MILLENNIAL BATTLE: OGAGA IFOWODO AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE THIRD GENERATION MODERN NIGERIAN POETS

BY

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ABSTRACT

The challenges of the 21st century on African literature are very palpable. An appreciation of the dynamics of modern Nigerian poetry into the millennium reveals a facet of these challenges. This paper studies these dynamics and the peculiar circumstances within which the third generation of modern Nigerian poets emerged. Focusing on Ogaga Ifowodo and his poetry, the paper is particularly concerned with the ways in which these young poets have grappled with their incarnation and their tussle to define themselves within the tradition of modern Nigerian poetry.

INTRODUCTION

POETIC BEGINNINGS IN MODERN NIGERIAN POETRY

As Harold Bloom (1973) would tell us, poetry has become more "subjective" in postmodern times. In this sense therefore it has continued to be more egoistic. developing in a state of mental and [creative] tension (Inyabri 1). Many critics have corroborated these assertions. Tracing the origin of modern African poetry, J. P. Clark (-Bekederemo) has come out with a classical model that could be relevant to us. For Clark (1970), the origins of modern African poetry can be located in the complex endeavour by the colonized African to appreciate, simulate and perhaps surmount the linguistic codes of the colonial master.

Using the fictive relationship that exists between Shakespeare's legendary characters, Prospero and Caliban, Clark thinks that Caliban and the African writer have a common problem (1). This problem is not really what they both lost to their imperial lords, but what they gained, namely the legacy of language (2). Language becomes an ambiguous legacy for these 'benefactors' as they can use it to articulate their mind, at the same time it is a burden to manage.

As a form of language therefore, modern African poetry originated within that tension inherent in utilizing this colonial language and extricating the poet from its domineering images. Addressing what he calls "The Communication Line between Poet and Public" (sic) Clark further elucidates this point. There he opines that the emergence of modern African poetry can be traced to the education of its poets (61). This education dwells predominantly on their models, the Anglo-modernist poets.

It is thus not farfetched that this learning gave rise to the first generation of poets in Africa who more importantly, simulated and attempted to live above those domineering images. For the first generation of modern Nigerian poets, the attempts at living above these dominant Anglo-modernist

images, betrays itself in the utilization of indigenous folk traditions and experiences of their time. This way they hoped to carve out their own identities.

In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T. S. Eliot contends with the implications of cultural history, tradition and the individual talent. He sees the talent of the individual as a phenomenon within the wider context of tradition. Engaging "the mind of Europe", Eliot argues that "every nation, every race, has not only its own creative but also its own critical turn of mind" (71). He went further to contend that the best works of great poets are those, which "… the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immorality most vigorously" (71). For this study, Eliot's theory has a lot of implications for the continuum of modern Nigerian poetry into the millennium.

Our theoretical posture is also predicated on the Bloomian paradigm of reading the origin of Anglo-American poetry. He (Bloom) holds that "ephebe or beginning poets" establish their identities in a subtle combination of anxiety and influence. Albeit its intricate mythography, this theory simply means that poets gain prominence through the influence of their "precursor poets". This poetic influence for Bloom is not just a simple phenomenon. It is what he calls "influenza, … an astral disease" (95).

Poetic influence thus articulated becomes a two-edged sword, beneficial on the one hand and destructive on the other. It is destructive because an "ephebe" could be drowned by the gigantic image of his poetic fathers, whom Bloom continually refers to as "covering cherub" and "sphinx". On the other hand, it is beneficial because it creates an impulse of creative anxiety in the "strong poet" one who has the potential to be prominent. This anxiety fires the creativity of the strong poet to establish his own identity, hence, his own fame.

This influence, and consequently the anxiety are betrayed in an interesting act of "intellectual revisionism" (29). In itself, revisionism is a "creative correction" (29) of the works of the precursors. It is important to note that this act of revisionism has been identified by Bloom as the hallmark of modern poetry. This strain of intellectual revisionism makes the "strong poet" deviate from the paths of his poetic father(s), insisting that they had got it wrong at that point of his deviation. This is a phenomenon, which Bloom topically terms "kenosis" (77).

At kenosis therefore, the strong poet carves a niche for himself. Thus, he gives birth to himself. But all this is a paradox. For in giving birth to himself his precursors live on (within the ambience of his works). This is what has been mythically described as "Apophrades" "the return of the dead" (60). "Aphophrades" therefore, is the same thing as Eliot's present-ness of the past.

In this regard, it goes without emphasis that there is a father and son relationship in the poetry of some cultures. Following Fruedian psychoanalysis, Bloom further sees an Oedipus complex governing the relationship between the muse, the precursor and the strong poet. The muse is the mother image to which the strong poet treats with filial jealousy. He sees the precursor as a father, a rival from whom he (the strong poet) must wrestle his freedom. In that way he possesses the muse (his mother) and becomes his own man the son of his father (63).

To this study, it is this complex that has brought Nigerian poetry through to the 21st century. As it would soon be shown, a certain psychology of rivalry intellectual and creative characterizes modern Nigerian poetry. This rivalry is in any case healthy. It is the force that has continued to sustain productivity in the genre.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE THIRD GENERATION OF MODERN NIGERIAN POETS

Izevbaye (1995) and Adesanmi (2002) have suggested that there are three generations of poets that have evolved in "modern" Nigeria. This classification though, only stands to serve the purpose of studying Nigerian poetry within that scope. This point has to be underscored because poets like Okara, Clark (-Bekederemo) and Soyinka of the first generation, and Osundare, Ojaide and Chinweizu of the second generation are still vibrant in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Today we have a new generation of young poets that make up the third generation. This generation of poets has been described in various manners. Adesanmi records that the British critic, Jane Bryce refers to them "as producers of "the third text" in Nigerian writing. Niyi Osundare and Odia Ofeimun have referred to them as the "CNN generation of Nigerian writers" and "the clap-trap generation of writers" respectively (17). Although some of these young poets are yet to gain international recognition, others have attained national and international acclaim. Amongst this multiplicity of voices we have Ogaga Howodo, Akeem Lasisi, Maik Nwosu, E. C. Osondu, Angela Agali, Remi Raji, Toyin Adewale (-Gabriel), Chiedu Ezeana and Joe Ushie etc.

A study of these three generations of Nigerian poets reveals influences from a preceding generation. In some cases there is a conscious effort at disrupting the poetics of the precursor(s). This was the sentiment coupled with the drive to explore modes of expressions more germane to contemporary issues that saw the birth of the second generation of modern Nigerian poets. These poets and their critics thought that their precursors (Okara, Clark (-Bekederemo), Soyinka, Echerou, Okigbo, etc) were enjoying an exaggerated attention. They went ahead to indict some of the critics of that generation for 'mid-wifing' this inflated ego. It is in this regard that Chinwiezu et al. (1980) saw the first generation of modern Nigerian poets as "aping" Anglo-modernist poets. Furthermore they hold that much of African poetry lost its traditional flavour in the creativity of these poets. Chinweizu and his co-critics thought that this adoption of Euro-modernist poetics was indiscriminate. Hence, it becomes a destructive web in itself: An alien technique, based on an alien sensitivity that is rather too formalist ambiguity for ambiguity's sake, sprung rhythm for sprung rhythm's sake, etc obscure them as they try to present or explore thoughts that are rooted in the traditional African setting (183).

Thus, it is the impulse to embattle this "willful obscurity", privatism, abstractness and many other Eurocentric nuances that characterized the rise of the second generation. This generation was particularly put off by the mystification implicit in the myth-based texts of the first generation. Soyinka's "Idanre ..." and Okigbo's "Labyrinth ..." are two examples of these texts. It is important to mention that, the psychology to embattle their forebears does not just arise as a remote creative impulse. The radical movement of the mid 70's and early 80's also fed this spirit. This radical factor

is quite obvious in the early poetry of Ojaide, Osundare, Ofeimun, Bayo Ogunjimi and Chimweizu. Some of their titles further underscore this posture: Children of Iroko (1973), The Poet Lied (1980) and Songs of the Market Place (1983). Although many critics have shown that the sentiments of the second-generation backfires on them, a phenomenon which Bloom refers to as "misprison". However, our attention is not so much on it as it is on that spirit of embattlement. An appreciation of the evolution and emergence of the third generation would also reveal the same battle by strong poets to establish them-selves. In the case of the third generation, it seems that all the odds were up against their incarnation. Hence their undying spirit to be born. To appreciate the embattlement and birth of the third generation, it would be necessary to engage briefly, the socio-political and economic space within which they emerged.

This would throw more light on the kind of poetry they wrote. As it was for the second generation, the historical dynamics of Nigeria conditions the emergence of the third generation. For the second generation the schism of the civil war and its consequences go a long way to fuel their revolutionary spirit. However, for Ifowodo and his generation, it is the repercussions of the post-civil war years that are more impressionable than the war itself. Post-war Nigeria plummeted steadily into a polity of cultural, moral and socio-economic degeneration. Macebuh (2002) opines that by the mid-80's the best of the first and second generation had already been seen. The sour state of the polity had forced that cream of Nigerian scholars (from Achebe, Echerou, to Jeyifo and Iyayi) into exile. By the late 1980's through the 90's, dictatorship had been fully enthroned, the pursuit of educational excellence had been abandoned and the economy left in shambles. In this situation they was a psyche of desperation and moral decay. This is not far-fetched as all that was left of indigenous values were ruptured. Materialism, betrayed by the inordinate pursuit for wealth held way. As this writer notes somewhere else, this again “is an absurd reaction to the myriads of materials and [mental] poverty in the country” (50).

These circumstances have a deep impression on the third generation, who began to have a mind at the time. They became the progenies of this depravity, having a heritage of “deprivation”. Macebuh again defines this generation succinctly. Using the Igbo youths as a paradigm he referred to them as: “… these illustrious children … these anger-ridden, money-driven avengers of a collective grievance …” (14). For him they are “the authentic children of the war and all its dislocations” (13). In the enterprise of their art therefore, these young Nigerian poets lacked the critical heritage that was vibrant in the country before and immediately after the war. During the mid-80's when their poetry was emerging the serious critical insights that would have nurtured their sensibility were in exile. Thus, as Oditta (2001) writes, the journalist became the ultimate critic for his generation. For Macebuh this situation was unfortunate because: Such out pouring inevitably lacked the discipline of systematic study and research for it is simply impossible to derive from the hastily and merely provisional offerings of the newsroom or editorial office any lasting interpretation either of social history or of social doctrine (4).

With this unfortunate reality Ifowodo's generation was faced with the woe of an impending non-recognition. Moreso, major criticisms from abroad were silent on them. Available ones thought

that the generation would not be able to sustain the seasoned creativity established by the first generation (Nwosu 1999 and Adesanmi, 123-4). However, these young poets have converted these stereotypes into productive anxieties. As it would soon be shown, this generation has stamped its presence in modern Nigerian poetry. Nwosu believes that, as the 21st century unfolds this generation would be the true inheritors of the millennium. It is in this conviction that he dismissed all the stereotypes against his generation as “clear cases of fixation” (36). In an introduction to Voices from the Fringe, Harry Garuba extends the battle on the side of the third generation, when he says “literature like land, is not a birth-right” (XV). In these words, he echoes Bloom, who says, “Poetry is property as politics is property” (78). This metaphorization of the art leaves it to be possessed by any formidable generation. Hence, it is in this spirit that we present the new voices of Nigerian poets, true voices of the 21st century.

OGAGA IFOWODO'S POETRY AND THE DEFINITION OF THE THIRD GENERATION MODERN NIGERIAN POETS

As a poet who was born in 1966, Ifowodo suits that definition by Macebuh as a true child "of the war and all its dislocations". He was not only born into the war, but has also lived within the vagaries of the nation's history. He has experienced all the despotism of this country and was locked up in 19997 by the Abacha's regime for his activism. He won the Association of Nigerian Author's (ANA) prize for poetry in 1993; and was the recipient of the Barbara Freedom Goldsmith Freedom to-write Award in 1998. These are amongst many other international literary honours.

It must be for the above laurels that Adesanmi refers to him as one of the "shining lights" of his generation. Ifowodo's poetry is an outstanding representation of the poetics of his generation. In them he has truly captured the socio-political realism of his era. This study will draw references from his two collections Homeland and other poems (1998) (hereafter referred to as Homeland ...) and Madiba (2003).

In "For Arts Sake," the first poem of Homeland ..., the poet shows his awareness of the socio-political/literary challenges that faces his generation. However, he is poised to assert his humanity and produce the art that stings and is enjoyed. Thus, he writes "For arts sake we shall shun/pain and write lyrics of the ear" (11).

As it would soon be obvious, 'pain' is a major trope that launched in the poetry of Ifowodo's generation. What more, considering the daily reality of their time. In fact Adesanmi has characterized the poetry of this generation as "an aesthetics of pain" (121). However, this generation has learned to balance their pain with a slant of humor. Thus, they "... shun/pain and write lyrics of the ear". However, even the humour here must be taken as a loaded code. For it is also, an alternative expression of the painful reality of the time.

This dialectical sense of pain is palpable all through Ifowodo's first two collections. In "She lay dying at Oshodi", (1920), "Poem to the Child of My Time" (32-3) and "Homeland" (the title poem), this imagery is vividly captured. "She lay dying at Oshodi" recreates the gory experience of the

poet persona in Oshodi. Amidst the scum and chaos of Oshodi a train crushed a little girl. She becomes a victim "... of a headless world" (20) in which she grew. Perhaps more tragic for the poet, is the irresponsiveness of the victim's society. For they could not advance "... a ministering hand", because they are even "deader than her dying self" (19).

The fate of this child is also that of another person in "Drift wood" (15-6). In this case also, the dead is shown as a victim, carrying the curse of a "profane world". Again "the funeral crowd of hawker/commuter, bus boy, pick-pocket etc." (15) are portrayed as living-dead. They lack a true sense of remorse which, for the poet, is a result of a prolonged period of collective abuse "... Perhaps we have lived too long on 'dung hills/to know dignity worthier than dogs and dung beetles" (15).

The litters of corpses in major Nigerian cities are realities of the poet's time. Perhaps in no era, except during the civil war, are corpses so commonplace in Nigerian cities. In some other regard, Oha (1999) depicts such corpses as part of "the semiotics of the drama of violence in the [Nigerian] city". As this researcher had noted somewhere else, it is "an index of a deceased system" (54). In some other poems namely: "our Eyes are Born Again", (Homeland....24) and "God punished you, Lord Lugard" (Madiba, 21), the poet narrates the reality of his time with absurdity. Few lines from the poems above will suffice.

> In "Our Eyes are Born Again" the poet depicts the poverty of his
> society and the resilience of the people thereof.
> Daily, our eyes are born again.
> To sorrows wider than the world:
> The cooking pot is home of spiders
> And lizards are landlords of the kitchen.
> Affirming the death of fire in countless huts,
> Who braves the market place
> Drains purse and heart
> For a spoonful of salt
>
> *(Homeland....24)*

"God punish you, Lord Lugard" (21) is a multi-layered humorous poem, which captures the condition of a post-colonial society. It reveals the repercussions of its heterogeneous citizens to mediate their penury via the colonial language. In his attempts to solicit for charity, a desperate beggar decides to exert some pressures on the English language: "help me for chop, I beg. God go bless you" (iv.i). But thinking that "some flourish, or polish ..." could "persuade" (iv. li-iii) better he pleaded further:

"... Good day, brodas and sistas.

Half massy on me, please half sampaty
Allah's piss for you....."

(iv.iv, vii)

Although in his first collection, *Homeland....*, Ifowodo shows his reader that he is writing predominantly for his generation, it is in *Madiba* that he comes up more unequivocally on this theme. The poem "Theme of the Half-child" (65-68) is an imaginary dialogue between the poet and Wole Soyinka a literary giant of the first generation. In this fairly long poem, Ifowodo shows his generation as the real sufferers of the harsh history of Nigeria. Though Soyinka claims his own generation is "wasted", (sect. 1.i) Ifowodo contends that part of Soyinka's pain was his own choice.

Ogaga: you chose your suffering, because you're a poet
Like your friend, Okigbo ...(II. xii)
As for him (Ogaga) he was born into his predicament, denied of his humanity:

Ogaga: ... I was born into war, a half-child, to play with bombs, ...

... At my birth, the world had gone blind!

(II. vii, x)

By Soyinka's own confessions, he "... had seen the sun warm the misty/morning's boastful hoe. The farmer's vow/at down's light promised the fattest cow". (I. ii-iii). On the contrary Ogaga's contemporary reality is bedeviled "... you saw a promise/I threats, and death for the praying mantis". (II. v).

Apart from the topical definition of his generation as "the Half-Child", Ifowodo makes bold to distinguish his generation from his precursors' when his persona argues:

Ogaga: some grief, but grown too large to be the same, a cough, now tuberculosis, a name that eats away the lungs and stops the heart.

(II. xvii xviii).

It may seem to some readers that the grime in the poetry of Ifowodo creates a predominant sense of pessimism. This would not be a true appreciation of the vision implied in his poetry. For in spite of the pain that pervades his poetry, Ifowodo also has an unwavering sense of optimism. We have seen this clearly stated in "For art sake". It is this strong refusal to be despaired in the face of tyranny and deprivation that Adesanmi refers to as "... our stubborn belief in the redeemable destiny of our country" (123).

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to theorize the third generation of modern Nigerian poets. The aim is to locate them within the tradition of modern Nigerian poetry. In doing this, the research has historicized

the psychology of modern Nigerian poets. The purpose here, is to enable the reader distinguish the socio-political and aesthetic impulses that lunched in each generation.

In theorizing the third generation, the study has utilized western theoretical standards. This has been done mindful of current trends by post-colonial critics to evolve local critical standards for local literatures. It is the view of this researcher that theories developed in the west can also make in-roads to appreciating indigenous arts. The theories that have been applied here have also helped in re-reading the literature of Africans in the Diaspora. In fact, it is a major paradigm adopted by Henry Louise Gates Jnr. (1987). This goes further to show that in a post-modern world no culture can be self-enclosed.

However, it must be emphasized that, although this study talks of the "influence" and "anxiety" of poets to their precursor(s), the tradition does not correspond exactly with that of the West. While we could trace the influence of

succeeding generations of Euro-American poets to a major literary figure(s), in Nigeria, like most post-colonial cultures, we do not have central figures attracting succeeding generation of poets.

The point above must be emphasized because, in Nigerian poetry, poets grapple more with the poetic standards of a group of precursors. Ifowodo and his generation for instance, grapple with the assumptions of their immediate precursors as well as the generation before that. Thus, this chain of re-actions has established the third generation within the tradition of modern Nigerian poetry.

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