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Guerilla Journalism in the Niger Delta, an Underdog or a Watchdog:

An Ecopostcolonial Interrogation

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Abstract

In a crises-ridden society like Nigeria, investigative journalism, otherwise known as guerilla journalism is an elusive project characterized by innumerable and infamous compromises. This paper attempts to evaluate the limitations of journalism by establishing the albatross(es) of investigative journalism in the Nigerian media orbit stalling national development. It is most of all, an evaluation of the uncovering of the daemons that torment the South-south region of Nigeria, and the inability of the media to do what is expected in Helon Habila's Oil on Water (OOW). As the media in Nigeria strive to cut across ranks in their reportages, the policies that strangulate their efforts and the determining factors which place them as underdogs in which neither the masses nor the government is vindicated or vilified, are the foci of this study. Employing the Ecopostcolonial critical theory, this work interrogates the role of journalism in the furtherance of national cohesion, while the textual analysis method will give credence to the language, images and symbols in the text under study, to establish the futility associated with journalism in Nigeria in particular, and the world in general. Through the interpretation of the experiences in the narrative, contemporary issues associated with a compromised media can be connected with the elements identified in the text.

Keywords: Media, National Development, Niger Delta, Military Regime, Journalism

Introduction

Flora Shaw, a British reporter and the spouse of the Governor-General who amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in 1914, Lord Frederick Lugard, created the name, "Nigeria" in the 1890s (Okafor, 2020), deriving from the River Niger. Today with over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, journalism is replicated in form and content to mirror the reportages of these diverse peoples that make up the Nigerian entity. This is a major factor which

accounts for the underdog position of the media in certain circumstances. Because Nigeria is divided along religious and ethnic lines, there is a selective dissemination of information that serves the purpose for each distinct line of complexity. It is no longer news that all forms of media which publish, transmit or broadcast reportages that do not favour the government of the day are usually proscribed, and their editors usually incarcerated or killed as the case may be; especially during the military regimes in Nigeria.

In his literary fiction under study, Habila presents the story of two journalists embarking on a hazardous adventure of seeking an abducted white woman, Isabel Floode and negotiating her release with her abductors. This is, primarily for the sake of the cash they stand to gain from her desperate spouse and the fame this would attract them as journalists. Less importantly, is their love for journalism for the older journalist; and slightly different for the younger journalist. The story also portrays the perils which reporters face after which they are unable to accomplish their goals in the end.

Journalism in Nigeria has never experienced a good ride in its reportage within the socio-political milieu of the Nigerian nation; despite its diversity. This is because the constitutional law on media operational activities is not effective in real time. The mass media have too many no-go areas, and are positioned as a sycophantic vehicle employed for the transportation and fostering of the ambitions of the government. The populace is never in the equation, and this is explicable thus:

> A multiplicity of media voices can be found in Nigeria largely because of the diversity of the population of the country and the history preceding its independence. The nation remains unsettled and its constitution is not enforced in all regions equally. This has led to confusion, frustration, and violence resulting in numerous deaths in the late 1990s and early 2000s. (*Press Reference*)

The first media to emerge in Nigeria was the press media; although it had been earlier launched in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia in 1801, 1822, and 1826 respectively. The first press media to appear in the Nigerian scene was published on December 3rd, 1859 and written in Yoruba and named, *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* (meaning, Newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba). (Maringuez). This was actually published by Reverend Henry Townsend and reported religious issues, and other general issues relating to the civil rights, education, abolition of slavery, and other enlightening issues.

Subsequently, more religious magazines emerged including *Lagos Observer, Lagos Weekly Record, Lagos Times, African Challenger, Lagos Echo,* etc. Even at this point, the print media were privileged to some form of independence from the government. By 1903, certain 'publishers obligations' were brought into existence in the government's bid to exercise control over the press. This mandated the submission of every issue of a newspaper to the authorities.

Gradually, the press began to lose the independence it once had. In 1903, a decree was promulgated for those who 'through speech or writing' encouraged sentiments that are anti government; and this carried a two-year imprisonment jail term for offenders. Lugard also introduced censorship by 1917. Although newspapers reacted to this new development, nothing changed instead the colonial administration became more subtle in her influence by controlling the financial aspect of one of the leading newspapers at the time, the *Nigerian Daily Times* by 1926. Going forward, more decrees/laws were promulgated/passed to further emasculate the press in Nigeria.

Investigative journalism entails the uncovering of important information about matters of private or general interest using unconventional approaches of information collection. It involves "… unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances - and the analysis and exposure of all relevant facts to the public." (UNESCO, 2021). When the mass media is mentioned, the newspaper, radio and television stations, and magazines come to mind. While in the actual sense, they refer to general information dissipated in a particular locality to solve global and national issues.

The most important roles of the mass media in journalism are to communicate risks and issues of governance to the populace and vice versa. In a study by Tanja Perko (2012), "An average individual in today's society is exposed to a large amount of risk-related information, definitely larger than one can easily absorb. Risk has become an important element in our daily life as we live …" Dr. Perko further asserts that in a risk society, risk communication is one of the most important areas of risk management. However, risk communication itself, in democratic societies "… is an interactive exchange of information and opinions concerning risks and risk management among the risk assessors, risk managers, consumers and other interested parties, usually referred to as stakeholders, by different means of mass communication."

This work attempts an Ecopostcolonial interrogation of the restriction of guerrilla journalism in the combustible terrain of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Ecopostcolonial criticism, a hybrid of ecocriticism and postcolonialism is a recent literary theory which intersperses ecological and postcolonial ideologies in the reading of topical issues relating to literatures emerging after the colonial period in relationship with their environments. Ecocriticism although recently named by Western literary aesthetes, had long dominated African literatures even Before Christ. This is evident in the Egyptian literatures and others which had long emerged from other parts of Africa long before the recording of creative works. Remarkably, the Holy Bible read by Christians begins with an ecocritical narrative demonstrating the creative feat of God Almighty.

Postcolonialism is a remarkable literary ideology in which black nations of South America, the Caribbean Islands, Africa and Asia began to insist on regaining their indigenous cultures which were emasculated as a result of colonialism. Postcolonialism concerns itself with:

> …the omnipresent power struggles between cultures and the intersection of cultures which results in multiculturalism and poly-valency of culture,

> Postcolonialism analyses the metaphysical, ethical and political concerns about cultural identity, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, subjectivity, language and power. (Literariness).

As such, former colonies in denouncing the cultures of their colonizers, produce literatures that assert the existence of the African socio-cultural hegemony long before colonization. This is eminent as Africans find their voices in order to tell their own histories and recall the memories of their subdued cultural heritage.

Literariness further asserts that Postcolonial writers like postmodernists and poststructuralists align themselves with assertive writings which not only counter "… colonial metanarratives with counter-narratives of resistance" poised to assert cultural identities "… through strategies such as separatism, nativism, cultural syncretism, hybridity, mimicry, active participation and assimilation", but also, rewrite the imperialist narratives which debase their continents. It is on the basis of this that foremost postcolonial theorists like Edward Said's major works, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*; and also, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* find relevance.

The relevance of postcolonial criticism can be found in narratives where prejudiced accounts of the colonized cultures are enshrouded in imperialism. This is the basis on which Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, Homi Bbabha etc. who rebuff the abysmal and prejudiced accounts that ridicule the third-world continents like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Forster's *A Passage to India*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* etc., wrote extensively. Said whose 1978 work, *Orientalism* remains the first major work from which the postcolonial theory sprang up, is considered the father of Postcolonial theory (Azizeh, 2019) as he interrogates the stereotyping established between the colonizers and their colonies especially the stereotyping of the Middle-East. Postcolonialism primarily studies the effects of imperialism and colonization on the culture and literature of the colonies of the different colonial masters. A study by Mambrol (2016) states thus:

> … postcolonialism concerns itself with the study of the colonization (which began as early as the Renaissance), the decolonization (which involves winning back and reconstituting the native cultures), and the neocolonising process (an aftermath of postmodernism and late capitalism, when multinational corporations control the world).

Mambrol further expatiates that Postcolonialism recognizes colonial understandings in Literature and replaces the colonial 'metanarratives' with narratives that counter resistance "… by rewriting history and asserting cultural identities through strategies such as separatism, nativism, cultural syncretism, hybridity, mimicry, active participation and assimilation." Major proponents of the Postcolonial literary theory include Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, and Homi Bhabha. Some of these critics seek to reassess earlier works in order to reinterpret the values of these texts based on the circumstances within which they are written as well as, discover the ideologies of the colonial period that are subtly hidden in them.

With the attainment of independence by most of the third-world colonies under European imperialism, writings about the problems and consequences of imperialism and colonization began to sprout. In Ghana, Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the foremost postcolonial writers, while Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the first meaningful postcolonial literature to emanate from Nigeria. Other African writers followed suit as the consequences of colonization aggravated and depreciated the African cultural value the more. Sawant affirms that "The process of self-determination and the granting of political independence to each country of Empire brought out postcolonial age in the history of the World. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the term 'Post-Colonialism' has gained currency and what is more, it has eclipsed terms like postmodernism, poststructuralism and so on."

Mambrol further expatiates that focusing on the omnipresent power struggles between cultures and the intersection of cultures which results in multiculturalism and poly-valency of culture, Postcolonialism analyses the metaphysical, ethical and political concerns about cultural identity, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, subjectivity, language and power. A simpler and vivid description of the consequences of colonialism, which births Postcolonialism according to Said is depicted in the persistence of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed going on in many countries especially because of the debris of colonization. (Lufti, 2014).

Without overemphasizing on this fact, the mass media is the bedrock of every nation's democracy. It is basically the avenue through which the government and the electorate exchange ideas and information. However, recent times, Journalism has been upturned as an instrument of disunity, rancor and insanity in many countries especially Nigeria. Not only are the reportages sycophantic but also, prejudiced and ridden with falsehood. The military regimes experienced by Nigeria in the 1980s and 90s did not help matters in this aspect either.

It is worthwhile to remark that as a result of the nagging debates between the Niger Delta region and the Federal government spanning over fifty years without any reasonable compromise or solution, the affected regions are decisive on their demands. This is pressed through the pressured groups by which their questions are to be answered. Habila in his novel expounds on the crises that rids the two geopolitical regions in a manner that posits that the Nigerian media for fifty years, has remained the underdog in Nigeria's collective agenda.

Precisely after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war which lasted for thirty months (July 1966 and January 1970), the Niger Delta discourse remains an indubitable contention that has yielded little or no optimistic consequences. The leadership of the Nigerian nation after the civil war did not help matters, and as Lawal (2015) notes:

> … both the military and civilian political class have mismanaged the national affairs in a manner that convinced any observers that they have not learned any lessons from the calamity that befell Nigeria. Nothing tangible was done to promote nation-building, unity and cohesion.

Considering the realities of the Nigerian nation, the conundrum of agitations for the Niger Delta discourses as contemporary issues, resounds with immeasurable risks within which the media

can effectively sustain real time reportage. The mass media on whom the onus of mirroring the reality of the Niger Delta situation lies, is enmeshed in threat, intimidation and coercion and forthwith are either forced to chicken out midway, or in continuing to the end are met with disappointment or threat of extermination. Although the mass media is focal to democracy, they crouch under the yoke of intimidation especially in the face of an entity with the greater authority.

Methodology

Embarking on an in-depth analysis of Habila's OOW, a thorough analysis of the elements of the work is relevant. The environmental pollution depicting the ecocritical content of the narrative situates the events in the South-South region of Nigeria characterized by creeks, rain forests, islands and waterways making navigation, herculean and perilous. This also constitutes the vulnerability of the characters in the work. The textual analysis approach interrogates the narrative style employed by Habila, and the imageries of violence, kidnap and abduction, poverty, militancy, mysticism, and unemployment as these contribute to the development of the plot of the novel.

The specificity of situating the story mainly in the islands, creeks and forests of the Niger Delta in order to demonstrate the volatility of the region establishes the extent to which the militants are willing to uphold their conviction. This they declare in Chapter 21 of the book that they are not barbarians as the propagandists employed by the government make the world to believe, but all the militants do is for the Niger Delta people, and releasing the journalists will be the only opportunity for them to write the truth. This truth therefore, is the foundation on which the interrogation of the role of the media impassioned towards guerrilla journalism in Nigeria as illuminated in this text, is based. The major highlights of the novel will be interpreted in the context in which they are written in the text.

Ode to Nigerian Journalism: The Constitution & Media

The Nigerian press is cowered under the yoke of censorship such that even though freedom exists for the press, it is only a fantasy in real life situations. Further studies affirm that "Journalists do not only report about the reality; they also influence it … they (journalists) represent, interpret, and construct it (crisis) and the related political and public salience of various issues is partly driven by the media coverage." (Perko, 2012).

In his research, Anthony Ali (2013) insists that, "The traditional role of the media in any society is to inform, educate, entertain, publicize and perhaps, most importantly correct the excesses of the society." It is on record that in Nigeria, many journalists and media houses have faced several punitive actions by way of proscriptions and/or arrests, especially during the

military regimes. This is so because the press has been in the middle of struggles for democracy. Citing Sunday Dare's work titled, *Guerrilla Journalism: Dispatches from the Underground*, Adeniyi (2016) asserts thus:

> It is either that journalists are themselves assuming the role of fighters, often snowballing to guerrilla journalism … or exile journalism, or their platforms and pedestals are opened to other professionals to wit lawyers, politicians, medical doctors, writers, academics, or retired military officers for democratic activism. The media in these circumstances become avenues for the ventilation of pent-up pro-democracy emotions, gestating from extended periods of subjugations, harassments, intimidations, incarcerations, trials, detention without trials, accessory after the "fact of coups" (a charge brought up by the military to try journalists who reportedly got wind of coup plots but did not reveal it) … (p. 16).

The dilemma of the press emerged when in 1964, the Nigerian Federal House of Parliament pronounced a newspaper law known as The Newspaper (Amendment) Act of 1964 which raised numerous debates that place restrictions on the press in the post-independent Nigeria. The Act proclaimed thus:

> Any person who authorizes for publication, publishes, reproduces or circulates for sale in a newspaper any statement, rumour or report knowing or having reason to believe that such statement, rumour or report is false shall be guilty of an offense and liable on conviction to a fine of two hundred pounds or to imprisonment for a term of one year. (b.) It shall be no defence to a charge under this section that he did not know or did not have reason to believe that the statement, rumour or report was false unless he proves that prior to publication, he took reasonable measures to verify the accuracy of such statement, rumour or report. (Imeso, 2017).

In an article which presents the elusiveness of the Nigerian press freedom, Obi (2018) avers that press freedom was actually perceived from the 1950s as undeserved favour extended to journalists. Onishi (2010) asserts about the Nigerian press in a publication in *New York Times* after the installation of a civilian president in Nigeria in 1999 thus:

> Scarred but undaunted, Nigeria's newspapers have emerged triumphant … At least 5 new newspapers have joined about 15 other major dailies on newsstands in the last year, sealing the victory of a vibrant culture over military repression and securing Nigeria's standing as West Africa's news media capital.

In a web publication of June 2014, the Nigerian army was said to clamp down on national newspapers in Nigeria, in the disguise that the action was based on security grounds. The circulation of newspapers was stalled for five days, affecting areas including Kano, Jos, Maiduguri, Abuja, Ibadan and Kaduna. This operation, vans distributing the papers especially by *The Nation, The Punch, Daily Trust, Leadership*, etc., were sieged. (WAN-IFRA, 2014).

It is on record that, in 1973 under the Gowon regime, Mr. Minere Amakiri who was the Rivers State correspondent for *Nigerian Observer* was arrested by the then Military Administrator, Commander Alfred Diette-Spiff through his Aide de Camp, ASP Ralph Michael Iwowari. Amakiri was incarcerated and brutalized, while his hair got shaved with a broken bottle for publishing the story about the striking teachers in Port Harcourt in the *Nigerian Observer*. (Daily Independent, 2011).

Likewise, the *Newsbreed* magazine was proscribed in 1977 by General Olusegun Obasanjo for:

> … having featured a series of probing articles and unconventional interviews that had culminated in one edition that featured both an expose of the nascent-NSO (the National Security Organization, that later birthed the SSS, NIA, et al) … which the government claimed was seditious because it had published the name and photograph of the army officer who then headed the abusive NSO… (Uranta, 2009).

According to Uranta, this series was penned under the watch of Mr. Christopher Maduaburochukwu Okolie. This was exclusive of the critical stories that had been published in the magazine. General Muhammad Buhari's regime, which was short lived was inarguarbly, brutal to the press in a decisive manner. General Buhari as Nigeria's Head of State:

> … promulgated the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 of 1984, which authorized the detention of anyone who was alleged to have contributed to the economic adversity of the nation, or who was concerned in acts prejudicial to State Security or in preparation or instigation of such acts. The Decree effectively ousted the jurisdiction of the courts. (Falana, 2019).

More striking is his promulgation against the press that, "Publishing truth that hurts a government official in every material particular is liable to an offense. It also prescribed punishment for publishing falsehoods against government officials." (This Day, 2022).

It will be noted that the press suffered the worst perdition under the General Muhammadu Buhari regime in the early 1980s. Niran Malaolu, the editor of *The Diet*, a daily newspaper was arraigned by a Special Military Tribunal sitting in Jos on April 28, 1998. He was alleged to be involved in 'information gathering' and 'implication in the alleged coup plot of December 1997'. Initially, he got a life sentence but by July 10 of the same year, his sentence was reduced to 15 years. (Committee to Protect Journalists). Malaolu was eventually released two years after and was credited to have written over sixty poems while in prison.

The worst hit of all the journalists during the military regime was the decimation of the 39-year old prolific writer and journalist, Dele Giwa who was a co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch* during the Babangida regime. He was killed at his 25, Talabi Street, off Adeniyi Jones Avenue, Ikeja, Lagos residence on Sunday, October 19, 1986 using a packaged parcel (letter bomb) claimed to bear the Nigerian coat of arms. (Akinbode, 2019). Although indicted for this strange assassination by many sources, the erstwhile military head of state General Ibrahim Babangida refused to appear before any panel that had attempted to probe this or required him to

provide any concise defense to this; the last being the Chukwudifu Oputa panel, the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC) which Babangida had questioned its legality. (Okenwa, 2002).

Senator Chris Anyanwu, who was the Editor-in-Chief of *The Sunday Magazine* was arrested on May 31, 1995 for publishing articles "… reporting that there was no evidence of an alleged plot to overthrow Nigeria's military regime headed by General Sani Abacha." She was later released in 1998 alongside many; including President Olusegun Obasanjo (Lovitt, 1998). She was also incarcerated on many occasions during the military rule as she practiced journalism that was could not be sycophantic, which petitioned several years later. (Falodun, 2000).

The press was mostly gagged during the military regimes in Nigeria between 1985 and 1998 especially during Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha regimes. Despite the fact that the print and electronic media in Nigeria are active vehicles for the dissipation of information, sensitization and conscientization of Nigerians while also taking back ideas as is obtainable globally, Omoerah (2010) insists that the press is "… A watchdog in recognition of its watchful and critical role against the bad practices of the government and private individuals… The media have been irrepressible in holding the citizenry, particularly the political leaders accountable in Nigeria." (pp. 35-36).

Babangida's regime promulgated the Treason and Treasonable Offences Decree No. 29 of 1993 that prohibited information or ideas that diminishes the sovereignty of the Nigerian nation and place limitless restrictions on the press; including a prison term of ten years, fine or even both as the case may be. Babangida's stringent promulgation against the press also included the establishment of an office by each newspaper or magazine outfit in the Federal capital within one year of the promulgation of that decree.

Unfortunately, the press laws are almost impossible to implement due to the dynamic Nigerian society and its intricacies. The absence of press freedom can be attributed to the power bases which are contending with each other. The variance that exists between cultural, political and religious entities in Nigeria is vile as each claims authority over the governance of the country on its own terms. As is reported by Press Reference, General Murtala Muhammed observed in the late 1970s during the drafting stage of the Nigerian Constitution thus:

> Since the inception of this administration, and particularly since the announcement of your appointment as members of the Constitution Drafting Committee, there has been a lively debate in the press urging the introduction of one form of political ideology or another. Past events have however, shown that we cannot build a future for this country on a rigid political ideology. Such an approach would be unrealistic. The evolution of a doctrinal concept is usually predicated upon the general acceptance by the people of a national.

This is not to say that the censorship of the press is only peculiar to the Nigeria nation only. It has been recognized over time, that other countries especially in the African and Asian continents have been found to censor the press in its primary duty of information dissemination. It is equally, recognized that press freedom is a myth in most countries of the world. In fact, a report by Brynes, Harrington and Stebbins (2020) establishes thus:

> Elected leaders in many democracies, which are known for having free and independent media, have tried to silence critical outlets and promote those that offer favorable coverage. Even the president of the United States, one of the oldest democracies and a country famous for its fierce defense of its First Amendment that guarantees freedom of the press, has frequently demonized the news media as the "enemy of the people." His rhetoric has given succor to political leaders in other countries who have passed bills making "fake news" illegal, and have framed articles they don't like as bogus news.

However, the same report avows that Scandinavian and Western Europe media still enjoy an unlimited scope of press freedom in the world today. Libya's media under Gadhafi were the most tightly controlled in the Arab world. Both the TV radio and press organizations were entirely owned by the government. In fact, "Gadaffi's regime nationalized all publishing and press organizations, no private press was allowed to operate in Libya for over 25 years." (Musa).

The 'notorious' Decree No. 4 of 1984 by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime was promulgated and imposed on account of which Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson, then journalists of *The Guardian* Newspaper were the first casualties of Decree No. 4 of 1984, on July 4, 1984 specifically. (Punch, 2019). In other words; Decree 78 was promulgated to repeal Decree 4 under which Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson journalists with the *Guardian Newspapers* were convicted.

Between 1993 and 1998, General Sani Abacha who was Nigeria's military Head of State at the time repressed the press to a halt, which forced most journalists to venture into guerrilla journalism. In fact, according to a publication citing the Committee to Protect Journalists, between March and September 1998, over fifty journalists were either censored, imprisoned, harassed, attacked, threatened, or killed. (Refworld, 1999).

It is common knowledge that during the civilian dispensation and in the process of discharging their duties, many journalists are incarcerated and in extreme cases, forced on exile or killed. The freedom of the press is still questionable despite the accredited freedom it enjoys. Obi (2018) still insists that "Sixty years down the road, the same mentality (of seeing press freedom as a favour to journalists) still subsists. Its latest yield is the so-called Nigerian Press Council Amendment Bill …" Nigeria particularly, is a highly-volatile terrain politically, and despite the 'One Nigeria' slogan, the diversity is unimaginable. This also accounts for many interests which are and must be represented in the media as well.

This is where professionalism comes in. Will Nduka Obaigbena publish a twisted story because a Raymond Dokpesi is involved, for instance? How much brazenness is left in journalism that can foster unbiased reportage no matter whose ox is gored? Habila presents much

the same type of reporter, Rufus, who defends and justifies the Niger Delta people's act of violence and destruction based on the fact that the people are suffering and generally shortchanged. (Habila, 2012, p. 97).

President Olusegun Obasanjo between 1999 and 2007 was usually apprehensive with press men during media interviews. Reporters without Borders declare that, "Olusegun Obasanjo loses no opportunity to declare his support for democracy, so he should put an end to the harassment to which so many journalists are subjected and restore order to the federal security services responsible for mistreating them …" (RSF, 2004). During Obasanjo's civilian regime, newspapers were raided and shut down, and Editors mostly attacked or brutalized, threatened or incarcerated too. In fact, it is speculated that between January and September 2004, not less than 53 press freedom violations had taken place; while 15 journalists had been physically attacked and about 20 heavily fined, invited by the police, extorted, warned, suspended, sacked or placed under surveillance.

According to Perko (2012), of course, the principle of knowing and participating is currently being incorporated in laws and regulations that exist locally, nationally, internationally, transnationally and globally. Although Nigeria is currently governed by the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, the principles and contents adopted in that constitution is a replicate of the 1979 Constitution. Certainly, the media lost their constitutional freedom because of the application of the Sharia in Northern Nigeria. (Oxford Department of International Development). In the publication by Press Reference, the United States Department of State annual report for year 2000 mentions that Christians are exempted from Sharia law. However, the societal implications of the law also infringed on the rights of citizens who do not practice Islam in Northern Nigeria; and such was the case of violence which erupted in Kaduna in February 2000 between the Christians and Muslims when the expanded Sharia law was to be implemented there. (Alao and Mavalla, 2016, p. 8).

Nigerian Media in Dilemma: A South-South Enquiry from Habila's Perspective

Basically, the recent two-pronged agendum of the Niger delta is based on the aftermath of the 1967-1970 civil war, corroborating the account of Omagu and Onwugbufor (2017) that, "The problem of the Niger Delta began after, in May 1967 the people of the Eastern Nigeria otherwise known as the Igbos attempted to secede from the Nigerian nation under the name of the Republic of Biafra." (p. 87).

Important of note, is the fact that the derivation principle took effect in the 1940s under the different constitutions which were established by and named after the British colonial governors who wrote them. Subsequently, this derivation principle was adopted after Nigeria became autonomous to allow the geopolitical regions sufficient authority over revenues accruing from their minerals, lands and commerce. According to the derivation principle enshrined in the Independence Constitution of 1960 and the Republican Constitution of 1963, mining

communities were paid 50% of what was accumulated as royalties and rents, keeping 20% for the Federal government, and 30% committed to the Distributable Pool Account (DPA).

Golwa (2013) avers that this meant that communities that earned 50% would also share in the DPA-allocated 30%. However, this derivation principle ceased at the onset of the war, and even after almost half a century after the virulent civil war, it is yet to be enshrined in the Nigerian constitution; instead the military sanction that host communities received only 45% of their mineral revenue while the military government retained 55%. However, Omagu &, Onwugbufor (2017) surmise based on the afore-mentioned thus:

> It is against this backdrop that the militants as captured by Habila's *Oil on Water* remain dogged in pressing their demands by various acts of violence no matter who is to be a victim, and at the peril of their lives; and in any case, the militants believe that conceptually, they have no lives no future to protect anymore and for as long as their lives and future stand endangered, everything can go down alongside. (p. 90).

Helon Habila's OOW is the story of the virulent agitation of the people of the Niger delta which defies all media reportages. Characterized by numerous deaths and travails of many journalists, Habila's narrative remonstrates the disparagement of journalism in a democratic dispensation and questions the truism that it is 'One Nigeria'. As opined by Omagu & Onwugbufor (2017), "Habila's OOW is an ethnic voice that decries the prejudice meted out to the people of the area united by their ethnicity" (p. 97). In affirmation of this frustration that hobnobs the media; Major in Habila's OOW mockingly cajoles Rufus thus:

> I'm looking for the woman too, everyone is looking for her. You think you can find her if we can't? I don't trust you. I can't trust you, you see my dilemma? You have till tomorrow to think of something … Tomorrow, I want proof. Answers. Otherwise I'll have to lock you up with the rebels and treat you the same way. (p. 59).

The South-south geopolitical region of Nigeria is regarded as the gold mine of Nigeria due to large deposits of petroleum in the area. According to Amissah & Oisamoje (2016), "By the end of the 1970s, the petroleum sector took over dominance of the economy, accounting for over 90 percent of export earnings and more than 80 percent of government revenue." Interestingly, the press helped Gowon regime to announce to the world while in power as Nigeria's Head of State, that the only problem with Nigeria at the time, was how to spend her money. (Ogunlesi, 2015). The press since independence has remained crucial, according to a web publication by Press Reference insisting that by the end of the 20th century, there are over 30 national and regional newspapers in Nigeria; and more than 20 general interest journals and magazines on the stands, including over 20 radio and television stations.

This underdog status of the media makes it imperative for the electorate to press its demands in ways in which it deems fit; if one of the chief stakeholders of democracy is muzzled from reporting veracities when the occasion calls for it. This paper attempts to narrow down this research on how policies affecting the media and the public have undermined development in Nigeria, focusing on the Niger delta question.

The southern hostility primarily championed by the peoples of the Niger delta and the Igbos, remains inexorable as these claim that they are marginalized. Even the Biafran agendum having lingered for over fifty years, is as rhetoric as the Niger delta issue. However, efforts of the military and civilian governments in Nigeria so far, to rectify the Niger delta issue remains imaginary. It will be remembered according to Barrett & Faniyan (2010) that:

> In order to curb the rising disenchantment between oil companies and the host communities, the Federal Government, then headed by General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, established the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992. This agency was to manage the three percent derivation fund from the Federation Account for the development of the oil producing areas, and mediate between oil companies and the host communities.

In favour of the Igbo agitation, Professor Ijoma Okoro's assertion (2014) that Igbos, to combat harsh economic certainties, emigrated to other geopolitical zones in order to be able to fend for themselves, their immediate families and their less-privileged extended families, holds water. Ijoma (2014) insists that, "It may not be an exaggeration if one asserts that the south-east zone, over the long years, believed and still believes strongly in the Nigerian political project." The history of Nigeria will not be written in the next century without a detailed reference to the Niger delta agitations.

Apart from the terrorist attacks which have persisted in northern Nigeria till the present, the most sporadic issues of great and controversial concern in the Nigerian polity is the south-south demands. These press for absolute administrative and economic independence especially in the utilization of their resources. The intensification of the Niger delta hostilities can be traced to stagnation, backwardness, dearth, hopelessness, squalor and deprivation suffered by the Niger delta communities caused by environmental degradation by oil exploration activities; but most importantly, by the Derivation principle as enshrined in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution. It will be recalled, according to Ibaba (2013), that the Niger delta:

> … has been noticed as an area characterized by conflicts since the 1960s, when the Isaac Adaka Boro led Niger delta Volunteer Services (NDVS) declared the Niger Delta Republic which resulted in a 12-day rebellion… Conflicts resumed in the region from the 1970s when oil producing communities; agitating for development attention, environmental protection, resource control and self-determination, led protests and demonstrations against the oil companies, security operatives and by extension the Nigerian state. This confrontation later resulted in insurgency which lasted from 2005-2009.

Journalists emerge to tell the tale of the Niger delta people through the mass media. As hard as they try, the woes that befall them are incomprehensible as they attempt to narrate the sources of the misfortune of the Niger Delta inhabitants which dates to the 1950s when oil was discovered in the area while Nigerian leaders mismanage monies accruing from this discovery by diversion to personal use especially stored in foreign bank accounts. The reason behind the indispensability of journalists is based on a research that shows that, "… when media increase their attention to a

given issue, the political elites jump on the bandwagon by stating their opinion, asking parliamentary questions, tabling law proposals, or issuing executive orders." (Perko 2012).

In the light of the obvious frustration associated with investigative journalism, Lagos reporters judging by their first boat experience foresee no success in their journalistic adventure (p. 80) – they, "stood to one side, looking at their watches, impatient to be off …" The baptism of fire of the media took a nosedive, according to Evaristo (2010) after the unjust annihilation in 1995 of Ken Saro-Wiwa who led a movement, unassociated with any form of protest or violence against the extermination of the Niger delta environment affecting over twenty million people who inhabit the region at the time.

The publicity of Saro-Wiwa's execution is short-lived because of the terminable provisions encapsulated in Nigeria's Constitution regarding media reportage. Despite the fact that the media usually are on the side of the electorate, Habila portrays the picture of media reporters whose lives are as equally in peril as the militants who claim the victimization of the Niger delta region and the Federal government militia thus:

> When Nkem stepped forward to ask him (a militant) a question, he made a dissuasive gesture with his gun, making Nkem to jump back immediately. 'We're journalists, and we're on your side. We want to report the truth, how your men were brutally slaughtered today for no reason. We just want to ask you a few questions. (p. 76).

Habila represents the journalists who are not cowered by the government to vend falsehood but of a determined generation that is willing to do what it takes to access honest and factual reportage. This is the frustration that grips Rufus when Dr. Dagogo-Mark announces the state of Rufus' professional colleague, mentor and friend, Zaq, "Your friend, I am sorry to say, is dying." The risk of death and danger did not pay off as they only trace Isabel Floode but unable to secure her freedom via any meaningful deliberation. (p. 141).

Despite Rufus' professional disposition as a journalist, his human tendencies remained alert as he speaks the mind of the electorate in these words, "Maybe fate wanted to show her firsthand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and waterbirds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce." (p. 182). His humanism also rouses compassion when he witnesses the molestation of Tamuno in the presence of his helpless son. For this, Rufus opts to be taken instead of the old man.

Journalism in Nigeria: The Nightmare of Champions

In every government, the press is usually positioned as the supervisory body. The press should enjoy freedom of reportage as is obtainable in few unrestricted countries globally; yet this is not to be so because the different voices that dominate the media merely fulfill the caprices of special interest groups competing among themselves. As a reiteration of the verdict of the Press Reference online research page, Ali posits that "The media functions as watchdog capable of blowing the whistle to call attention to serious national issues. This implies a clear recognition of the fact that the media plays an important role on issues of national security."

The media should play the watchdog role for the five 'Ws' (what, who, where, when) and 'H' (How). This is the woe which Habila bemoans in OOW. As new governments strive to provide the media with unconditional freedom of reportage behind the curtain, the real situation is that of intimidation and coercion. The paramount role of the media cannot be overemphasized; and as Toryue and Ogenyi (2017) insist thus:

> … where the media abdicate their role for any reason, internal or external, fail to discharge their responsibility effectively or for any reason underperform in their duty to the society, the future tends to be mortgaged since the media as adjudged by scholars (e.g. Okoro & Ekwueme, 2012; Aliede & Afam, 2015 etc.) serve as the conscience of the society and a powerful force that protects the socio-economic and political institutions of the society for desirable growth. (pp. 122-123).

The state of the media in Nigeria is further aggravated by military and quasi-military governments which saunter in the guise of democratic governments. Habila's earlier work, *Waiting for an Angel* (WFA) reveals the endemic plight of journalists during the military era and a perfect illustration of the 'underdogism' of the Nigerian media. While the journalist in WFA is incarcerated and he writes most of his experiences from a jail bed, the journalists in OOW, Zaq and Rufus enjoy masked freedom to practice their profession but under threats and frustrations.

The Media for Democracy Monitor is quoted by Mangut & Wuam (2010) thus, "... modern democracy and the mass media are vital, indispensable link between those who govern and those who are governed." (p. 81). In substantiating this link, Habila establishes the gulf between the governed and those who govern, bridged frantically by journalists in Zaq's definition of a journalist's mission which he asserts: "… to find out the truth, even it is buried deep in the earth." (p. 182). Journalists not only portray the angst of the electorate but also, verbally defend their rights and justify the electorate's acts of corruption, violence and protests.

Journalism is portrayed as an underdog in the face of democracy while lazy journalism becomes rife. In the face of this anomaly, the profession loses its adventure and objectivity. The Lagos journalists in Habila's OOW quickly return to base with the least uncertainty in view. Habila successfully mirrors a society that has come to the realization of the health hazards, economic retrogression and abject poverty which the oil exploration had brought to the region in good or bad faith. With this consciousness, Habila through the character of Rufus who becomes the voice of the local people of the oil communities, declares thus:

> Of course, I could take the money and not go back to the island. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of that possibility. After all, he couldn't sue me, could he? A hundred

> thousand was nothing to a man like him … I could take his money and walk out and nothing would happen. Wasn't he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process? Surely I was entitled to some reparation, some rent money from him? But even as I took the money, and an extra hundred thousand that he said was for Zaq, I still wasn't sure what I'd do when I walked out of his gate. (p. 101).

In depicting the dearth and decay that characterized the oil communities, Rufus in his narration concludes: "The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil, dead fish bobbed white-bellied between the tree roots." (p. 8).

The unofficial defense of the electorate by journalists places them in innumerable hazards which muddle their integrity most of the time, in their attempt to seek recompense through incongruous means. Rufus, in demonstrating his stance in the face of Floode's inducement, whimpers at the thought of taking advantage of Floode's tempting offer to solve his personal problems considering the risks associated with doing Floode's bid including a feeling of entitlement that aligns with the demands of the militants yet adamant to doing Floode's:

> He was offering a lot of money, more money than I had ever seen … I thought of the dead bodies covered by bamboo leaves, and I knew anything could happen to me … I had been lucky once: I had gone and returned safely … But, on the other hand, there was the money. I needed it to pay Boma's rent, and my own rent, for that matter … Of course, I could take the money and not go back to the island. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of that possibility. After all, he couldn't sue me, could he? … A hundred thousand was nothing to a man like him … I could take his money and walk out and nothing would happen. Wasn't he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process? Surely I was entitled to some reparation, some rent money from him? But even as I took the money, and an extra thousand that he said was for Zaq, I still wasn't sure that I'd do when when I walked out of his gate. Bid. (pp. 100-101).

Due to the enormity of the role of the journalist via the mass media, the rhetoric remains if it is possible for a journalist not to receive bribe. Bribery is corruption and is condemnable under the code of ethics of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). Being a reporter himself, Habila's Rufus notes every official and unofficial incident that drives the frustration of the people. Unofficial incidents rouse Rufus' sentiments which he connects to the annoyances of the militants in the creek - friends and relatives of the many whom he encounters daily in the cities.

In another informal incident, Rufus captures the fate of the people who experience peace through domestic violence of some sort, "In one of the rooms a man and his wife were fighting, their words loud and full of hate. In the background their children were crying, there was the sound of a slap, the crying stopped, the shouting stopped. Peace reigned." (p. 104). In his interaction with the arrested militants – Henshaw, Taiga and Gabriel, Rufus establishes the doggedness of typical Niger delta militants who are no more scared of dying or death itself, but

no new information about Isabel Floode emerges from his association with these three prime rebels. (pp. 152-156). In narrating the militants' visit to Naman and his worshippers, after which Gloria, the nurse is taken away, the level-headedness of the militants whose purpose for visiting is to establish the allegiance of Naman and his worshippers to the militants and their cause, is revealed (p. 159).

Despite the nocturnal activities of the militants, they do not overflog the relevance of the media in their agitations, as Salomon declares of the leader of the militants called, "The Professor went with two boatloads of his men to Agbuki to wait for the media. He loves the media, he loves talking about his war for the environment and he wanted to receive the media personally …" Professor (p. 216). This buttresses the confidence which Salomon had earlier expressed of the media when he confesses to Rufus: "You must write it down exactly as I say, because I am the only one who knows everything that happened. I had a hand in the kidnapping, at first, but later I took care of her very well, otherwise … she wouldn't be alive right now." (p. 209).

Investigative or guerilla journalism involves far beyond speaking with every party to establish every view point. It also goes a step above interviews to investigative actions. Rufus befriends Gloria, the nurse attached to Naman and his worshippers, and their amorous association paves the way for an important revelation after the unearthing of Isabel Floode's 'body' from the grave by Zaq and Rufus which refocuses the plot of OOW. In all, the journalists in Habila's OOW successfully mirror the minds of the Niger delta militants who bask in the justification for their kidnapping acts and receiving of ransoms from their captors according to Salomon as 'collecting payment for all the pain' caused and a refund for all his investment in his fiancée whom James Floode got pregnant.

Conclusion

Journalists are either gagged from revealing the truth which they discover; or are obstructed from accessing the truth. That is the fate of Zaq and Rufus which in the end, leads to the death of Zaq while Rufus slips into depression as his expectation cannot be sustained. Little wonder, Chinua Achebe more or less echoing Trillo Richard and Jim Hugens in *West Africa: The Rough Guide* mentions the frustrations of the press thus (Adekoya, 2018, para. 9):

> … Listen to Nigerian leaders and you will frequently hear the phrase 'this great country of ours'. Nigeria is not a great country. Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun … It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short it is among the most unpleasant places on earth!

Having practiced as a journalist before his relocation to America, Habila is able to relate with the frustrations which the media and journalists are subjected to in their engagement with investigative journalism. Although the story in OOW is based on factuality, it is difficult to decipher the end of the violence in the Niger delta if investigative measures are not taken to

establish the truth about the situation which only the media in conjunction with arbitrators and conflict resolution experts have the privilege to facilitate.

As the Nigeria government continues to thrive on truancy while her electorate languishes in carnage, deprivation and squalor, a baseless optimism hovers around the polity which is better put by Naman, the priest encapsulated in his animistic religious philosophy: "We believe the sun rising brings a renewal. All creation is born anew with the new day. Whatever goes wrong in the night has a chance for redemption after a cycle." (p. 85).

Conclusively, Habila portrays the near-image of the militants through the Professor in these word:

> We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them? I am speaking for myself and my group, of course … I am aware that, out there, there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth. And be careful, whatever you write, be careful. I am watching you. I have people everywhere. (pp. 221-222).

Although Habila projects in details the obstacles standing against good reportage by journalists, his work fails to recommend a way out of the debacle which they point out so vividly. Because Nigeria is divided along religious and ethnic lines, Nigerian leaders command reportages which each media team must engage in, and as soon as such leadership exits, the media of his time becomes irrelevant. It is the position of this study to recommend in the words of Aderibigbe and Adegoke (2017) that as the watchdog of the society which the media objectively should strive to remain, they must (McQuail, 1987 as cited by Folarin, 1998: 31):

> … accept and carry out positive developments tasks to line with nationally established policy; freedom of the media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society. Media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language(s); Media should give priority in news and information to links with other developing countries which are close geographically, culturally or politically; journalists and other media workers have responsibilities as well as freedom in their information gathering and dissemination tasks; and in the interest of development ends, the state has a right to intervene in, or restrict media operation; and devices of censorship, subsidy and direct control can be justified. (p. 21).

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