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History, Vision and Craft in New Nigerian Poetry

MODERN AFRICA'S poverty and political instability has furnished the background for the lamentation poetry of her younger poets. Not even the economic exploitation of Africa by Europe, and neo-colonialist politics of the New (economic) world order: themes of actual historical significance in African studies, have preoccupied the new poetics of Africa as much as the issue of black man's betrayal of motherland has affected her bards. Images of Africa's self-inflicted reversals are thence presented with emotive poignance and expressive clarity in the new poetry that have emerged from the region of Nigeria.

These new brands of mournful poetry are expressed in voices not alien to their surrounding despite the several occurrence of modern styles. Of interest in this study is the poetic threnodies which style of rendition is drawn from spheres of human endeavour. It could be the loss sustained from betrayal of trust, disappointment in relationships, denial and deprivation of rights and the sense of atrophy experienced from inured visions.

Wherever a poet utilises the threnodic voice in his poetry, such

poems differ in terms of sentiment. Nigerian poets are thence caught expressing despair, gloom, hopelessness, melancholy, despondency, discouragement, bitterness, desperation, and shock. These feelings are also expressed through a language of ire, anger, passion, fury, exasperation, trepidation, cynicism, bitterness, sarcasm, ridicule, derision, irony, grief, distress, misery, woe, and anguish.

In spite of the mass of voices, however, only a few of these poetry achieve a harmony of rhythm and meaning, where surface layers of poetic expression yield their underlying message. This perfect blend of medium and message, when successful in the hands of the poet, becomes the measure of the beauty of his verse. Equally important is the relevance of a poet's art within a given time and age. T. S. Eliot observes that, the great poet, in writing himself, writes his time. It is the poet's business to express the greatest emotional intensity of his 'time' based on whatever his time happened to think. (Hayward 23)

Many of Africa's new generation poets reflect the quality of an age that is being swept in a woolly reverie of failures. They have therefore become lamenters or dirge singers by extension. They lament the atrophy of national aspirations as envisioned by her founding fathers only a few decades ago. To this group belong such poets led by Chinweizu, Niyi Osundare, Funso Aiyejina, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Odia Ofeimun and Ossie Enekwe. Others, more recently, are Peter Onwudinjo, Joe Ushie, Chin Ce, Ismail B. Garba, Toyin Adewale, Osita Ezeliora, Remi Raji, etc. all of Nigeria. With the upheavals of 1963 and 1966, which degenerated into a mindless civil war, Nigerian poets continue to be inspired by these experiences after the fact.

Generally, these 'Jeremiah' breed of poets lament the betrayal by the political leaders, or the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation. Their anger over the corruption that afflicts the nation is unmistakable. It is this form of threnody ushered in by these young men and women that has come to be known as the new poetry or third generation poetry:

Where are you oh Olokun
 They rape you and raid your children
 They march on your fertile brows
 And rig rods of crude pain in your veins...
 (Raji *Webs* 34)

These are the brand of poets whose impatience with national slogans that fly in the face of glaring contradictions is hardly disguised. For them, political sloganeering, when juxtaposed with the serial betrayals by their own leaders becomes meaningless. Ethnic and racial divides no longer hold in a nation where the individual has, perhaps, never been more traumatised by any other generation than his.

The feeling of betrayal finds evidence in a history of civil war and post-war divisions. Other legacies of dishonour by political leaders include widespread unemployment, poverty and inflation, crumbling educational institutions, endemic corruption and sheer buffoonery in statecraft. Onwudinjo moans in his *Women of Biafra*:

Great ancestors of Ejimoke
 Mourn the silting and the trickle
 Of a house that thundered once
 Like youthful stream
 ...

Today laughter is snuffed
Out of the fireplace...
(59)

The new Nigerian poets react to these times with a poignant feeling of disillusionment and a near-disregard for the corporate entity called Nigeria. The hallmark of this brand of poetry, as opposed to those of earlier generations, is the militancy of spirit often conveyed with threnody of voice and mood. Their manners of poetic expression are informed by the visionary pursuits of these poets. The dearth of purposeful vision in all spheres of life of the Nigerian nation is too overwhelming an issue to agglomerate in 'mild' language, hence they 'scream' these problems in a voice that is discernible to the masses whose woes they chronicle.

Woe to you who plunder our peace
And cast the jewels of our love
To beasts and birds of prey
You will pay a dreadful price.
(Onwudinjo 59)

The disillusionment and frustration brought about by these experiences inform the mood and tone of their poetry. In this paper, a few samples from the works of Funso Aiyejina, Niyi Osundare, Chin Ce, and Toyin Adewale would suffice.

Funso Aiyejina is one of the foremost younger Nigerian poets. His collection of poems, *Letter to Lynda* came out in 1984, blazing a trail in rhythms traditional rhythms. Such poems as 'Growing Up', 'Before the Dawn Dawns,' and 'The Year of Hopeless-Hope' explore contemporary politics. The political themes of these poems emerge

through the art of invoking the conditions of desultory living among the masses of his country and the predatory instincts of their rulers. Aijejina projects mistrust, disillusionment, and even disaster for the political future of the nation. He identifies those responsible for Nigeria's political and economic problems. Where death, in traditional dirge, is bemoaned at the demise of a loved one, Nigerian politicians are held responsible for the virtual death of the Nigerian nation.

Till date, this state of anomie persists in Nigeria and, as far politics is concerned, the poets may crow themselves hoarse. Elections are still won through unabashed rigging and blatant disregard for constitutional ethics. In the poet's vision, we are being herded towards mined futures because those presumably 'voted' into power derisively 'tell us to go and feed on (our) votes,' boasting shamelessly that 'they were victors long before the people voted.' These crystallise in a powerful sense of hopelessness. Just as one stung by death's misfortune, the poet stung by the abuses of military despotism sees a bleak future ahead for the nation.

Niyi Osundare's 'Siren' and 'Rithmetic of Ruse' explore similar political themes with Aiyejina's. 'Siren' bewails the arrogant parade of power by local leaders through a graphic depiction of starving nature and malnourished humanity:

kwashiorkored children
 waving tattered flags, land
 disembowelled by erosion
 ... yam tendrils yellowing
 on tubers smaller than a palm kernel
 (*Songs 21*)

Their 'Excellencies' manage not to see the seeds of tomorrow's famine because they are not there for the begging and bickering of the faceless rural crowd. The mourner of a national tragedy is a satirist who sketches the modern poverty of the Nigerian people whose contorted babies on their 'mothers' back/ are question marks for tomorrow's answer.'

Osundare's lamentation is typical of the revolutionary temper that dominates African dirge songs. The poet's lament, inspired by sensitivity to the anomaly of prevailing leadership, acutely shares the feeling of loss and frustration.

Similarly, 'Rithmetic of Ruse' shows how power-sick civilians inflate census figures in order to gain political ascendancy over their opponents. We are told how their politicians go to the extent of adding their cattle to census figures and engage in all sorts of deceit in order to grab power. Osundare's poetry creates a feeling of despondency in the reader. But undaunted by this evil, there is the underlying note of confidence on the triumph of knowledge: 'our search/for the fragments of truth' over ignorance.'

We have to concede the necessity of economic hardships, ceaseless power struggles, election rigging, squandermania, ethnic irredentism and mindless exploitation of local resources that lend enormous impact to the sensitivity of modern laments especially in the African society where art is both functional and entertaining. African poetry is always in the service of society, not of necessity, but from the relevance of its existence. Poetry is not merely the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.' It is also a calculated, creative response of talent to environment. The poetry of Chin Ce, for example, reveals an awareness of shared experiences in relation to the singularity of individual destiny or purpose whether in

collective or personal degrees. *An African Eclipse* would ring shrilly, and bristle with contempt while the poet's is so full of experimentations to the point of eccentricity. Yet the overall threnody of the *African Eclipse* takes the quality of an African dirge. The prologue comprises a single poem, 'Farewell,' wherein the poet sets the tone for a new direction:

But I have taken now the day is bright
 (the shining light of
 Soul lights) the other route.
 (*Eclipse 6*)

We may assume that this is a parting of ways, from old to new but it is the 'old ways' that Ce confronts us with. In a traditional sense, 'African Eclipse' mourns the atrophy of Africa's future. It is the truncation of hopes for a great black African nation by the 'generation without a soul,' the responsibility of which must be traced to military and civilian collaborators in national ruin.

This tendency to load the enemy with negative images has become a continuing tradition with popular lamentation poetry. Nigerian politicians are vultures, and their military turncoats are reptiles.⁽⁷⁾ In any case, the military are the precipitators of the eclipse. In 'Darkness,' we are left in no doubt of the vicious wheel of counter-military interventions which the nation was made to revolve since independence in 1960. 'All borders closed' is only but diplomatic 'blundering in the dark.'⁽¹¹⁾ The metaphoric darkness accentuates the benumbing of total loss and desolation experienced at the instance of death, time being an extended allusion to its fatal certainty.

time only crawled

...
and who began to curse?

Probably the most acerbic lamentation of political corruption can be found in the four-part movement to the 'Eclipse.' (16-19) 'The sun shall not wait...' begins the poet, in admonitory locution to the president who barricades himself in office and is now alienated from his people. The image of time which does not wait but hurtles down the decline is ominous of impending doom:

Time does not stall
It hurtles
Dangerously down the decline
And every penny must be paid
(‘Eclipse’ 19)

World events attest to the veracity of allegations of public misconduct of our so-called leaders and the irony of their basic immaturity or inadequacy for such positions. The president, in his 'drunken dream' of office accoutrements fondles his mistresses behind the primitive seclusion of his estate. In many cases, all he volunteers are mere speeches and unoriginal public declarations. To his retinue of sycophants, he offers bacchanal feasts and medals of service seen in the glamour of publicity: 'the gourd of honour' ('The Second Reptile') and 'dog medals around... necks' ('Eclipse').

Of course such sights as 'bony heads of children,' and homeless street dwellers are safely shut from the view of public officials who do not see very much from their seat of indulgence. Added to empty slogans, public figures further insult the people's intelligence with human rights violations:

Cries of torture and murder
Sweep the streets
Where your mad dogs roam

Nigerian poets in the manner of visionaries, warn of dire consequences. 'Time,' is no 'respector' of persons. The style of rendition in the Eclipse presents time as the great leveller: that which equalises the imbalance among men, nations, and races. 'Every penny must be paid,' is the refrain that presages future consequences of present decisions.

Yet one of the finer points of recent Nigerian poetry is the critical assessment of varied nuances of speech. In Ce's 'Prodigal Drums,' Fuff is made to approximate the juvenile dereliction of moral values. As a city immigrant his language changes to the fast, racy banter of modern lifestyle. However, the tension from two opposing forces of conformity and rebellion snaps very soon and predictably too in a rebellion that anti-climaxes from an uncoordinated, one-man squad, not founded on a strategic base of social dynamics, yet enough to make a victim of the hero. The moral fable seems to be that no resistance to a corrupt society can be successful by just one man's indignation and physical protest. The society that breeds corrupt electricity officials, police officers, judges, etc., ensures that Fuff, one of its rebels, permanently remains behind bars until his psychic derangement (a treatment Nigeria has given to some of her writers e.g. Wole Soyinka in the heat of her civil war). In 'The Prodigal', loneliness comes across in pithy lines.

There was no one, not one
to pay the bail
and for nine hundred weeks
far in the northern heat

did the sun of the Sahara
blank his mind in jail (*Eclipse* 39)

But Chin Ce's typically New Nigerian poetry is not all a lament of 'stinging stench,' 'stalking hyenas,' 'barbarian boot,' and 'tired drummers.' The constellation changes hint at some future determination and is symbolic of an after-eclipse. The sun in the epilogue amplifies the concept even before the succeeding four poems enforce this hope of a renewal. More striking is how a mournful chronicle now presents this sense of renewal *aposteriori*. In the loud denunciations of the preceding sections of Chin Ce's *African Eclipse*, none could have thought such deep sense of optimism possible. But such is the real vintage of an African lamentation which lifts the veil of sullen grief to reveal a landscape of glorious fortune.

Toyin Adewale's *Naked Testimonies* starts on a night of weeping. We are struck by the poet's ability to make of general interest such personal themes. Like the African dirge singer on a mission of introspective and communal purgation, *Naked Testimonies* overcomes the mournful perplexity of broken truces with studied, deliberate renunciation of all that discredit the villainous object of her mourning:

I tell a tale of sour tangerines
And shrivelled penises
In the furnace of testicle crushers
Diamonds are mere stones
In the trauma of dry sentences ...
(56)

These ruined hopes, as of death, are further extrapolated in images of ruin and desolation:

...
 hearths crumble
 in courtyards of ruin
 absurd altars say I am sacrifice...
 (57)

Echoes of tragic loss reverberate along the third and fourth sequences, unearthing more benumbing spectre until the fifth movement where the poet unravels a visionary triumph. It is also an emotional and psychological triumph. In spite of all our tribulations, let us all in humanity stand firm and resolute:

Striding upon my high places
 Shield my voice
 I walk in fire (60)

There is a cold cynical stance typical of Adewale's poetry which strives to belie the depth of the hurt residing within.

...
 scowls that decrease our face value
 This is the night
 ...
 vigil of septic pits
 This is the storm
 ...
 solid sheet of shattered eggs
 (54)

Feelings of loss and disappointment also run through *Naked Testimonies* with intense, private and imaginative rhythm. This

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symbolic loss, very much like that of a cherished dream, has the power of creating a new awareness in the individual. With this awareness comes faith in the self:

There are lacerations
But we shall salve our wounds
Calm sandstorms...
(68)

The poetic gift of optimism is neither squandered nor inured
...on the trail/of light
...
soaring and prideful like an eagle in flight
(68)

It is rather enhanced by the promise of an eternal significance.
We have in 'Untitled' the promise of

hope (that) flutters
...
Like a quaking foundation
(67)

Adewale's *Naked Testimonies* subtly leads into deeper knowingness and awareness that prod mere human sentiments and emotions into the realm of indomitable spirit.

...
I'll hold your sure word
Knowing it's spirit and blood
(67)

The poets of the third generation reflect cultural sensibility. 'Unfolding Season,' by Osundare is full of traditional imagery drawn from an agrarian landscape:

the smoke of burning bush ...
 antelopes and grass-cutters
 scuttling out of the flames
 (71)

Osundare's 'Cloud Watching' is pastoral poetry. Prominent in the style of modern African expressions is the 'rich imagery of African environment ...unstifled by far-fetched allusions'(Ohaeto 13) The poems are replete with '...storm-ravaged banana leaves,' 'like the epidemic laden-noon heat,' also 'fireflies,' 'soldier ants,' 'like greying creepers on dying trees.' (Aiyejina 23) etc. There are attempts to retain the reality of local flora and fauna: 'Skins scaly like iguana's,' 'feet swollen like water melon' (Osundare 7) Drawn from local environment to bring vivid pictures to the mind's eye, these images serve to validate the experience of both the poet and the audience.

A further point of artistic convergence among these poets is the use of simple language, as against the convoluted diction of the previous generation but this has been stated by several local scholars. This may be an attempt to make their art accessible to the people whose experiences they seek to register. Of striking interest in this convergence is the incidence of common connotations and symbolisms. Aiyejina's predatory images: 'dog,' 'snake,' and 'eagle,' for Nigerian leaders echo in the laments of Chin Ce and Ezenwa Ohaeto. Niyi Osundare and Funso Aiyejina explore the image of 'soldier ants' as metaphor for oppression. The poetry of the new

threnodists is also characterised by code switching where local nomenclatures take their position with formal English. Here, names like 'tanwiji,' 'molue,' 'danfo,' and 'dagbere,' abound in Osundare as a matter of conscious artistry. In Aiyejina Yoruba and Hausa codes are virtually switched. In 'The Year of Hopeless Hope' the lines '*lai lai Alamu O le dede la eewo Orisa*' express the Yoruba thought that 'nothing happens from nothing' in a manner that retains the collective belief in that truism where its English equivalent may truly not have sufficed. From Ce's poems, local nomenclature: 'Dodan,' 'agbada,' 'menini,' 'surugede,' retain their cultural trappings in spite of the formal language of artistic expression. Aiyejina plays with syntax and morphemes of the language, breaking words into segments in order to achieve pun and ambiguity. In 'The Year of a Hopeless Hope,' linguistic truncations: 'Of/f course,' 'con/tract/or' imbue the poem with levels of meaning. We are struck by Osundare's manipulation of diction to create a sense of rhythm. Copious allophones, alliterations and assonance abound in his art. In 'Siren,' 'buntings and banners ... brazen bombasts...' call to mind the festive mood that squalid towns are made to wear when the 'big shots' come to town. Cleverly manipulated alliterations and assonance: 'begging bickering,' 'clangorous convoy,' 'acrobats and motor bikes,' render musicality and rhythmic motions to his poetry.

Most poignant in the poetry of Adewale and Ce are the ethereal images. Recurrent images denoting the elements: fire, waves, water, wind, clouds, light and nature: 'hills,' 'waterfall,' 'mountain paths,' 'sands,' 'sun,' 'moon' flow through their writings. Adewale and Ce make no deliberate attempt to speak in the traditional high flown proverbial language and imagery remarkable of their contemporaries. But this is not to say that the language of both poets does not reflect local environment. There is rather a preponderance

of urban mirrors reflecting influences that have come to be accepted as a part of emerging African societies with which they are more accustomed. For example, Adewale's 'jigsaw puzzles,' 'Gethsamane,' 'diesel,' 'knife,' 'spoon,' 'fork,' 'peak,' 'cap,' 'car,' 'tarmac,' and 'sunglasses,' amplify the urban presence. In his second collection, *Full Moon*, Ce's poetic landscape is replete with 'polythene,' 'jazz,' 'siren snouts,' 'ships,' 'revolution,' 'doctrines,' 'sentry,' and 'missiles.' In style and technique Chin Ce's deployment of alliterations and assonance have been largely successful in establishing alternate or varying attitudes.

Passions potted with pomp...

...

against your yeoman's yoke...

...

Prints in sinking sands ...

(26-27)

Greed grabbed the gritty mask

For prize fight at Vanity Fair...

While the 'men of the people' (Nigerian political class) in spite of obvious rumbles of discontent in the polity can only

Strut and fluff

Feathers in the gathering clouds ...

(29)

In a local funeral ceremony ('Fun Rail) the drummers "prattled their practised hands ..." This expressionist deployment of images, employed for the effect of scorn or ribaldry, is reminiscent of the 'age

of reason' in English poetry, that era in verse which witnessed works of satire against social and political anomalies more than any other period in English literary history (Thwaite iv).

The examples of Aiyejina, Osundare, Adewale and Ce, acting on the influence of their times and age, succeed in exploring the range of emotions to delineate the near tragic complexities of their society. They have employed these varying elegiac emotions in their inward and outward creative outlets without hindrance. This marks the dawn of a new kind of poetic or creative liberty in serious African writing now and probably in later years to come. That Africa has produced leaders who rank among the mediaeval lords of Europe in mendacity and bestiality is almost a blessing to Nigerian creativity which has imbued global literature with contemporary art whose imagery and linguistic experimentations have allowed for the truer representation of those transient realities that can only indicate a quality of art in touch with its times.

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