-like was the situation in Kenya of the colonial era or the postcolonial militancy in the Niger/Delta in Nigeria where poor people rose up against their oppressors and took up arms in order to defend themselves. The people in both situations do not just take up arms against their oppressors for the fun of it; they are conscientized by a common enemy; hunger to change their social situations or conditions for better. They are calling for a change in their lot and are prepared to pay the ultimate price for their cause. Out of the multitude, there will emerge a central figure who will coordinate the affairs of the group; a rallying figure to head the operation. Such a person will not only be selfless but committed to the ideological cause of the group. How do the people he leads see him? How is he seen by the people he fights against? These are the salient issues to be demonstrated in the paper.

Heroism is a nebulous concept that has generated multiple meanings and understanding among different people across cultures, time and space. In this paper, heroism is examined through the Marxist theory to provide insights into the heroic actions of the protagonist in the two plays. This is because; the idea of what constitutes heroic acts (heroism) is perhaps shifting based on individual experiences and societies. Thus, heroism as an idea is formed and expressed in a variety of ways, representing different things to different people in different social and cultural contexts, including historical epochs. For Zeno E. Franco, Kathy Blau and Philip G. Zimbardo, heroism “represents the ideals of citizens transforming civic virtue into the highest form of

civic action, accepting either physical peril or social sacrifice” (99). This definition views heroism from the surface and general ideal of it, which is “to act in a prosocial manner despite personal risks.”

However, Franco et al clarify that such a fundamental definition of heroism, though satisfying, “masks a number of subtle, interrelated paradoxes that arguably make heroism one of the most complex human behaviours to study.” For them, heroism is a “social attribution, never a personal one; yet the act itself is often a solitary, existential choice. For these critics, heroic acts include civil courage, courageous resistance, extreme altruism, moral courage and the like (100). It is historically, culturally, and situationally determined, thus heroes of one era may prove to be villain in another time when controverting evidence emerges; yet some heroes endure across centuries,” they conclude.

In exploring heroism, Kristian Frisk explores literatures on heroism into four ideal possible types: the study of great men, heroic stories, heroic action, and hero institutions respectively (90). In brief, and without going in the details of the typologies, Frisk acknowledges the core essentials of heroic acts such as courage, strength, and intentions. Moreover, Merriam Webber dictionary views heroism as “a heroic conduct especially as exhibited in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end.” Or, it is simply, ‘the qualities of a hero’ [emphasises ours].

From these few sampled definitions; heroism refers to an act of great courage or bravery often done selflessly in the service of other people. Again, this explanation furthers births contestations since what constitutes ‘a courageous or brave act or, what counts as a heroic act’ can be quite subjective based on a number of factors. Hence, heroism transcends physical acts of courage; traversing moral heroism (prosocial thing that are meant for others), civil heroism, principle-driven heroism, cultural heroism, collective heroism to mention but a few.

These multiple meanings or notions/concepts of heroism inevitably bring us to the question- who then is a hero? Or, “who are heroes”? According to Amanda Shang, the traditional epic hero in literature is often one who is equipped with extraordinary strength or courage, one who risks his life in wars in order to achieve glory and safety for the society he protects” (5). Shang’s classicist definition is narrow as it precludes other aspects of heroic acts. Shang herself

acknowledges this limitation by asserting that “in order to truly identify heroes, one must consider the context of the story, the context of the situation, and the audience’s cultural background”.

According to Hope Eghagha, a hero emerges in ritual drama when “his [her] experiences are on behalf of the larger community; no personal gain is involved” (68). Using the ritual-person as an example of a hero, Eghagha opines that the social expectations of the ritual-person or a hero supersede the personal wish and desires of the ritual-person or hero. In other words, this expectation presupposes the withering and melting away of personal dispositions into the communal or collective yearnings of the people. Consequently, the fate of such an individual lies and it is “predicated on the collective will of the people whose perception and acceptance of tradition forms the basis of belief and practices” (Eghagha 69). From these critical submissions, courage and personal sacrifice are identified as core determinants of heroism.

Thus, viewed from all perspectives, all heroic acts and heroes act fundamentally in the interests of other people and their community rather than focusing on their individual safety, need, and goals. It is this sense of altruism, sacrifice, and inspiration that heroic acts and their performers (heroes) are cherished in the society as well as their fascination and exploration, particularly in dramatic literature in contrast with its dual opposite, villainy. A villain is perhaps the opposite of a hero; an anti-hero who uses dishonest means to achieve results for personal gains or benefits. Michael Meyer defines the antihero (villain) as a “protagonist who has the opposite of most of the traditional attributes of a hero” (2122). For Meyer, antiheroes or villains are loathed, isolated, and, are without noble values.

The Hero in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*: A Brief Synopsis of the play

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi as mentioned earlier dramatises the turbulent resistance against British imperial regime in Kenya in the 1950s during pre-independence period. It also chronicles the travails and struggles of the Kenyans against colonialism and its concomitant trappings such as domination, exploitation, impoverishment, dehumanisation, racial superiority, and subjugation to mention but a few. Interestingly, the plot of the play revolves around the protagonist, Dedan Kimathi, who is the leader of the armed resistance. Kimathi is

a strong leader, a field Marshal in the famous Mau Mau resistance local army that fought against British imperialism with the sole aim of toppling and dismantling the repressively oppressive regime as depicted in the play which we will henceforth abbreviate as *TDK* in the analysis.

Dedan Kimathi was a real historical figure, a freedom fighter, liberator, and hero of a somewhat mythical personality because of his exploits and fearless leadership in the armed resistance. Because of his heroic deeds, he was presumed to have mythical powers and abilities that make him invincible. (*TDK* 21) Dedan Kimathi was then considered a major threat by the powers that be (the British), leading to his capture, trials, and eventual death by hanging (*TDK* 82). He is tried four times; making him obviously a major target of the regime as he militantly encourages his people to resist the British and her colonial imprints.

Eventually, the presumption of invincibility fails with Dedan Kimathi's capture, torture, and eventual death (by hanging) in the hands of the oppressors, despite all efforts by Woman, one of the characters and co-female freedom fighters to release him. His capture is a combination of internal betrayal and personal hubris. However, Dedan Kimathi stands out as a major resistance leader in the Mau Mau movement for the emancipation of the people of Kenya as depicted by Nguigi wa Thion'go and Micere Githae Mugo in the play.

Thus, the play is a 'recreation of both pre-colonial wars of resistance against European intrusion and slavery and anti-colonial struggles for independence and democracy as well as post-colonial independence struggles against neo-colonialism' (qtd from the preface to the play). To this end also, the authors have put a caveat that "the play is not a representation of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasant and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling class" (wa Thion'go and Mugo in the preface to play).

The Conflict

As the plot reveals, exploitation and oppression stand out as major drivers of the armed resistance in the play. The British imperial power, during the heydays of her dominance in Africa and all former colonies, exudes characteristic exploitation and oppression of the colonised

people. Often, the colonial subjects are exploited through corrosive capitalism, whereby natural resources of the indigenous people are cornered and shipped overseas, leaving the original owners in abject poverty, poor infrastructure, underdevelopment, and dependence. In the context of the play, the British imperial regime appropriated lands and mineral resources in Kenya, creating acute scarcity as the indigenous citizens jostle for few available plots of lands, controlled by British officials (settlers) who only gave to those loyal or are seen to be loyal to their government.

For G. D. Killam, the cause of armed resistance against the British imperialism lies in the abrasive finance capitalism, leading to exploitation, oppression, and poverty among the people (82). Killam argues that greed and false nationalist sentiment were the real motives of imperialism. Despite all claims of altruistic basis of imperialism, the realities in the peripheral (colonised) nations reveal the selfish motives and other ugly coated underbellies that Dedan Kimathi and other peasants are fighting against. Till date, Kenyans, and by extension, Africans, still bears the brunt imprints of imperial colonial past in form of influences and meddlesomeness, economically, politically, and socially.

This exploitation not only creates social tensions or conflicts which Marx advocates revolution against, it also pitches the people against one another in the midst of adversity and penury. As a result, the society becomes segmented on class line (class based), where exists two main classes: the affluent, dominant class, represented by the British lords and their Kenyan lackeys, and the impoverished lower class, represented by the suffering masses, united by hunger, destitution, poverty, lack, anger, and quest for freedom. Thus, the armed resistance calibrated as the Mau Mau warfare, is essentially a protest against the inhumanities of imperialism inflicted on the people of Kenya by the British colonial masters.

Oppression is another signature imprint (nature) of the British imperial regime portrayed in the play by the playwrights. The Kenyans are not only exploited, they are also oppressed. The regime uses the instrumentality of superior political and administrative power to oppress and subjugate the colonised subjects, making them slaves in their own lands. They rule with iron fists as dictators through the super structure such as the law courts for maintaining “law and order”, religion, economics, and politics. Through the divide and rule tactics,

they infiltrate the Kenyans, making collective drive for resistance pretty difficult and less effective. Dissent is an anathema as the subjects are meant to obey all instructions of the imperial Majesty. Akin to a dystopian state, the regime engages in total suppression and obfuscation of freedom of speech, denial of democratic principles, strict surveillance, no freedom of association, and other acts of collective agitation that could whittle down imperial powers and dominance.

Incensed by the effects of Britain's colonial oppression, exploitation, and dehumanisation, Dedan Kimathi and other Kenyan peasants took up arms and revolted against the continued alien occupation of their lands, government, and existence. At that critical moment, Dedan Kimathi offers himself to lead the resistance movement, engraving himself as one of the most vociferous heroes of the movement. With his soldering resistance fervour, it is clear that the British regime would do everything to eliminate him. And rightly so, he was charged with trump-up charges of insurrection and breach of peace (*TDK* 61). Kimathi shot into prominence in the late 1950s as hero of the anti-colonial government. He organises the guerrilla warriors that aims to fight against the corrupt, oppressive and exploitative British enterprises in Kenya, and by extensions, Africa.

Till date, Kimathi stands out as of the most politically astute revolutionary leaders, who resisted imperialism through armed resistance. His uncanny tact for guerrilla warfare, protest and organised resistance are commendable. With his rather coercive leadership, he garners and channels popular grievances of the Kenyan masses into an organically resolute armed resistance that became the now famous Mau Mau resistance. Through secret lectures, Kimathi is able to sensitise and galvanise the masses to join the armed struggle with a clear message: Kenyan liberation and annihilation of anything British and her imperial badges. Demonstratively, he refuses to be judged by Shaw Henderson, who represents British oppression: "By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgement over me/..To a criminal judge in a criminal court/set up by criminal law/: law of oppression/ I have no words," he rants against charges levelled against him by Shaw Henderson/British imperialism (*TDK* 25).

Driven by the love of his people and the zeal to liberate them, he however, deploys, in some cases, dictatorial tendencies. For instance, Kimathi dismisses Shaw Henderson's entreaties for peace

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and to end the war rather dictatorially (*TDK* 34). Also, he declares and dismisses other important stakeholders (though they appear to have been compromised) such as Business Executive, Politician, and Priest as ‘betrayals’ without listening to them, labelling them as “drinkers of honey from human skulls” (*TDK* 52). His harsh position is, however, fuelled by the fear of elite connivance with imperial masters to ‘betray’ their cause, the resistance struggle.

This heightened zeal produces a string of dictatorial overtures akin to an emperor that almost ruin his genuine patriotism, thus affirming the human propensity to slide into villainy (especially heroes becoming villains) during armed resistance. Dedan Kimathi is perhaps one of the foremost oppositional political heroes or figures whom the British imperialism sets out to apprehend in order to quench the resistance steam. After several attempts, Kimathi was arrested and thrown into prison, and eventually charged for possession of an unlicensed arms (weapon) after putting up excellent defence (*TDK* 34).

The court created, controlled, and headed by the imperial Britain ensured he was found guilty through a British judge, Shaw Henderson who insists Kimathi ‘confesses his crimes’ (*TDK* 25). For them, Kimathi is a villain; an antagonist, a trouble maker, and an ‘evil’ that must be crushed in order to pave way for Britain’s continued imperial suppression, oppression, and exploitation of the Kenyans. Thus, the British Lords (represented by Henderson and Settler) subjected him to physical, mental, emotional, and psychological ordeals, including imprisonment, ultimately leading to his death (*TDK* 33).

For us, Dedan Kimathi’s travails smack of a passionate hero that is more ‘sinned against than sinned.’ He is a hero praised at home but seen as a villain, trouble maker that is loathed by the imperial Britain. His ordeals bear testament to acts of brutality characteristic of imperial conquest. Kimathi bears the indignities of imperialism with dignity, pride, and candour/ courage. He endures both physical and mental torture with candour of a ‘martyr’, refusing to concede to Britain’s brutal suppression. Kimathi reinforces this resolution of ‘no retreat, no surrender’ until victory is won:

We shall win the war. For, let me tell the faint
hearted that this our struggle will continue until we

seize back the right and the ability to make ourselves
new men and women in our own land (TDK 45).

Kimathi believes that they have already won the battle/struggle: “In spirit, yes, the spirit of our people, their will to life, freedom and power...” (TDK 46).

Ideologically, Kimathi subscribes to a Socialist-nationalism, where justice, equity, and fairness reign for the Kenyans. Moreover, Kimathi craves for classless and egalitarian society where all Kenyans will be free from all imperial strangleholds, including unfettered access to their God-given natural resources, particularly land. Kimathi is given the label of a terrorist and villain by the British colonial regime because of his anti-position and resistance to British’s continued oppression, exploitation, and highhandedness. For Kimathi, imperialism is defended by force and can only be dismantled by forceful resistance as the central thesis. Woman reveals Kimathi’s resolve thus:

Ngai! It is the same old story. Everywhere.
Mombasa, Nkururu, Kisumu, Eldoret. The same old
story. Our people ... tearing one another... and all
because of crumbs thrown at them by exploiting
foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown
at us in our own land, where we should have the
whole share...sweat on our own soil for the profit of
our oppressors. Kimathi’s teaching is: unite, drive
out the enemy and control your riches-enjoy the
fruits of your sweat. It is for this that the enemy
captured him (TDK 18)

As Woman reveals in the excerpt, Kimathi’s travails are strategic as they are symbolic: they are meant to stifle the Mau Mau resistance, on one hand, and to allow for continued suppression, oppression, and exploitation of the Kenyan people on the other hand.

As mentioned earlier, some of his actions, inactions, beliefs, and stance/position on issues, particularly the desire for total freedom for his people from British imperial reign are certainly extreme, creating moral dilemmas. However, what is not in doubt is the fact that Dedan Kimathi loves his country and people. He is a consummate

hero, a politically engaged freedom fighter, activist, public intellectual, and an informed agitator. Kimathi is equally passionate about the freedom and emancipation of his people, deservedly fitting into our categorisation as a hero in this study.

Is Dedan Kimathi a saint? Certainly, he is not. Again, a hero does not necessarily need to be a saint or faultless in the course of his journey but one with a consummate passion, love, drive, courage, tact, zeal, and will to pilot the affairs of his or her people in critical times. A hero is one who is willing to sacrifice self, career, and passion in order to transform their society or improve the lots of their people, in this context, the liberation and emancipation of the Kenyans. This, of course, distinguishes a hero from a villain, whether in the classical or contemporary sense of the word.

To this end, Dedan Kimathi's seemingly high-handedness and dictatorial tendencies, viewed from the vantage point of an armed resistant movement leader fighting against a superior power can be understood. Armed resistance movements are dynamic and complex, making most of its leaders susceptible to hubris. Perhaps Dedan Kimathi's excessive nationalist love and zeal may have largely influenced his actions and insistence. His hubris, if any, could also be seen as the needed strictness meant to stir up the masses and to remind them that acts of betrayals undermine successful resistance and must be punished.

In any case, resistance against imperialism has been a herculean task, riddled with conspiracies and betrayals as depicted in the play. That is why Dedan Kimathi remains crested in the public minds of the readers and Kenyans as a martyred hero. Perhaps an alter-ego of the author, Nguigi wa Thiong'o, Kimathi's courage and resolve to liberate his people places him among the revered African freedom fighters and independence agitators such as Nkrumah of Ghana, Nelson Mandela, and Julius Nyerere to mention but a few.

Consequently, this paper argues that Kimathi's ordeals are meant to stifle the Mau Mau resistance, and by extension, silence the Kenyans from making their voices heard against Britain's oppression and exploitation. While the British oppressors view Kimathi as a villain, the Kenyans view him as a reliable challenger, fighter, and emancipator (*TDK* 21). This is the very reason the British viewed him a 'traitor,' a 'trouble maker' that must be eliminated which is a further

confirmation of the broader ambition of all imperial powers: colonial domination and exploitation.

The Hero in *Hard Ground*

Hard Ground is a play that dramatises armed resistance in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. This region (Niger Delta) is where most of Nigeria's most known sources of revenue generation come from as mentioned earlier. However, the region remains one of the most exploited and perhaps impoverished. The Federal government, through local officials (in connivance with traditional rulers, wealthy merchants, and politicians from the region) and international oil corporations have consistently neglected the region by failing to provide social infrastructure despite the humongous money they get from oil exploration.

Oil exploration comes with its effects such as environmental pollution, gas flaring, and oil spillage that make fishing and farming, the peoples' main occupation, inevitably impossible. This further impoverishes the people as well, culminating in social conflicts and tension, leading to armed resistance by the people of the region, particularly the youths through violent militancy. The plot revolves around the protagonist, Nimi, who drops out of school to become a child soldier, a self-appointed leader of a group of militant minnows, vowing to fight for their people. Their activities involve blowing up oil installations, kidnapping for ransom, killing, and adoption of girls, and other sundry atrocities.

As mentioned earlier, the conflict in the play arises basically from the exploitation of the people by the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies. Through corrupt traditional rulers and greedy individuals from the region, the poor masses are impoverished. The people are left to wallow in poverty with poor living conditions: poor infrastructure, no schools, employment, diseases, and famine. This why the people, mostly youths, take up arms to demand justice, equity, and most importantly, improved social life as host communities where that house the cornet from which Nigeria milks the cursed honey ('resource curse') as depicted in the play by Yerima.

This study focuses on Baba, one of the characters in the armed resistance, interrogating his actions and what he stands for in the struggles to liberate their people from continuous exploitation and ecological degradation. Baba is the father of the protagonist, Nimi, and

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Mama's husband. He is calm, hopeful (optimistic), calculated in his actions, and resolute in his belief that things will change for better in the region. Perhaps through experience and elderly wisdom, Baba is circumspect on the mode of resistance, preferring conciliatory approach to the conflicts in Niger Delta. He seems to denounce bloody violence which Nimi advocates but must not be mistaken to be peace loving and less revolutionary.

Lacking the trappings of the blood thirsty Kimathian and Nimi's resistance models, Baba is a silent and an avowed revolutionist, knowing when to act and when not to act. This portrays him as a more experienced, organised, patient, and assertive agitator. Through Mama, Baba is portrayed as an irresponsible, carefree polygamist whose sexual escapades have led to her physical, emotional, and psychological traumas. Through Mama's revelations, Nimi gets to know the evolution of their marriage through 'rape,' increasing Nimi's hatred and disdain for Baba (*Hard Ground* P.30).

However, beneath these surface inadequacies, Baba is inherently loving and passionate about the peace of his immediate family and community in general. In fact, it is this burning desire for peace that leads to his tragic death by pretending to be the Don, ultimately leading to his demise (*Hard Ground* p. 61). His decision to die for his family unravels the scapegoat motif of the play. He pretends to be Don, so he could be killed in order to bring peace to his family that see him as their main source of unhappiness as depicted in the play.

Baba's sacrificial death (Messianism) throws complicated moral and ethical debates as to whether such death has or not, the possibility to right wrongs. Is death a redeemer? While this debate can linger on, Baba's action is based on his belief in the freedom of his family and people. This love is why he sends Nimi back to his native town to understudy the culture and ways of his people, though Nimi drops out of school and joins armed struggles in the creeks (*Hard Ground* p.15).

In interrogating Baba as a hero, attention should be focussed more on the object of his sacrifice, which is the desire for freedom and happiness for his family and community. Perhaps if Baba is viewed from this perspective, his apparent shortcomings such as dismissive tendencies and misogynistic dismissal of Mama when they discuss familial issues, withers and dissolves into a harmless family scuttle and

mere masculinity that is common to all men. For instance, when Baba admonishes Nimi to shun bloody violence and sacredness of the human life, he literarily shots out Mama from the conversation, almost dismissively: "...woman! Go in. I shall call you when we need you," (*Hard Ground* 12).

From this excerpt, it seems that Baba lacks deep conjugal friendship, companionship, and collective togetherness of an ideal husband/wife relationship. However, Baba's decision to sacrifice his life for the same family so they can have peace shows a strong sense of justice and love (*Hard ground* 61). Perhaps this heroic act shows that Baba may have been misrepresented and misunderstood by Mama and Nimi who see Baba as the main source of their pains and sorrows. Baba is a resolute hero who supports Nimi's position and drive to fight for his people's emancipation. Of course, he abhors needless spilling of blood that Nimi and his gang members crave for. He is a measured resistance hero, who gives total support to the armed resistance in the Niger Delta. For instance, when Mama vows to denounce Nimi for impregnating Pikibo, labelling him a 'bastard,' Baba calms her down, admonishing that "they cover the shame properly" (*Hard Ground* 21). Baba does not only support Nimi, he also paid the ransom for the release of Nimi that saved his life (*Hard Ground* 22). This, and other acts performed by Baba in the play, show that Baba belongs to the pantheon of heroes who, not only stood up for the peace of their land and people, but also paid the ultimate price.

Baba's act however contradicts his earlier advice to Nimi that he must first be alive in order to protect Pikibo and the unborn child (*Hard Ground* 23). In any case, Baba's heroic status stands radiantly as Nimi attests:

The school you sent me to was [is] a wasteland and poverty. And even as a child, you [Baba] smell it and you quickly learnt 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 (13).

Evidently, this excerpt reveals that Baba sowed resistance impulse to Nimi from early stage, and therefore, approves of Nimi's resistance enterprises, though he denounces the needless bloodletting Nimi engages in. As demonstrated above, Baba belongs to the class of heroes

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who place the happiness and freedom of their people well and above personal lives and liberty.

The actions of Dedan Kimathi and Baba are thus indicative of their frustrations and despair about the social conditions and situations in their respective country. Their anger and desperation are openly seen and felt both inwardly and outwardly in their actions. This is all the more heightened as they become more aware about the limits of their ambition, power and drive to totally change their people and society as they had desired. This bitter realisation, notwithstanding, they continued to push the boundaries of hope, beliefs, and aspiration, ultimately paying the price with their lives as heroes.

Speaking positively, in Dedan Kimathi and Baba, one encounters heroes with a combination of determination and self-assertion of will to liberate their people. While Dedan Kimathi strives against direct colonial oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation, and racial prejudices in Kenya, on one hand, Baba fights against neo-colonial exploitation, leadership corruption, social neglect, poverty, and official pillage in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, on the other hand. Benedict M. Ibitokun summarises the driving force behind Baba and Dedan Kimathi's resolve to fight Britain's exploitation and oppression thus:

... Right from the beginning, everybody, including the peasants, was caring gun to fight for independence. It was the famous Mau Mau guerrilla warfare. The socio-political and economic condition was such that the people of Kenya had to remake their history, they had to make firm stance to praxis by wrenching their land and liberty from alien squatters. At this moment in history, fighting was a way of life (*TDK 59*).

This lucid picture of the social situation in Kenya above consistently propels Dedan Kimathi and energises his resolve to fight imperialism with unusual equanimity and vitality as a hero.

In the same token, Baba's decision to support Nimi, morally and materially, stems from this cruel realisation of injustices meted out on the people of the Niger Delta by the Federal government and other people that connive to exploit them. So, for Baba, no price is too heavy to pay for his people's freedom. For Dedan Kimathi and

Baba, silence in the face of the cruel exploitation, manipulation, and injustices on their respective people, is a crime to humanity and unforgivable betrayal. Hence, despite all the ordeals, they are resolute in their resolve, having courage to go on, the courage to stand up against oppressors and exploiters as well as the courage to continue to lead and guide their people as heroes.

Moreover, for them, it is ultimately more honourable to suffer indignities than accept continued dehumanisation of their people. Their strength is bolstered by the nobility of their chosen cause: to liberate their people from the strangleholds of oppression and exploitation. Thus, their enormous sacrifice, particularly, their willingness to pay the ultimate price (death), makes them qualify for our categorisation as heroes. The hero - status of Baba and Kimathi is supported by Martin Luther King's assertion that "people are often led to causes and often become committed to great ideas through persons who personify those ideas. They have to find the embodiment of the ideas in flesh and blood in order to commit themselves to it." Both Baba and Kimathi stood for, and died for their ideas and emancipation of their people as depicted in the plays.

Conclusion

This paper examined two characters that are perhaps different in personality traits and mode of operation as resistance fighters, but they are one of a kind in terms of their resolve to free their people from oppression, exploitation, and destitution. They are also willing to pay the ultimate prices in order to achieve their set objectives, which is the liberation of their people for better life. This noble intention makes us to categorise them as heroes, despite the seemingly villainous epithet given to them in the plays under discussion. True nature: simple people who are radicalised by the oppression of the period and decide to rise up against exploitation, misrule and abuse of power and tyranny. Both Kimathi and Baba are ideologically passionate people. They are fervent, committed to a cause and they die for what they believe in.

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