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NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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AND WAITING FOR DAWN*

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THE POET A SOCIAL REFORMER:
A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON AKACHI ADIMORA
- EZEIGBO'S *HEART SONGS* AND
WAITING FOR DAWN

Clement Chukwuka Idegwu

Abstract

A critical look at oneself and environment shows that so many things are done wrongly. People, both in governance, and other spheres of life, behave in a way that leaves much to be desired. These behaviours mortgage the people's commonwealth. Hence the need for reforms engineered by poets which entails giving up bad habits or improving on ones behaviour either as an individual or a nation. Unfortunately, this can only take place when the people are aware of whom they are, the environment's beauty or ugliness, appreciate the need for a change for the better, and going headlong to act rightly. Poets create vivid images of their society which serve as a forum for sober reflection, and critical self and national evaluation. This paper examines this concept of the poet, a social reformer, exploring Akachi Adimora - Ezeigbo's collections of poetry: *Heart Songs* and *Waiting for Dawn* as anchor texts.

Keywords: Social reformer, mortgage, commonwealth, headlong and national evaluation.

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Introduction

Professor Akachi Adimora – Eziebgo is a poet who sincerely employs her poetry as a viable tool for political and social reforms. She critically x-rays the political and social spheres of the nation, exploring the beauty of being a person or nation of high repute, and the consequences of derailing from the ideal. She also explores the need for regeneration and how this could be attained.

This is the poet's way of fulfilling her role as a sensitive needle of her nation, affecting the political, economic and social life of her society and the re-education of the people in order to realise a positive change. Jide Balogun (2006) explicates that poets use "poetry as a vehicle for political mediation and social control" (78) and that art remains "a potent instrument to expose the dilemma of a nation whose leaders and the led have gone corrupt in all ramifications. Adjiboye Gabriel Ajadi (2020) corroborates the above by stressing that:

an African writer, therefore, whether at home or in diaspora, creates consciousness, a functional aesthetics which actually reduces the concept of "art for art's sake" to what Chinua Achebe rightly labels as "... another piece of deodorised dog shit" (sic) for African writer sees art as an instrument of justice in whatever form it may be produced (203).

The intention of the poet is to re-direct the society towards an ideal way of life both in governance and socio-economic spheres of life. The quintessence is to enlighten the people of the need to shun all forms of evil and to guide and give perception to the future generation as it compels them to explore their past, ascertain their present and project their future. This discourse centres on the state of the nation in governance and socio-economic aspects. It focuses on how the poet presents the reality of the moment and tries to reform the people for good. The primary texts for the discourse are Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Heart Songs* and *Waiting for Dawn*.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is anchored on sociological theory. Sociological critics see literature as a reflection of the socio-political and religious issues of the society among other things. Its beauty lies on its reflection of the mutual relationship between society and literature, M. H. Abrams (2005) states that:

Sociological critics treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned - in the choice and development of its subject matter, the ways of thinking it incorporates, its evaluations of the modes of life it renders, and even in its formal qualities - by the social, political, and economic organization and forces of its age. (298).

Adimora - Ezeigbo's two collections of poetry which are the primary texts for this analysis, are indeed perfect illustrations of the fact that literature remains inescapably conditioned by the socio-political forces of its age as postulated by Abrams above.

This discourse is indeed an attempt to explicate how the poet as a social reformer can conscientise and sensitise the people towards living a cultivated life.

The Poet a Social Reformer

Writers all over the world through their creative works x-ray the ills, the craze for materialism, the iniquitous acts and other forms of ignoble behaviours that bedevil the world. Writers like Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri and Adimora-Ezeigbo among others daily employ literature as an indispensable tool in their attempts to sanitise their society, thereby creating an ideal world. Adimora-Ezeigbo in *Heart Songs* and *Wait for dawn* creates vivid images of the happenings in Nigeria, how parents and their children engage in corruption and immorality, deliberately destroying our commonwealth. Hence, Myles Munroe (2007) talking about parenting stressed the need for character development. According to him:

The second goal of parenting is to reproduce the character of the parents in the children ...

We have succeeded as parents if people who know us can walk up to our children and say, "you remind me of your daddy," or "you're just like your mama"...

Parenting should have the goal of reproducing the behaviour of the parents in the child. (11).

Munroe (2007) stressed the dilemma of modern nations where poor parenting creates problems that are today noticeable in adults in all walks of life. Adimora - Ezeigbo in "Nudity" talks about the behaviour of the Nigerian ladies which leaves much to be desired.

Chei, which kind madness
catch women for present time!...

But, every year na him de thing get worse
Like fire way catch dry forest for Harmattan

From Lagos to Sokoto, you go see am
From Maiduguri to Port Harcourt...

Dem call am show belly, show bobby
Tits as tempter; boobs as booby trap.

You enter school, you go see am plenty
You wakka go church, na dere de ting bokwu.

Topless is to operation bare your breasts as
Striptease is sequel to show your pubic region. (40)

The poet as a social reformer whose ultimate aim is to ensure that the people extricate aspects of their behaviour that are inimical to their wellbeing, and improve on their personalities, exposes the errors in the current trends in ladies' fashion. She criticises dresses that expose womanhood as if they are articles which the sales representative is bent on impressing on the buyers to purchase. She talks about a situation where they "bare their breasts, show belly, show bobby tits as tempters, boobs as booby traps" (40) which is very much uncalled for and

unnecessary. The poet's anger also is based on the fact that nobody feels like putting the things right. Hence her question:

Why everybody no talk, just dey look
Like mumu wey just wake from sleep.

Nobody calls for order. Everyone behaves as if things are normal. No one has the moral courage to raise an eyebrow or could everybody be mad or enjoying the madness? Pathetically everybody looks "like mumu wey just wake from sleep" while,

every year na him de ting get worse
Like fire wey catch dry forest for Harmattan.

In Nigeria, anarchy reigns, for everywhere, things have fallen apart, apology to Achebe. The poet in her desire to reform her society tries to check the rise of criminal tendencies. Iyorwese as cited by Ohimekpen, E. Ekaniyere Benjamin and Igetei, Magdalene O. (2020) stresses that "... while politicians and soldiers appear to change the world through their action, the real lasting change comes through art which changes the world, the change of human consciousness." (88). This is a true axiom, "for when consciousness changes; no force on earth is strong enough to resist it" (88), as further observed by Hagher Ohimekpen and Igetei. In their argument about behavioural change, they explicate that "consciousness change invokes powerful emotional resilience and doggedness in human life. It is this change in consciousness" (89) and its desirability that make the reformer-poet to stick out her neck to mobilise by exposing the dangers in a society where women walk naked on their streets in the name of fashion.

The poet, as a woman of high repute, feels sad that some mothers are involved in indecent dressing:

De one wey vex me be say old woman dey do
Some go oyinbo country for lift up dem boobs ...

Even so, enough be enough. Dis nakedness
I say I don do! I don talk my own.

If daughter dey drown, mama dey drown
Na who go save de one and the oder? (40-41)

The beauty of the “poet’s” reformatory acts lies in the solutions they proffer among other things. Adimora-Ezeigbo in her poem proffers solutions in “Nudity”. She calls for the arrest of women who are found to walk naked in the streets as a way of curbing such excesses:

I wan make government arrest women
Wey cannot for house naked or half naked

Having done, with “Nudity”, it is pertinent to talk about “cultism”. Cultism is another vice that is ravaging Nigeria like a wild fire in a harmattan season. Adimora - Ezeigbo in “Cultism” bemocks a society where the youths that ought to be focused, handling the issues of life with the desired attention and care are all in cults, killing and maiming as if human beings are “Fulani cattle” or “Bamenda goats”

... I worry for today youths
Dem no do well at all; dem offence too much ...
... dis secret cult no be mistake
Na real crime, proper murder
As dem cultist just dey butcher people
Like dem be Fulani cattle, abi Bamenda goat.
(38)

The poet, in her analysis of the state of the nation explicates that most of the youths in cults, vandalism and other related crimes are the children of the high and mighty. Those who by their positions in society are supposed to influence the society for good. According to the poet:

Dem say dem papa na big man for de country
Pikin dem don spoil with plenty money
Dis people think say money be everything
Dem tink say dem money can buy anything
Name your price. Everything get him price

Like joke, like joke, de pickin dey drug
Dem smoke grass-igbo, wee

Kaikai dem drink like water sef
 Womanize pass sojaman and sailor. (38)

Here lays the crux of the matter and the need for reforms. The society is daily ravaged and destroyed by children of the big and mighty in government and the very rich in society. Munroe (2007) talks about the genesis of the problem thus:

Whether negative or positive, parenting is a powerful and inescapable influence. Everybody is parented by somebody. We each reflect in our lives and our attitude the nature, character, and behaviour of those who have influenced us the most. We tend to become like the persons who parent us and he or she may or may not be our biological parents. This is true for our children. You can be a father or a mother and still not be a parent, because a 'parent' is the one who has the most formative influence on a child's life" (16 - 17).

The poet therefore, employs her poems for socio-political transformation, mediation and control. The poet in her characteristic manner, which is an embodiment of committed poets proffers solution thus:

If I be President of dis country
 I go prosecute every cultist and him papa
 If him kill somebody, him and him papa go die
 If na manslaughter, na life sentence dem go get
 Yes, ke, if bird dey fly without perching
 Na so hunter go dey shoot without aiming. 38 - 39

The poet's solution marks the beginning of the success of the reformer's quest. She drums it on her readers and society that cultism is bad and that the consequences are grievous.

Robin Sharma (2017), posits that "you will never be able to eliminate a weakness you don't even know about. The first step to eliminate a negative habit is to become aware of it," (84). Sharma further argues that "once you develop an awareness about the behaviour you are trying to change, you will be well on your way to replacing it with one that is more helpful" (84). The poet's call for reforms could

be seen to be effecting the desired change. Dapo Akinrefon (2021), in his article titled Court Jails Professor for manipulating 2019 election results brings to the fore the emerging results of the poet's reformation of her society. According to Akinrefon:

Professor Peter Ogban, a returning officer in the 2019 general election in Akwa Ibom North West senatorial district has been jailed for election fraud ...

The court found him guilty of altering the results of the election to favour the All Progressive Congress, APC, against the People's Democratic Party, PDP.

He was sentenced to three years in jail for the offences. (12)

The state of the nation by this sentence, the fact that "He was prosecuted by the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC," (12), the judiciary, being non-partisan, and the president whose party was favoured by the falsification distancing himself, is a positive development. This also explicates that Adimora-Ezeigbo and other poets saddled with social reforms have indeed done well. The poet, stressing the need for a decent life style moves further to advocate such in "As man live na so man die."

As man live
Na so man die
Big man, small man
Death dey wait for am

Even sef you get power
Pass everybody
Or you get money plenty
Na so you go answer
Death call one day
De ting youdo go kill you
De life you live go finish you

The poet is emphatic in her call for a rethink. She wants every member of her society to carry out self-examination, thoroughly and objectively:

Ashawo work? Sometime life sweet am
But one day, one crazy customer go kill am
If not, one kain disease finish am
Like HIV/AIDS or VD

Since my mama born me
Even now I be grown man
I see say people die as them live
Na dis make me begin dey tink (52 - 53).

There is an understanding at the end of the poem. There is conscious re-awakening of the people that they must do what is right in order to be fulfilled. This is in tune with Josaphat Kubayanda's argument as cited by Ogaga Okuyade (2010). According to him:

Literary production and criticism actually is an integral part of the process of state formation, for at least the heart of the polemics is the search, for new politic orders for a continent that is viewed by intellectuals as desperately in need of social change. The writer articulates the ideas, words and images that relate to or undercut real power in order to construct a powerful literature alternative Utopia or a new sense of nationality. (3)

To state that Nigeria as a nation is desperately in need of a new social order is emphasising the obvious. Adimora-Ezeigbo, a committed reformer, sees the monumental failure of Nigerian leaders and the nation sliding into anarchy in all walks of life, and articulates the people's way of life. She articulates these ideas in 'words and images' with a view to reform and change the thoughts and lives of the people. She argues for a new mind-set which will positively advance the people's lives.

In "Sex machine", the poet, in furtherance of her thematic construct of reformation, explores another area where the country is sick, showing how highly placed men in society abuse girls sexually:

King Utunko
 You spoil people pikin
 Your own dey for cover
 You guard them like treasure
 But the woman you spoil no be few
 One day your offence go catch you

Mark my word
 De ting you give
 Na him you go receive
 You be sex machine
 Wey de shine
 You no dey tire?
 Soon you go backfire (56)

The poet in her characteristic manner, employs Pidgin English in order to reach all and sundry in her quest to reform the society. The act of sexual immorality is another canker worm that has eaten the entire fabric of our society. That a king - king Utunko - who ought to be an apostle of sound moral standard could be seducing or forcing innocent young girls to have sex with him is an abuse of office which is punishable under the law. The annoying aspect of it all is that while he spoils other people's daughters, he jealously guards his own like treasures. This is heartlessness. The poet in the last stanza appeals for caution:

End of talk
 A beg, reduce your pace
 Give wisdom some space
 In your womanizing mind

King Utunko is everywhere in Nigeria doing whatever pleases him for no one dares to question. Here, the reader is exposed to Africa's corruption which remains a manifestation of institutional and leadership failure of post-independence. A. K. Jain (2001) defines corruption as "an act in which the power of public office is used for personal gain in a manner that contravenes the rules of the genre." Hence in "Fallen Tyrant", the poet not only explores the reign of

tyrants, but reminds them that nemesis will always catch up with them. This is intended to make them redefine their lives for Roy Health as cited by Ogaga Okuyade (2010) argues that "it is our creative artists, our writers, painters, sculptors, and music that we must look up to rebuild a shattered nation ..." (5). It is public concern that it is wrong for fathers and grandfathers to be sexually involved with girls that are of the age of their granddaughters among other things.

Done with the analysis of Adimora-Eziegbo's attempts to reform her society in *Heart Songs*, it behoves us to x-ray some poems in her *Waiting for Dawn*. This is to further demonstrate that her thematic constructs in that collection are in furtherance of her reformative tendencies.

"Death by hanging" is one of Adimora-Eziegbo's poems in *Waiting for Dawn*. In this poem the poet talks about the death of "the song bird",

The guillotined verdict descended
 On the song bird;
 Death: by hanging
 Together to drink the cup with eight
 Seafarers
 The bard and his acolytes
 Together to die by a decree
 Issued by men of steel
 Executed with the speed
 Of a match flare. (22)

In this poem Adimora-Ezeigbo criticises the government of Sani Abacha for the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa who deployed his art to fight for the people of Ogoni. The death sentence on Ken Saro Wiwa was "executed with the speed/of a match flare", to prevent international communities from wedging into the matter. The poet explicates how during Abacha's regime

...death sentence
 Like textile bundle
 Traverses the horror road
 of Ogoni
 Unrolling echoes
 In faraway Iraq

Adimora-Ezeigbo compares the killing at Ogoni with evils of faraway Iraq, under Saddam Hussein. According to Kadir Ayinde Abdullahi (2017), a committed poet writes: "to promote the interest of the teeming alienated and oppressed members of his society through a polemical poetry that could awaken their consciousness" (76). Abdullahi further argues that "He seeks to mobilise the numerous voiceless, have-nots to the desire for social transformation" (76). The poet as a reformer is always on clarion calls, forewarning the society on what to do to avert danger.

In "Waifs and strays of the city" the poet, writes:

There was indeed a time
 Stray dogs and cats
 Paraded the streets of our orderly city,
 Foraging in the garbage bin.

The poet starts the poem by stressing a time past when strong dogs and cats "parade" the streets of our orderly city. There was once decorum in the people's lives. The owners of the stray dogs and cats failed to prevent their dogs and cats from foraging in the garbage bin, in spite of poets' condemnation of such acts. Hence

Today,
 The waifs and strays of the city
 Are children
 Homeless, abandoned

Human, litter, debris
 The boulevards, parks and gardens
 Turning them to dumps for human flesh

The poets' attempts to sanitise the people, were ignored. The leaders of the nation failed to keep to the warning and before they knew it: "fountains" that "lost their watery jets" soon:

Became dry holes for copulating beggars
 Creating more images of themselves
 Another miscarriage
 To join the army of destitute.
 (24)

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 (24)

The poet condemns a situation where most parents give birth to children the way pigs do. These children are left unprovided for. No education, not even primary education. Unfortunately for the nation these children turned beggars copulating at the "watery jets" that "became dry holes", creating or producing images of themselves; daily joining the army of destitute.

Adimora-Ezeigbo, in her characteristic manner, proffers a solution:

Let this be a clarion call:
 Take these children off the street
 Behead the monster before it strikes
 Quench the fire before it becomes a conflagration
 Remove the Monkey's hand from the soup pot
 Before it turns to a human hand!
 (24)

Though Nigerian leaders never heed the clarion calls, hence Boko Haram, kidnappers, bandits and armed robbers have taken over the nation, something could still be done if those in governance act quickly.

Waifs and strays of the city, done with, it behoves us to analyse "another miscarriage", which by its title shows that the nation has had series of miscarriages which make the poet's acts of redemption very imperative. In this poem, the poet x-rays the April 2007 national election which she terms "another miscarriage" - bad administration; mismanagement, a failure of administration or management.

You who lie dead
 Cold in a mass grave
 Lying there; unmarked and unmourned
 Tangled bodies under red earth
 Have you avenged your death?
 Who were the perpetrators of that
 Daylight murder?
 Mass murderers, whose murderous memories
 Lost remembrance of yesteryear.

The poet talks about Nigerian elections that are usually marred by mass murder. The 2007 national election witnessed mass murder of innocent citizens who were buried in mass graves, unmarked and unmourned. She talks about mass murderers whose murderous memories have lost remembrance of yesteryears. Hence the repetition of the evils of yesteryears. She also emphasises the deception in the land. The masses stupidly played "to the philosophy of togetherness:

Togetherness that kills memory
And challenged "Anyi bu ofu"
(20)

which is "a chance game." The annoying thing is that the: rabble-rousers murdered truth, and faith. The poet ends the poem on a note of disillusionment for the rabble-rousers murdered truth and faith "and incinerated the cross bearer/At crossroad without flowers" (20). They failed to take the desired decisions that would have saved the people. This state of the nation necessitates the poet's acts of sensitising the people. Uche Janet Ogbalu (2018) postulates that the 'beauty of poets and other literary artists lays in their ability to redeem a failed nation. According to her, poets use their work "to satirize those who deviate from the acceptable ways of the society" (18). She further argues that poetry is used ... in Nigeria as a medium for inculcating socially acceptable behaviours and in criticizing socially disapproved behaviours in the society.

This done, it is important to analyse "*Dark days are here*". In this poem Adimora-Ezeigbo talks about the apprehension that enveloped the nation due to a re-enactment of the terrors of yester years.

... a re-enactment
Of the terror of those earlier days
Meant to usher in our Democracy
But instead wove in a Death dance
We had a foretaste of our nightmare
In broad daylight.

This shows how terrible it was. That there is re-enactment of the reign of terror is an indication that things are very bad. The poet feels bad that the people are not courageous enough to ask for and consciously work for a society they earnestly desire. According to her:

What reason have we
For our inaction,
For our show of shame
Is the mongrel so important that
A bitch on heat
Cannot turn him on?
The castration of the he-goat
Emboldens the stray of she-goat.
We console your conscience:
A small dog does not bark at spirits.

The poet gives enough reasons why the people should ask questions. Truly the castration of the he-goat must embolden the straying she-goat. If the she-goat must not stray, the he-goat must not be castrated. Adimora - Ezeigbo writes to re-awaken the people's revolutionary consciousness and create the desired reforms. Her poems are in tune with literary artists' quest to reform and re-define their society. Emmanuel, A. M. (2007) posits that:

There, is that type of literature by which the writer rebels against social values. He is one that is sensitive to what is going on around him; one who wants a better deal for everybody. This is the kind of literature that becomes an instrument for social transformation. Its basic aim is to awaken the revolutionary consciousness in the majority of group of the society who are oppressed, exploited and deprived of good social living.

A situation where people console their conscience with the axiom that "a small dog does not back at spirits" (21), even when the spirits run mad is an aberration. It leads to more pains and agonies. Hence the timely warning;

Take heed,
Dark days spray their soot
None can escape the smeat. (21).

That is a timely warning from a committed poet who is conscious of her calling, having critically examine her society and is determined to stop the nations drift to anarchy. Saje U. (2016) corroborates Adimora-Ezeigbo's commitment by stressing that: "literary writers invariably examine the extent to which certain phenomena have permeated a social setting and their detrimental consequences on the corporate existence of the society or nation" (178).

"*Waiting for dawn*," which is the last for this analysis demonstrates the poet's belief that dawn will certainly come. The poet's ability to inculcate this mind-set on the people will go a long way in keeping hope alive. According to her:

It does not matter how long
Nightmares steal our sleep
It does not matter how far
We have been blown off course
Our ship adrift in the storm
Heading the wrong way

We will wait for dawn, tireless
Knowing it will usher in the sun
It comes with vitalizing rays
With powerful wings
Dawn stirs us awake
From the slumbers of the watchful
(84)

This, indeed is a reformers way of encouraging the people to be steadfast in their quest for a better society. Ogbalu (2018) in corroborating the argument of this paper stressed that "in modern Nigeria, there is a pressing need to generate national consciousness which will help in creating the ideal society that the nation sincerely hopes for.

Conclusion

This discourse carried out a sociological analysis of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Heart Songs* and *Waiting for Dawn*, two collections of poetry in which the poet deliberately explores the agonies of a nation adrift. The paper

through the application of sociological theory as a literary concept explicates the state of the Nigerian nation exploring both the national and the private life of the people in order to demonstrate the monumental decay that characterised the totality of what the people epitomise. That parents and children are immensely involved in the abysmal decay is instructive. Hence both must retrace their steps and take the path of wisdom. The poet employs both Pidgin English and the queens/standards English in order to heighten the level of sensitisation and conscientisation of the people. This is result oriented. Though, the reformer poet is making progress as the court jails a professor for falsifying election results, much needs to be done. In conclusion, "the poet, a social reformer..." re-echoes the need for an ideal life style both as a nation and as an individual. The climax of it all is the determination to tirelessly wait for dawn knowing fully well that it will certainly usher in the sun whenever it comes.

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