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Phases in Nigerian Poetry in English

IF WE EXCLUDE the oral renditions in various Nigerian languages and the early phase of Nigerian poetry in English (represented by the works of Epelle, Enitan Brown, Dennis Osadebay, Adeboye Babalola and Olumbe Bassir, etc., as recognised by critics to constitute the first generation, there would be two clearly defined phases in Nigerian poetry in English. Generally we refer to the remaining two generations simply as the first and the second. The first generation is represented by such names as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, while Odi Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Onuora, Ossie Enekwe, Catherine Acholonu and Harry Garuba are the major voices of the second generation. There is, then, the third and emerging group whose artistic features constitute a hitherto uncharted terrain in Nigerian poetry studies.

Members of the first generation had come into the limelight in the days of Nigeria's struggle for independence in the late 1950s, including the period of the country's first attempt at civil rule. As such, they "... participated side by side with the politicians in the fight for independence" (Osofisan, 1996: 15). In *Toward The Decolonization of African Literature* (Vol. I, 1980: 163), Chinweizu and others identify three categories common to these early poets. These are (1) the

euromodernists, "who assiduously aped the practices of 20th-century European poetry"; (2) "the traditionalists, who sought to model their English language poetry on elements from traditional African poetry"; and (3) "a miscellany of individual voices of the middle ground who...share no strongly distinguishing characteristics".

Essentially, what appeared to be the foremost preoccupation of these poets was what their novelist contemporary, Chinua Achebe, pointed out to be the need "to teach [their] readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (*Morning Yet* 45). Asein aptly describes the character of the writing of this era thus:

... we can conveniently affirm that there was no serious discussion of the social responsibilities of the writer in the Nigerian society before 1965. For many Nigerian writers before that date, social/political commitment in so far as it related to literature was generally suspect: and literature of commitment was understandably looked upon as second-rate and irrelevant to the immediate needs of the...society at that particular stage of national development. Greater emphasis was placed on the need to restore the past, and 'commitment' for most Nigerian writers meant cultural commitment which did not necessarily involve the writer in partisan politics and social programmes. (Nwoga 98)

Asein substantiates this trend among the first generation Nigerian poets with testimonies from two of the major members of

this period, Christopher Okigbo and Clark-Bekederemo (J.P. Clark). Okigbo asserts as follows:

... the writer in Africa doesn't have any function. That is, personally I can only say what I conceive as my own function. I have no function as a writer; I think I merely express myself, and the public can use these things for anything they like.... I don't, in fact, think that it is necessary for the writer to assume a particular function as the Messiah or anything like that. As an individual he could assume this sort of role, but I don't think that the fact that he's a writer should entitle him to assume a particular role as an educator (105).

The second testimony of Clark as cited by Asein, goes thus:

... it seems to me that people are creating for the writer an almost superstitious role which I find unbearable, as if he were a special kind of human being who has certain duties, functions, privileges mystically set apart from other human beings. I don't at all assume that kind of romantic position. I'm not impressed with the social or political life a poet leads outside of his profession if he doesn't produce poems (107).

But, as Asein further states, the crises leading to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 soon "overtook" Okigbo and he "appropriated into the system of his apocalyptic verse many aspects of the national experience" (105). Thenceforth, Okigbo became committed as a writer to the socio-political realities of his time, a commitment that manifests in his collection, *Path of Thunder: Poems Prophecy*

War. Clark-Bekederemo, too, responded somewhat to the crises in his poetry but as Ayein noted, his work "does not glamourize the crisis nor does it celebrate specific characters with patriotic zeal. His interest is not in the heroic as Soyinka's is in his poems "...but in the tragedy and agony which the 'victims' of the crisis had to live through" (110).

Thus, although these poets explored the African cultural environment for their imagery in the bid to validate their African cultural heritage, they did not seem to succeed in substituting African communal vision and a people-oriented artistic style for the individualism that characterized their European poetic models. Wole Soyinka, the early Okigbo and Clark-Bekederemo appear the most frequently assailed. Chinweizu, et al, (as cited earlier) refer to them as suffering from the Hopkins' disease. In addition to echoing the feeling that these poets were, essentially, individualistic, Aiyejina (in Ogunbiyi, 1988) comments on their style as well. According to him,

Generally speaking, Nigerian poetry in English before this period [1967-1970] was marked by an excessive preoccupation with the poet's private grief and emotions over and above social tragedies and triumphs. It was also a poetry distinguished by an undue eurocentrism, derivativeness, obscurantism and private esotericism (112)

From the foregoing, especially taking into consideration the testimonies of Okigbo and Clark-Bekederemo, it would appear that the members of this first generation of Nigerian poets saw poetry, essentially, as a private, personal affair. And even their styles -

especially Soyinka's and the early Okigbo's- were influenced by euromodernist tendencies. However, this researcher believes that while Soyinka's and the early Okigbo's works have a measure of obscurity, there seems to be an exaggeration in the portrayal of the distance these poets kept from social issues. An example is the remark by Chinweizu and co-authors that "the poets seem to shun searching treatment of overtly political and social matters and display a marked preference for private matters" (157).

In contrast to this observation, Asein points out that Soyinka's verse of the Nigerian crisis period (1960s) "reveals [a] consistent view of the public duty which the writer could perform in his country" (99). This poetic commitment to public interest reflects in his work, *Idanre and Other Poems*, especially in the section "October 1966". The commitment here is similar to that of Okigbo which, as we noted earlier, manifests in his *Path of Thunder: Poems Propheying War*. Thus, rather than consider the members of this group as not sufficiently responsive to social issues, it seems better to see them as a reflection of the relationship between the artiste and the society from which he/she draws his/her raw material. Art, it shows, is quite malleable to changes in its concrete world, so that in the pre-crisis days, Okigbo, Soyinka and Clark-Bekederemo saw themselves merely as poets who were at relative peace with themselves the same way as their physical world tended to be. But when the brewing crisis became open, the writers too opened up their art and responded to it though in varying degrees and manner. Indeed, some of them became overtly and even physically involved in the social issues such that Soyinka was detained for his role in trying to stop the war while Okigbo lost his life in it.

In assessing their responsiveness therefore, it is necessary to gauge their art against the actual physical conditions of the society

at the time when they composed. It appears this kind of consideration was what Irele had in mind when he said that:

in a growing literary culture the canon is hardly ever a stable or final one, and every generation has the opportunity to shape its literary preferences according to its own perception of the values it considers essential to the continuity of its tradition.
(Ogunbiyi 110).

The members of this group, especially Soyinka and the early Okigbo, have also been criticised for writing obscure poetry. Perhaps the most critical of this generation's style and language are Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike. Two quotations from their work will serve as an illustration of their position. The first is:

There is a failure of craft in the works of the euromodernist Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry. Despite the high praise heaped upon it from all sides, most of its practitioners display glaring faults, e.g., old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic traditions, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism.(165).

Elsewhere in the same work, the authors also remark that these euromodernist poets "... are at best middle-mettle poets who package their mediocrity in mannerisms which they assume are sufficient to turn the prosaic into poetry" (195). Then, finally, on pages 170-171 of their text, they illustrate how poetry should be written, using Soyinka's own poem, "Malediction", which they

reproduce "in simple English" in contrast to Soyinka's original "obscure" version.

It seems settled that considering the functional role of art in Africa, the poetry of this generation needed to winnow out the foreign influences and be made more accessible to readers. But it appears also true that Chinweizu exceeded the limits of scholarly discretion in the manner they criticised the language and techniques of this school of poetry. Specifically, the language of the critics appears generally harsh and hostile. Secondly, it is not the duty of the critic to prescribe for the writer what creative choices and nuances he/ she should adopt as the critics have attempted. Once more, we will lean on Irele for support on this position:

While it is proper to entertain ideas about what writers should be doing, it is not the business of criticism to set up orthodoxes they are required to conform with. It is rather to examine the works they have actually produced. (104)

In sum, while conceding that the poetry of this generation generally needed to be made less opaque, it cannot be fair to these writers to assert that they were characteristically indifferent to the social and political issues of their time. Besides, in assessing them as poets, it is necessary to note that the nation's economic woes which gained prominence in the post-war years and, hence whetted the sensitivities of the succeeding generation, were not yet pronounced in the Okigbo-Clark-Soyinka days. Thus, it seems more appropriate to see the posture of these earlier poets, relative to that of their successors, as an index of the relationship between the nature of society's problems at a given time and the degree of militancy of the arts.

From our discussion thus far, one thing that has emerged is the fact that the first generation of Nigerian poets did adjust their scope to accommodate the crisis that led to the civil war and did, in fact, write poems on the war. But the effect of the war on Nigerian poetry went beyond this. The war combined with two external influences to give birth to a new generation of voices commonly recognised as the second generation of Nigerian poets. According to Garuba (Okunoye 267), "The civil war is important as 'historical context' because it... saw the beginning of a civil war in Nigerian literature in the 'textual context' of poems". How the war contributed to the emergence of this second generation is more vividly presented by Aiyejina:

The mangled limbs and dismembered bowels of the victims of the crises and the frustrated hopes of the people have metamorphosed into images of death, aridity, decay, putrefaction, betrayal and hypocrisy. The mournful tone of the dirge has thus become the dominant mood of the poetry by the post-Okigbo "Nsukka poets". (115).

This mood of anger and despair was not restricted to the "Nsukka poets". Aiyejina adds that poets outside Nsukka also responded to the situation by resolving

... to make poetry as relevant to the realities of their daily existence as possible: no more pursuit of the clever and esoteric lines of Soyinka, the Latinate phrases of Okigbo and Echeruo or the Hopkinsian syntax of Clark. (119)

In addition to the civil war, two external influences also contributed to the emergence and artistic characteristics of this

second group. These influences were the exposure of the new voices to Marxism and the decolonization of African literature that had begun in East Africa. On the role of Marxism, for instance, a leading member of the generation, Niyi Osundare, states thus:

We read the works of Marx, the works of Lenin, and many of the speeches of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro and, of course, the works of Fanon, particularly Fanon.... These were works that we read and we discovered that they were saying things that were true about our position, and of course, these things influenced what we wrote eventually (Adagbonyin: 79)

Leading names of this group include Chinweizu, Niyi Osundare, Odiya Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Onuora Ossie Enekwe, Femi Oyebode, Harry Garuba, Catherine Acholonu, Femi Fatoba and Femi Osofisan (who is more known as a playwright than as a poet). Osofisan further expatiates on the mission of this generation as follows:

... our focus was on the present state of our society, on unmasking the class forces at play within it, revealing the material sources of exploitation and injustices, demonstrating how the masses could liberate themselves [and] of greater pertinence now as the collective struggle, fought by the hero with a thousand faces, a thousand hands. (16)

Since the poetry of this era was now focussed on the condition of the ordinary people, the peasants and workers, what were the implications of this change in concerns for the language and style of

the group? Would they, for instance, achieve this goal if their poetry remained as opaque as that of their predecessors? Or would it be necessary to make their work more accessible to the public through a radical departure from the style of the preceding group? These are the questions which Osundare's definitional statement in *Songs of the Marketplace* seems to address when he sees poetry, not as "the esoteric whisper/of an excluding tongue", but as "man/meaning/to man" (3-4). Elsewhere, he further explains:

The thematic preoccupation remains the desperate situation of Africa, the stylistic hallmarks are clarity and directness of expression, formal experimentation, and a deliberate incorporation of African oral literary modes (27)

One specific aspect in which this was put into practice in the language of this generation is in the conscious introduction of the proverb because of its "capacity... to drive home populist expressions" (Nwachukwu-Agbada, in Jones, eds, 168-169). Nwachukwu-Agbada also notes that the poets of this time returned ...to the local speech pattern so that, whether the poet is Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo or Nupe, there are linguistic models in his poetic afflation which every member of a Nigerian, if not African, audience can relate to. In sum, members of the second generation of Nigerian poets had their sensibility sharpened by the country's civil war as well as the exposure to Marxism, but they turned to their African roots in matters in style and language as a response to the trend in East Africa. In a way, the stylistic posture of the group tended to conform to the prescription by Chinweizu, et al, that "All that the poet has to is open his ears, and listen to his contemporaries who have not lost touch with tradition and write the way they speak" (170)

In concluding our examination of this second generation of Nigerian poets, it is necessary to take another look at Nwachukwu-Agbada's statement that in the work of the poets of this era, whether "Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo or Nupe, there are linguistic models in [their] poetic afflation which every member of a Nigerian, if not an African, audience can relate to". This assertion needs some modification since the domestication of lexical codes that characterises much of this poetry may make the texts less accessible to even some Nigerians from different linguistic groups. Thus, much as one appreciates that there is often a loss of meaning through translation from one language to the other, affected inundation of mother tongue into poetry in English may rather constitute unnecessary stumbling blocks to readers with a different linguistic background from that of the poet. Banjo's observation lends credence to this position:

It is necessary to note that the presence of locally derived metaphors does not necessarily guarantee accessibility to an African audience ...partly because of the multilingual nature of Africa which makes it sometimes difficult for metaphors derived from one particular language to be comprehensible to the speakers of other languages. And to further confound the situation, accessibility is not guaranteed even to all the native speakers of that same language because of a general lack of any education in local languages and cultures (33)

While the distinguishing features of the first and second generations of Nigerian poets are established, these older writers having benefited from critical attention, the thematic and stylistic

trends of the rising voices are yet not characterised. In terms of content, Osofisan (1996) observes that "as far as theme and tone of political commitment are concerned, there is really not much distinction any longer between the younger or older writers, in the works produced from the early 80s onwards". But when he lists representative poets of his (second) generation, only Olu Oguibe and Afam Akeh are included from the younger group. However, that Osofisan identifies only "theme and tone of political commitment" as a feature common to "works produced from the early 80s onwards" suggests that in other aspects of the poetry, there could be differences among these writers of the early eighties and beyond.

Tanure Ojaide presents more lucidly the phases in modern African -and hence Nigerian- poetry thus, "... the Soyinka-Clark-Awoonor-Peters older group, the middle group of Anyidoho-Chipasula-Ojaide-Osundare group, and the very young group represented in *Voices from the Fringe*" (88).

Niyi Osundare, however, offers a more comprehensive picture of these rising voices than any other observer of the literary trend. He introduces them as those "...born around Nigeria's independence (1960), Nigeria's midnight children, as it were, who have spent the first three decades of their lives confronting the nightmare that the country has become" (20). He further describes their poetic temperament as ranging "from angry through desperate to despondent" (40). Some of the new poets include Femi Oyebo, Olu Oguibe, Afam Akeh, Ogaga Ifowodo, Esiaba Irobi, Onookome Okome, Uche Nduka, Chiedu Ezeanah, Chin Ce, Usman Shehu, Kemi Atanda-Ilori, Idzia Ahmad, Sesan Ajayi, Remi Raji, Sola Osofisan, Nnimmo Bassey, Toyin Adewale-Nduka, Obu Udeozo, Eddie Aderinokun, Kayode Aderinokun, Joe Ushie, Maik Nwosu, Epaphras Osondu, Obi Nwakanma, Asodionye Ejiofor,

Tunde Olusunle, Isidore Diala and Ogechi Ironmantu.

Although this list appears long, it does not exhaust the names in this generation, hence Osundare's description of the group as "the poets' generation [since] close to three quarters of its publications belong to the poetic genre" (21). Nevertheless, what seems clear thus far is that Nigeria's poetic works of the early eighties and beyond are not one homogenous entity, even if the dividing line among them is only form and language to the exclusion of "theme and tone of political commitment".

What, then, are the defining characteristics of this emerging group? So far, descriptions of the work of these rising voices have been few and sketchy. Osundare, for instance, refers to them as "less ideologically conscious than the second generation"(21) while Olu Oguibe, himself a member of this phase, comments on them as follows in his Introduction to the poetry collection: *Poets in their Youth, An Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*:

The poets presented in this anthology reveal the depth to which poetry in Nigeria has sunk in recent years: a low level of accomplishment in the art and craft, no critical attention whatsoever, and hardly any encouragement. (iv)

Similarly, in introducing another anthology whose entries were mainly from this group, E.C. Osondu notes:

The form-criterion was that each entry selected should be at least a poem with basic imagistic refraction of its subjective universe. In applying these minimal criteria, more than half of the entries, *sadly*, could not be published (9) (emphasis mine).

Furthermore, *The Guardian* of Monday November 18, 1996, reports the following observations by that year's jury of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA, on entries for the year's competitions:

In a majority of the entries, there are serious problems with grammar and this shows that most of our creative writers have not made the necessary effort to master the basic structures of language Some of the poems read like first drafts hastily submitted to meet the deadline.

Incidentally, Dan Izevbaye and Niyi Osundare (both in Enekwe, 1996) also echo the same point of haste and impatience among the new writers.

However one must ask to what extent can this observation be true of the new poets? And, in the work of the emerging voices, how has the tradition of the artiste as conscience of his/her society fared? What, therefore, can we say are the major thematic and stylistic highlights of this group? The lacuna to which these questions point needs filling in some future study.

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