

IMAGING HISTORICAL REALITIES IN ODIA OFEIMUN'S POETRY

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Abstract

Literature mirrors the social, economic and political realities of the society that produces it and Modern Nigerian Poetry is no exception. Modern Nigerian poetry has proven to be a useful tool in the documentation of happenings in its society. By historicising the socio-political traumas of the Nigerian people, Nigerian poets have exposed and criticized the dehumanization and degradation of its people. The paper studies three of Ofeimun's poetry collections: A Boiling Caracas (2008), Go Tell the Generals (2008) and I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice (2008), as historical documents with which Ofeimun x-rays varieties of evil bedeviling the Nigerian society. Ofeimun images the experiences of oppressed Nigerians during the era of military rule. Also, the disastrous effect of oil discovery and its exploration in the Niger Delta regions were condemned and revealed to be tyrannous. The study affirms the role poetry plays in enlightening its readers because to know your future is to know your past.

Keywords: literature, poetry, Niger Delta, society.

Introduction

Modern Nigerian poetry is highly committed to the socio-historical realities of the Nigerian state. From the pioneering works of Dennis Osadebay, the Euro-modernist efforts of Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara and J.P. Clark, to the contemporary vision of Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Okinba Launko, Funso Aiyejina, Femi Fatoba and others, modern Nigerian poetry has proved

to be an art bearing a high level of social commitment. Modern Nigerian poetry, from its inception is a product of experience and expression of the socio-political and historical realities that impacted developments in Nigeria.

From colonial era to the present, modern Nigerian literature has faithfully followed and mirrored the historical transitions and experiences of Nigeria and her people. It is the utilitarian consciousness of modern Nigerian literature that informed Achebe's (1975) declaration that "art-for-art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit"; stressing that "art is, and was always in the service of man" (19). Irele (1988) recognizes the historical mood of modern African literature when he asserts:

There is such a direct correlation between the contemporary experience of Africa and modern African literature in European languages that the criticism devoted to this literature has inevitably come to be determined by this overriding historical factor. Given the fact that modern African literature is in every sense a product of the colonial situation—both as a reflection of the problems of living which this situation has posed for us and as an indication of the pervasive reach of the modes of expression the colonial impact has established among us—it was natural that this literature should have been analyzed and discussed in terms largely of its referential value. (152)

The above submission shows that Modern African literature recreates the historical experiences of the people. In literature, historical realities mean the artistic re-creation of historical events, moods and temper. Here, Ofeimun's poetry is seen as a vehicle that conveys indices of Nigerian history. Besides the resources of language, Ofeimun's poetry often mirrors the social, political, economic and

cultural contexts which produce it. Contemporary Nigerian poetry and in particular, Ofeimun's poetry has proved to be a reliable means through which we can recollect our past which is creatively documented in poetic-narration.

Theoretical framework

New Historicism was a school of literary theory which consolidated critical theory into easier forms of practice for academic literary theorists, it came of age in the 1990s. Literature, Greenblatt (1982) claims "mirrors" the era's beliefs, but from a "safe distance." He explains that although the distinction between artistic production and the politics of the time exists, it is no longer intrinsic to the texts because they are "constantly redrawn by artists, audiences, and readers" (6). It involves an intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts.

Narrating Sociological and Environmental Tragedies in the Selected Poems

Sociological and environmental tragedies in the Nigeria are narrated in the poetry of Ofeimun, with the aim of raising a conscious question on the value of humanity. The poeticism of these experiences helps to foreground the debasement or degeneration which the human value has been made to face right from the 20th century to the present.

In "Memory II", Ofeimun laments the decades of plunder in the Niger Delta landscape. The Niger Delta question is a vexatious issue. Oil and gas from the Niger Delta region account for over ninety percent of Nigeria's export earnings, yet the region wallows in abject poverty, and its environment suffers degradation as a result of oil exploration activities. There are vast networks of aged and unsafe pipelines that crisscross neighborhood, farmlands and waters in the Niger Delta, and they threaten all forms of lives with their fragility. A deplorable case occurred in October 1998, when over 1,000 peasants

and other innocent souls perished in the pipeline vandalism inferno in Jesse, Delta State; and this tragedy is ranked as the worst oil-induced holocaust in the world (Darah 2006). Hence, Ofeimun laments:

We knew
only after the explosions in our creeks
we'd been sitting for centuries
on soggy wealth that was also death.

We'd forgotten the songs
of the madwoman of the creeks
who said to look the last on crocodiles
salamanders and iguanas
like dinosaurs, in a blaze of oil

(Go tell the Generals 23)

Undoubtedly, these lines re-echo the decades of pillage in the Niger Delta area. It is a proof of Ofeimun's historical consciousness and social commitment. The destruction of Odi and Gbaramatu as well as the tragedy of Ogoni quickly come to mind. As a poet-historian, Ofeimun takes this idea to a crescendo in "Children of the Creek" which resounds the various protest movements birthed in the Niger Delta as a reaction to socio-political infidelity:

The children of the creeks
cried for hands to raise
the sky that loomed
too close to the earth
they prayed for the old days
of timber and palm oil
to return to the mangroves

...

The children of the creeks

yelled in searching electrodes;
as evergreen trees roasted
in the haggle of loot-sharers
who stalked the Delta
for the very last overcoming
of the Lower Niger

(Go tell the Generals 25)

In “Ken”, Ofeimun historicizes the dehumanization caused to lives as a result of the activities of the oil conglomerates. The horrible murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Abacha dictatorial Government on the 10th of November, 1995, recalls the history of injustices and dehumanization to the Niger Delta region. Ken Saro-Wiwa was a writer-activist who fought tirelessly for the survival of the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa personified the freedom of the Ogoni people; and by extension, the Niger Delta people. As such, his death is a great tragedy:

Now when they speak of the Niger Delta
they will neither sleep nor cover
they will meet the spirit of Ogoni
a whistle locked in trees, rocks and waters
unrolling forests from incarnate agony:
to dress creeks with will that never withers
hope that traverses every dispensation
to arrive, generation after generation
with an acid vow stronger than machine guns
love of hearth tougher than blood oaths

(Go tell the Generals 31)

From the above poetic-narration, we are made to understand that Saro-Wiwa’s death is a manifestation of the various biocides perpetuated against the natives of the Delta by the Federal

Government and Oil Multinationals. Besides, the history surrounding the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa unmasks the brutality of Abacha's tyrannical government.

Narrating Socio-Political Failures and Injustices in the Selected Poems.

Ofeimun gives a proof of his historical consciousness by engaging political history with his poetry. Through his poems, Nigerian socio-political history is narrated in an appealing manner. He narrates the sad experiences of socio-political alienation, revealing indices of hunger, enslavement, death and protest etc. Cases of post-independence betrayal, anger and disillusionment are clearly presented.

It is this historic-narration of the experiences of political unfairness that informed "To Beach" where the persona affirms:

Let there be dancing on the street!
Said marchers for democracy of baboons!
Tired of the parliament of monkeys
Stomping as Putschists, streaking out
From tree branch to bridgehead
To lock court houses against judges

(A Boiling Caracas 10)

In "We Welcome You, General", Ofeimun recounts the bitterness and dehumanization perpetuated by military dictators in Nigeria. The history of military rule is that of violence and debasement of human values. The masses show their distastes to military dictatorship. Ofeimun reveals some of such protest movements:

"We welcome you, General", we marched
Through the chatter of weaverbirds
converging where hope, in imperfect supply,

put an auctioneer's label
upon truths we all swore by;

we welcomed the reformers who walked
taller than elephant grass, in beret and fatigues
through happy crowds rented for one last dance
to humor a scrambled decade of retrenched workers

'We welcome you General' we chanted;
free to line the routes of passing tanks
with flag-waving kindergarten on forced holidays
we welcomed the generals with garrulous vowels
longer than queues baiting essential commodities

in a graffiti of anger and anguish
stretching from food stalls to bustops
from sea-swelling Delta to Sahel-Stricken Yobe
(Go tell the Generals 2)

The lines above are redolent of the military dictatorship of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and General Sani Abacha. From 1985 until 1998 Nigeria was governed by two military dictators, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985- 1993) and Sani Abacha (1993-1998). This period was disastrous for Nigeria, as Babangida and Abacha helped to deepen and entrench patterns of corruption and human rights abuse which the country has not been able to escape from.

In the poem "We Welcome You, General"(*Go tell the Generals 2*) , Ofeimun recreates the kind of suffocating, tensed and debased atmosphere created by military dictatorship in Nigeria. Similarly, in "Angels of the Lootyard", Ofeimun historicizes the

masses dissatisfaction with military and civilian dictatorships. The poem reveals issues of mal-administration, a major problem facing the Nigerian nation since independence.

One foot forward to a democracy of baboons
one foot backward to a tyranny of angels
secured by a campaign of ants
whose megaphones goad silence
for poets to forget their metaphors
in groundings with party secretaries
and Area Fathers

(*A Boiling Caracas* 12)

The preceding submission reveals the failure of civilian and military rule in Nigeria. The poet goes ahead to sound the history of injustice and deprivation suffered by the natives of the Delta, revealing the current amnesty program that is used to placate the angry militants in the Niger Delta region. This tenor is evident in the following lines: “To settle briefs in streets marches and demos/ They paid marchers to vacate shop floors/Factory yards and oil rigs” (*A Boiling Caracas* 12)

The poet who reflects on the history of failures in the Nigerian political leadership, laments: “Always, one foot forward/a second in regress” (13). Armed with the historical developments of the Nigerian socio-political space, Ofeimun expresses his distaste for the Nigerian political leadership. It is Ofeimun’s taste for history that informs his submission in “Bolivar Square” when he avers: “history tired of waiting, ogles repetition/right or wrong what does it matter” (*A Boiling Caracas* 2). Here, he expresses himself as an objective analyst who x-rays the history of the ugly and beautiful.

In “After the Coup”, Ofeimun laments the consequences of coup plotting in Nigeria usually leave the masses unhappy. The phrase

‘we the people’ signifies that Ofeimun is aligning himself with the masses, this is in line with him being a poet-activist. This implies that he and masses are usually the sufferers of the violent manifestations of coup d’état. Ofeimun bemoans:

‘we the people’,
carried famously
through gunsmoke by dawn broadcasts
we hallow public squares to welcome Generals
who bend stalk away
-from the seeding rains of July,
-the silo of tomorrow’s harvest,
-the stock of fate in answered prayers

we are those who have no grace to fall from

...

We journey towards maps
bled by Generals in tanks
in a hero-hood of the forgotten...

Brasher than the robber’s blood
Of self-satisfied power

(Go tell the General 3)

It is the characteristic tense and chaotic atmosphere that pervaded military rule in Nigeria that informed the poem, “Scandal”, which Ofeimun deploys to mirror military violence and coup plotting in Nigeria. According to Ofeimun, the military rule has not brought any reasonable benefit to Nigeria, but severe ruin to her integrity and people. Ofeimun narrates:

Forget the season when the hero of our moon
was brigand of the highway
displacing Generals from news-lines

let's give the devil his due-
and forget the vagabond in power
who made an art of scandal and a scandal of oaths
outflanking bigots of the crescent and the cross

(I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice, 16)

Correspondingly, in “Martial Music”, Ofeimun reveals the apparent adulation of the head of state. Lamentably, he is ignorantly adored by the poor and vulnerable masses:

The procession return to festival Road
astride the endless challenge of sirens
freedom waving for the General
the last hegemon and denizen of chance
riding the drumbeats to end all coups
on Festival Road

(Go tell the Generals, 9)

The above lines echo the ugly history of military tyranny by Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (IBB). It narrates the march on Festival Road in Abuja. The foolishness of the hapless masses who engaged in conventional exaltation of the Generals is lamentable. Again in “SCANDAL”, Ofeimun narrates the scandalous actions of the soldiers as follows:

forget the days and forget the nights
forget how we vowed but could smash no evil
forget the Orgy of Rapists
who overcame the National Day
forget those tirades over-took-law-making
and overtook standing armies held down
with the eloquence of bribes

(I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice, 16)

In “The Prophet”, Ofeimun treats socio-political, religious and economic degeneration as apparent in the Nigerian society. In retrospect, Ofeimun lampoons religious hypocrisy and political betrayals. He intones:

times when we had prophets without skills for lying
and the nights were longer than our years
and the paraffin lanterns did no last
the length of a blinked eyelid
and the groundnut farmers lost
their pyramids to oil Sheikhs
who brought the salvation of deceits;

...

and the canoe-men haggling for palm oil in the creeks
returned to the day of the Merchant Princes
exiled to the Seychelles

(I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice, 18)

The expression, “prophet without skills for lying”, does not merely convey the uprightness of our moral past, but underscores the current religious hypocrites otherwise called political pastors that are rampant in the contemporary Nigerian society. Bearing a good knowledge of the past, Ofeimun makes a biting comment on the high level of immoral degeneration in our socio-political and religious life, such that deceit now reigns.

In “The New Science”, Ofeimun employs varieties of maritime imagery to parody the World Bank economic control. This poem also conveys the trepidation and injustices faced by the Niger Delta in the process of extracting the oil:

In the name of the market, they need
A people without the indiscipline of the river
that enters the sea in a delta; they said,

a river must hold together against the creek;

...

they needed a people who will grow in acceptance
and prostrate in the name of the market
to the primitive fate of black gold flowing
into deserts of foreign bank accounts

(I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice 20)

This poem serves as an eye-opener to the betrayals and tricks that pervade the business of the multinational oil companies. A similar historic temper runs through “Bola Ige” which recalls the Nigerian lawyer and politician, Bola Ige, assassinated on 23rd December, 2001. His death re-echoes the tyrannical nature of Nigerian leaders, who are ready to exterminate anybody that questions their atrocities or refuses to dine with them. Thus, any leftist that goes against their evil manifestation is silenced with the gun. It is this politics of thuggery that Ofeimun laments by remembering Bola Ige:

If you step across the threshold
the earth will swallow you,
dragon buds and petals will open,
fangs-ready, filament clawing
and tongues lolling determinedly
to suck you into scented corruption and abuse

(Go tell the Generals 43)

Conclusion

This paper concludes that these collections of Ofeimun’s poetry is committed to exposing the Nigerian experience. It does this by historicising, with great craftsmanship, two major eras in Nigerian history: the Niger Delta oil era and the military era. The poet employs his creative imagination to capture the series of inhuman activities carried out in the Niger Delta which includes, among others, the

destruction of the ecological system, deaths caused by pipeline inferno and the deliberate killing of Ken Saro Wiwa and seven others. It also historicizes the despondencies of military dictatorships in Nigeria from the 1980s to the 1990s. The dictatorships of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and late General Sani Abacha brought untold hardship to Nigerians. The effects of military dictatorship still resonate in Nigeria as it is yet to recover from the dispossession, suppression and oppression that came with those regimes. The poet chronicles these experiences with the intention of highlighting some of the reasons behind the degradation of human life in Nigeria.

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