

SOCIAL REALITIES IN MARIA AJIMA'S POEMS OF SANITY

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Abstract

This study is concerned with the various perspectives of society captured by Maria Ajima in her collection of poems titled Poems of Sanity (2000). The theoretical framework used is the Sociological Literary Criticism. This approach to the study of literature is a conviction that literature is a social product wherein the people's thoughts and feelings are shaped by the cultural life of society. The research methodologies are semantic interpretation and inter stanzaic analysis to arrive at the relationship between the selected poems and contemporary society. The data constitute poems and stanzas which reflect socio-political and economic realities at content and aesthetic levels. This study is paramount to scholarship because it dwells on a new phase in Nigerian poetry which is poetry by female poets. Poetry written by women was hitherto sparse in relation to their male counterpart. This research dwells on the contemporary issues and functional artistry employed by the female poet reviewed. The findings are that themes by contemporary female poets are divergent and sociologically relevant in Africa. This study concludes that Ajima is a socially conscious poet who is involved with contemporary issues bedevilling Africa.

Key words – Social, Realities, Contemporary issues, Maria Ajima, Poems of Sanity.

Introduction

African cultural impediments and the Western sexism of the colonial system which prevented girls from attending missionary schools, delayed the arrival of women on the literary scene. Beginning from the late 1960's there arose a generation of women whose desire was to introduce a female perspective to the way women were portrayed in literature. The earliest of these writings was Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1967) which was the first novel written by a woman in Anglophone Africa. The first generation of Nigerian female writers saw patriarchy as the major form of women oppression. Many of them write to debunk the subordinate portrayal of women by male writers. These writers include Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Zulu Sofola, Molar Ogundipe – Leslie, Catherine Acholonu and others. They portray women in positive light. The writings of these literary matriarchs were reactionary to the subservient portrayal of women by their male counterparts. Catherine Acholonu, a first generation Nigerian female poet, rooted her themes on traditional values. Other female poets in this generation are Mabel Segun and Omolara Ogundipe (Doki, 14).

In recent times, there has been a proliferation of female writers. One major factor that has brought the increase in female authors is the establishment of feminist presses like Women Writing Africa which already has four volumes. The series is a collection of works by African

female storytellers, performers and writers. Closely related to this is the access to western publishing houses by African women living abroad who equally benefit from writing workshops and women's writing networks. Many of these women are publishing in the United States, United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. There is a shift in focus in works of these contemporary Nigerian female writers and poets from that of the earlier generation. These new writers portray the woman in realistic and broader terms. They do not negate patriarchy but create men and women who are economically, politically and socially conscious of the environment. They use their works to try to correct societal ills and discuss in details political and economic issues in contemporary times (Bwai 321). For instance, Maria Ajima rather than fight patriarchy, focuses on the challenges and prospects of Africa. She is termed as a socially conscious poet (Aliyu – Ibrahim, 10).

Socially conscious writers, poets and thinkers especially in Africa are engaged with the interactions that exist between people, their culture and their physical environment. For the fictive writer in Africa, art is essentially a comprehensive testimony and a pattern of existence in which Africans have been involved. The relationship between art and society is rooted in Africa's ancestry. These writers are engaged with the question of change in modern Africa. Issues of African cultural heritage and power form the concerns of their writings. Through literature, they reconcile Africa's past with the present. Maria Ajima is a poet who is engaged with the problems and possible solutions to the plethora of problems in the society. She is a former President of Women Writers of Nigeria. She won the Association of Nigerian Writers/Spectrum Prose Prize with the unpublished novel *The Survivor*. She has several collections of poems including *Poems of Sanity* (2000). The social realities she portrays in *Poems of Sanity* is a land of travails and in dire need of socio – political and economic transformations. This study is concerned with a critical assessment of these contemporary social realities.

Social Realities in Maria Ajima's *Poems of Sanity*

Social realities in Africa especially since her attainment of independence, has been series of socio - political and economic challenges ranging from years of civil wars, military rule, bad governance, loss of freedom of speech, materialism, terrorism and others. As such African writers like Ajima have helped to critically illuminate the fundamental ways in which these challenges and questions can be faced and answered. Ajima's *Poems of Sanity* provides a perspective for understanding the problems in society. Her poems are an aesthetic portrayal and interrogation of the traumatic experiences that characterize the lives of people and their existence in contemporary African society.

“Una Too Like Katakata Sef” (7), is a poem written in Pidgin English as a commentary on the nation Nigeria especially the hustles of her people. The poet says:

... for this our Obodo country
If you no rush for something
Na so dem go de leave
Sha, make God help us! (7)

Nigeria is a country with a desire to get rich quick by many of its citizens. There is so much rush to get money and acquire properties regardless of the means which it is gotten. The poet refers to people who acquire money at any cost as “vultures” in the poem “Fear” (56).

Vulture is an animal of prey. Vultures are like fraudsters and dupes. The category of people who dupe people, come in various guises as:

Businessmen, car – owners, goodwillers,
do gooders, relations, colleagues,
Pastors, Reverends, maimed, poor, needy,
widowed, bereaved, sick, dumb, deaf,
well – wishers, money spinners,
All those you can think of (56).

These aforementioned categories of people are referred to as “Four one niners”; 419. 419 is the penal code of fraud in the Nigerian criminal code. It is sometimes called Advanced Fee Fraud. It is an illegal way of getting money from people through false pretence. Their targets are usually gullible people. There are variants to these scams such as making promises for employment, lottery, financial gains or marital connections. The poet is puzzled on the multiplicity of vices in society and asks “why?” in the poem “Why” (12). In this poem, the poet lists all other vices especially those that have kept the continent of Africa technologically backward.

“Why” (12), is Ajima's rhetorical poem that questions Africa on her inability to equate her counterparts in technological advancement. The poet says:

Others zoom into space
While we remain
In the stone age
Murdering one another
In the huts
Why ...
This cry must be endless (12),

The “stone age” which Africa has remained in is devoid of any inventions. Things are still done in crude and primitive ways. An instance cited in the poem is that Africa's buildings are “huts”. Technologically advanced countries have conquered the earth and have zoomed into space to conquer other planets (12). One of the reasons the continent has remained perpetually backwards is that they keep “Murdering one another” even in their state of squalor. There are several ways Africans keep murdering one another which the poet interrogates with “why”. The poet asks “why” seven times for emphasis.

The seven “why” in the poem can be interpreted as an interrogation of impeding policies and practices in Africa. Therefore, a critical analysis and interpretation of these seven rhetorical “why” can be re - written as:

Why Retrogressive Traditional Practices?
Why Crimes Against Women?
Why Child Labour and Trafficking?
Why Nepotism?
Why Corruption?
Why Bad Leadership?
Why Xenophobia?

The first “why” is the issue of retrogressive traditional practices which has kept the continent of Africa stagnated. Practices such as human sacrifices, early or forced marriages,

superstitions and domestic violence are some of these cultural inhibitions that have retarded the growth of the continent technologically, politically and economically.

Secondly, crimes against women in Africa are issues of female genital mutilation, infibulations, rape, denying the girl – child access to education, wife battering, forced prostitution and preference for sons over daughters. The United Nations defines violence against women as:

... any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life.

One of Africa's gender based crimes is the inequality that exists between men and women in the society. This inequality has prevented women from holding leadership roles in society. Majority of the crimes against women are backed up by the tradition of patriarchy in the communities. The statistics of crimes against women in Africa is high. Crimes against women have over the decades prevented African women from competing favourably with women from other parts of the world.

Closely related to crimes against women is the issue of child labour and trafficking. This can be described as modern day slavery. It involves the labouring, recruiting and transporting of children for domestic use or adoption. According to the statistics by International Labour Organisation, about 1.2 million children are trafficked annually. By Nigerian constitution, a child is a person less than eighteen years. As such, child labour is the employment of a child which restricts them from basic education and development. According to (Agbo, 2017) "Child labour is any work or task a child below the age of 18 years undertakes with a view of being rewarded in cash or in kind or for any other reason at all, and which deprives him of good health, good education and normal development." Some of the reasons for child labour are poverty, high rate of illiteracy, cultural factors and greed. Child labour and trafficking are vices that have under-developed Africa over decades.

Nepotism is another factor that has kept Africa on the list of third world countries which accounts for the fourth "why". Nepotism means favouritism, that is, giving your relations and acquaintances privileges not on the basis of merits. There are two major types of Nepotism: Political and Institutional Nepotism. Political Nepotism is assigning a person to a political position based on kin or kith relationship while Institutional Nepotism is employing a person based on familial relationship. Nepotism, as a bane of Africa, has been practised by both male and female leaders.

Corruption intertwines with Nepotism. Bribery has been one of the major forms of corruption in Africa. According to a report on 11th July 2019, by Transparency International:

Corruption in African countries is hindering economic, political and social development. It is a major barrier to economic growth, good governance and basic freedoms, such as freedom of speech or citizens' right to hold governments to account. More than this, corruption affects the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

Corruption remains one of the major reasons many Africans live in abject poverty. Money laundering to foreign countries is also part of corruption. Despite attempts by governments to

curb corruption, it has been on the increase and affects the educational, health, religious, social and political sectors of the society.

Most of the issues of corruption are products of bad leadership. In spite of the rich mineral resources in Africa, poor leadership has brought the continent's United Nations human development index ranking very low. The continent has been bedevilled by years of military rule, coups, high inflation rates, increased poverty rates, acts of violence, civil wars and lack of freedom of speech.

The last of these interrogative “why” is Xenophobia. It is one of the threats against the unity of Africa. Xenophobia is the fear of foreigners. South Africa is at the centre of most xenophobic attacks against other African countries. Immigrants into South Africa have faced discrimination and violence since 1994. Two major reasons given for these attacks are that migrants took all their available jobs and social amenities, also they claimed migrants were responsible for majority of the crimes in the country. The most recent of these xenophobic attacks was on 1st September 2019, called the Johannesburg Riots. There were massive riots and looting of shops especially shops owned by Nigerians. Simultaneously, there was a nation – wide strike by truck drivers protesting against the employment of foreign truck drivers. These xenophobic attacks, riots and looting of properties are detrimental to the unity of Africa. Thus, the poet asks: Why Xenophobia?

The poem, “Make Your Own Utopia” (8), is a wake-up call to African brothers and sisters. Utopia is a world where there is peace and harmony. It reiterates the issue of the conquest of outer space by the western world. Ajima suggests that Africans should work day and night, just like ants, to build a conducive society. The social reality in Africa is that: “We sit and stare / We flock to their Mecca” (9). Africa is characterized by a lifestyle of mediocrity, lacadaxical attitudes, low productivity and a high dependence on Western economy. It is better we “... create our Mecca” rather than “... flock to their Mecca” (9). The poem ends on an advisory note:

Do you remember?
We had once been ants
Let us wake from our slumber
For even if we forget our skin
They do not forget (9).

African past history is filled with heroic deeds, conquests, hard – work and nation building. Some of these nation builders are Princess Inikpi of Igala land, Queen Amina of Zazzau, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi of Benin, King Jaja of Opobo and Shaka Zulu of Zulu land. These were warriors and leaders who fought for the unity and peace of Africa, their fatherland. They were either exiled or killed in their fight for the territorial sanctity of their communities. These legends are meant to be foundations for the continuous growth of the continent. Unfortunately, in contemporary times, the labours of our past heroes are going in vain. This poem calls on Africans to retrace her steps thereby establishing her on the path to greatness. One of the ways Africa can become great is by developing a maintenance culture, that is, continuing with projects or policies of past leaders.

“Edifices” (62), is a lamentation on the various discontinued/abandoned projects, policies and edifices in Nigeria. These edifices are littered in the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western regions of Nigeria. The poet persona laments:

I have seen gargantuan edifices of pride
Behemoths copied without thought
From colder climes around the globe,
They litter all over Ajaokuta,
Oku – Ibokun, Festac, Ikeja and Abuja
It seems you believe in elephantine
edifices
They are of little use
To anybody but the contractors (62).

Ajaokuta, Oku – Ibokun, Festac, Ikeja and Abuja are located in the different geo-political zones of Nigeria with abandoned projects. These ailing Public enterprises include Ajaokuta Steel Company Limited, Nigerian Newspaper Manufacturing Company Limited Oku-Ibokun, Honeywell Flour Mills Ikeja, May and Baker (Nig) Limited Ikeja, Jos Steel Rolling Mill Limited, Katsina Steel Rolling Mill Company Limited, Nigerian Paper Mills Jebba and others. The initiative to build these technological projects was “copied without thought / From colder climes around the globe” (62). This is reference to mindless technological lifting from Western worlds without the technological know-how to run and maintain them. The resultant effect is the collapse of these mills, factories or industries. Another reason for the collapse of industries in Nigeria is the constant change in government and not having any continuity agenda by succeeding governments.

Inability of Nigerian successive governments to continue in the agenda and policies of their predecessors is discussed in the poem “Hypo-Theoretics” (63). “Hypo” means when a situation is below or beneath standard while “Theoretics” means being concerned with theories or hypotheses rather than with practical matters. Therefore, the coinage “Hypo-Theoretics” means operating seriously below standard and having an obsession with theories rather than realities. The poet persona analyses that:

When you speak of transitional hypo –
theoretics
Men will come and men will go
It is not so much the face,
as the systems
that need tinkering (63).

The educational, economic and political systems in the nation need tinkering or repair. There is therefore need to make policies that will bring continuity in the society. Majority of the public sectors in the country has been stalled because of non-progressive policies and

administrations. One of the government agencies negatively affected by changing policies is NEPA (National Electric Power Authority) now called PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria) due to privatisation of the electric company.

“Millipede” (67), is the poem which disapproves of the inefficiency of public sectors especially NEPA. The poet persona asks:

In this jet age
How could you continue to crab along millipede pace?
when others are in frenzy
for the millennium?
...
Oh, NEPA, NEPA
what shall we do
with thee? (67)

Electricity distribution in Nigeria dates back to 1898 when the first generating power plant was installed in Lagos. NEPA had the monopoly of electric supply for several decades. Despite the national and international financial investments in the corporation, power outages were its norm. This made the Nigerian populace change its acronym NEPA to Never Expect Power Always. During the tenure of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the corporation was privatized on 30th September, 2013. In its stead, an independent agency called the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC) was formed. By this privatisation process, licenses were issued to other marketers for electricity generation at state or regional levels. It is expected that the diversification will bring efficient power supply to all parts of the country. The poem ends on a hopeful note:

And I believe
You will rise, and rise,
Out of these mottled ashes,
Like the sphinx,
my beloved Country! (67)

In spite of the degradations in the public sectors, there is need for Nigerian citizens to be patriotic to their country. The poet fondly calls the nation “my beloved Country” (67). The theme of patriotism is discussed in the poem “Me I Love the Anthem” (75).

“Me I Love the Anthem” (75), is a patriotic poem which applauds the nation's unity in diversity. Nigeria is the:

... only place on earth
You will eat pounded yam with ogbono soup
Kwose with 'kamu
Grass cutter with egusi
Ewedu with amala
... I just like my country (75).

The people's foods and cultures make them unique among the nations of the earth. The nation's anthem is a call for the different ethnic groups and religions to arise to her

responsibilities of nation-building: “Arise O Compatriots, Nigeria's call Obey”. It is evident that “There is no other anthem / Like it, anywhere else in the world” (76). The anthem speaks to the souls of its citizens. The nation is a “marriage” of different ethnic groups. Ajima's poem titled “The Dispossessed” (64) is a cry against the ethnic wars and tribal marginalisation that wants to tear this unity apart. The poet focuses on Benue State which is one of the states in the middle belt of Nigeria. The poet says no one should be tribalistic because “they never designed their birth place” (64).

Benue State has been bedevilled with years of Fulani herders and indigenous farmers' clashes which have rendered many clans and communities homeless. Most of these people have become Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) on their land. The dispossessed are these IDP's. The poet is of Benue origin as such uses the collective pronoun “we” to refer to the plights of her people:

But we the dispossessed insist
That surely as the world
goes round its axis
On a point three hundred and sixty degrees
That dial must go round us all
For one head is as good as another
Awo hitherto knew this
Though he belonged to one of the “Big Three” (65).

The “Big Three” are the three major languages in Nigeria; Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, who have majorly been in the helm of Nigeria's governance since independence in 1960. It is time for the dial of leadership to go round so that other ethnic groups can partake in top leadership positions particularly presidency.

The three major tribes are not the only ones who have manpower and intelligence to contribute to the development of the country. “On the Cool Morning in the Hills of Mbayion” (47), is a picturesque poem on the beauty of the landscape of Mbayion, a clan in Gboko LGA of Benue State. Other clans there are Mbativ, Ipav, Mbatiev and Yandav. The beauty of the area is characterised by:

The birds chirp away, chattering a refrain
Gossiping on what awaits the day
You stride royally, unabashed
Seeping lightly into my skin
And I draw my breath deeply (47).

This excerpt talks on the unpolluted atmosphere of the place untapped without industrial pollution and false civilisation. Mbayion is a microcosm of the African continent. The poet is of the opinion that wildness of Africa is a symbol of the absence of false civilization. This issue is further discussed in the poem “I Like You Wild” (40). Civilization and all its technological advancements have caused the world to gradually lose its ozone layer. 22nd April yearly is marked as World Earth Day to raise awareness on the importance of environmental protection.

The theme of the Earth Day 2020 is Climate Action. The first Earth Day was fifty years ago, April 22, 1970. The year 2020 edition is meant to mobilize nations and people to the challenges of climate change on the future of humanity and life-support systems.

In spite of the challenges that Africa has faced, the poet is optimistic that with proper re-orientation and a spirit of patriotism, the continent can be great again. The foundation for the greatness of Africa has been laid by her past leaders. As such, there is need for continuity in order to achieve an egalitarian society.

Conclusion

The social realities in Ajima's collection of poems is a continent plagued by retrogressive traditional practices, crimes against women, child labour and trafficking, nepotism, corruption, bad leadership and xenophobia. Other vices are tribal marginalisation and inter communal crises. The poet suggests that the dial of leadership should go round the different tribes of the nation as a way to end incessant crises. Also, African leaders should imbibe the culture of continuity in nation-building policies to ensure social progress. In addition, the continent should join other parts of the world to preserve the earth by avoiding ozone depleting practices. Therefore, Ajima has used poetry as a channel for political and social transformation of Africa.

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