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Broken Humanity: The Poetry of Osmond Ossie Enekwe

Introduction

OSMOND OSSIE Enekwe was born on 12th November, 1942 in Affa, Enugu State of Nigeria. He graduated from the University of Nigeria in 1971 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. He earned his masters and doctoral degrees from Columbia University, New York. He is a scholar and a prolific writer whose teaching experience spans several universities in two continents: America and Africa. His international reputation is primarily as a poet, but he is also a theatre scholar, director, musician and novelist. Ossie Enekwe, like the English Romantic poet, William Blake, was apprenticed to an artist but his longing for education propelled him to abandon that career for education. His competence in these several professions bears on his works, especially on his poems. Today, his works are published in several local and international academic journals and books. Some of his poems, particularly those in his recent collection of poems, *Marching to Kilimanjaro*, are already in Tijan Sallah's *New Poets of West Africa*.

Enekwe's poems generally may be categorized into two. The

poems in *Broken Pots* are the lamentations of the poet on broken humanity. He bemoans also the physical and spiritual wasteland, the pointlessness and the human suffering, which are consequences of wars. Like a prophet, he warns humanity about his vision of a new world order where violence and destruction will take the center stage because of man's loss of vision, feeling, emotion, hope, aspiration and dream. In the new order, human values are lost, and man becomes a wolf to fellow men. His vision is in line with the theory of the English political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* where he postulates that man is essentially selfish. Eneke believes that this latent selfishness in man explodes into a destructive force because of the physical and psychological trauma and the physical and psychological alienation he is subjected to as a result of wars. The psycho-neurotic man can do anything: lie, cheat, steal, kill and main as long as he benefits from his actions. His former yardstick for the measurement of achievement and heroism has been eroded by wars, and replaced by a new gauge of violence and destruction.

His other poems in *Marching to Kilimanjaro* will be examined in this essay since that collection constitutes a second category of his poems. In this category, the poet still laments the birth of the man of violence and bloodbath, which was foretold in *Broken Pots*. However, the poems are essentially those of social and economic criticisms or protest. He satirizes the actions of visionless, insensitive and parasitic leaders who feed on the people's flesh and blood. He points out to humanity the glaring, man-made chasm that separates the two classes of humanity: the haves and the have-nots. The rich have so much to eat and drink that they grow 'flatulent' while the poor go through excruciating poverty that their 'drunken bones shrivel'.

Ossie Eneke cannot be seen solely as a pessimistic poet; he also gives out rays of light and hope at the dark and dangerous tunnel of life in which man is a wayfarer. In *Broken Pots*, he believes that the cycle of doom of broken humanity can stop if there could be unadulterated love and friendship. And in *Marching to Kilimanjaro*, he advocates that the chains of bondage, servitude, humiliation, degradation, suppression and injustice must be broken by a bloodless revolution, where the 'rockets' and 'bazookas' fired to be replaced with new weapons: 'knowledge', 'intellection', 'work', 'love for truth and beauty'. The poet agrees with Richard Wright in his inspiring novel, *Black Boy*, and William Blake in the poem, "The Tyger" (Songs of Experience) that it is only through the power of knowledge that comes from education 'burning bright/in the forests of the night' that broken humanity can break the dams of inequality and injustice, which separate the mighty from the weak. It is only through this violence-free revolution that they can create an egalitarian society where all men will live in peace and love. The poet espouses in "Situation Report":

But through knowledge, intellection and work, we will give this rage the firmness and potency of rockets and bazookas, streaking fast against the assumed permanence of injustice. Through love for truth and beauty, we will create the world where the hawk and the eagle can perch, none displacing the other.

These ideas run through all his works. In *Broken Pots*, he presents vividly the physical and spiritual wasteland that comes before and after a war with its resultant human and material wastage. The broken psyche caused by the war can only be

redeemed through the power of love and friendship.

In *Marching to Kilimanjaro*, the poet following the footsteps of visionary, creative artists Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Olu Oguibe, Emeka Nwabueze and a host of other African literary artists disillusioned at the leadership of post-independent African countries, aims his satire with a clear view of a reformation of the oppressive and tyrannical system. All these men of letters in Africa unanimously agree that at the dawn of independence in every African country, black tin gods replaced white ones and caused untold economic, social and political stagnation of the continent. One poet presents the situation thus:

Freedom is strapped in cuffs again,
Human rights crushed to dust.
We're back to scratch
Groping anew for freedom's light
(Olusunle "Rights" 51)

The African prose narrative is not left without a voice calling for an internal revolution to be led by Africa's marginalised.

Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system of all its preying bloodthirsty gods and gnostic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving in creative labour....(*Petals* 344)

Ossie Enekwe's use of language is remarkable. His themes in

his poetry cannot be divorced from their language of portrayal. He brings to bear on his poems his mastery of different art forms: painting, theatre, directing and music. He describes people, things, places, situations and events with the minutest detail. He paints them with vivid colours. He pays attention to details, whether in his description of the battered and shattered broken humanity in *Broken Pots* or the alienated, traumatized, and damned of the earth in *Marching to Kilimanjaro*. The lyricism of his poems and the use of the distancing persona have been eulogized. In fact, reading Enekwe's poems feels like reading William Blake. Both share similar vision: that man can attain self-fulfillment if man-made obstacles are removed. They are both concerned with the underdogs, particularly the plight of children, in every society. They both use simple and descriptive language laced with imagery that stimulate different sense impressions. Enekwe, particularly, personifies objects, events and ideas he describes in such a way that they are conjured up in the reader's mind. He employs mythologies from diverse cultures the translates Igbo proverbs to express his world-view as H. G. Widdowson suggests:

At the heart of literary creation is the struggle to devise patterns of language which will bestow upon the linguistic items concerned just those values which will convey the individual writer's personal vision. (42)

Ossie Enekwe deviates radically from his predecessors that eulogized and romanticized the virtues of Africa as an unadulterated continent ravaged by the vicissitudes of slavery and colonialism. For example, the Negritude poet, David Diop, paints a utopian picture of the pre-colonial continent in Africa, excluding the several

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inter-tribal wars fought to establish the supremacy of its numerous kingdoms.

Africa, my Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
Africa of whom my grandmother sings
On the banks of the distant river
I have never known you
But your blood flows in my veins
Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the field....
(Nwoga 111)

He also departs markedly from those African poets that acidly attacked the racial discrimination against Negroes in Africa and in the Western world. A feminine voice from Africa in a soul-searching reflection informs her kith and kin of the indignities heaped on the Negroes. In Europe, they inhabit the worst environment, poorly dressed and menial jobs are reserved for them. The same fate awaits both dead and living Negroes: degradation and humiliation.

Beautiful Black Bodies
Changed into elephant-grey corpses,
Littered all over the western world,
Thrown across railway tracks for
midnight expresses to mangle
just a little bit more
Offered to cold flowing waters
Buried in thickets and snow
Their penises cut. (Adioo 62).

Ossie Enekwe is neither immune to Western exploitation of his homeland nor their brutality to his race; he does not criticize them

violently. However, in "Manhattan" (*Broken Pots*), he presents the racial discrimination around him. He shows his personal disagreement with the city's emotionless treatment of blacks.

Hate me every moment of your life
 So I can sleep in peace
 in your basements where mice
 and all uncivilized beings
 search for food in the ribs of the night.
 Give me white hate that yields itself day or night.
 Why should I sing for your love?
 me, a nigger-trash barking
 the bark of a black dog
 in a dark deserted alley. (2004:37)

Broken Pots concentrates on the pointlessness, wastage and loss of values that go with wars. The poet is not only dealing with the Biafran war, which he participated in as a young undergraduate. His vision about wars has a universal application, whether the World Wars, Liberian civil war, the genocidal war in Rwanda or the war in Iraq. The irreparable material and human wastage, and the irretrievable loss in the value system plague a society that goes through the pangs of wars. In short, the post-war situation in any society may best be described in the Yeatsian poetics:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. (Kermode 234)

The "Pot of Unity" which symbolizes the unity and the preservative force in a society when carried by visionless leaders without ideologies and a sense of direction, can lead to a civil war. Its first bearer 'faltered by the cliff' because he is perplexed by the 'groping populace' and his successor, being unsure of himself as he moves through the chaos created by his predecessor, stumbles and falls; the pot breaks and its content pours out. The journey motif, which exists in almost every culture illustrates the difficulty of holding a country together. The similes and personification point to the hesitancy and injudiciousness of holders of the reign of power who eventually lead the country to a civil strife.

Standing like an Iroko
terror hit him in the face
He stumbled and the blood-thirsty snakes
trailed off to the four corners,
boiling with venom. (35)

The civil consequence of the pot breaking and its content pouring out is that war engulfs all parts of the country. This must be the poet's apocalyptic admonition to emergent African countries that are basking in the euphoria of independence. The poet foresees that the new leaders have a Herculean task. In the opinion of Fanon, they owe their people a grave responsibility.

Diplomacy, as inaugurated by the newly independent peoples is not an affair of nuances, of implications, and of hypnotic passes. For the nations spokesmen are responsible at one and the same time for safeguarding

the unity of the nation, the progress of the masses
towards a state of well-being and the right of all peoples to
bread and liberty. (Wretched 61)

There is political, economic and social quagmire; there is the
blatant exploitation some parts of the entity, and where there is the
gross violation of the rights of citizens whose aftermath is
uncontrollable violence that ends in war.

The pot broke and the blood-thirsty snakes
trailed off to the four corners,
boiling with venom.

“Shadows of Osiris” wonders whether supernatural powers or
gods cause violence and wars. It explores this belief using 'Osiris',
the Egyptian ruler of the dead and the underworld. In this myth, the
god is supposed to die and resurrect in order to renew the fertility of
the earth. However, in this poem, the god must demand human
sacrifices to renew itself. Instead of the parasitic relationship that
exists in the original myth, the poet creates a symbiotic relationship
between earth and man. Human beings must be sacrificed for the
earth to carry out its primary responsibility of renewing or fertilizing
itself.

Once in every season
the earth that we feed
and sit on
asks for food
and we hurry
to do her will. (4)

The irony here is that man does not hesitate to carry out the wish of the gods. He wages ferocious wars with very dangerous weapons in battered and shattered battlefields. In the process of satisfying the demand of the supernatural force, he dies with his foes.

Forget fear,
fellow tillers
of the soil,
forget fear
as we cut fangs and lead
from the lungs, sharpen
on the crooked stone
the dull edges of our hearts
and rush across tattered fields
to meet our foes. (4)

We cannot but admire the poet's language, its lyricism is brought about by the chiming or the alliterative fricative /f/ in 'forget', 'fear' and 'fellow' and the repetition of 'forget fear' in two lines of the stanza. He calls the soldiers 'fellow tillers' and the devastated battlegrounds 'tattered fields'. Both descriptions enunciate the suffering and abandonment associated with wars. The fields are tattered because the youths who are supposed to till them are mowing down each other. Therefore, the image of a symbiotic relationship created in the first stanza vanishes in the second. There is a reversal of role as the earth is now a parasite on man instead of the other way round. As it swallows him up, man dies in the war as he 'cut fangs and lead' on his lungs.

In "Whatever Happened to the Memorial Drum", the poet continues with his idea of futility and wastage involved in wars

beginning with a roll call of heroes from different climes, times and faith: Achilles, Caesar, Hannibal, Sulliman, Chaka, Churchill, Hitler and Napoleon. Nevertheless, he warns humanity that despite the eulogies given to heroes, wars involved so much human wastage and destruction of hope.

Wars came and men died.
Hope rose, swayed and shat;
soldiers marched, kissed the dust,
and we made gods of them out of mud and copper. (10)

In "Broken Pots" where the collection derives its title, tales of his childhood and the rural environment paint the peaceful nature of his home. He personifies the natural and serene environment, which contrasts sharply with the violent humans that inhabit it.

The heavy bosomed hill
Lies close to our hut
And the winding narrow path
Stumbles into our farm.

Up above where squirrels prance
Or the little naughty birds twitter. (13)

The cold harmattan runs its fingers on their bodies 'like a drunken lover....' It is in this unviolated atmosphere that young virgins are won and their blood flows as a 'little fountain'.

As the naïve or innocent narrator describes his childhood experience, the reader understands that the pot is not the earthenware for fetching water in rural communities. It symbolizes the loss of virginity and innocence, in extension, the loss of dreams

and hope. The 'broken pots' symbolize the agony of broken humanity, especially the youth whose dreams and aspirations are destroyed by wars.

"Ripples of Apocalypse", recalls a time when the people lived in unity.

There was a time
before the death of the Moon
when apes lived in the forest,
time when all the malignant things
that crawl through grass and bushes
passed indifferent to our cause (19)

However, the harmonious co-existence is lost when 'love was buried'. The end of love marks the beginning of anarchy. "But now all the demons have returned with hatchets and spades, and lizards sharpen their teeth on our sinews" (19).

The consequence of this is the slaughtering of kinsmen and women, which he euphemistically calls 'A pogrom sweeter than orgasm'.

For on that day, the rivers, even the mighty ones
will turn to stone, and tress will rush like warriors
across the wilds, the ivory beads around
the necks of your maidens will turn to cobras. (19).

Enekwe's "No Way for Heroes to Die" seeks to immortalize Biafran war heroes. He uses the roll call tradition in Yeats's "Easter" to lament the ignominious treatment of heroes: Nzeogwu, Achibong and Atuegwu. Their corpses are defiled by not giving them proper burial. He foresees their demise 'foretells the apocalypse of a

muscle-bound people'. Their brutal killing and indecent treatment of their corpses violate the tradition of civilized societies and the principles enunciated in humanitarian law.

Some heroes are carved in stone for the blind to see.
Others disintegrate in the shifting seasons. (21)

In the third stanza of the poem, the poet-persona recollects how Biafran war heroes were murdered ignominiously:

Nzeogwu died like a lamb ripped apart by
invisible claws,
his body drawn in the dust that could not rise enough
to tell his people of his whereabouts.
Achibong's head dropped when a coward found heroism
in a hatchet chopping the head of a fallen soldier.
Atuegwu died in a dark cell while he waited for prosecution.
(21)

The pain is neither the unbecoming killing of the heroes nor the defilement of their corpses that are left to the vagaries of the weather nor their being unmourned and uncelebrated, but that 'hungry historians and starving professors' have trivialized their cause by turning 'their resolve into folly'. And that is why he laments it is not the way for heroes to die.

It is doubtless that the poet struggles with language and imagery to communicate emotions that seem to overwhelm him. In the *Broken Pots* collection, he chronicles his personal experiences in that war and those of others that he witnessed. Says Professor Edith Ihekweazu:

Ossie Enekwe's poem, simple with few exceptions cannot

be labelled as being influenced by any author or school. They are his very personal and own reactions to situations where ordinary language cannot absorb the shock of a shaking experience and where poetry is the rescuing medium. (Broken iv)

The poet foregrounds his groping to find the words that adequately portray the degradation and brutalization of the unsung Biafran heroes. In the first stanza he laments:

Carcass of heroism stung by rainbows,
Stung till blanched, it was abandoned by flies
Femur and joint juggled by the wind....

The lines create images of abandonment and degradation of the bodies of fallen heroes. They are deliberately left in the field for natural elements and insects to deal with them.

The second stanza also continues with the issue of deliberate abandonment and humiliation of fellow human beings.

their scattered bones jeer at the azure sky
and snared at the masked terrors of rainbow
Raindrops endow them with the colours
until they dissolve in the perpetual
moulding of the earth
Where the worms that groan endlessly in the mud
Tumble them through their guts.... (21)

In the third stanza the poet presents the violent and barbaric killing of three Biafran soldiers in terrible pictures of a violent end.

Nzeogwu died like a lamb ripped by invisible claws

his body drawn in the dust...
Achibong's head dropped when a coward found heroism
in a hatchet chopping the head of a fallen soldier
'Atuegwu died in a dark cell while he waited for
prosecution. (21)

A conglomeration of phrases: 'carcass', 'abandoned by flies', 'scattered bones jeer' and 'sneer', 'worms that groan endlessly', 'disintegrate' 'ripped', 'invisible claws', 'drawn in the dust', 'hatchet chopping the neck' and 'died in a dark cell' create mental pictures of destruction, suffering, sorrow, abandonment, cruelty and barbarism. The poet intentionally foregrounds his imagery to send a message to the reader on the barbarism and human wastage involved in the Nigerian Civil War.

In "The Defiant One", which he writes in the memory of the poet, Christopher Okigbo, he praises the immortality of Okigbo's poetry despite the fact he was one of the unsung soldiers on the Biafran side.

You lacked the drift
of the aged smoke
ubiquitousness in time
and colour, despite drought
and wreckage of the shrine. (22)

And in "To a Friend Made and Lost in War", the poet-persona painfully remembers the loss of a friend and a fellow soldier during the Nigerian War. He recaptures agonizingly the traumatic experiences and recounts his physical and spiritual journey to find a friend, who had escaped death from enemy weapons in three different locations in the heart of Biafra only to be knocked down and

hauled into a ditch by a 'hungry driver' in control of a 'tired truck'.

Here again Enekewe succeeds in using simple, clear diction to paint a horrendous picture of human suffering, despair, destruction and death. His knowledge of art brings to bear in his metonym the colour 'purple' to describe human blood and human life as 'soul'. The engine of every human being is the blood and soul of that individual and their escape from him means his death. He also uses the colour 'purple' to symbolize the death of a man of noble birth, Major-General Mamman Vatsa, implicated in an attempted coup d'etat under Ibrahim Babangida's military regime.

Also in "Mass for the Dead", the poet imprints a lasting impression on the reader's mind about the suffering, the degradation and the wastage in genocidal wars. In the lyrical persona's lamentation of the dead, the dying and living dead, the poet puts at the background the beauty and faithfulness of natural objects, which are in contradistinction with the human vagaries and vicissitudes during wars. The persona describes the ill-clad, ill-fed, poorly dressed and tired soldiers marching to and fro with their weapons of mass destruction. Meanwhile, the nature continues with her eternal cycle, unmindful of the violence that human beings unleash on themselves.

At sunset...
bloated edges of humanity,
abandoned mud forms of their mates,
drift from the red horizon
to march back tomorrow behind the Sun. (27)

The poet here again reiterates the indignities meted out to human beings during wars. Corpses are abandoned to the effects of elements of weather as in "No Way for Heroes to Die". The

persona presents the peak of the human suffering: the physical and psychological trauma that the parents and relations of these soldiers are subjected to. Instead of the valley being filled with serene, pastoral tranquility, it is a valley of death as the poet presents images of 'battered bells' that daily announce the demise of the youth, a long line of malnourished people whom he describes as 'living stare' trooping out to pray for the soldiers who are dying in the battlefield or for themselves who are dying from starvation.

Ossie Enekwe cannot be described as a poet that celebrates only the dark side of life: the suffering, horror, barbarism and death seen in wars. He points out that despite the vices seen in war, there is only one virtue that can heal the wound of wars. He believes that it is only unpolluted and immortal love that can quench the fire of hatred, bitterness and negative emotion that kindle wars. The reader gets a peep into this immortal love in "To a Friend Made and Lost in War", where the fallen soldier's friends show their friendship and love.

We only wanted to identify your portion
and stand over you awhile,
at east to prove to you
that you had friends. (24)

In emerging African countries the rulers appropriate the wealth of the nations to themselves and their families to the exclusion of the ruled. Olu Oguibe as quoted in *Celebrating God's Own Robot* calls these Africa's visionless and selfish leaders:

Patriarchs of crumbling quarters
President for life
Founding fathers who founded

Only their own estates. (Akpuda 43-44)

Enekwe shows himself as a humanitarian and humanistic poet who is disturbed by the welfare of the poor and the broken humanity. "Homeless in the City" with its ironical title directs a bitter satire on the privileged class in every society, especially those in the industrialized and civilized countries of Europe and America. The poem starts with an apostrophe in the first line of the first stanza: 'See the great wonders of civilization'. The reader naturally expects the wonders of either ancient or modern civilization, but finds:

Scavengers loose in the streets,
Picking old clothes, cans and bottles
Haunting for food
in the anus of the city.
(6)

Enekwe points out that the modern man violates the first generation of the basic or fundamental rights of other human beings. The destitute are the alienated and marginalized phenomena in industrialized, scientifically and technologically advanced, capitalist countries. This idea is advanced again in "Big Fish, Small Fish" where the poet directs his searchlight on the inequality that exists in every human society. The title is symbolic of the oppression and injustice that thrives in an egalitarian relationship. Its four stanzaic refrain brings out the idea of a parasitic eco-system.

Big fish eat small fish
Big men, small men
In the belly of the night. (Sallah 83)

Conclusion

Ossie Eneke is undoubtedly a humanitarian who is sympathetic to the plight of the traumatized, alienated and broken humanity. A situation, which is brought about either by the violence and wastage of wars or the parasitic relationship that exist in a strict social stratification. Wars will end where there is friendship and love. He advocates an internal revolution to end an unfair social and economic order. The missiles to be fired in the revolution are education and the appreciation of beauty and truth. In a language that is simple but replete with imagery and other figures of speech he brings out his unique vision of life in a new and egalitarian world order where peace and love will prevail.

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