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PORTRAYAL OF RESENTMENT AND UNDY- ING SPIRIT OF OGONI PEOPLE IN THE PO- ETRY OF KEN-SARO WIWA

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ABSTRACT: This research work aims to bring forth the spirit of Ogoni people, and their determination towards fighting for independence of Ogoni land. The exploitation of Ogoni land finds no dissent in mainstream world, it was Ken Saro Wiwa, who through his power of poetry brought the plight of Ogoni people on the world stage. No one ever thought that machine and muscle power could be defeated by verses of an armless poet. Saro Wiwa sacrificed his life for his land, his tribe. The revolt he started is still alive in the youth of Ogoni, the harbingers of WIWA-Spirit.

Keywords: Ken-Saro Wiwa, Ogoni, WIWA-Spirit, Nigeria

“ Lord take my soul but the struggle continues ”

These were the last words of Nigerian writer and activist Ken-Saro Wiwa ,who was the founder of Movement For The Survival Of The Ogoni People (MOSOP), which fought against the exploitation of natural resources of Ogoniland by the oil company Shell.

One of the oldest settler in the eastern Niger delta region, Ogoni is an ethnic minority group which is largely dependent on their farmland, rivers, and forest for their survival. Saro Wiwa as a teenager saw his land polluted by the oil spills and flares burning the motherland, which ignited his interest in writing.

It is his literary works through which we get to know the Ogoni story. In a letter to sister Majella he says “ keep putting your thoughts on paper who knows how we can use them in future.The Ogoni story will have to be told” and Wiwa succeeded in putting the struggle of Ogoniland on the world map.

“ Ogoni is the land
The people, Ogoni

The agony of trees dying
In an ancestral farmlands ”

Wiwa wrote poems like ‘OGONI! OGONI!’ which speaks about the priorities of the community. For them land comes first and then the people of the land as it is evident in the poem, they are indebted to this land for their existence. But now this land is under tremendous threat as the trees are dying , ‘streams polluted’ and ‘air poisoned’. The discovery of oil in the Niger delta region initially appeared as an opportunity for economical boost up but a nation with crying people and a dying land could hardly progress, this discovery became more of a curse than a blessing. Wiwa sees Ogoni as a dream, as he says in this poem, a hope which will break chains from the ‘drooping neck’ of their mother, ‘A SHELL-Shocked Land’.

In another poem ‘Ogoni Hymn’, Wiwa denotes Ogoni as the ‘Land of glory and wealth’ and seeks strength and wisdom for the people of Gokana Khana, Eleme, Tai and Babbe to shame their enemies ,the enemies of their motherland.

Being an ethnic minority Ogonis felt powerless to defend their farmland until 1990, when Wiwa brought MOSOP into existence with a dream of putting an end to the thirty-five years of oil pollution. Wiwa wrote in the poem ‘MOSOP’ describing the organisation as ‘an arm of peace’ which ‘stands for justice’.

“ MOSOP will never stop
Till Ogoni is free
MOSOP goes marching home ”

MOSOP became the voice of Ogonis and Wiwa in a public meet said “ We are going to demand our rights peacefully, non-violently and we shall win! ”, he believed in words and not war, for he knew very well that war would only result in bloodshed.

On January 4th 1993, three-hundred thousand people took part in peaceful marches. Swaying leafy twigs in their hands, they sang “Who will deliver us from trouble? Ken and MOSOP will deliver us from trouble”. Ken gave voice to voiceless, he sowed the seeds of hope in the minds of Ogonis and his words gave them courage and ignited the fire to speak and demand their rights.

The rage of Wiwa and of Ogonis is expressed in the poem ‘Fire’,

“ There is a fire in me
Burns all night and day”

It is this fire which makes them feel alive and gives meaning to their life , it ‘Flares at injustice’ and ‘Leaps at oppression’, but Wiwa makes it clear that does not represent the blind rage or destruction as it ‘Glow warmly in beauty’. This fire is not directionless but is an eternal light of hope and change.

In an interview, Wiwa accuses the Oil company and the government of slavery and genocide, Ogonis were orphaned from their own motherland and in return they were given nothing as if they never existed and had no claim over their land and resources.

This fight for land and nature never gets old, in various parts of the world indigenous people are struggling for their share of rights. According to World Resources Institute, about fifty percent of world’s land is occupied and used by indigenous people and communities involving more than 2.5 billion people but these groups are increasingly losing their ancestral lands. The race for strong economy and political motives keeps pushing the boundaries of resource extraction whose consequences will be suffered by every creature of the planet. Indigenous territories have turned into battlegrounds, various species are under threat of extinction and environmentalists are being murdered for raising voice against government and multinational companies. In 2019 record breaking fires raged Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the earth. It was evident that these fires were aimed to raise deforestation to pump up the economy of Brazil. Mura tribe of Brazil have witnessed the rise in deforestation, invasion and logging since a long time. In a symbolic move they have painted their bodies in red and orange carrying bows and clubs, declaring a fight against destruction of their home and have sworn to fight for Amazon ‘to last drop of blood’.

Wiwa’s struggle was not only his own but it was the struggle of humanity against the humans. During the period of 1992-1994, he was imprisoned for several months without trial by the Nigerian military government. During this period he produced a number of literary pieces which includes letters and poetry. On June 3rd 1995,

five months before his execution, he wrote his poem 'I Lie Alone At Night', probably addressing the beloved and remembering the good old days when he used to comfort him in the arms of beloved and the sight of bandits breaking into their 'hallowed bedroom' remains still fresh in his mind. By the term 'hallowed bedroom', he seems to denote his motherland as a bedroom, which for them is a sacred land whose sanctity is been threatened by 'cruelly knife'. He wonders, why pain, which according to him should be his lot to bear, is shared by beloved in hope for his return. He ends the poem with a dream of 'a great new dawn', a space without "boots and knives, broken hearts, breaking souls, empty dreams and lonely beds". He dreams of the day when the night will bloom with the songs of love and peace.

In 'Keep Out of Prison', he makes it clear that there's no way of keeping him out of prison as he could not succumb to lies, to injustice which has been made to this land, where the 'land is ravaged', 'air poisoned', 'streams choke with pollution', 'Silence would be treason', a treason to one's own existence, when the earth is crying and your land is calling for help tells Wiwa in the poem 'The Call', "Nature succumbs to the ecological war".

Wiwa does not spare those who are disgust for womb, which has given birth to them.

In the poem 'Victory Song', he shame the 'black brother of the same womb' who raped the land and silenced the efforts of those who raise their voice against them. He waits for the day when he will take revenge and would mark their sin 'on the walls of history', then only he will present 'bouquets of peace' to the motherland.

His one of the finest poem 'The True Prison', breaks the stereotypical image of a prison which people have in their mind. For him, it is not the leaking roof and singing mosquitoes which makes a place prison, neither it is the feeling of being locked in a 'damp wretched cell', and being fed with measly rations. Prison is not the emptiness of the day and the blackness of the night which asserts that your days are meant to spent in silence and not in slogans of justice. He states that these things do not combine into a prison, but a true prison is made of the lies which has been 'drummed' in their ears for generations. The word 'drummed' puts emphasis on the slogans of independence, justice and equality during colonisation, these promises were nothing but lies.

People fought for years to make their land free from foreigners but less did they knew that their own people will do the same to their nation. Capitalism took over Nationalism, and as Wiwa says

"In exchange for a wretched meal a day
The magistrate writing into her book
A punishment she knows is undeserved"

It was sheer act of cowardice masked as obedience, a moral infirmity. This butchering of free voices are the 'meat of dictators'. Wiwa in strong and bold words compares this cowardice to the fear of damping one's trouser because they don't have the guts to wash them. It is the same fear of raising voice as it would invite a great amount of struggle, patience and endurance to maintain that voice. For Wiwa, it is this fear which turns free world into a dreary prison. Fear is the most pervasive prison, as it causes us to self censor. We loose our voice without even realising it.

In the last recorded interview of Wiwa in 1994, he says that to deny people the right to self determination is to subject them to slavery and to take away the land on which they are solely dependent for their survival and refuse to pay them compensation is to subject them to genocide.

Wiwa devoted and sacrificed all he had for his motherland. The sole purpose of his life was to fight for his land and its future. This selfless act of sacrifice is mark of a patriotic, a devotee of his roots. this spirit of resentment is carried by the youth of Ogoni. Today's Ogoni youth is the harbinger of The WIWA-Spirit, the undying spirit of Ken and his land, 'Ogoni Land'.

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