

HUMOUR AS AN AESTHETICO EXISTENTIAL STRATEGY IN THIRD GENERATION MODERN NIGERIAN POETRY

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(Received 13 July, 2012: Revision accepted 26, September 2012)

ABSTRACT

The emergence of any generation of poets, at least since the moderns, has been characterized by a lot of controversies. In Modern Nigerian Poetry, the incarnation of the third generation has its own slant of controversies. Burdened by the lack of a formidable, vibrant critical presence at home and challenged by the dominant standards of powerful precursors, there have been doubts about the emergence of a third generation in Modern Nigerian Poetry. Given that each generation should be defined by some peculiarities, it has been asked, what the defining aesthetic features of this generation are? This paper critically affirms the emergence of the third generation of modern Nigerian poets within the context of Nigerian literary history. The paper identifies and interrogates Humour as a particular quality which typifies the poetry this generation.

KEYWORDS: Generationalism, Nigerian Poetry, Humour, Aesthetics, Existentialism

INTRODUCTION

God! What dancers!
Singers –
God! What singers!
Singers and laughers
Laughers?
Yes, laughers... laughers... laughers –
Loud mouthed laughers in the hands of Fate
(Langston Hughes, 27-8).

It seems to me that there is no other generation of poets in the history of Nigerian Poetry among who humour is so impressive, that it becomes definitive of their voices, than the third generation of modern Nigerian Poets. To deeply appreciate this claim, it would be instructive for us to put into perspective the precursors of this generation and their own emergence in the Nigerian literary space. In addition, it would also be noteworthy to have within the same critical compass the circumstance within which they incarnated in order to appreciate the poetic choices they make.

Emerging at a time when African Nations were still in the throes of colonialism and the prevalent spirit was Pan-African, the first

generation of Modern Nigerian Poets developed a Pan-African, culturally conscious poetics, which transported their sensibilities back to the idyllic grooves and spiritual habitat of their ancestors. This was in search of a lost (African) spiritual essence, which typifies them as prodigals. In fact, Christopher Okigbo expresses the paradox of his post-colonial situation as a Christian coming to terms with his traditional calling as a re-incarnated personality among his kin (Okigbo, *African Writers Talking*, 145). However, one factor which is of prime importance to our discourse is the general texture of the voices of this first generation of poets. Nurtured by amplitude of anglo-modernists Poetics this generation is characterized by a self-reclusive tone which the troika see as “unmusical..., obscure and inaccessible... .” (Chinweizu, Jemie & Madubuike, 165)

It is the critical aversion to that well mannered tone, which ruled Nigerian Poetry through the 60s, the events that led to the civil war and the cataclysm of the war itself that opened up the space for a new and more radical generation in the mid 70s. Funso Ayejina is the critic who better captures the zeitgeist and its impact on Nigerian poetry at the time when he

says: "The shells and bullets made sure that there were no closets left from which the closet-poets could operate" (13).

The image of a "closet-poet" is very important here. This is because the language and tone of closet poetry is that of a select few talking to a preferred audience. Indeed, it is instructive that it was Okigbo who told us that "...poetry is at the best a mere gesture to stay within a close, closed society or to be liked by the other fellow, one's fellows..."(135). But, ironically, Nigerian Poetry would always refer to Okigbo for the remote impulse that opened up the space for a more public slant in Nigerian Poetry. Ayejina, again, identifies this when he notes:

The move towards the demystification of Nigerian Poetry in English had been irrevocably started by the pre-coup crises in the country. These events inspired Christopher Okigbo to write his most lucid accessible poetry ("Path of Thunder") which set the tone and texture for a lot of the poetry that followed. (113, emphasis added).

Thus, from this initial impulse emerged the poetry of the second generation of modern Nigerian poets among who are poets like the late Pol Ndu, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Ossie Enekwe, Odia Ofeimun and many others. The idea of lucidity and accessibility are appropriate words that characterise the poetic voices of the times. What accounts for this public tone goes beyond the cataclysm of the civil war and the events preceding it. Its most radical indices can be located in the mindless and directionless plundering of the wealth accruing from the oil boom of the 70s, the arrant corruption, red-tapism and militarism which was gripping post-civil war Nigerian polity.

Hence, it was unfashionable for poets to speak in the closet language of the first generation of modern Nigerian poets. Having experienced the affluence of a new independent nation, which descended abysmally, much vexation and anger became palpable in the tone and theme of the second generation of modern Nigerian poets. The impulse therefore was to mince no words in naming the evil. In this regard, the poets position themselves as voices of the people. Thus, in their poetry there is a pronounced dichotomy between the-haves and the-have-nots, the dictators and the oppressed. Wracked with anger and depression, Ofeimun's persona wonders:

And how can I sing
when they stuff cobwebs in my mouth
spit the rheum of their blank sense
of direction in my eyes
- who will open the portals of
my hope in this desultory walk? (3)

The sense of oppression which goes a long way to stamp the dichotomy we had mentioned above can also be identified in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare.

At this juncture, it is important for us to note that one is not attempting to create an essential theory for reading Nigerian Poetry in a strict paradigm. On the contrary, our endeavour is to see how a dominant feature may be used to study the poetry of a particular generation. No generation of poets holds the monopoly of humour. What is instructive is the purpose to which it is used and the manner in which it is exploited. It is on this note that one may conclude that the humour which one deciphers in second generation poetry arises from the general lampoon on the ineptitude and moral bankruptcy of the echelons. This is palpable in the poetry of the most active poets in that generation. One only needs to read Ofeimun, Ojaide and Osundare to appreciate this satiric humour.

However, we encounter a different sense of humour, which we do not find even in Osundare's *Waiting Laughters*, when we turn to the poetry of the third generation of Modern Nigerian Poets. Here humour arises out of a certain sense of self-mockery, a psychological reaction to the condition of victimhood and pain that the generation finds itself. No doubt, the factor of the failure of the establishment is present in the 'songs' of this generation. But to them, what seems more important is the condition which that failure engenders in the people, especially the city dwellers. To come to terms with that condition, it is important to also place in context the emergence of this generation of poets and the circumstance within which their imagination thrives.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE THIRD GENERATION OF MODERN NIGERIAN POETS.

By the Mid-Eighties when this generation of poets emerged, dictatorship, graft and mismanagement had been fully established in the polity and in collective consciousness of Nigerians. Embezzlement of public treasury and

an advanced sense of materialism were, and still remain the order of the day. More than this, public freedom was utterly disregarded and years of totalitarianism meant summary judgement by decrees and street justice. The general underfunding of the academic system and its degeneration today derive from that period.

Thus, by the late 80s and 90s, the cream of Nigerian intellectuals had migrated to the West either as political or economic exiles, since the country itself had been plundered into austerity and made uncomfortable for the progressives. The consequence of these antecedents was that a culture of mediocrity had been fully established by the time those who were born in the late 50s, early 60s through the 70s were beginning to have a mind. It is therefore a legacy of desperation and lack which this generation poets inherited.

Using the Igbo youths as a typical case study, Stanley Macebuh refers to the youths of this generation as “anger-ridden, money driven avengers of a collective grievance...” (14). In another instance, he refers to them as “the authentic children of the war and all its dislocations” (13). The dislocation which Macebuh talks about appropriately captures the situation within which the third generation of modern Nigerian poets finds itself. It is the general lack which occasioned the emergence of this generation that makes Osundare to describe them as “Nigeria’s midnight children” (73).

This is not the place to assess critics’ reception of the poets of this generation. But suffice to say that inheriting this degenerate legacy, the poets of this generation did not have a very complimentary critical reception. However as it concerns the dominant motif in their poetry one finds that the best of this generation articulates a profound imagery of poverty, degeneration, dispossession, victimhood and anxiety. Observing the predominance of these themes in the poetry of his peers, Pius Adesanmi concludes that theirs is “aesthetics of pain” (121). This aesthetics of pain is recurrent in the poetry of these young poets. Olu Oguibe, who has been regarded as a “sensitive, committed, and versatile artist...” (Osundare, *Thread in the Loom...*, 73) is a formidable voice of this generation who refers to his country as “...a burden...a crown of thorns” (96). Yet he cautions his homeland not to stretch him to elasticity.

Don’t drive me mad, Home land
Don’t twist me, bend me, break me
Like you have broken these eighty million youths
Now dragging their bodies through your streets

Each a portrait of anguish. (91)

Oguibe’s sensibilities of the homeland seem to be the same as another fine and equally committed poet in his generation – Ogaga Ifowodo. In “Homeland” (49) Ifowodo seems to express the burden which Oguibe’s persona talks about:

What are the things that grow here?
Those that grow from stone, lacking
life and root, flesh and water
things cut as caps
for the baldness of stone. (49)

Interestingly, the imagery above reminds one of T. S. Eliot’s representations of the desolate landscape of Second World War Europe. Indeed, Remi Raji also plays into Eliot’s imagery by entitling one of his collections of poems, *Love Song for My Wasteland*. Intriguingly, wastefulness becomes a common motif that connects Raji and many other young poets of his generation. Looking into the culture of materialism, mediocrity and violence Joe Ushie sees the youth of his time as victims of “the new creed” (55)

those golden lamps
emptied of blood at the
shrine of our new god. (55)

Yet, it is Ifowodo whose poetry offers us the most cryptic metaphor of the youth in his generation when he describes the “the child of [his] time” as a “Half-Child” (*Madiba*, 65). These bemoaning of the collective fate of an entire generation can be found in Austin Njoku’s “My Generation” (90) and in Rotimi Fasan’s “A Wreath for My Land” (45), “Sangba fo!” (56), “Caravan of Life” (59-60) and in many other poems collected in his *Evening of My Doubt*.

THE DYNAMICS OF HUMOUR IN THIRD GENERATION MODERN NIGERIAN POETRY.

Our purpose is far from reading the motif of pain as captured in the poetry of the third generation. On the contrary, it is the aim of this paper to explore a dominant tone within which the poets choose to express their anxieties and victimhood. Deriving from an existential perspective, humour as we would illustrate, is both an aesthetic and psychological option “to keep from crying” as Langston Hughes entitles a collection of stories. The example of Langston Hughes is apt for us in this context. This is

because he is one poet who chooses to face the depth of human deprivation and pain in a racist system with laughter.

The poets of the generation under study seem to draw inspiration from the same psychological trough as Hughes. At home, Ken Saro-Wiwa expresses the basis for this existential choice in his poetic fable "The Tail of a Tale" (35):

The tortoise said to the tiger
'Forgive me friend, if I laugh
At what should make me cry.

To laugh, you see, is to show my teeth
And to cry is just the same
And well, I choose to laugh' (35)

While Ken Saro-Wiwa could be said to represent this impulse on a larger scale, Obiora Udechukwu is also a strong influence in this direction. He (Udechukwu) faced Nigeria's post-civil war moral breakdown with the same sense of humour as Saro-Wiwa. His poems in *What the Mad Man said* give us a hint into what becomes a dominant tone in the third generation of Modern Nigerian Poets.

In the light of the above, Remi Raji and Ogaga Ifowodo seem to declare the aesthetic choice of their generation. It is worth mentioning that coming from their first collections of poems their poetic declarations speak volume of the overall tone that is prevalent in their career. In "Introit" (12), the first poem in *A Harvest of Laughters*, Raji's poet persona declares:

I will spread my songs
in a sunlight of webs
I'll seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter;
No, not for me the twilight tales
of sick knights
not for me, the wilting metaphors
of pain-wrights (12)

It is in the same spirit that Ifowodo's opening poem in *Homeland* entitled "For Art's Sake" (11) is articulated. Here Ifowodo states an aesthetic choice that is profound in its stoicism. It would make more meaning to read the title of the poem into the body of the extract below:

For art's sake

... ..

We shall roam the full earth
and see no pain in our paths
and no evil in men's hearts.

For art's sake, we shall shun
Pain, and write lyrics of the ear (11)

In a sense one could say that the above piece, with Raji's "Introit", are poetic manifestoes of this generation. What can be more impressive than the poise to wear the comic mask even in the face of such pain and betrayal that characterise a generation like theirs. In their poetry, there are reasons why mirth seems to be an unavoidable choice. Implicit in Ifowodo's "For Art's Sake" is the option to give sheer artistic pleasure to the listener/reader, even in the midst of pain. The idea to shun pain is to retrieve one's humanity by insisting on the wholesome side of life as the poet persona would put it:

We shall write only

- the redness of setting suns
on wonders of rolling seas
- the greenness of forest leaves
and the songs of dwelling birds
- the sweetness of women's eyes
and the adventures of stubborn loves.
(11)

Raji's persona in "I Rise Now" (13-4) seems to give more pleasure than the expression of raw anger and anxiety. That is why even "The news of acid rain...", the blighted clouds of a locust train" (13) cannot impinge on the mirth of the persona:

And I rise now
with long drums of laughter
to slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain.
Oh laughter, legacy of mask
my wind of burning words
beyond the blues (14)

Still, for Raji the comic mask is an elixir. He is unequivocal about the therapeutic value of humour in two poems namely, "Black Laughter" (19-20) and in "Harvest I-VI" (80-2) where the persona regrets men's inability to realize the vitality in humour:

if only
if only we know
if we know the crescent magic of laughter

we will ride the flood of predicated pains
we'll toast to a tomorrow full of love
without stitches or stains
without brimstone of plagues
without milestones of snakes;

grim-faced brother, Laughter can heal
if only you know... (80)

Thus, it is to maintain one's sanity that the poet persona decides on the option of humour. But, in another regard, humour is indicative of sour experiences. In a subtle way, it exposes subterranean predicaments without being overtly mournful. In such situations, it is the irony that comes to the fore, that same irony that is palpable in Udechukwu's "What the Madman says" and especially in Saro-Wiwa's "The Tail of a Tale".

Some poems in the third generation are loaded with the indirection observed above. Eberonwu is good at lacing his poetry with dark humour. He, Eberonwu, is a fearless poet for whom there is no subject too sacred or elevated to address. In fact, in *Suddenly God was Naked*, a collection which is brave in its title, the poet persona says "to whatever I feel / Whatever stirs my emotion / I give voice and rhythm" (6). However, the piece "Marshal Music" (11) derives its humour from the obvious mimicry of a second language speaker of English. In this case the satire is on the recurrent motif of military adventurers into Nigerian politics. The moral bankruptcy and deficient logic of dictatorship is represented in the heavily accented speech of the Nigerian soldier:

The voice trailed the echoes
The echoes to end the chaos
"Zis is Lieutenant Colonel Hassan
Of ze National Army" (11)

By the end of the 'patriotic' speech of the "Lieutenant colonel", the persona succeeds, through sheer mimicry, in specifying the fate of a people caught up in a cycle tyranny:

This is the end of the music of echoes
Welcome to another phase of woes (11)

It is through the same ingenious mimicry that Ifowodo touches on grave issues in "God punish you Lord Lugard" (*Madiba*, 21). Here the poet persona reveals the linguistic repercussions of a post-colonial speaker exploiting the English Language to express his latent frustrations. Yet the painful humour of the poem is not only on the desperation of the "blind and battered" beggar (*Madiba*, 21), who stretches the limits of the English Language but on the fatalism of "The city's long-suffering commuters" (*Madiba*, 21). The conductor becomes our point of

consciousness as he touches on the topicality of the poem:

The conductor, scorning all etiquette
Laughed loud, pitying country, not beggar
And swore; "God punish you, Lord Lugard,
Na you bring this English come Nigeria!" (*Madiba*, 21)

It is not only in Ifowodo that this conductor becomes a point of consciousness or a metaphor for reading the collective unconscious of the post-colonial city. In the agencies of contemporary Nigerian imagination – movies, advertisements, comedies, fiction – the conductor is a recurrent image of ridicule and urban impulse. Contemporary Nigerian poets exploit that image, as we have seen in Ifowodo's piece above, to make satiric statements on the nation's condition. In a bid to capture the contradiction of that debased figure in post-war Nigeria, Rotimi Fasan, in "Caravan of Life" (59-60), refers to that complex city creation as a "conductout" (60). This portmanteau term captures the dual character of the persona in a milieu marked by extreme desperation. In the same poem the conductor plays a dominant role in dramatising the depravity of the city. As one laughs at this easily excitable figure and the fate of his suffering passengers, one cannot but pity their collective condition in that "Cauldron" (59) of a bus.

Like Fasan's conductor, the Area Boy in Adolphus Amasiatu's "The Fiery Eyed Hawk" (29) is a Nigerian tout original. He (the tout) earns his living by exploiting the vain potentials of his oral art in a dubious strategy of praise singing, "Tackling helpless preys" (29) and "Extorting 'Settlements' " (29). In the last stanza of the poem, the poet persona aptly qualifies these breeds of depraved figure and the system that produces them:

Half naked, half wild
Hated and feared
Monstrosities of anomic creation
Torn in between worlds
Of banditry and lunaticism
All hail the area boy. (29)

In a poetic way therefore, Amasiatu does not only ridicule the Area Boy but indicts the system that makes a monster of its own citizen. As we laugh at the caricature of the conductor and Area Boy, we ironically laugh at our collective condition. Hence, self mockery becomes a strategy of psycho-social exorcism.

Nimmo Bassey, like his contemporary, has that knack for self-mockery. His collections of poems are highly humorous. Loaded with lampoons, puns and ironies, Nimmo Bassey exploits these instruments of creative deception and licences of situation to mirror the consequences of today's mis-governance. His title poem "Patriots and Cockroaches" (23-4) is characteristic of the general mirth that we have identified above. His deft humour in that poem recreates the poverty of the down trodden in an environment of the immoral display of abundance. Mobilizing the imagery of squalor and penury, Nimmo Bassey challenges the whole idea of patriotism in the face of penury and betrayal of hope. By indirection, the poet persona seems to affirm that the essence of patriotism is in the provision for the masses. Definitely, this is a civic position put through by the comic mode which has become a generational aesthetic tool.

CONCLUSION

Our concern in this paper has been to make in-road into the poetics of the third generation of modern Nigerian poets. In doing this we have tried to, briefly, narrativize the emergence of the generation under study and specify the socio-political and artistic circumstance within which they emerged.

Although we acknowledge the problematic of talking about generations in a post-colonial context such as Nigeria, never-the-less the paradigm suffices in studying poetic beginnings and providing a system within which to understand developments in our literature generally. Given the dire need for critical attention on these new voices in Nigerian poetry, this paper has attempted to identify and interrogate one of the collective impulses of this generation. The study, therefore, becomes another contribution to the emerging discourse on a generation that has stretched the frontiers of Nigerian poetry and indeed modern African poetry as a whole.

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