

No To Injustice: A Critical Appraisal Of Three Nigerian Poets

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Abstract

This paper argues that poets are the conscience of the nation and thus use their poems to vilify leaders and those who oppress people. Employing the sociological approach to the study of literature, the paper examines the use of poetry to equip the people to say no to injustice in whatever form it occurs. The paper analyses the poetry of Ochia Ofeimuna, Tayo Olatoye and Remi Raji. These Nigerian poets, through their poems, empower Nigerians to say no to injustice in order to create an ideal society where servant-leaders govern the affairs of the people for the good of all. Through their poetry, Nigerians are called to be courageous to say no to injustice for it is only in this state of being that leaders, at whatever level, will render selfless services, and improve the plight of the common man. This study, therefore, explicates the beauty of poetry in helping man to redeem himself and his society by being courageous enough to resist all forms of injustice.

Keywords: Injustice, servant-leaders, conscience, ideal society.

Introduction

In every age, literary artists play salient roles in the socio-political, economic, religious and cultural re-education of the citizenry in order to ensure a positive change. As the conscience of the society, Nigerian poets employ their arts to conscientise and sensitise the people in order to ensure that they are well guided in the process of leading Nigeria to a glorious destination. Poems, plays and novels are the literary artists unique ways of certifying political, socio-economic, religious and cultural matters of the society. The areas the writer frowns at or wishes to celebrate become his thematic construct. Hence, the full appreciation of his or her endeavours.

It is important to stress that poetry plays a primordial role in shaping and developing the

character of an individual. It perfectly transmits the human values and knowledge that are necessary for peaceful co-existence. Indeed, it forges very strong links between people irrespective of their cultural affiliations. This is why poetry remains an integral part of the humanities. Poetry helps peoples to better conceptualise injustice, create ways of coping with it while employing all available legal means to bring it to an end. The cathartic role of poetry remains an indispensable companion for creating awareness of the citizenry.

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how poets educate, give vision, and guide or direct the people to know that they have a right to be angry and protest against bad governance and situations that are

inimical to the collective well-being of their people. It is also to make them know that they can put an end to such a government. Accordingly, the concern of this article is to examine the poet's attempts to put things right in Nigeria bearing in mind that the poet's themes are "germane to the concerns of his community" (259) as Chinweizu et al sum it up. Ofeimuna, Olafioye and Raji preoccupy themselves with the aim of re-ordering Nigeria as this research demonstrates. Olafioye (2000) articulates this when he posits that "the poet must use silent creativity to speak volumes of reasonable noises to defeat misguided blue prints of governance" (166). This paper therefore analyses Ofeimuna's "How can I sing?", "Resolve" "Benin Woman"; Olafioye's "One day", "Christmas bonus: in the Songhai Sinatte"; and Raji's "This land ticks me", "My soul is stitched (for Kunle Ajubade", "An underground poem for Jack Mapanje".

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is anchored on the sociological approach to literary criticism. It talks about the relationship between literature and society which is dynamic and complex. It interrogates the social context of a literary work, the relationship between a work of art and the readers or audience and how literature and society affect each other.

Blessing Diala-Ogumna (2012) contributing to the discourse on the importance of literature to nation building avers that:

every oppressive system has witnessed a literature of protest that uses themes of violence and conflict within the writers' ideological framework. It is the desire to change oppressive human history to place man in a better position to understand his environment and

subsequently harness his resources to boost his living condition that makes artists protest subtly or violently against factors that inhibit their quest. (115).

This argument is very relevant to this discourse on the poets re-engineering the people, and equipping them with what it takes to say no to any form of injustice. Poetry helps the audience or people to understand their environment, how to harness what is available to them to better their living condition in terms of their body, soul and spirit and how to violently or subtly protest against whatever hinders them from being fulfilled.

Emmanuel A. Nkaanem (2007) corroborating Diala-Ogumna's position argues the poet does not only rebels against societal values, the poet is the "... one who is sensitive to what is going on around him, one who wants a better deal for everybody" (87). He further avers that "this is the kind of literature that becomes an instrument for social transformation. It's basic aim is to awaken the revolutionary consciousness in the majority of groups of the society who are oppressed, exploited and deprived of good social living condition" (87).

Poetry indeed awakens the revolutionary consciousness in man or in the majority of groups who are being oppressed by those who are supposed to be servant leaders. Adebayo Williams gives credence to the basis of this research by opining that:

African writers have resisted oppression and injustice in the continent with great force and

courage. Literature is fundamentally incompatible with tyranny. In its purest state, literature is subversive of authority and authoritarian rulers. Its joyous and spontaneous celebration of life, its near anarchic contempt for regulation and regimentation makes it the most natural enemy of dictatorship.

While the dictator seeks a total domination of men and society, literature seeks their total liberation (350).

The truism in Williams position is that the three poets for this analysis are out "to evoke, to awaken in the observer, listener or reader's emotion and impulse to action or opposition ..." (6) as Raji would put it, "The product of a writer's pen both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade us to take certain attitude to reality. The persuasion can be a direct appeal through influencing the imagination, feelings and actions of the recipient" (4).

Analysis of Ofeimum's poems

Ofeimum's portrayal of humanity predicaments is indepth and relevant and thus deserves critical attention. The call for a decent society where leaders serve epitomises the ideal state of life usually forms the basis of his thematic construct.

In "How can I sing?" Ofeimum echoes the poet's creating in man the audacity to say no to any form of injustices. In the first stanza, the narrative persona says:

I cannot blind myself to putrefying carcasses in the market place pulling giant vultures from the sky (123)

The poet as a seer, prophet and an advocate explicates the spheres of life where putrefying carcasses are in the market place. Corruption and all forms of evil are everywhere today. Evil is done in broad day light today, and nothing is done about it. In the poem, the narrator says:

How can I sing when they stuff cobwebs
in my mouth Spit the rheum of their blank
sense of direction in my eyes (123)

The poet graphically shows how the rulers destroy the people by manipulating them. To 'stuff cobwebs' in one's mouth and 'spit the rheum of their blank sense' of direction in ones eyes is to ensure that the person's vision is blurred and the mouth closed. This creates perpetual servitude as the person(s) loses the use of the senses. This is how Nigerians are daily wasted. The narrative persona moves further to ask:

-who will open the portals of my hope in
the desultory work (123).

This is a thought provoking question: The issues of life raised here are salient. It is disturbing to note that the rulers make the citizens live a of planlessness and purposelessness. The poet explicates his love for Nigeria and the audacity to say no more injustice thus:

But I cannot blunt my feelers to cheapen
my ingrained sorrow I cannot refuse to
drink from the gourd you hold to my lips
A garland of subversive utterances should
answer these morbid landscapes my land,
my Woman.

The narrative persona's love for his nation is likened to a man's love for a woman. He talks about "a garland of subversive utterances" and "morbid landscapes" which explain the

revolutionary tendencies that must take place for the society to be what it should be. Jude Agho (1999) corroborates this assertion by stating that:

There has emerged in Africa a tradition of literary creativity that is confrontational, declamatory and generally protesting in tone. The embodying culture of the contemporary post-colonial period is thus predicated on the need to educate the masses of the African people, drawing their attention to the inequality inherent in their exploitation by the members of the political class (73).

The education of the masses helps greatly in advancing the culture of the audacity to say injustices must end in Nigeria. Kolawole Ogungbesan (1979) avers to Agho's postulation when he posits that Soyinka's presidential call to African writers to demonstrate that they have a vision shows that he sees the literary artist as a redeemer. He believes that the writer possesses an inner light unavailable to the masses of his people and that it is his duty to use this inspiration and insight to guide his society towards a beautiful future (7 – 8).

This, Ofeimim has craftily done in his poems. The words of Alex La Guma (1972) in an interview with Robert Serumaga that he writes "to expose the situation with a view of changing peoples ideas about what is happening ... their acceptance of the idea so that they can move forward to take down the barriers which exist ..." (93) are of great import here. Ofeimim's poems are tools he employs to explain to Nigerians and his readers how their lives are, whatever bondage they are in, and how to free themselves from such.

In "Resolve," Ofeimim speaks to the conscience of his readers about the state of the nation and the need to do something tangible about it.

To placate those the night surprised in their noons; those we loaded with lead; Push to dungeons and makeshift graves; to absolve our irretrievable selves from the badger of willow-whips lurking in time

We need no mourners in our stride, no remorse, no tears.

Only this: Resolve that the locust shall never again visit our farmlands. (125)

In the poem above, the poet talks about those who died in their prime, "those the night surprised in their noons," when they least expected death. They were those killed for protesting and calling for reforms, and an end to SARS in Nigeria. They were those who were killed at Lekki on 20th October, 2020 for no just cause. "Those we loaded with lead; Pushed to dungeons and make shift graves" (125). Ofeimim's narrative here is akin to the massacre of peaceful protesters during the end of SARS and other reforms in Nigeria on Tuesday, 20th October, 2020.

The poet in his task of conscientising and sensitising the people, cautions that a great damage has been done to the people of Nigeria. Hence, the need to resolve "that the locust shall never again visit" their farmsteads, nation and society. This is a product of the impartation of the audacity to say no to bad governance, injustice and exploitation of the masses which has been Ofeimim's thematic construct. Stephen Solanke (2013) acknowledges this point by stressing that "the resolve must

always be not to allow the negative to control the nation and its nationals but if this happens then it must be ousted – either from the leadership or the led” (60). R. O. Fasn corroborating states that “the poetry is combative and the poet neither gives nor takes quanten” (153) and the basic emotion that defines such poems is “anger with the Nigerian ruling class” (153) because of their misrule.

In “Benin Woman,” Ofeimur’s reminds his readers of Emotan of ancient Benin Kingdom, a woman bold enough to reject injustice and gave her all for a just cause for which she is remembered today. Ofeimur reminds his readers of the bravery of their ancestors and urges them to follow suit, and reject bad governance.

You become for me, the symbol of my
snuffed-out love, (cheap mushroom for a
famished night’s palate) a totem of
innocent death

The speech of your eurythma transforms
my erstwhile derision to worship; And I
suddenly realize You put a stopped on
your road to oil the rusted joints of bittered
emotions (53).

The poet talks about the courage to resist man’s inhumanity to man, and urges for a re-enactment of Emotan’s act in modern Nigeria:

... how I wish some woman now
would bear your name a new, for my sake
But your sky inspires awe...
I dance to your song of bronze (53).

The narrative persona’s dancing to Emotan’s songs of bronze is an indication of the poet’s success in inundating the people of the records

of redeemers like Emotan. It is an act of inspiration. Sola Owonibi (2014) validates the stand of this paper by emphasising that “literature serves as a means through which the links between the past, the present, and the future are highlighted as a way of facilitating a positive oriented growth of society.” (290). The readers’ awareness that people danced before now will definitely inspire them to do same today. Femi Osofisan lends his voice to the argument when he states that literature is “to serve as a means of enlightening our people, to help increase their awareness to wean them from the dark pit of false consciousness” (18). In summing Ofeimur’s disposition in his poetry, it is important to acknowledge Ismail Bola’s (2012) update that “for Ofeimur, the major aim of a poet, especially a Nigerian poet is ... upholding some form of political right: the blunt denial and refusal of the human mind to all falsehood” (122).

Analysis of Olafioye’s poems

Olafioye is a poet devoted to the task of redeeming Nigeria and this he demonstrates in his poetry. In “One day” he talks about using poetry to change the world order. In the first stanza, the reader sees the poet’s ability to penetrate and co-ordinate the human hearts through navigating the hearts as a compass: “One day I’ll sail the troubled sea/using my heart as a compass.” (22) The poetic persona employs the refrain “someday I’ll” and “one day I’ll” to stress the plagues the nation is afflicted with and how the healing can take place. The first line of each of the eight regular stanzas of two lines begins with either of the refrain:

One day I’ll sail the troubled seas.
Someday I’ll rid the troubled world of
AIDS

The poet in the above lines/refrain convincingly stresses the various areas of life, he intends to put right by his art. He persuasively creates in the mind of his readers the boldness to strive towards evolving an ideal world of their choice. Ordinarily, the people will be afraid to raise an eyebrow but the poet creates in them the ability to do the needful as would be seen in the END SARS protests.

In "Christmas bonus: in the Songhai Sinate," the poet discusses the Nigeria where the National Assembly could be termed a parliament of idiots which incidentally is the title of this collection of poems. The first stanza is a picture of gloom.

Never before has daylight been so dark
The eclipse of people innocence
Homeland spirit drenched in hemlock and
stench Rancid all over the sphere. (30)

The poem begins on the note that something terrible, never seen in the history of the nation has occurred. The poet, the committed patriot he is, feels pained and advances the causes of the unprecedented darkness which witnesses "the eclipse of the people's innocence,"

Ogidan, the Sinate patriarch Harnessed
22mil naira for his vault His deputy,
Aburaker, only 17mil with bravado some
hefty crumbs for marginal groundlings the
Songhai worker – His usual dose of
placebos and poverties (30).

While the Sinate patriarch or president and other legislators corruptly enrich themselves, the workers and masses have their usual doses of placebo and poverty. Chambers 21st Century Dictionary sees placebo as "a substance that is administered as a drug but has

no medicinal content, either given to a patient for its reassuring and therefore beneficial effect or used in a clinical trial for a real drug." (105). So, if 22 million naira was used to build a mere storage facility, one can imagine the degree of valuables that can be stored in such a vault.

While the Senate President and his men loot the treasury daily, the Nigerian workers are placed on placebos which is not medicinal and have no positive effect on their well-being. This is why it takes a Nigerian worker, whose monthly salary is N18,000 one thousand six hundred and thirty-eight years, to earn the yearly salary of a Nigerian Senator.

The poet further talks about "how the Sinate always manure its farmland" and "Not the welfare of the masses" (30). He poses a question:

One poser though – how much will Jesus
Christ collect from Songhai tax payers for
his own birthday? (30)

This is how the people in power waste the nation's wealth on their birthdays. It is instructive to state that the legislators in the national assembly enrich themselves at the detriment of the masses. This is an abuse of office. The agony of it all is that majority of the masses are ignorant of how much they are exploited. The few who are aware are afraid to question the rationale. It is therefore, imperative for the poet and prophet to sensitise the citizenry.

Analysis of Raji poems

Raji is a committed poet, whose poetry is an embodiment of the socio-political happenings in Nigeria especially the period of military dictatorship and the infantile democracy. In "Webs of Remembrance", Raji talks about the

writers and intellectuals who were victims of military dictatorship in Nigeria and Africa in general.

"This land tickles me", discusses how bad one feels about Nigeria, a country naturally endowed with human and natural resources.

This land tickles me like a new love
Sweet-bitter pie of pleasure grilled in pints
of pain (17)

The poetic persona talks about being tickled like a new love but not one which provokes a light pricking or tingling laughter or sensation which involves a lovers' touch. Instead of the beauty of a new love, what occurs is "sweet-bitter pile of pleasure" that is highly "grilled in pints of pain". The poet graphically presents this state of pains. The poet further talks about the society being filled with "Naked gods".

Naked gods roll on parade on grounds on
rots and starched rust where men wear
bravery on tattered stripes.

Raji explicates that those who parade themselves as messiahs are men who have rotten conscience. The poet becomes very angry when he states:

This land strikes me like the shooting
range when the priest prays for a column
of criminals

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the poet talks about a new violence of theories which begins in the market place and the fact that one cannot "forget the land's vanity, its melody of stones/this land tickles me without end". The poet's emphatic exposition of the hopelessness of the state of things is a call for action, the desired audacity to say no to the continued acts of injustice. Anyone who reads this poem immediately begins to feel bad about a society that exploits its citizens. This feelings

over time graduate into a moment of boldly questioning the status quo that perpetrates injustice and ensures the reign of corruption.

This land tickles me so soft, so hard and
soft I cannot forget its vanity, its melody
of stones The land tickles me without end
... (17).

The fact that the tickling renders "its melodies of stones" and it is "without end" espouses the predicament of the people. Despair is the word. Raji's pictorial presentation of the state of the nation, and the despondency is deliberate and purposeful as it is meant to evoke in the reader questions such as: What do I do? What do we do? How did we get to where we are today? No! This must stop. There is need to find solution to the present quagmire. The deliberate actions of Nigerian soldiers who have held this nation hostage for a very long part of the history of Nigeria and the political class that has been in power since 1999 have corruptly enriched themselves at the detriment of the nation. The actions of Nigerian leaders affirm Raji's pessimism when he stresses: "The land tickles me without end" The tickling that does not end remains a constant reminder that all is not well with the nation and will not be well until the people decide to act. The poet as seer presents the desired road map for the liberation of the people.

Raji in "My soul is stitched (for Kunle Ajibade)" explicates the audacity to reject injustice. Having talked about the tickling without end in "this land tickles me", the poetic persona decides to "break the emperor's:

testicles in a nutshell crash of screaming
songs they covered my head with ash, hot
as hell because I rode in a paddle of
proverbs against the aching currents of an
environs sea they tore my sails and drown
my voice (26).

The boldness and confrontational nature of the persona is not in doubt. This indeed is the audacity, the courage to confront evil headlong. Though the persona pays the price such as: "they covered my head/with ash, hot as hell (lines 4 -5), they tore my sails/and drowned my voice (lines 9 - 10) and, they scattered my flesh/to dragon streams ..." (lines 15-16), Raji in line with Nkaanem (2007) postulation that a committed poet "rebels against the social order that is inimical to the well-being of the people, thereby making his poem serve as an instrument of transformation." (87).

Years ago, during the inglorious regime of Sani Abacha, Saro Wiwa and the other Ogoni 8 were killed for daring to speak. Late Dele Giwa, the then editor-in-chief of Newswatch Magazine was killed through a letter bomb for wanting to talk about Gloria Okon. In spite of the killings and imprisonment meant to silence the writer, Raji, through the poetic persona unequivocally states: "But because my soul is stitched/to rivers of songs/they cannot kill the truth/of my liquid/lore .../I've grown deep/deep against the toxic ride/of their feudal wreckage. My soul is stitched to the fate of sonorous rivers".

The poet's audacity surfaces when he dares to tell the world the state of our nation and the beasts Nigerian leaders are.

Because I caught our drunken gods
In a beastly pose and sold the canvass to
sneering mortals (26)

Raji in "An underground poem (for Jack Mapanje)" continues with the crux of this discourse. He talks about how much the masses have been exploited and how the people can put an end to the injustices in the society.

In the 5th, and the last stanzas of the poem, the persona states:

I speak against gods who refuse to burn or die or sink in their own flames.

Against gods whose flesh refuse to melt or dance to fires of simple songs all of me in a household of canine bravery (27)

The persona's audacity is very glaring here. He speaks against the evils of his time. In lines 1 - 2, the persona states: "My body is a temple/of angry music". He talks about the fact that he cannot be killed. He is angry against misrule, corruption and other social vices being perpetrated by the leaders. A lot of people who dare have been killed.

A maddening echo fills my soul I'm the sole survivor in this hole where melodies are made on platters of skulls. (27)

This stanza talks about the narrator being the only survivor and unfortunately still lives in a hole for fear of being destroyed. Nothing good takes place in a society where the beautiful ones are daily liquidated. It is pathetic when he stressed that melodies are made or celebration are put in place to honour the destroyers of the nation. These are the realities of modern Nigeria.

This indeed is what Raji tries to do in these three poems employed for this analysis. What Raji has tried to do here is "to evoke, to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulse to action or opposition ..." (6).

Conclusion

Nigeria, a country richly blessed in human and natural resources yet it very little to show after sixty-one years of independence. Unfortunately for Nigerians, while her political class, the oppressors, always manipulate the

people in all walks of life, nations far less naturally endowed with resources strive genuinely to make measurable progress, the people watch the country's "inexorable slide to chaotic irrelevance" as Igiebor (2000) would put it.

That this ignoble act, a continuum, makes it mandatory for literature to draw attention to the unfortunate gap between the haves and have nots which seems to increase geometrically daily. The poets for this analysis have effectively used their poems as a weapon against the denials of basic human rights among other things. The dividends of the

degree of their articulations of the chaotic nature of the society, and the re-awakening of the people's consciousness could be seen in the recent End SARS PROTEST amongst others. It is evident that with the re-awakening of the slumbering Nigerians to the act of agitating against bad governance, and the audacity to have persisted in their protests for now show that the long walk to freedom may have begun.

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