

**POETRY AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNES:
A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS OF EZENWA-OHAETO**

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Abstract

The tendency of using poetry to project the communal values in any given society is a general preoccupation of poets from Anglophone West African countries such as Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Liberia. Independence in all African countries came with social consciousness, dislocations and disillusionment; this political disjunction necessitated a change in poetic tradition, attention is thus shifted to the perennial socio-political and economic problems emanating from self-rule. Through the narration of private experiences, these poets are able to examine the social and political dislocations in their societies thereby sensitizing the public's conscience on the happenings in their societies. This paper understudies the social consciousness in some poetry collections of Ezenwa-Ohaeto, taking a sociological approach and postcolonial theory in analyzing the poems.

Keywords: Social Consciousness, Cultural, Social, Economic, Intellectual and Political Life of the African people

Introduction

A pervading motif in recent Anglophone West African poetry is the narration of the pains and gains of recession which abound in the society; this marks a shift in the thematic focus from the poetry of dehumanization at home to the poetry of humiliation and disillusionment, and by extension, the subtle stigmatization of African leaders for their irresponsible governance. It is also concerned with the cultural and psychological disorientation of an individual. Literary production in Anglophone West Africa is informed by diverse experiences that result from the socio-cultural, political and economic realities of the sub-continent. Emanating from these phenomenal concerns is the diagnosis of the challenges that the continent has had to contend with in asserting its place and importance in the world. Modern Anglophone West African poetry simply refers to the recent literary poetic production written in the language of the former colonial master, specifically, Britain, in West Africa. Several factors could be attributed to the growth of this poetic tradition: the frequent political skirmishes in Africa have the tendency of producing equivalent thematic response through the medium of poetry.

Social Consciousness in the Poetry of Some West African Poets

Within Anglophone West Africa, a great deal of poetic creativity was witnessed starting from the mid-twentieth century. These poets have had to develop personal themes through their private experiences and as a result, there emerged new ways of expression that came with the use of personal and complex images and symbols which some critics have described as obscure as it reflects the cultural, social, economic, intellectual and political life of the African people. Through the narration of private experiences, these poets are able to examine the social and political dislocations in their societies. For instance, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark and Christopher Okigbo, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Ossie Enekwe, Tanure Ojaide and Joe Ushie, to mention but a few wrote more on the social consciousness of the African continent more specifically Nigeria. Since the 1960s, political, economic, and cultural events have begun to shape African poetry. Gone are the days when the shades of colonialism were an unending preoccupation of African poets. In modern African poetry, works that focus on the healing and purging of the country and families have dominated African poetry. Poets in Africa have faced

issues in ways that not only explain how indigenous cultures are absorbed by western standards but also how limiting in vision their leaders have been.

Today, the proliferation of poetry in Nigeria is stirred by the increasing social awareness and emotional pressure brought on by social, political, and economic issues and crises. Contemporary Nigerian poets (the fourth generation) like Remi Raji, Uche Peter Umez, Obi Nwakanma, Ogaga Ifowodo, Chidi Anthony Opara, Maik Nwosu and many others, are churning out poems virtually on a daily basis, either in book form or published on the Internet. Poets from around the world are envious of and learning from the power and fame that Nigerian poets enjoy in the country's literary scene. But as one critic said of the Nigerian poetry scene today, there is a mixed collection of talent and mediocrity, rhyme, rhetoric and reason. Still, the researcher believes that there is no dearth of intellectuals among Nigerian poets. Nigerian poets are great writers, visionaries, and social reformers who consistently seek to drive their point home (the same cannot be said of our political leadership). Against the backdrop of what can be described as formidable, Nigerian poets represent the opposition to the ills of the society. However, Nigerian poets and authors are committed to the cause of humanity and social justice, because they have always given back to society, Nigerians must strive to keep their legacy alive.

Poverty

Is there anything like poverty?

Is it POVERTY when a man is healthy but not wealthy?

Is it POVERTY when a man is wealthy but not healthy?

Is it POVERTY when a man is a rich-illiterate but a poor-literate?

Is it POVERTY when a man has many children but there is no money to take care of them?

Is it POVERTY when a man is rich but has no child?

What you call POVERTY might be RICHES to the other man.

Are there not out there financially rich barren women who are craving for children?

Are there not out there financially muscled people who do not have peace?

Are there not out there people who are handicapped but have handwork?

What seems as POVERTY to you might be RICHES to the other man.

Is the success of man determined by how successful he is financially?

In life, man lags one thing or another no matter how highly placed.

So, there is no RICH man, no POOR man.

What abound are gluttonous-insatiable persons or you call them, kleptomaniacs.

- Odimegwu Onwumere

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Societal Issues and Trends in Osundare's Poetry

There is no doubt that Niyi Osundare focuses his poetic lens on the society and its well-being. Amongst the myriads of issues plaguing the contemporary Nigerian society, social inequality plays a major role. This is why our poet has anchored some of his titles on it. "The Land of Unease" and "Unequal Fingers" both in the collection *Village Voices* are glary examples. In "The Land of Unease," Osundare posits:

That land never knows peace
where a few have too much
and many none at all (46).

This unease springs from the imbalance in wealth distribution that characterizes the economic and the capitalist society which only allows the rich to get richer and the poor poorer. It is further intensified by the unjust means through which the rich keep enriching themselves and systematically subject the poor to perpetual poverty. The poet persona reveals:

Men form unequal knives.
A few slashing the yam
With matchets greedler
Than Esimuda's sword
Leaving mere peelings
For the many others (46).

Here, the poet persona metaphorically uses "yam", a popular staple food to refer to wealth or resources that should have been evenly distributed. When the poor and the deprived masses question the rationale behind the unequal sharing, a proverbial clinch resonates:

And when we ask why
They say fingers are not equal (46).

This response seems to complicate rather than solve the problem of inequality and uneven distribution of national or communal resources. As we see in "Unequal Fingers", the deprived masses resolutely reject the unfair treatment and deprivation, stating their knowledge of this evil thus:

Let no one tell us again
That fingers are not equal
For we know
how the thumb grew fatter
Than all the others (60).

Through the use of plural personae, Osundare makes a case of the collective rejection of the unfavourable status quo and advocates for a radical change. To the poor masses, it is no longer business as usual. They are not ignorant of the fact that wealth of the nation is enough to get to every citizen, at least, to a satisfactory extent. The poet persona avers:

The yam of this world
is enough for all mouths
which pay daily homage
to the god of the throat (61).

Such deprivation only leaves the masses in a poorer state. Hunger and starvation step in to torture the spirit, soul, and body of the poor. In "Excursions", Osundare paints a picture of poverty-stricken people similar to Cheney-Coker's "peasants! In their emaciated bones" The sordid imagery is one that hardly fades away from the mind of the reader. According to the poet persona:

We meet eyes in sunken sockets
Teeth bereft of gums
Skins scaly like iguana's
Feet swollen like watermelons.
We see village boys' kwashiokored bellies
And ribs baring the benevolence of
The body politics (7).

While the poor starve, the rich feed fat and flourish in their homes and at public places. In "Bukka Banter," Osundare employs a dialogue techniques to expose the affluence that the rich few recklessly exhibit. He represented this through the meal orders that his rich poet-personae place at an eatery. When asked by a waiter "wetin you chop?" Hear their replies:

Give me three wraps of semovita
With obedient okra soup...
Give me two amala with a
Generous forest of ewedu.
One square yard of ponmo off the
Back of a specially stubborn cow....
Six wraps of eba...

This scenario is identical to what we see in “Senior Service Club” where the participating personae equally have sumptuous meals; a testimonial of their wealth and status. We see them order for beer, Guinness stout, gin-n-lime, and chicken that have “done several years in the prison of the fridge” (10). “Songs of the Tax-Gather” laments to the complexities of the agony of the power. We understand from the poem that the privileged leaders squander the resources of the nation, they resort to harsh economic policies that further plunge the poor masses deeper into penury.

Generally, the modern poets have left the public for the private domain. They develop personal themes. They speak of life and death, of joys and pains, they write of their experiences and their growth in life, of their loves and hates. It is clear that, although the poets are thinking of themselves when they are writing these poems, their poems are also meaningful for us – for we go through the same, or similar, experiences. They therefore enlarge our sympathies and our emotional and mental growth and help us to adjust to comparable situations when they arise in our own lives. All this is, of course, in addition to the main purpose of the poet which is to give beautiful and poignant expression to his chosen theme. This aspect of expression must be realized as very important, for poetry is literature and is meant to entertain. It might as well be mentioned that it is possible for a poem to be worth reading even if it does not say much that is meaningful. It will not be important poetry, but it could be very entertaining.

Many of the poets here are young and are yet to write their best poetry, but one feels that they have achieved much to support the expectations of a vigorous West African Literature. The modern African poets are more concerned with the happenings in their environments. Some write about discrimination, the negative effect of colonization on Africa while some condemned bad African leaders who enriched themselves at the expense of their citizens. Others condemned the traditional practice of some African states while some praise mother earth (Africa).

The role of a literary artist is to overthrow evil and enthrone good in the society in order to achieve a society noted for rule of law, justice, equal opportunity, security and equity. The aforementioned roles of the literary artist are clearly supported by notable creative writers and critics. For example, Chinua Achebe, in stating his role as a creative writer states that:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re – education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past-with all its imperfections- was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered them (45).

So, the work of a committed literary writer or any writer for that matter is to assist in the onerous task of re-educating, re-directing, reforming and regenerating his people by sensitizing their ordinarily dull and complacent conscience for a positive action. And by “Marching in Front”, the artist acts as a General in the army who leads his officers and men into a battle field for victory.

Similarly, Ezekiel Mphahlele, in his book *African Image*, perceives the literary artist as “the sensitive point of his community”. In his own view, William Abraham, a Ghanaian Philosopher argues that the literary artist should not for any reason, be excused from the task of re-education, regeneration and reformation of his society, just like African professionals in diverse fields are not excused. According to him:

Just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa; African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa, why should African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves recognized as genuine? (45)

A critical analysis of William Abraham’s social functions of African intellectuals and professionals reveals that the literary creators (as he called them) perform the roles of scientists, historians and

political scientists in the course of performing their work as literary writers because literature permeates every field of human activity. In his own perception, Senator Fulbright ranks the work of a literary artist, especially a social critic as the highest demonstration of nationalism and patriotism. According to him, “to criticize one’s country, to tell her that it could do better, is to pay it the highest compliments.” It is therefore not surprising when Wole Soyinka, in appreciating the inevitable and precarious tasks which literary artists and critics often set for themselves, argues, “I have one abiding religion -human liberty.”

The above is a great religion because any writer or critic whose ultimate religion or goal is to liberate humanity, the society and the individual must ironically forfeits his own liberty, or sometimes his life in order to liberate others. A great religion is one in which any writer or critic’s ultimate religion or goal is to liberate humanity, the society and the individual. As the critic or writer ironically forfeits his own liberty or sometimes loses his life in order to liberate others. So Wole Soyinka is stating in plain language the role of the literary writer/critic as an agent of social consciousness and reformation when he declares:

I believe implicitly that any work of art which opens out the horizon of human mind, and intellect, is by its very nature, a force for change, a medium for change (247).

This change may be positive or negative depending on the society or individual at a particular point in time. A change could only be possible and effective when the ruling class listens to the cries and what the society is undergoing at the moment.

Social Consciousness in the Poetry of Ezenwa- Ohaeto

In the subsequent part of this paper, efforts are made through a critical study of some selected poems from Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s anthology of poems, written in standard and Pidgin English to prove that he wrote many of his poems mainly to sensitize his readers on the aspects of social injustice, criminality in high and low places, dehumanization, deprivation, deceit, poverty, abuse of power, purposeless leadership and impoverishment of the masses that often go unchallenged and unpunished. The thematic concerns of his poems are in line with the views of the writers and critics reviewed above. In his own words, Ezenwa-Ohaeto states his roles as a writer to include: a singer, a speaker, a seer, and a town crier, whose objective is to rouse the dogs to rouse the guards for the guards to subdue the numerous rogues in our society at various levels.

These poetic manifestoes are specifically given vents in some poems in his anthologies such as *If to Say I Bi Soja*, *Bullets for Buntings* and *I Wan Bi President*, which are poetry for Sensitization, Criticism and Change. In the poetry volume entitled: -

I Wan Bi President and in the poem: “My Credentials,” Ezenwa-Ohaeto clearly states his poetic Mission and Vision as a poet and social critic. As a sensitive member of the Nigerian society, he gives his literary manifesto when he says that his task is to arouse the dogs with his songs in order to arouse the guards to subdue the rogues in the Nigerian Society. He puts his entire literary crusade thus:

I have taken the old gong
I have learnt the old song
Deafness kills a child
Silence slaughters the adult.
I have seen and I will speak.....
I have presented my credentials (lines 1-30)

In this poem, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, through his years of education in various Universities and through extensive and intensive reading of literary works and travels, states his determination and preparedness as an “Adult” poet and critic, among children (insensitive and complacent citizens) to speak against the evils he sees in the society. And if the readers remain adamant and deaf to his clarion call for action against injustices, inequality, abuse of power, general impoverishment of the people, oppression and poor leadership, he like the Watchman in the book of Ezekiel Chapter 33:1-7, would not be held

culpable for their ultimate suffering and destruction, because “He has seen and has spoken” (line 28). If the readers should perish because of lack of understanding, insensitivity, stubbornness, gullibility or complacency, the blood of the readers would be on their own heads. And in line with his self-imposed social crusade, Ezenwa demonstrates the profundity of his knowledge of the geographical terrain of his country, Nigeria and the level of the suffering of children, youths, men and women in various parts of the country.

In an absolute display of his knowledge of the importance of diction to the overall effects and beauty of any given poem, he plays with words as he presents the troubles in Nigeria and the problems with Nigerians. In the poem: “My Credentials”, he observes:

A maid moaning in Maiduguri
Mumbles the massive scars of many
mumps
A youth yawning in Yola
Yields to the yells of yearly yokes
A boy boiling in Abeokuta
Buries his body in a bottle of bitterness
A woman worrying in Owerri
Weeps of the weary wind in penury
A son suffering in Sokoto screams of a
Series of serious sets of disasters (lines 12-21).

In the poem, the poet’s diction indicates the diverse ways Nigerians of all ages, places and walks of life undergo suffering or hardship. The words that show the suffering by Nigerians include: moaning, yawning, yokes, buries, bitterness, weeps, weary, screams and disasters. The poet has therefore seen and spoken through the above words that possess negative connotation. The action, which is “to say no in thunder and in the face of oppression lies with the masses.”

Similarly, in the poem; “The inquisitive Idiot”, Ezenwa exposes, through satirical inclination, the various misunderstanding and application of the word POLITICS in Nigeria. For example, the material tendencies and inclinations of members of the executive, and legislative to politics’ are revealed through the questions on the meaning of politics to three group of people. In response to the inquisitive idiot’s question: “What is politics in Nigeria, the following responses were gotten: for the senator, “politics is my fat salary”, for the legislator, “politics is my huge allowances”. Similarly, while political leaders are in politics to get “several board memberships; the shameless intellectuals are in politics for “sycophant appointments.” Whereas traditional rulers and chiefs join politics “to receive gifts for persuading their subjects to vote for certain political parties, traders and business men are in politics because to them, “politics is lifted ban on goods.” While politics reminds students of their colleagues who were hacked down by law enforcement agents during students demonstrations against injustice and poor leadership in the university or country, politics reminds young boys of their “fathers who were sacked from office in the name of retrenchment.” And for the villagers, politics symbolizes their numerous children who are dying of hunger and ignorance in the midst of plenty. And for the poet, the real politics is “this poem,” through which he tells the reader what politics is not and should never be or perceived to be.

Therefore, as far as the poet is concerned, the diverse perception and practice of politics in Nigeria by Nigerians leave a sour taste in the mouth. The moment the semantic implication of politics moves completely away from the realm of service to humanity through good governance, it becomes “poli self,” that is, politics of self, by self and for self. In the poem in Pidgin English entitled: “Where God Dey?,” Ezenwa-Ohaeto condemns the fatalistic tendency of attributing everything to God and expecting Him to do those minor things which man can do for himself. In the poem, he detests man’s inability to “say no in thunder and in the face of oppression,” as Wole Soyinka would say. The poet sensitizes the ordinary citizens to challenge some of the obnoxious policies and injustices in the society by not accepting and attributing everything happening to them to God’s will. As he satirically but painfully puts it:

If dem carry you
Go thruway for prison
You go talk say God dey.
If dem carry bulldozer
Make your house disappear...
Take your wife,
Carry your
daughter too
Go make rape for outside
I sure say you go talk
Tell people say God dey (lines 1-13)

In reaction against leaving what one can do for oneself to God, the poet calls his readers to take action instead of attributing man's inhumanity to man to the will and opinion of God. He puts his call for action against one's oppressors thus:

My broder make I tell you
You fit talk say God dey
Me I know say God dey
When person take him hand
Push him oppressor for ground

In another poem titled "I wan bi President", the poet diversifies the different types of presidents and their roles in their different offices. In so doing, he feels that the president is a unique being that has everything to his beck and call and has nothing to do with the sufferings and hardship that his subjects are subjected to in the society. For the poet, there are presidents and there are presidents. He goes ahead to list the different kinds of presidents from which the reader can choose the one he wants to lead him or aspires to be. He satirically puts the categories of presidents thus:

President dey different different
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey make ideology
Dey look like person we no see food chop
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey worry make dem country better
You go see suffer for dem face
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey kill person like dem bi flies
If you frown face na firing squad
If you say you no see food chop
Na bullet you go see chop one time
Some presidents dem dey
We don fat like person wey dey
Fattening room
Presidents dey different different. (lines 71 –85).

The poem makes one think the poet is a psychoanalyst who explores the recesses of man's mind to bring to the fore the suppressed human desires sublimated in the unconscious part of the mind. In this poem, the personae wishes or expresses his desire to be president but is caught up in his own daydreaming as he acknowledges that he is only dreaming and not a political campaigner seeking for power. His position as president gives him an immunity to do whatever he wants and goes wherever he so desires to go. The poet presents presidents who are human-oriented, issues and development inclined, philosopher kings and democratic. Yet in another view, he presents some presidents who are self-centered, high-handed, brutal and dictatorial in outlook and action. He satirizes the presidents who are high-handed and self-centered in these lines:

I wan bi president
Wey dem go dey praise
Every street go carry my name...
All the towns go carry my name
If dem publish magazine or newspaper
We curse me even small
Na bomb I go take tech dem lesson. (lines 129 –138).

In the poem, “I like my kontri people” Nigerian professionals in high and low places are dissected, analyzed and criticized to show that the entire system is deceased and rotten. For example, the teacher who takes his teaching career as a part-time job, who teaches nonsense to learners; who embarks on:

If my neighbor open mouth shout
My lawyer go take me go court (lines 54-56).

Moreover, Ohaeto is concerned so much with the high level of religious bigotry, falsehood, division, conflict, violence and destruction of lives and property often aided and abetted by some religious leaders in the country. Particularly, the exploitative tendencies of religious leaders worry the poet greatly. He puts it thus:

I like my priest well well
I like my Iman well well
My priest say Islam na devil
My Iman say Christianity na devil
Dem go tell me make I kill my broder
I go carry petrol burn church burn mosque (lines 83 –88).

He turned his searchlight on the armed forces that are often idle, reckless with alcohol, woman and power and mess up in the mess. He satirically acknowledges the negative contributions of the armed forces to a national development thus:

Our army dey strong well well
You no fit drink pass dem
You no fit chop pass dem
You no fit get money pass dem
You no fit go even capture women pas dem
As dem no see war fight
Na civilians dem dey fight (lines 98–117).

Subsequently, the poet subtly indicts the following groups and professionals for doing what they ought not to do: customs officials who allow contraband goods to cross the international borders freely, only to be confiscated in local markets, high ways and villages; Nigerian engineers who build bridges, houses and roads that do not withstand a single rainy season; armed robbers who robbed with guns and golden pens; traders who sell fake drugs, used and spent tyres in the open markets; civil servants who hide people’s files until their palms are greased; politicians who make false promises, keep fat foreign accounts and charge ten percent on contracts at the expense of good jobs; and the masses for gullibility, insincerity and silence in the face of oppression and open injustice.

In fact, Ezenwa-Ohaeto never spared any group of people in Nigeria in his subtle satirical criticism that calls for a change of heart, style, attitude and practice in order to produce a better society. In accordance with his other poems, Ohaeto, in the poem: “A Poet’s Probity”, compares what a poet does with poetry to what a soldier does with bomb, and what a farmer does with farm implements. According to him, “poetry rescues minds from depths of sorrow.” And any attempt to strangulate a poet or proscribe poetry attracts the anger of nature. For instance, if governments in realization of the powerful impacts of poets in the society “binds the poet with ropes of venomous policies,” “(lines 11-12) “the thunder will scream anxiously at mid day,” rains in the dry season will come unbidden to inquire the reason for your decisions”, “seeds will not germinate and the earth in temper would forbid the shoot to emerge”, as

“trees of forests would turn in horror waving branches frantically at the sky” as “prison walls would crack spewing out concretes of fear and the moon would vie for the sky with the sun.” “Volcanoes would explode through the mouths of sane minds.” So, in this poem the poet restates the roles of poets as mouthpiece and conscience of his people and that any attempt under any guise, to gag or imprison the poet would attract the vengeance of gods and nature. And in concluding in this poem, what poets should do to put the society in a better pedestrian, Ezenwa reiterates:

But the poet would also
Search his conscience
Our poems must talk
To the soul of the frightened
Our poems must speak
To the ear of the terrified
Our poems must confide
To the mind ready to know (lines 10-34).

Therefore, once the poet, through his poems, talks to the “frightened”, speaks to the “terrified” and “confides to the mind ready to know”, he has inspired, sensitized and ignited them to act, to question, to revolt, to react against all forms of injustices and inequality in the society.

It is worthwhile to note that exactly one year after the publication of this poetry volume *If To Say I Bi Soja* that condemns military intervention in the country, the army withdrew into the barracks and mess. Interestingly, they have remained there from 1999 to date. Whether it is by providence or co-incidence, the Army have been warned by the poet to stay away from governance in order to concentrate on their primary functions of defending the nation from foreign aggression and keeping peace in Nigeria, Africa and the rest of the world. At this rate, the poet has succeeded in sensitizing the society on the issues bothering the society.

Conclusion

Ezenwa-Ohaeto is concerned with the plight of the common man, the less privileged who revels in his dream of a better tomorrow, who wallows in the world of “if wishes were horses”. The man or woman who falls prey in the fascination and lure of the city life in his poem “Looking at Lagos”, he finds himself helpless in an overwhelming system of exploitation, he laments the hardship that awaits those who leave the comfort of their villages in search of good and greener life in Lagos. Though there is still the pessimistic picture of hope for the lucky ones in the last stanza, as the success of adventure in Lagos depends on how the individual has been able to subdue the factors inhibiting his progress.

A close study of some of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poems (as we have done here) reveals that he is a poet with profound social commitment, a critic and crusader, who aims at awakening sleeping minds, sensitizing gullible hearts and igniting latent fire in the soul of the masses to rise up in unison to challenge obvious cases of injustice, inequality, dehumanization that abound in the society. The ultimate aim of the collective result is to stop keeping silent in the face of oppression, and to shout No in the face of thunder. These objectives would be accomplished when:

...pens must become guns
... where words strike faster than bullets
... where each land has a time for the birth of a rebel
... I saw what should be said
... I will say what I have seen
... for many moons, many suns
... the cooking pot lies on its side
... and idleness has married the heart
... Deafness kills the child
... Silence slaughters the adult
... I have seen and I will speak

Therefore, the pungent lines extracted from different poems in his anthologies speak eloquently of his poems as instruments of sensitization and awareness, call for action that would lead to positive social change.

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