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Writing resistance: Dissidence and visions of healing in Nigerian poetry of the military era

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In spite of the fact that about thirty years of military rule impacted negatively on various spheres of Nigerian life, this essay argues that it also served as a catalyst for the growth of Nigerian poetry. It contests the critical standpoint that exclusively identifies socially sensitive poetry in Nigeria in the closing decades of the twentieth century with a particular 'generation' of poets and situates the phenomenal growth of Nigerian poetry within this period – which also coincides with the military era – within the flowering of a vibrant civil society and activist writing. It maintains that more poets and tendencies than have been associated with the experience contributed to its making and suggests that this tradition constitutes a major component of the corpus of Nigerian poetry of English expression. In reappraising the growth of Nigerian poetry in the last three decades of the twentieth century, this paper argues that writing against dictatorship – the defining character of this tradition – has enriched Nigerian poetry in more ways than critics have suggested. It correlates developments within the political sphere with corresponding responses in the Nigerian poetic imagination to define the unique character of this major phase in the development of Nigerian poetry. **Key words:** Nigerian poetic imagination; post-civil war Nigeria; pro-democracy agitation; resistance poetry.

1

There has been growing scholarly interest in the impact of military dictatorship on various institutions in Nigeria.¹ The military “ruled Nigeria from 1966–1979, and 1983–1999”, a period of about thirty years (Alli 2001: 208). The experience left the nation’s economy in ruins, frustrated her democratic desires and brought the Nigerian military into disrepute. While the military adventure lasted, a virile press, civil society organisations and writers mounted pressure on successive military rulers to checkmate their attempts at self-perpetuation and resist violations of human rights. But while the roles of the Nigerian press, the intellectual elite and civil society organisations in the struggle to redeem Nigeria have enjoyed reasonable scholarly attention (Ette 2000; Olukotun 2002; 2004; Williams 1998), little has been done to locate Nigerian writing as a component of cultural production in the project. Gbemisola Adeoti’s “The military in Nigerian postcolonial literature: An overview” (2003) draws attention to the response of Nigerian writers to military dictatorship by categorizing attitudes and works that the experience inspired in a broad sense. It creates awareness about

the conditioning impact of military dictatorship on Nigerian writing as a whole by presenting an exhaustive list of writers and texts that responded to the military experience. It will however take many more studies that explore this tradition of writing in various genres to present a clearer picture of the ways in which the experience modified both the form and function of Nigerian writing during the period.

Anyone familiar with the growth of Nigerian literature after the civil war will have no difficulty appreciating why the genre of poetry dominated Nigerian writing, especially from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. In a sense, the prevailing political climate in the country created the atmosphere for it to thrive. Proof that Nigerian poetry has been very dynamic is that it has drawn on a variety of experiences. But of the three major events that have significantly impacted on it – the Nigerian crisis of the 1960s, the Nigerian civil war (1967–70) and military rule (1966–79; 1983–99) – the impact of military dictatorship has been far more pervasive and enduring. It gave a unique identity to Nigerian poetry by assigning it a new role and redefined the social standing of the poet: it emboldened the poet, inspired a variety of poetic idioms and modified the taste of the audience. Helon Habila (2007: 55), who belongs to a younger generation of Nigerian writers, testifies to this: “[I]n a way, the dictatorship was good for literature because it supplied some of us with our subject matter, and also while it lasted, gave us an education in politics that we couldn’t have acquired in school or anywhere else. We saw pro-democracy activists being killed or arrested or exiled – unfortunate for the victims but great stuff for writing.”

The most influential study of Nigerian poetry of the period under review is Funsho Ayejina’s “Recent Nigerian poetry in English: An alter-native tradition” (1988), an essay that has popularised the reading of Nigerian poetry along generational lines. The essay represents those it identifies as the second generation of Nigerian poets as the exclusive promoters of socially-responsive poetry, while associating older Nigerian poets with a different consciousness. With the benefit of hindsight, it is now possible to say that this way of mapping generations in Nigerian poetry was hasty given that Nigerian poetry as at the mid-eighties had not acquired the character that it was to manifest in the late nineties. By the nineties successive military administrations had inflicted various dictatorial tendencies on the nation, and most civil society groups and labour unions had formed an alliance aimed at humiliating the military and quickening the process of democratisation. There is enough unity of vision in the works and political actions of Nigerian writers across the so-called generational categories to suggest that branding some as socially irresponsible was faulty.² The unproblematic manner in which Ayejina’s essay delineates generations has exposed it to considerable interrogation. Harry Garuba’s reaction to its rather contestable outlook on generations of Nigerian writers exemplifies this: “For a body of writing as ‘young’ as Nigerian poetry in English, to suggest over-categorical demarcations at

this point in time would be foolhardy [...] The ambiguity heightens when writers said to belong to one generation are still active and producing work two or three generations after the one to which they are said to belong” (Garuba 2005: 51–52).

Aiyejina failed to appreciate the extent to which Nigerian poetry has been driven by developments within the sphere of politics and society, which accounts for its intense critical passion. Stewart Brown (1995: 58) in fact maintains, “the defining characteristic of Nigerian poetry in English has been its confrontational attitude to authority.” While there has always been a sense of social responsibility in Nigerian writing as a whole, it is possible to argue that it was most intense from the mid-eighties to the late nineties. It is impossible to separate this development from the general context of civil action that attended the failure of the military and the discontent with military rulers. Starting with the Gowon regime, through the Muritala-Obasanjo, Buhari-Idiagbon administrations (1984–86), the Babangida “presidency” (1986–93), to Sanni Abacha’s junta (1993–98), Nigerians endured various forms of repression. But the misadventure acquired its worst character under the late Sanni Abacha. A section of the Nigerian media proved to be an ally of Nigerian writers at this time, going by the courage it exhibited in capturing experiences under the military. To then speak of the military era in Nigeria is to focus on a period that reminds Nigerians of not just infringements on the rights of individuals and the stagnation of the country but one that also accounts for such unprecedented developments in the nation’s annals as the murder of journalists and politicians and the frustration of Nigeria’s aspiration to democracy.³

The stage for Nigerian writers to confront the erring indigenous ruling elite was set as far back as the late sixties, before the civil war broke out,⁴ though it was the civil war that really served as the catalyst for what Chidi Amuta (1988: 92) calls “the politicization of the Nigerian literary imagination.” The parting of ways between the poet and the political class happened not long after independence, when it became clear that the indigenous ruling elite had betrayed the trust reposed in it by failing to deliver the promises that the struggle for independence held. Politicians abused their privileges and the populace became disillusioned. This made the political class an object of ridicule. The situation worsened when the military, which cashed in on the failure of the politicians, proved not to be any better. There have consequently been more passionate responses to the presence of the military on the Nigerian political scene than the satirical indictment of politicians. The decadence of Nigerian military regimes elicited appropriate literary responses, proving the capacity of Nigerian poetry to confront bad governance. Various tendencies of dictators – lawlessness, despotism, violation of human rights and corruption – have attracted adequate responses.

Even though writing against dictatorship may immediately suggest writing solely preoccupied with criticising dictators, the tradition has grown, impacting in the process on the form and media of poetic expression. There have been three main

phases in the development of anti-military poetry in Nigeria. The first coincides with the work of Ochia Ofeimun and constitutes the foundation for the tradition in the sense of inaugurating the basic discursive foundation for it. The second was a development in the eighties which saw many poets building on the foundation that had been laid, while the third, in part an extension of the second, largely chronicles the losses and social dislocations – personal and collective – occasioned by the last phase of military dictatorship.⁵

2

In very specific terms, writing against dictatorship in the Nigerian context started in the 1970s and it was at once a response to the failure of the military and a reaction to the form of poetry that was in vogue at the time (Okunoye 1998). Ochia Ofeimun accomplished this with the publication of *The Poet Lied* (1980), even though many other poets have now come to be identified with it. The post-war era saw the emergence of very many young writers who, in addition to being acquainted with the works of the older poets, were also eager to register their presence on the literary scene. John Pepper Clark read the title poem of Ofeimun's collection as a direct attack on his poetry on the Nigerian civil war (1967–70). This provoked the threat of a legal action, which delayed the appearance of the collection in Nigeria. This poem remains controversial largely because it has come to be seen as advocating a remarkable departure in sensibility in Nigerian poetry. But it succeeds in doing this only because it also states the sense in which the work of an older poet does not meaningfully address a national crisis. The import of Ochia Ofeimun's early work consists in its ability to affirm the capacity of poetry to enlighten and inspire action. The poems in question were written in the seventies, when the military were justifying their intervention by instituting campaigns that they claimed would instil discipline in Nigerians. The verdict of the poet is that the military were insincere, as they had nothing to show for all their claims to being corrective:

And if you want to know why
The streets grunt now
Under rank garbage
Under the weight of decay, of nightsoil
More than ever before
They will point triumphantly, very triumphantly
At their well-made timetable:

“We shall get there soonest:
nightsoil clearance is next on the list”
(Ofeimun 1980: 5).

In discursive terms Ofeimun's work eliminates the gulf between the persona and the poet and pitches the poet against the military. Deploying visual imagery that depicts decadence, the poet's quest for national cleansing presents him as an activist. Ofeimun has articulated his view with regard to the irrelevance of the notion of the death of the author in the African literary experience in "Postmodernism and the impossible death of the African writer." His argument, which many other writers in Africa will have no problem identifying with, is that African writers cannot afford the luxury that the attitude to writing in the West represents because the conditions that inspire writing in Africa are different:

In relation to the Death of the Author the originating historical context was indeed definite and definitive: one in which it was believed that society (read: Western society) had arrived at its destination. It has boasted the triumphs of science and technology, industrialization and enterprise, democracy and affluence. It has meant a society in which the civic freedoms, universal adult suffrage and all-pervasive ideology of free choice are shored up by mass literacy, mass production and the means, if necessary, of mass suicide. It is a society that has so portentously breached necessity in favour of freedom that it can afford to produce the welter of theories and anti-theories which posit the death of the author. (Ofeimun 1998: 38).

3

Ofeimun's early work was groundbreaking in the sense that it demonstrated the possibility of a new type of poetry. But the type of poetry he envisioned only flourished in the eighties and Niyi Osundare, Femi Fatoba, Okinba Launko and Tanure Ojaide are the best known of the poets associated with this development. A feature of Ofeimun's poetry that has been replicated in the works of other poets is the statement of a poetic credo. The 1980s turned out to be a period of unparalleled poetic creativity in Nigeria. J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1993: 85) will even insist that "[n]o history of Nigerian poetry will be complete without an auspicious mention of the 1980s." The umbrella body of Nigerian writers, Association of Nigerian Authors, which was formed in 1981, became the major promoter of writing in the country.⁶ The fact that writers' groups in various cities also organized reading sessions at which established and aspiring poets discussed their works encouraged the writing of poetry. Writers' groups in university towns in particular organized poetry reading sessions either to celebrate events or simply promote the works of their members. The Ibadan Poetry Club was, for instance, a major breeding ground for aspiring poets at the period (Raji-Oyelade 2005).⁷ A few years before this, a group of scholars with socialist persuasion at the University of Ibadan and what was then the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), was also publishing *Positive Review*, which promoted a form of radical scholarship.⁸ Femi Osofisan (2007: 45), writing as a participant-observer, reveals that

even though members of the group were not all writers, they shared a concern for the state of the nation, exhibiting anger and impatience with the state of affairs, having been “infected with students’ radicalism that was prevalent in those days.” And because literary journals like *The Black Orpheus* and *The Horn* were no longer appearing, Osofisan and Sam Omo Asein founded *Opon Ifa* in Ibadan, while Abiola Irele started a publishing outfit known as *The New Horn*.

In the midst of the creative ferment, alternative outlets for publishing poetry were needed. *The Guardian*, a privately owned newspaper that was established in 1983 in Lagos, drew academics, mainly scholars associated with the Positive Review Group, as either editorial board members or columnists. These scholar-writers, among other things, started a weekly literary series in addition to publishing poems in the Sunday edition of the newspaper. The poetry column, which at a point was featuring the work of a poet each week, provided an avenue to showcase the works of promising but yet unpublished poets, while also featuring the works of the better-known writers. The Ibadan-based *Sunday Tribune* equally encouraged Niyi Osundare to maintain a column called “Songs of the Season”, featuring poems that addressed topical issues from 1985 to 1990.⁹ The Association of Nigerian Authors made an effort to encourage many promising but unpublished poets by sponsoring the publication of *Voices from the Fringe*, an anthology that represents the works of a hundred of such aspiring poets. All these efforts added up to popularizing poetry in Nigeria. It is not surprising that mainstream Nigerian poetry as at the late 1980s assumed an anti-establishment character. This was also the time that the high-handed and dictatorial tendencies of military leaders were becoming evident. While the Buhari-Idiagbon regime was very ruthless and extremely intolerant in the guise of instilling discipline, the Babangida regime, which had the longest life span, exhibited all the excesses and antics of African dictators. In spite of pretending to be popular, it was intolerant of opposing views on national issues and also repressed the press. Its unceremonious end came as a result of the dubious manner in which it handled the outcome of the successful elections of 1993.

It is a testimony to the resilience of the Nigerian civil society that appropriate responses within the sphere of culture and civil action were deployed to confront the ruthless order. This was particularly evident when the masterminds of the military rule subtly deployed security agencies in suppressing free speech, freedom of association and legitimate protests. Surprisingly, the Nigerian media witnessed unprecedented growth at this time and was very active in mobilising the populace. Anti-military groups and civil society organisations equally flourished, indicating the forging of alliances across ethnic, religious and social divides. But Lai Oso does not see anything unusual in this role of the media. He says: “The Nigerian press has from its infancy been a participant in the country’s political processes. From its beginnings, the press has not been a mere chronicler of political events and politicians. Quite often, the press has either wittingly or unwittingly been a major actor in all the events.” (Oso 2001: 265).

Inspired by the moral support provided by the active involvement of such influential public figures as Wole Soyinka, Gani Fawehinmi, and the leadership of the National Association of Nigerian Students, mass protests and anti-government rallies were staged to confront the military and denounce violations of human rights, lawlessness and despotic tendencies. Civil society organisations like the Civil Liberties Organisation, Campaign for Democracy and the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, worked in concert with labour and professional bodies like the Nigerian Bar Association, the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Academic Staff Union of Universities to stage protests and denounce unpopular policies and actions of successive military rulers. Journalists and popular artists as well displayed courage in acting as the conscience of the nation and defied all the decrees and orders of successive military juntas to suppress dissension and informed opposition.

To silence the news media, the pivot on which civil society rotates in Nigeria, the government enacted draconian laws. These included Decree No. 4 of 1984, criminalising press reports and written statements that exposed an officer of the military government to ridicule, and Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree 35 of 1993 that empowered the president to ban or sanction any publication as he wished. Despite these restrictions, journalists still found a way to continue operations and perform their role as watchdog of Nigerian society (Ojo 2007: 545).

The question that arises is what the climate of crisis within the sphere of popular resistance has to do with creative writing. The link between the two operates at two levels. Apart from the fact that the poets, as active and responsive members of the Nigerian society, could not feign ignorance about the state of affairs in their country, very many of them were, in addition, either members of the various human rights organisations or columnists for leading Nigerian newspapers, especially those within the Lagos-Ibadan axis.¹⁰ It is remarkable that academics constitute the majority of Nigerian writers. It is also no surprise that the umbrella association of Nigerian university teachers, the Academic Staff Union of Universities, opposed the policies of successive military administrations and survived proscriptions at various times.¹¹

Osundare stands out among the poets that engaged the military and he has also done more to theorise, popularise and defend this type of poetry than any other poet who became prominent in the 1980s. His newspaper poetry represents the first sustained effort at confronting military dictators. Even though *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983) clearly states his poetic manifesto, it is in his newspaper poetry that he made the most enduring contribution to the growth of poetry against dictators in Nigeria. He recognizes the fact that this type of writing exposes the poet to a lot of danger as it involves reacting directly to unpopular government policies, celebrating critics of the military and giving voice to victims of their policies. Reflecting on his work in "From the closet to the marketplace: Popular poetry and the democratic space in Nigeria," Osundare establishes a link between committed poetry and popular media:

Indeed, the more repressive the situation, the more urgent the communicative purpose of the freedom-loving writer; the wider the tyrant's dragnet of silence threatens to spread, the more passionate the writer's communicative impulse. [...] Some contexts choose their styles. A writer in dire need to subvert the dictator's silence invariably reaches for an idiom which will be readily accessible to the people whose dreams he plans to stir. (Osundare 2001: 134).

Osundare's newspaper poetry was an uncommon attempt at confronting the military. The fact that the poems were responding to events and developments as they unfolded made the project at once interesting and risky. It is then no surprise that Osundare's newspaper poetry creates a world of binaries, one in which the poor are necessarily against the rich; the powerless are against the powerful, and the masses are against the military. But the poet consistently identifies with the helpless, the violated and the weak, affirming that they would outlive their oppressors. He sees himself as the mouthpiece of the marginalized majority and his strategies range from the parabolic to the dramatic. The critical intent in his poems is couched in a variety of idioms. The poem titled "a tongue in the crypt" not only plays on the title of Soyinka's collection of prison poetry, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1967), but also ridicules infringement of the rights of the people to freedom of expression under the Babangida junta:¹²

Patriots
Thinkers
Countrymen
Behold your tongue
Sealed up in iron cage
For public safety
And the national interest

For permission to use,
Apply to:
The Minister of Whispering Affairs
Dept. of Patriotic Silence,
53 Graveyard Avenue,
DUMBERIA
(Osundare 1990: 127).

Relying mainly on humour and hyperbole, Osundare's poems that satirize the military and their excesses graphically depict the masses as their helpless victims. In exposing the cruelty of Nigerian military rulers to ridicule in "Movement XVI" of *Moonsongs* (1988), the poet evokes an atmosphere of terror in a tone that echoes the prophetic passion of Christopher Okigbo's "Thunder can break":

The General missiles a swagger
 And a nest of edicts jets out
 Of his adamantine mouth...
 The general is up, up, up
 The general is up
 There is a beltful of scars
 In the furrows of our sweating backs
 (Osundare 1994: 33).

But while it is easy to recognise Osundare's use of a popular poetic idiom as his unique contribution in this regard, it may not be apparent that he drew inspiration from the Yoruba assumption about the incredible immunity of the singer-poet.¹³ Osundare was not the only poet that found the newspaper an ideal platform to publish poetry at this time. Charles Bodunde's study of newspaper poetry in Nigeria documents the growth of the tradition, stressing that "the newspaper medium offers the appropriate arena for poets to make a moment to moment picture of their society" (1996: 85).

Femi Fatoba's poetry shares the same informing cultural background with Osundare's work. Even though it does not match the output of many of his contemporaries in quantity, it will be difficult to exclude it from any serious reading of Nigerian poetry of the period under review because of its unique satirical temper. *They said I abused the Government* (2001), his second collection of poems in English, has consolidated his position as a skilful poet in the satirical convention.¹⁴ The focus of the collection is on the later phase of military rule. *Petals of Thought* (1984) had earlier established his capacity for satire, revealing his skill at deploying humour and irony for satirical purposes. But while the satirical butt in his first book of poems is the Nigerian political class and its antics, the latter concentrates on the woes that befell the nation under the military, while still keeping the ravages of the ousted civilian regime in mind. The satirical project in *They said I abused the Government* recreates the oddities that marked Nigerian life under the military. Although the title poem and others such as "Gagsmith", "Soldier of the gut", "Mister Soldier Sir", "Checkpoint" and "Song of the riot squad" extensively ridicule the military rulers by reliving the master-servant structure that defined their relationship with the citizenry, most of the other poems – especially "Prayer for the national team", "The road to Abuja" and "Dear late Nigerians" – capture the perversion of values in the larger Nigerian society and suggest that virtually every facet of Nigerian life at the time was plagued by chaos and moral decadence. But most of the poems in the collection, in spite of their obvious satirical intent, hardly provoke any laughter as they employ images of the terror, want and fear that helpless citizens endured. The title poem is one of the longest satirical indictments of Nigerian military rulers. It is modelled on the Yoruba song of

abuse and represents the poet-persona as a daring patriot. The poem launches direct verbal assault in the spirit of the song of abuse and personifies the military government as a deformed and demented entity:

I asked the human tongs of Gestapo
How I did abuse the government.
Did I say the government is deaf
And does not hear the cries of her people!
Did I say the government is lame
And never lifts an arm in the service of her people!
Did I say the government is blind
And does not see where she is going!
Did I say the government is a cannibal
Killing and eating her own children!
Did I ever say anything
Bigger than the small mouth
With which I ask simple questions?
Anyway, who am I to abuse the government!
(Fatoba 2001: 8).

Such younger poets as Ezenwa Ohaeto, Gbemisola Adeoti, Joe Ushie, Ogaga Ifowodo and Olu Oguibe, who share a lot with the 'second generation' Nigerian poets with regard to social vision, are rendering similar experiences in unique idioms. They seem to be more interested in the effect of the chaotic state of affairs on aspirations of individual Nigerians as opposed to the confrontational approach of the older poets. They therefore employ a variety of idioms and metaphors in capturing the era with a shared interest in demonizing the soldier. Ohaeto's recourse to Nigerian Pidgin as poetic medium, in particular, brought a great deal of humour and irony into capturing the decadence of the military era. Apart from freeing poetry from the constraints that the use of Standard English may represent, his poems in *If to say I be Soja* (If I were a soldier) (1998) employ a popular idiom to remarkable satirical effect. His experiment at once derives inspiration from, and also builds on, the achievement of Frank Aig-Imoukhuede in *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead* (1982).¹⁵ Ohaeto's title poem depicts the soldier as an opportunist in a bid to project the popular perception of the military. The strength of the poem is in the way it scrutinizes the antics of military rulers who amassed wealth and abused power in a variety of ways:

I carry wine go see one girl so
I tell am say I go like to marry am
She look me up, she look me down
Den she open mouth tell me say
She for marry me if to say I be soja,

(I took wine along to visit a girl
I told her that I would marry her
She looked at me critically
And told me that
She would have married me
if I were a soldier)

The persona goes ahead to say:

If to say I be Soja...
I for don make my own coup

Put my broder as Minister
Make my friend Board Chairman
Even my Houseboy go become
Permanent Secretary for Ministry
(Ohaeto 1998: 39).

(if I were a soldier...
I would have plotted a coup

And made my brother a cabinet minister
And my friend Board Chairman
Even my houseboy would be
A permanent Secretary of a Ministry)

In suggesting that being in the military brings the prospect of seizing power under any pretext to satisfy inordinate personal desires, the poem reveals the extent to which the adventure of the military in politics damaged its collective image and entrenched nepotism and mediocrity. Olu Oguibe's work paints an equally despicable image of military chiefs. "Who would listen to the poet," in questioning the professional credentials of a typical Nigerian soldier-ruler, presents a picture of generals who did not earn their ranks. Drawing on a subversive use of *oriki*, the Yoruba tradition of praise poetry, the persona depicts the ruthless ruler as

General with a rusty sword
Warrior whose shield
decorates the inner room
[...]
The tears of broken men quench your thirst
The sight of famished children feeds your pride.
(Oguibe 1992: 22).

Joe Ushie and Gbemisola Adeoti deploy images that draw attention to the devastating impact of military rule on the psyche of the populace as well as the nation's resources and the titles of their relevant collections betray their intentions. What runs through Adeoti's *Naked Soles* (2005) is a gripping picture of anguish expressed in images of pain and discomfort. The various afflictions that ordinary Nigerians had to endure assume physical form, and the landscape that it evokes is one that is peopled by helpless and hapless people

dancing through blooming thorns
hopping with muffled shrill
on souls of thorns and glass chips
(Adeoti 2005: 31).

The world of Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* (2004) is no less disturbing. It is one in which the depredation of rulers either in uniform or other guises leaves the land emasculated and ruined. "A reign of locusts," presents a situation in which "the locust-choked sky / Darkens the infant rays / Of our rising sun" (Ushie 2004: 18) while "Musa's legacy" constructs a genealogy of self-seeking African military dictators, beginning with Mansa Musa, who emerges in the world of the poem as the patron of all African dictators:

How can we forget you, O great one,
When even now, we lean on foreign vaults
Where our communal sweat winters
In private coded accounts?
(Ushie 2004: 16).

4

The popular struggle against the military in Nigeria came to a climax in the dying days of the Babangida regime in the early 1990s when, following the annulment of the highly successful presidential election of 12 June 1993, Babangida hurriedly handed over to a pseudo-civilian administration that was tagged Interim National Government. The agitation that the cancellation of the election sparked was sustained throughout the short lifespan of the interim government and the tempo only increased during the Abacha era. The occasional pretences to liberalism that Babangida exhibited gave way to the worst form of autocracy under Abacha. The consequence was the rise in cases of state-sponsored murders, detention of activists and unprecedented lawlessness. At the height of his tyrannical order, Abacha compelled all the five political parties that were formed under his guidance to adopt him as their sole presidential candidate and foreclose the need for an election. The coalition of civil society groups, trade unions and professional associations met all of these with firm resistance.¹⁶ Others based abroad, like the National Democratic Coalition, the National Liberation

Council of Nigeria and the Joint Action Congress, mobilised international pressure and Nigerians in the Diaspora to oppose and resist the development in a variety of ways. Radio Democracy, a dissident radio station, initially named Radio Kudirat after Kudirat Abiola, who was shot dead by people believed to be working for the Abacha government, broadcast in Nigeria and abroad as an alternative media to government propaganda in the face of the clampdown on the Press. This was marked by closure of media houses and detention of journalists. All the repressive actions were matched with corresponding determination and popular resistance. There was also a mass exodus of activist-writers from the country, a development from which the country has not recovered. The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a notable writer and minority rights activist on 10 November 1995, in spite of widespread international pressure against his hanging, demonstrated the utter disregard of the Abacha junta for reason and tact and attracted unprecedented international sanctions against Nigeria.

The experience under Abacha compelled more writers to write in various forms and under various circumstances against these developments. This led to the flowering of three major trends in anti-authoritarian poetry in Nigeria. First, it inspired more prison memoirs and diaries in various forms. The memoirs, in their passionate and autobiographical substance, serve as enduring records of personal agony under a lawless regime. Security agents launched assaults on all civil rights activists and arrested and detained them without charges. Those who survived the ordeals always had tales of torture and dehumanizing restriction to tell. Even though there are more of such memoirs in narrative form, Nnimmo Bassey's *Intercepted* (1988) is one of the few works of poetry in this category.¹⁷ The collection documents the activist-poet's experience of detention for 41 days without charges after being arrested at the airport on his way to a conference in Accra. Bassey's detention poems chronicle his ordeal and inscribe defiant hope. They exhibit intense lyrical strain and render the relationship between the jailer and the jailed in metaphorical terms. Apart from offering insight into the world of detainees, they also reveal the poet-persona's own tortured psychology. His most remarkable poems are those that contrast the boundless liberty in Nature with imprisonment to underline the sense in which it negated the natural order:

Hemmed in
Locked up at every corner
The sky beckons
The sky smiles with its cap
Of clouds, stars and black holes

Oh
The joy in counting clouds
In clumps & in bits
The terror of weeping smoke
Breaks with the song of
The eagle spread above
The clouds.
(Bassey 1998: 18).

A form of exilic writing which responded to the hostile political climate in the country constitutes another major development in Nigerian poetry at this period. With the general clampdown on activists and the murder of leading figures in the pro-democracy struggle, the stage was set for persecuting all “subversive elements”. The irony is that this turned out to be the period that pro-democracy groups of various inclinations flourished most. With the support of such organisations as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the groups intensified the struggle against military dictatorship and the restoration of democracy. Local and international campaigns for the release of detained writers like Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Akin Adesokan and Ken Saro-Wiwa were launched, and those who had gone into exile to escape incarceration gave expression to their deep attachment to the homeland. Consequently, more Nigerian writers were driven into exile in the Abacha days than at any other time in the nation’s history. Among the poets that emigrated at this time are Afam Akeh, Emevwo Biakolo, Esiaba Irobi, Harry Garuba, Molar Ogundipe, Ogaga Ifowodo, Tanure Ojaide and Uche Nduka (ironically, the return to “democratic governance” in 1999 did not reverse this trend). The effect is that more of the established and up- and-coming Nigerian writers are now based abroad. While some awareness of exile and longing for the homeland is present in some of the poems of Olu Oguibe in *A Gathering Fear* (1992), and Uche Nduka’s *Chioroscuro* (1997) and *Bremen Poems* (1995), Ogaga Ifowodo has tended to transfer his anger to the homeland. The picture that he paints of Nigeria in “Homeland” (from *Homeland and Other Poems*, 2008) confirms this. The poem represents many others written at this time in the way it gives graphic expression to the hostile nature of the homeland, which made retreat into exile reasonable. The poem evokes gloom, decadence and aridity. The impression it creates is that of a land that could not support life:¹⁸

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...

And how do children grow here?
Out of wombs whipped with want
And desire, they burst forth, to be
Tough like street leather, sweet and hardy
Like sugarcane, to learn love in safe time.

Here, we will walk the street
where laughter is hidden in deep places
and stores cannot shut their doors
choked with hearts that bleed from gathered wounds
and you will see nothing can grow here, but agony.
(Ifowodo 2005: 45).

Similar sentiments run through the work of Oguibe. “For you, Nigeria” ends on the note:

I have aged in my youth
Wrinkled with rage
Fury fills every inch
Of my flesh with broken glass
My shoulders sag and bow
Like a withering seedling

I have worn my soul with worry
And I shiver in my bones
I look at you
And I say to myself
Is this all there is?
A field of tragedies?
Acres of stone...

You are a burden, Homeland
You are a crown of thorns
(Oguibe 1992: 95–96).

The two poems capture all that the homeland means to the activist-poets and rationalise exilic withdrawal. Ojaide’s *When it no longer Matters where you Live* (1998) is probably the most explicit effort at justifying exile. While Terhemba Shija (2008) reads the collection in relation to globalisation and exile, it is pertinent to underscore the fact that the title poem of the collection – which has become the favourite of many critics – and “Immigrant voice” articulate the dilemma of Nigerians who were forced by the situation in their country to reside abroad. The risk in remaining in Nigeria,

which is likened to a house on fire, is weighed against living abroad in “When it no longer matters where you live”:

There’s no one so hurt at home
who forgets the pain outside –
that’s the persistent ache one carries
until home is safe to return to
when it no longer matters
where you choose to live!
(Ojaide 1998: 77).

This becomes the more meaningful when read along with the concluding part of “Immigrant voice” which debunks the romanticised image of living abroad in the popular imagination of many home-based Nigerians. Rendered in Nigerian Pidgin English, the poem ends on the note:

Sometimes I cry my eyes red for night in bed.
Wetin my eye don see here pass pepper
make me de prepare to go sweet home.
If God de, make e punish them
wen drive me from Africa come hell.
(Ojaide 1998:106).

(I sometimes cry until my eyes become red at night in bed
For what I have experienced here is not pleasant
I desire to get ready for home
If there is God, let him punish those
Who drove me from Africa to this hell).

The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa along with other Ogoni activists inspired the third major trend in Nigerian poetry in the 1990s. Apart from being one of the most imaginatively recreated events in Nigerian poetry within the decade, it has inspired the flowering of a trans-ethnic tradition of resistance poetry in the Niger Delta region. The tradition thrives on a shared sense of violation and marginal consciousness (Okunoye 2008). Ojaide’s *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997), Adiyi Bestman’s *Textures of Dawn* (1998) and Ogaga Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* (2005) operate within this tradition. Even though Saro-Wiwa only promoted the cause of the Ogoni people in the oil-rich Niger Delta, the fact that he was improperly tried and hurriedly hanged along with eight other Ogoni activists provoked wide-spread hostility to the Abacha dictatorship.

Many underground publications decrying his murder subsequently sprang up. The most remarkable effort in this regard is an anthology edited by E. C. Osondu titled *For Ken, For Nigeria* (1996). The anthology has become a major reminder of the

tradition of underground publishing that thrived in the days of the military. Many of the poets it features – Ademola Babajide, Angela Agali, Chiedu Ezeana, Ebereonwu, Ezekiel Fajenyo, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Nduka Otiono, Obi Nwakanma, Ogaga Ifowodo, Remi Raji and Toyin Adewale – are among the leading figures in what has come to be known as the third generation of Nigerian poets.¹⁹ Some of the poems in Soyinka’s *Samarkand and Other Poems* (2003) equally respond to the same event. “Calling Joseph Brodsky for Ken Saro-Wiwa” in particular reinforces Saro-Wiwa’s heroism, seeing him, in biblical terms, as the deliverer of his people:

The Party of the Niger Delta rules by the barrel –
Oil and gun – a marriage made in heaven.
Market forces write the law, rigs and derricks
Scorch the landscape, livelihood and lives. Marionettes
In itchy uniforms salute and settle strife
On orders from above – the only tongue they learn –
For oil must flow through land and sea
Though both be stilted from contempt and greed.
(Soyinka 2003: 27).

In “Exit left, monster, victim in pursuit” Soyinka, in memory of Abacha, makes a list of those he killed, describing the category of people he was fond of eliminating:

His targets – women (Kudirat et al)
Octogenarians – Alfred Rewane – and
Once faithful servitors now mired
in the Gunner’s fears
Entrapped as flies in spotty webs
The Gunner spun at whim.
(Soyinka 2003: 22).

5

The foregoing will, no doubt, create the impression that the experience with the military created chaos, stasis and frustrations, all of which provoked angry responses and made fighters out of poets. This may suggest that the poets were engaged in an unending war with a people bent on terminating the Nigerian dream. On the contrary, the entire experience provoked the invention of hope, a sensibility that Nigerian poets across generational boundaries share. The fact that the poets went beyond envisioning an end to the chaotic state of affairs to imagining a new dawn for their land indicates that they saw the vision of change as the only viable alternative to despairing. They therefore invest images of renewal, rebirth and fulfilment in a future that holds prospects of recovery and the fruition of their dreams for Nigeria. While it is easy to recognize this in Niyi Osundare’s *Waiting Laughters* (1990) and Remi Raji’s

Love Songs for My Wasteland (2005), two collections that celebrate the imminence of renewal, not many people will immediately associate Fatoba's *They said I abused the Government* with this. The fact that these collections, like very many others, project this consciousness indicates that it is a significant feature of Nigerian poetry of this period. Osundare's "The possibilities of hope", delivered at his acceptance of the 1991 Noma Award for *Waiting Laughters*, predicates his vision of hope for Africa on what he calls "the vitality of our people, their resilience" (2002: 146). Appropriate images – laughter, rain and harvest – which project such desirable experiences as healing, relief and prosperity, recur in poems with this orientation. The promise of renewal that healing showers and laughter convey occurs intermittently in *Waiting Laughters*. In "Movement III", the poet-persona says:

My land is a desert
waiting for the seminal fury
of easy showers
(Osundare 1990: 47).

The last four poems in Fatoba's collection, "Rain... after a long dry spell", "I dream of rain", "For my country" and "Like weaverbirds, not crows" paint hope in a variety of shades. Rain again becomes the metaphor for renewal and recovery. In each case, the poet-persona invents a dream for the nation. "I dream of rain" starts on the note:

I dream of rain
And the softness of the earth
Of vegetation bathed in greenness
And brooks rushing in song
To meet with rivers.
(Fatoba 2001: 50).

The quest for rebirth comes as a prayer in "For My Country":

Let your tomorrow be
The hope we dreamt about,
Drown the mistakes of the past
In sparkling tears of expectancy and
Clear your vision with duty

Let the steps of the past
Which wandered lost in wonder
Trace paths of reconstruction
Let those hands which burnt edifices
Build crucibles of hope
And light the flames of glory.
(Fatoba 2001: 51).

The optimism comes to a climax in “Like weaverbirds, not crows”.

But while optimism in Osundare’s poetry is driven by a measure of humanist passion, the dream of change in Ademola Dasyuva’s poetry in *Song of Odamolugbe* (2006) thrives on prophetic impulse in the Judeo-Christian sense. This is a logical extension of the extensive use his work makes of idioms rooted in Judeo-Christian symbolism. Personages drawn from recent Nigerian history emerge as saints, martyrs or agents of divine judgment, while the military are “soldier-ants”. The change that his work envisions makes a claim to divine endorsement and hints at a longing in the Nigerian popular imagination for a revolutionary break with the past. The paradox that governs the vision is that it is apocalyptic:

Then I saw three cherubs:

Augusta, Dora and Gani, emerge from among
The people with a shout of inspired trumps
Of celestial host, their fiery sword poised to
Wreak vengeance on murderous fakers, and
Godless slavers of *Jah* people...

I saw a webbed pendulum move with a speed of
Lightening, swinging to the ecstasy of motion-slight;
The infidels unaware of our maturing agenda!
(Dasyuva 2006: 96).

6

In exploring the component of contemporary Nigerian poetry that the experience of military rule inspired, this essay has sought to demonstrate that writing against dictatorships can be dynamic. The fact that various phases of military rule in Nigeria elicited different responses from Nigerian poets across “generational” boundaries will suggest that this form of writing issues from the instinct of a society for self-preservation. The press and civil society groups, as dependable allies, created the atmosphere that facilitated the growth of writing against dictatorship. The most significant formal impact of the experience on Nigerian poetry consists in the radical sense in which the voice of the persona came to be identified with that of the poet. Newspapers naturally provided a popular and accessible platform to reach a wider audience as the poets were not content with writing but were also eager to influence the public. Military dictators and visionless politicians emerge in Nigerian poetry of this period as two of a kind. Even though power-drunk and self-serving generals are made to represent the Nigerian military in the tradition of poetry under review, the entire force emerges as a political formation and not as a patriotic force. This explains why the poets depict the men of the military as destroyers while celebrating the

people – the dead and the living – that were their victims. Nothing can be more damning than the deployment of animal images to counter the self-image of the military dictators as saviours and reformers. In sum, Nigerian poetry of the military era is not just about the military; it is as much about the nation and the people, the helpless witnesses of the oddities that characterized the era. It represents the people in their resilience and resolve to invent a new nation out of the rot and immortalizes those who dared to confront the dictators, those represented as the martyrs of the struggle. It thus constitutes the literary expression of resistance to the chaotic state of affairs that the Nigerian experience of military rule precipitated.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures, University of Sussex, Brighton on January 17, 2007, while the author was a British Academy Visiting Scholar at the Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. The author appreciates the invitation from Prof Stephanie Newell that inspired the writing of the paper in the first instance.
2. Aiyejina did not take into consideration that Soyinka's *Eti-Ope Revolution* (1983), which satirizes the activities of the politicians of the Second Republic (from 1979 onwards) in Pidgin English, was already circulating in the early 1980s.
3. The era, as a consequence, produced more martyrs and heroines of democracy than any other in Nigerian history. Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola and Alfred Rewane were murdered in very bizarre circumstances by those believed to be agents of the state, while the killing of Moshood Abiola and Ken Saro-Wiwa, in no less questionable circumstances, remain reminders of the damage that the military and their supporters did to stagnate Nigeria.
4. The later poetry of Christopher Okigbo possesses the passion and idiom that anticipate post-civil war Nigerian poetry.
5. The irony is that the worst phase of military rule in Nigeria – the Abacha era – provoked a variety of poetic idioms given that it also brought such unprecedented experiences as the killing of opposition figures, the arrest and detention of writers and critics of the military junta. This came to a climax with the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni activists. This was also the period that the nation recorded a mass exit of scholar – writers.
6. In addition to instituting and administering many prizes, which are announced at its annual convention every November, the Association of Nigerian Authors has also been a major pressure group and it reacted at different times to developments on the Nigerian scene in the days of the military. For instance, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo visited General Banbangida to plead for Mamman Vasta, a soldier-poet who was alleged to have masterminded a coup.
7. Efforts at replicating this in some other university towns as Nsukka, Ilorin and Ago-Iwoye also inspired student-poets.
8. Notable among these were Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, John Ohiorhenuan, Kole Omotoso, Molara Ogundipe and Omafume Onoge. The group was initially known as the Akwei Circle and later came to be called the Positive Review Group.
9. The poet has since resuscitated this column, even though he now resides outside Nigeria.
10. Ofeimun is quoted as confirming that he was the first to manage the Arts page of *The Guardian*. Osofisan also admitted his preference for the medium of the newspaper; see Charles Bodunde (1996).
11. The association had to change its name at certain points to beat proscription orders of military administrations that saw the banning of the association as a way to get rid of the opposition and the agitation that it championed. A few university teachers were also dismissed from their posts in violation of the terms of their appointment.
12. The collection brings together poems inspired by his detention during the civil war by the Gowon regime. It is not included in this study as it was primarily a response to Soyinka's experience of detention.

13. Simply expressed as *Oba ki i pa onkorin* (the king does not kill the singer), the principle is rooted in the idea that the poet as a custodian of truth should be accorded some immunity in discharging this duty. This adage is relevant in appreciating the satirical energy in the works of such performers of Yoruba origin as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Lanrewaju Adepoju and Ologundudu.
14. Fatoba also writes poetry in Yoruba. Some of the poems published in *Petals of Thought* also exist in Yoruba. Fatoba's major collection in Yoruba is *Eko* (1998).
15. While *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead* is the first collection of poems with pidgin poems published in Nigeria, only a few of the poems in it are in Pidgin while all the poems in *If to Say I be Soja* are in Pidgin English.
16. The leading associations and groups involved were the Academic Staff Union of Universities, the National Association of Nigerian Students, the Nigerian Bar Association, Campaign for Democracy, Committee for the Defence of Human Rights and the Constitutional Rights Project.
17. The best known of these are Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life* (1991) and Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* (1995).
18. Ironically, the poem was to play an important role during the campaign for the release of Ifowodo when agents of the Abacha junta detained him.
19. Osondu (1996) details the risk involved in publishing an anthology of this nature at the time in his introduction to the anthology, and it is no surprise that most of those that contributed poems were unpublished young poets who were also not afraid of identifying with the project.

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