

OIL POLITICS

'ECLIPSE'—An African Tragedy

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The oil politics of the Western nations led by the USA is well known. In 1946 Israel was created to keep a watch and control over the oil resources of the middle east. For the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the main reason was that Britain wanted a base in Peshawar for strategic control of the oil producing nations. The Arab-Israeli wars, Palestinian crisis, Iran-Iraq war, subjugation of Iraq and the running chaos in Afghanistan all have one thing in common—that is oil politics of the USA and western nations excluding Russia.

A similar scenario is emerging in the oil producing African nations. The principal producer of oil is Nigeria. An all pervasive misery and violence prevails in the Niger Delta. Even as the ruling clique steeped in corruption is minting money and stashing it in swiss banks, the dictatorship does not allow any opposition. A courageous environmental and human rights activist, Ken Saro Wiwa was hanged by General Sani Abacha, the country's brutal and corrupt dictator. The crime of which Saro-Wiwa stood accused, on flimsy evidence, was ordering the murder of four local chiefs who were members of the Ogoni, Saro Wiwa's ethnic group. The tribunal that tried him was summoned into existence by Abacha and was answerable to him alone; its arbitrary proceedings had little in common with courts as people know them, or with other courts in Nigeria. In the minds of most observers, Saro Wiwa's true crime was to protest excesses of the government and petroleum companies in the Niger Delta, and to seek for the Ogoni and others at least some of the benefits from revenues accruing to the petroleum companies and the kleptocratic regime of General Abacha.

Saro Wiwa was an extraordinarily courageous and exceptional in building a mass movement in a country where no such tradition existed; an eloquent advocate for non-violence, and a uniquely hopeful figure whose execution was devastating to the people of his impoverished region. He was inspired by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Events portrayed in the *novel take place in a country named Luandia—purely fictional. The author explains why he chose a fictional country : "Nigeria is a country with two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and an extremely complex society. Even Americans who know a lot about Nigeria do not pretend to fully understand it. As someone who can make neither claim, I worried about doing a serious justice to its people. Hence Luandia, a fictional country that serves the purpose of my novel without being a fully realized depiction of an actual place".

The environmental despoliation of the Niger Delia is more widely known, as are the persistent problems of poverty and corruption. Though Nigeria has returned to civilian control, the presidential election of 2007 was a blatant example of election rigging. The industrial world's need for oil has combined with post 9/11 concerns to make Nigeria a focal point in the search for energy security. The pervasive corruption surrounding oil revenues persists unabated.

Corruption and environmental despoliation pervades the Niger delta. The law suit portrayed in the novel finds its parallel in law suits brought by human rights groups on behalf of civilians slaughtered by Nigerian soldiers. The central premise of the law suits is that oil companies can be held legally responsible for the excesses of their protectors.

PRESIDENT'S RESIDENCE (SAVIOR ROCK)

"The barrier was guarded by soldiers in combat fatigues. After an officer checked by telephone with someone inside, the electronic fence opened, and Vorster and Pierce drove into four square miles surrounded by a twenty foot concrete wall and shrouded in darkness. A winding road flanked by palms led to the distant palace, brightly lit against the looming outline of Savior Rock, fifteen hundred feet of black stone. Three times Pierce and Vorster stopped at gated check points manned by sentries. Three times they passed large buildings; the compound of the state security service, bristling with satellite equipment intended to alert Karama to a coup; the home of the vice president, built inside Karama's compound to make its resident his virtual prisoner; the Congress building, where the "elected" members could not come or go unless the president permitted it. To Pierce, the compound was the physical expression of Karama's need to maintain power through fear. Some of our highly placed strategists tend to see Al Qaida where it isn't. So we invade Iraq and, by doing that, create more soldiers for Al Qaida and open the country to terrorists who were there before. Which brings us back to where we started—who are 'Al Qaida' in Luandia and are they Al Qaida at all".

PRESIDENT SPEAKS OUT

"You babbie Okari's (hero) pieties" Karama snapped, "mistaking poetry for power. He believes himself to be the world's darling, too rare a soul to be executed by a simple military man. But who is to stop me? Petro Global? They owe their stock holders the profits I can give them. The Chinese? They kill their own Okaris by the thousands including in Tibet. The Africans? South Africa helped keep Mugabe in business, and Mugabe has no oil America? As long as they get their oil and save their precious soldiers, the day after I hang Okari, he will just be another black corpse."

ABOUT THE TITLE

The central events of the novel take place during a total solar eclipse. Some employees of Petro Global Company held hostage by a rebel group are killed. The blame is put on Bobby Okari, a freedom fighter (fighting for the freedom of the Okari community). On the pretext of taking revenge and for intimidating the revolutionary leader, the government troops attack from air and on land killing all the inhabitants of the village, women are raped before they are killed and houses looted and put to fire. Bobby Okari, the freedom fighter and hero of the novel is arrested. Before he is taken to the jail, his father, the local tribal chieftain is beheaded in front of him.

In order to make the story interesting a heroine by name Marissa is introduced. She is born of mixed parents but very beautiful and intelligent. She meets her lawyer friend, Pierce while doing her course on journalism in an American University. Marissa had already decided to marry Bobby Okari, the hero of the novel, who had dedicated his life for freedom and a reasonable life for the people of his tribe. He is also a fighter for environmental issues.

Pierce, the rich and intelligent American lawyer has recently divorced his wife. Though he is attracted by Marissa, he knows that she is in love with Bobby Okari and his cause. Later they actually marry and more or less settle in the native village of Bobby Okari's and keep up their struggle for freedom.

Nearly after twelve years Pierce gets a phone call from Marissa that her husband has been arrested by Luandian army and his life was in danger. Pierce rushes to Luandia and after making tremendous efforts like spending money—bribing many hands and putting his life at great risk—he could himself be arrested or killed—meets Bobby Okari in jail and offers to fight his case in the law courts.

He finds Okari's imprisoned in cell without windows and illuminated by a bare bulb in the ceiling. The corridor leading to the cell was dark and fetid with the odour of human waste.

The prisoner was provided with a bucket for passing urine and stools—it was overflowing because it was never emptied.

The trial itself is a mockery. All the gory details are described. In spite of the best efforts of the American Lawyer Pierce and bringing out that there is no iota of evidence against Bobby Okari, the court passes a death sentence and Bobby is hanged. Before his death he requests his lawyer Pierce to take care of his wife—whom he knows that the barrister loves. In truth the lawyer had come all the way from America and risking his life had fought the case—only because of his love for Marissa.

With the help of some persons in American Embassy, and some expert human smugglers, Pierce succeeds in getting Marissa who is under house arrest, out of Luandia. Pierce also manages to leave Luandia alive. That is how the novel ends.

The novel successfully exposes how every nation in the world—the US—other western countries and China turn a blind eye to the trampling of human rights and atrocities of the Luandia government—all for the sake of oil.

Perhaps, the message one can get out of this novel is in the title itself. During a total solar eclipse, there is a brief spell of total darkness—one to four minutes maximum—and then the sun comes out gradually, things will definitely improve in Nigeria and other African nations caught in the eclipse of oil politics. □

*ECLIPSE

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