

EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN POETRY: FROM THE PRE-COLONIAL TO POST- COLONIAL ERA

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Abstract

This paper entitled “Evolution of Nigerian Poetry: From the Pre-colonial to Post- colonial Era” interrogates the multifaceted nature and ideological stance of Nigerian poetry from the post bellum years to the contemporary period. African poetry as an important genre of literature is rooted in the culture and oral renditions of African writers, how they convey their messages to the people and how these people react after consuming such messages. This paper adopts new historicism as the basic theoretical framework. This is because it accentuates the intellectual history of the poets and poems of the various generation The growth and development of African/nay Nigerian poetry will create a sense of consciousness among Nigerians and abreast us with the progression of Nigerian poetry from nowhere to somewhere. The findings show that the poetry of a particular period shapes the consciousness of the poet of that era by unmasking their ideological stance. It has also been observed that the African/Nigerian poems range from oral rendition, the esoteric jeers of scholars to a more vibrant and virile poems. The poetry of these poets from the pre-colonial to the contemporary period dwell on the elevation of human dignity and it contains some spikes of anti oppression.

Keywords: Evolution, Consciousness, New Historicism, Pre-colonial, Post-colonial, Nigerian Poetry

Evolution of Nigerian Poetry: From the Pre-colonial to Post-colonial Era

The earliest stage in Nigerian poetry is traceable to oral renditions in various Nigerian languages where poetry is part and parcel of the indigenous people's festivals, rites of passage, masquerade cultures, dance, funerals, speech patterns, folklores, rituals worship.etc. The poetry of this era is woven in oral performance and could be said to be highly functional, because it is close to the daily and social life of the people. Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun affirms that: "...through oral traditions, people are given information, ideas, opinions, feelings, and predictions are communicated. They are sources of inspirations for contemporary authors." (328). The oral rendition has remained a pivotal point where contemporary African writers source for traditional verbal resources to enhance their creativity. Apart from serving as a template for identification of "Africanness" in their creative works, it portends a great deal of inspiration for contemporary African writers. This is in line with the views of new historicists where the poets are engaged in the intellectual history of the various generation.

Western education engendered written poetry and witnessed the rise of the "pioneer poets anthologized in Donatus Nwoga in *West African Verse*" (12). Nwoga notes that the "pioneer poets are enlightened Nigerians who use their wealth of experience to fight common enemies: colonization and poor opinion that the rest of the world appears to have about the ability of the black man" (121-22). It is implicit in Nwoga's assertion that the pioneer poets are men and women of character who have seen the need to liberate themselves from colonial mentality and interrogate Europeans on behalf of Africans who did not have a voice. Nwoga explains that "they were people educated more than the generality of their compatriots. They use their poetry as tools in public engagement. And so we have poems that speak of colour, of Africa and of countries" (123). Joe Ushie describes this era as the "early phase of poetry in English" (11). The poets used their poems as creative means of action for racial definition and affirmation of African culture.

One major impulse of pioneer poets was the desire to portray African life, values and customs in order to refute centuries of vilification, denigration and misrepresentation by the Europeans. They strove to be assertive in fighting against the injustice of colonialism and liberation of the African intellectually and politically. The poets were

concerned with the creation of a modern culture and the development of a better Nigeria. The poets of this era include Denis Chukude Osadebay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Herbert Macaulay etc. For example, Denis Osadebay was the governor of Midwestern region of Nigeria until the outbreak of the Civil War in July 26, 1967. So he was truly a Nigerian statesman. These people "...were men and women involved in the problem of gaining recognition for the qualities of the black man, of achieving the political independence of their countries from colonial rule, of forming the minds of the countrymen for new Africa" (*West African Verse*, 23). For instance, Dennis Osadebay's poem "Who Buys My Thought", "Young Africa's Plea" and "To the Women of New Africa" focuses on asserting the dignity of the black man's culture and by implication his/her humanity. In "Who Buys My Thought", Osadebay writes

Who buys my thoughts
Buys not a cup of honey
That sweetens every taste;
He buys the throb.
Of Young Africa's soul,
The soul of teaming millions,
Hungry, naked and sick,
Yearning, pleading, waiting. (*West African Verse*, 15)

The poet expresses disgust at any attempt to subjugate the culture of the black man. In New historicist's perspective, the socio-cultural conditions of the people and their historical circumstances shaped the consciousness of the poets. This same idea echoes in "Young Africa's Plea" when the poet states:

Don't preserve my customs
As some fine curios
To suit some white historian tastes.
There is nothing artificial
That beats the natural way
In culture and ideals of life.
Let me play with the white man's ways
Let me work with the black man's brains (17)

Nwoga observes that “This poem, like the previous one, shows the poet’s concern with the development of a modern culture in Africa” (137). The pioneer poems act as a springboard to modern poems.

Despite the perceived strengths of the pioneer poets, they have been criticized for unprofessionalism. For instance, Nwoga’s asserts that “much of the verse written by the poets of the period was not poetry” (123). He explains that “subject matter does not make poetry-the expression is what raises the subject to a poetic level” (123). Patrick Oloko also avers that “the pioneer poets...wrote poems that are simple, straightforward, which by present day standard are not highly praised. The poetry of the era are devoid of humor and valid poetic expression” (2). Though these criticisms have been leveled against these poets, it should be noted here that the pioneers were prompt in addressing the issues of cultural deprivation, humiliation, fear, and anxiety which dominated their sensibilities and which at the same time are critical in Nigeria. The pioneer poets thus laid a fertile literary landscape for the emergence of the second generation poets, who are creatively more leveraged in composing more sophisticated, stylish and refined poetry in Nigeria.

The second generation of Nigerian poets include Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, Wole Soyinka, Michael Echuero and Okogbule Wonodi. The poets of this era exploit more diverse literary techniques at their disposal more than the pioneer poets. They were engaged, like their precursors, to wrestling independence from the colonial powers. But in many other ways, their concerns differ from those of the pioneer poets.

The poets of this period left the public scene to the walkway of domesticity and privacy. The poets did not really address topical issues and things that have to do with the immediate socio-political activities. Rather, they engage more on private issues. For instance, in “Olokun”, J. P. Clark graphically explores personal themes. Olokun as explored by Clark is a “Yoruba goddess of the sea. In a critical appraisal of the poem, Nwoga notes that Clark uses legendary figures not too “primitive” in “a back to land way”, but for his own purposes. Olokun is an accepted image of beautiful girls who are sometimes called “handmaid of Olokun” (*West African Verse*, 183). The poet’s preoccupation with private themes is evident in most second generation

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Nigerian poems. Wole Soyinka adroitly deploys the tenet of the period in his poem “Abiku” when he states as follows:

In vain your bangle cast
Charmed circles at my feet;
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time.

I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
The riddle of the palm. Remember
This, and dig me deeper still into
The god’s swollen foot. (*West African Verse*, 62)

Soyinka’s poem in this generation dwells so much on private themes. Little or no attention was given to interrogate the plight of the masses in society. The “esoteric whispers”, ‘hopkinsian syntax” and “extreme derivationism” appropriated by the writers portrayed the tenet of the era. Chinweizu et al describe this generation of poets as suffering from “Hopkins disease” (165) Hopkins disease refers to Africans who were infested with the European ways of living, especially in their writings. Funso Aiyejina holds that the poetry “... was marked by excessive preoccupation with the poet’s private grief and emotion over and above social tragedies and triumphs. It was also a poetry dismissed because of its undue eurocentrism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esoterism”(112). Chinweizu et al also claim that “the poets seem to shun searching treatment of overtly political and social matters and display a mark preference for private matters” (157).

The poets of this generation, to this extent are variously described as poets who engage in writing obscure poetry. They wrote poems that did not reflect the painful realities of a changing society. The writers, according to Chinweizu et al failed Nigerians in a number of ways:

There is a failure of craft in the works of the euromodernist Ibadan Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry. Despite the high praise heaped upon it from all sides, most of the practitioners display glaring faults, e.g old fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction, a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from

African traditions, tempered only by a lifeless attempt at revivalism(165).

The criticisms are all against writers like Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark and Echuero who ape the European ideology in their poems. Achebe who falls into the era however avers that “my generation belongs to the transitional generation...It carries its penalties...you are like the bat in folktales...you have one foot in the past ...and one in the present” (11). Despite the volume of accusations leveled against the poetry of this generation, the fact remains that it is a transitional stage in Nigerian poetry as Achebe had rightly pointed out. Hence, we should rather contemplate the poet of this era as shaping the poetic sensibilities of the third generation who initiated what Funso Aiyejina calls “the alternative tradition”- a more virile and radical creative bravura in confronting the social malaise in the society.

The third generation poets include T.C Nwosu, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Ossie Enekwe, Odiá Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Femi Fatoba, Tanure Ojaide and Chimalum Nwankwo. The poets of this era confront social ills like corruption, dictatorship, poor leadership, environmental degradation, electoral malpractices and civil war. Emmanuel Obiechina holds that “...faced with the new realities of power and politics in Africa (Nigeria), writers have had to reappraise their roles in the society. The pre-occupation with the past had to give way to concerns with pressing problems of the present” (122). This goes to show that the failure of independence is the failure of our leaders to validate their position in the society.

Consequently, poets of this generation seek to expose the antics of the ruling class and show how its philosophy oppresses the action of the working class. In trying to entrench “the alternative tradition” as Aiyejina perceived it, the poet deviated significantly from too much privatism in their thoughts and mode of expression. They focused more on the post colonial problems in the society, which the masses bear the major brunt. In this perspective, the poetic traditions of these poets confront various fear-provoking realities and seek to liberate the masses from the stranglehold of oppression and exploitation. They interrogate and challenge those restrictive practices of tradition and the socio-political situations in the country. Niyi Osundare, a poet of the generation avers that:

We read the works of Marx, the works of Lenin and many of the speeches of Che Guevera and Fidel Castro and, of course, the works of Fanon... These were works that we read and discovered that they were saying things that were true about our position, and of course, these things influenced what we wrote eventually (79).

From the assertion of Osundare, one can conclude that the poets were conditioned by their Marxist learning. For instance, Tanure Ojaide is a poet who strongly believes that a poet should be a social critic with a keen eye to confront moral decadence in the society. The poem "For Egbesu Boys" incarnates the radical and confrontational spirit of the people's deity of war and vengeance. In the poem, Ojaide's poet persona praises young militants who bear the god Egbesu as their guardian spirit into war with the exploitative neocolonial Nigerian state. In line with Marxist creed, the poet lampoons the oppressors in defiance of the Egbesu Boys who are unjustly and irrationally maligned by the government in this manner

Let the overlords call you obscene names.
Let the benefactors of robber vilify you.

let favorites of tyrants harass you without rest,
let criminals and outlaws call you callous names;
let their cohorts aim guns and grenades at you,
let them burn your villages and green refuge-...(40)

Ojaide who is a member of this generation deploys the Marxist ideological technique which is also couched in New Historicism to interrogate the plight of the masses, especially the history of the Niger Delta people. Marxist poets always agitate for revolution, reformation and change in a failed society. Femi Osofisan asserts that their focus was "...unmasking the class struggle within it, revealing the material sources of exploitation and injustices, demonstrating how the masses could liberate themselves..."(qtd in Ushie, 19). Inyabri reaffirms that "...in their poetry there is a pronounced dichotomy between the -haves and the have-nots, the dictator and the oppressed" (100). The poets of this

generation demonstrate outright disapproval of the political class whose sole aim is to steal and plunder. They act as watchdogs of the masses and see poetry as a medium by which the society holds mirror to itself.

The writers of this generation are ambassadors of the indigent and oppressed masses in the society. One major characteristic of the poets is the conscious introduction of proverbs, riddles, aphorisms and allusions. Femi Osofisan holds that “there is really not much distinction between the younger and the older writers in works produced from the 80s onwards”(22). In terms of ideology, the poets of this generation have the same thought as the contemporary poets who form the focus of this study.

The poets in the contemporary generation have been variously designated as “Young poets”, “New poets”, and “Younger poets”. Niyi Osundare call them “CNN generation of writers”, while Odia Ofeimun refers to them “as the clap trap generation of writers” (qtd in Inyabri, 68). Niyi Osundare further describes the generation of writers as those “...born around the Nigeria independence (1960), Nigeria’s midnight children, as it were, who have spent the first three decades of their lives confronting the nightmare the country has become” (20). According to Osundare, their poetic temperament ranges “from angry through desperate to despondent” (40). Poets of this generation include Peter Onwudinjo, Joe Ushie, Charles Ihuoma, Adimora-Ezeigbo, Femi Oyebode, Cecilia Kato, Olu Oguibe, Afam Akeh, Sophia Obi, Isaac Shuaibu, Hope Eghagha and Obari Gomba. Others are Remi Raji, Toyin Adewale, Ogechi Ironmatu, Isidore Diala, Uche Nduka, Onokome Okome, Usman Shehu, Chin Ce, Kemi Atanda and Kayode Aderinokun. The writers of this generation are Marxist oriented. In Marxist perspective, the poet has succeeded in leaving an ineffaceable revolutionary imprint on the minds of the masses. Again, the persona screams in “Time for action”:

Break the bonds
Of fear and isolation
Support with your strength
Victims of power
And the families
Turn your apathy to empathy
Fueled by fumes of anger

Your rationalization of evil
To righteous rage
Against all crimes
Cry for justice in the land
Heal those who are
Wounded by the cruelty of others
Especially the victims
Of war and violence
So that the oil of peace
Will anoint our homeland (*Dancing Masks*, 30).

Although, the above classification of contemporary poets involved poets that explore the social and topical issues in the country, it does not exclude poets who have shown “convincing deviation from willful obscurity and aping of western standard; and who at the same time are still responding to the social realities of Nigeria nation” (Osundare, 19). The poets of this generation use poetry as creative means of advocacy and criticism. They traditionally play a transformational role in the country. The revolutionary spirit has never been extinguished since the younger generation of Nigerian poets has continued with their crusade for liberation from the stronghold of capitalism. They see themselves as crusaders, critics and liberators. Chin Ce affirms that “these notes are vibrant, pulsating words; there are songs of freedom and innocence... is a struggle which more significantly, more psychologically reflects the...instinct of the individuals against the higher self”(1).The poets of this generation are vibrant, down to earth, visionary-driven, probing and never compromising. Their era is synonymous with Frederick Douglas’s famous assertion that “if there is no struggle, there is no freedom” (iv).

The poetry of these combative and versatile poets is not only national and historical; it is one that entreats the people to take revolutionary stance. Gloria Emezue explains that:

The emergence of the younger school of poetry with distinguishing temperaments from the new Nigerian counterparts was a welcome development for Nigerian writing. In spite of the dogged inventiveness of these bards within the new tradition, critics had set off the tendencies between old

emerging tendencies. But if there was little artistic distinction in the new comers from their contemporaries, the better promise was laid in the expressive power which lifts their presumptuous craft into what; in few decades, might prove a credible testimonial of their time (15).

Emezue further notes that the poets of this generation “speak from the very deep convictions, not tongue in cheek, but bold, clearly and with less ambiguity” (15). Hence, the poets of this generation use their poems as avenues to register their grievances against the demeaning and subjugating position of the masses. In new historicist’s perspective, the poets examine a text as a narrative from the pre-colonial to the contemporary period.

Conclusion

The poetry of the various generations is a direct reaction to the social upheavals of the time. The poets acknowledge the fact that Nigeria is their home and believe that the people have to fight doggedly to make this home a haven. These poets from the pre-colonial era started with oral renditions where poetry was conveyed through words. The era paved way for the pioneer poets who turned to the masses for their inspiration and define their goals in broadly collective and political terms. The modern poets left the public scenes of the pioneer poets to the precinct of domesticity where the poets usurped the Eurocentric ideals. But this acted as a springboard for the third and the contemporary generation of poets.

These poets have developed an enthusiastic and keen faculty for identifying, resisting and interrogating the irrationalities of a debased and depraved society. The unified thematic exposition and structure of their poems show their redemptive voices as agent of reformation. Their works do not necessarily draw emotional response from the people, but mobilize the masses by sowing seed of reformation that must be fruitful in all ramifications. Despite the obscurantisms, turgidity and what may be described as absence of emotions noted in the works of the different poets across the generations, there is a unifying premise for almost all the poets – the reliance on oral tradition that serves as their identity.

Recommendations

Their works specifically look at the evolution of Nigerian poetry from the pre-colonial to the contemporary period. These poets of the generations have tremendously shaped the lives of Nigerians and Africans at large. Although exhaustive research has been carried out on the evolution of Nigerian poetry from the pre-colonial to the contemporary period, there is a noticeable lack of significant attention on poems of each generation. This paper will bridge the scholarship and equally invite further research on the poets of the various periods. It is recommended that more research be carried on the evolution of Nigerian poetry to establish the vision, nature and temperament of poetry. This would be of immense benefit to scholars, readers and critics of African literature.

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