

SOCIAL REALISM IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP OBIOMA CHINEDU UMEH AND SLY –CHENEY COKER

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Abstract

Literature is a product of the society and the writers as watchdogs of their various societies recreate and expose the ills engulfing them. The paper focuses on social realism on the selected poems of Philip Obioma Chinedu Umeh and Sly Cheney Coker espousing how they have used their poetics in elucidating the relationships existing between the privilege few and the unprivileged majority in the society. This paper adopts Marxism as the basic theoretical underpinning. It has also been observed that the poetry of these writers acts as a driving force in exposing what Charles Bressler describes elsewhere as the “dominant class”. Social realism in this context is a realistic depiction in art of contemporary life, as a means of socio-political comment. It is also viewed as an artistic creation of the life of the common man in relation to that of the bourgeoisies. The poetry of Umeh and Coker is one area of research that have not received enough critical attention in spite of the visible predatory bites of their poems, especially in demystifying and reforming the ambiguous vacuum created in the society by this insatiable lust for the country’s national cake and complacency of the leaders toward the inadequacies of the led.

Keywords: Social realism, Marxism, Poetics, Privileged few and unprivileged majority

Introduction

The plight of the downtrodden and disenchantment with the leaders and privileged few have continued to engage the critical attention and watchful eyes of the literary artists, scholars and critics in our literary landscape; especially those of the developing nations of the world. This situation has given rise to two classes of people—one that sees itself as the blessed and the other as the cursed and the corresponding gulf separating them. Josephat Odey observes that “corruption, exploitation, lack of vision, oppression, injustice, abuse of privileges and the dissatisfaction of the people continue to be the bone of contention within most African nations, especially Nigeria” (1). The problem of bad leaderships in Africa and Nigeria are daily multiplying and this has caught the critical attention of contemporary poets. No wonder Emmanuel Usen observes that “writers have consistently addressed their works to the historical, social, political and economic problems of their societies...since they operate in an oppressive system” (10). The writers aware of this unholy attitude of the leaders vehemently frown at their dubious practices of the political class.

The function of art and in particular poetry in developing and emergent society cannot be overemphasized. It is in recognizing the indispensability of art that Herbert Read in his book entitled *The Meaning of Art* declares that “the ultimate goal of art is to express feelings and transmit understanding” (195). In other words, the ultimate goal of art is to expose and communicate the hidden truth to the majority of the masses. Supporting the indispensability of art as a vehicle of social regeneration and transformation, Mathew Umokoro argues that “...it forces itself upon with subtlety and the regularity of the very air we breathe; whether we belong to the intellectual cult of creative artists or to a large body of appreciative consumers or connoisseurs, art is for us all, as ineluctable and original as sin; (25). The opinion of Umokoro shows that art and human experience are intricately woven. To further substantiate the inseparable nature of art and the society, Chinua Achebe in his entitled *The Trouble with Nigeria* avers that “African writer who

tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames” (78). It is clear from Achebe’s treaty that Africa writer show ideological commitment in exposing the socio-political miasma and economic inequality in the society. It is against this backdrop that Umeh and Coker use their poems not only as a drive of social transformation but for renaissance in the minds of the leaders and the led.

The poetry of Umeh and Sly Cheney-Coker find expression in the aforementioned statement. Umeh’s “Ambassadors of Poverty” brings to the fore the various ills bedeviling contemporary African society. These ills range from greed, selfishness, callousness, insensitivity, indiscipline and unfulfilled promises. The poet captures the political atmosphere in this manner:

Ambassadors of poverty are
The corrupt masters of the economy
And anus at home
Patriots in reverse order
Determined merchant of loot
Who boost the economy of the colonial order
To impoverish brothers and sisters at home (21).

These groups of ambassadors represent those people who superintend over the political and economic affairs of the country. The expression “head abroad” and “anus at home” show the flirtation of our leaders between foreign countries and their home countries from where they smuggle their loot to, thereby boosting their economies at the expense of theirs. Hence, the reference in line 5 is very illuminating: “patriots in reverse order’. Going further with the tirade on this category of leaders, the poet describes them as “determined merchants of loot/who boost the economy of the colonial order/to impoverish brothers and sisters at home”. Their actions and activities show lack of wisdom and vision on the part if African leaders in the eyes of abundance.

The poet in his unbiased criticism of society makes it clear that not only the political class that is culpable in this inglorious acts but other

complacent citizen who could not wrestle with the status quo. These categories of people sit and watch the political leaders loot the economy and the ruin the future of the indigent masses. The following stanza is very instructive:

Ambassador of poverty are
Those whose actions and in-actions
Reduce their people's expectations to nothingness
Those whose antecedents
Have lost the spark to inspire
While their people lie in surrender
Having been defeated by poverty (23-4).

These men have lost the moral courage to confront the constricting system because the "people are (are) priced out of their conscience and power/incapacitated by their destitution". Rather they end up begging the politicians what rightly belongs to them because they are unable "to withstand the temptations/of crispy mint and food aroma". Also, the poet persona castigates all those who are hale and hearty but refused to be legally and gainfully engaged in meaningful ventures to better their lots. As a result, they have turned themselves into willing tools and instruments of violence in the hands of the political hegemony. They are described in this manner:

Ambassadors of poverty are
The able-bodied men on the street
Without motive, without vision, without mission
Men fit for the farm
But glued to the city
Hungry and desperate
Constituting willing tools in the hands
Of the political overlords
For mission of vendetta
Against political foes
In their fight for power (23).

The men are lured to the city with its promises of luxuries and self fulfillment only to find out that the city is a harbinger of paradoxes and impossibilities. These categories of people are further adrift from realizing their aspirations and dreams. The poet make us to understand

that seeking greener pastures in the city is not the only means of self fulfillment because agriculture is a lucrative endeavor that is capable of their fortunes around for better rather than idling away in the street of the metropolis surviving through monetary inducement and other dubious practices.

In the final stanza, the poet is of the view that everybody is as guilty as the politicians because in our inactions, we allow them toy with our destinies, incapacitate us through poverty and reduce us to their beck and call as we struggle to assuage our hunger. In such a society, a few live in opulence, majority in lack. Amanze Akpudu describes this type of visionless leaders as “Patriarchs of crumbling quarters. President for life. Founding fathers who founded only their own estates” (43-44). The problem of Nigeria is not squarely on leadership as Achebe rightly observed but a collapse of the superstructure and the complacent driven nature of the “able bodied men on the street”.

Sly-Cheney Coker in his poem “Myopia” throws light into the hardships and sufferings of the less privileged people in the society; especially those constitute the hub of the economy. In the same vein, the corrupt and visionless leaders in the corridors of power manipulate and squander the common wealth of the nation for their betterment to the detriment of the maligned masses. The first stanza of the poem is a picaresque recapitulation of hardship, agony, helplessness, abject poverty, misery and squalor. The poet captures it thus;

On rainy mornings
you will see them drenched
PEASANT! Shivering in their
emaciated bones along the boulevards
of misery (227).

Coker’s writing within the same ambience of Umeh sees the problem of the society as emanating basically from the shortsightedness or visionless-driven tendencies and monumental greed of the political class. The poet captures this in the second stanza thus;

The boulevard of this country
are railway tracks in my heart
a train of anguish runs on them

range corollary of hunger
the rice pads of this country
are putrid marshland in my soul
tended by no magic fertilizer (227)

The obvious lack of vision by the so called leaders in the affairs of governance has led to the abandonment of the “boulevards”. Government agencies and establishment which would have been utilized accordingly to create employment opportunities for the teeming population or generate revenue for the national development are allowed to degenerate to the state of being “putrid marshland in my soul”. Looking at the poem from a Marxist perspective, the poet persona who also among the most subjugated in the society is implicitly calling for a revolutionary action against the predatory advances of the political class

Coker deviates from Umeh in his approach. While the latter accuses everybody to be responsible for the problems bedeviling societal growth and development without proffering substantial or any solution, the former is virulent in his attack on the leaders. If the masses are incapacitated due to the subversive strategies of the hunger and poverty, he has offered himself to champion the course of the down-trodden.

Mountain if the wind blow tomorrow
make me a sabre of that wind
if the skeletons of stillborn promises
dry up in the catacombs
make me the incendiary bombs
if madness we must have
let me be the hangman hanging myself...(227)

The poet would like to be an instrument of change because of the realistic portraiture of debauchery among the political class. He is ready to pay the supreme price or penalty in order to effect the needed change in the status quo. Hence, Coker is advocating for revolution out of the stretched out quagmire. The implication of this is that the poet’s vision is a reflection of social realism through the careful selection of words, images and symbols which Mgbojirikwe C. Chinaka describes as “the

broken soul of the society is healed and the hope for a better society is near” (6)

In conclusion, Philip Obioma Umeh’s “Ambassadors of Poverty” and Sly-Cheney Coker’s “Myopia” adroitly x-ray the socio-political and economic issues that castrate and alienate the down-trodden in the face of abundance. This situation is brought about by greed, corruption and bad leadership initiatives coupled with the parasitic relationship existing between the leaders and led appropriated by social stratification. Their poetic is a call on all and sundry to arise and confront those depraving strictures that hold one bound or inhibit people’s dreams and aspirations of creating an egalitarian society.

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