

Relocating Sex And Related Vices In Post-Military Nigerian Fiction: The Example of Toni Kan Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage*

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Abstract

The demise of military regime in Nigeria has, unarguably, reshaped the literary sensibility of recent Nigerian writers. The euphoria which greeted the advent of civil rule had given a vain hope of utopia which, unequivocally, created an erroneous impression in them. Although their earlier counterparts were not impressed, new writers began to churn out works which privileged erotic satisfaction over cultural re-awakening. Having imbibed the mentality of Western society, albeit uncritically, they became the unofficial mouthpiece of a society whose norms is at variance with theirs! The thrust of this paper, therefore, is the need to checkmate abysmal application of non-Nigerian rhetoric in reading the poetic of recent Nigerian writers. In line with the Afrocentric theoretical assumption, it denounces any critical polemic which negates the quest for development and socio-cultural rejuvenation. It asserts that only the inculcation of the core tenets of African values is apposite for the interpretation of African texts and, invariably, to advance development for the nation. Against the backdrop of untoward consequences of wholesale implantation of 'hostile' canon into Nigerian literary landscape, it calls for its inversion which can only guarantee national rebirth.

Key words: Military regime, literary, civil rule, utopia, erotic satisfaction, Afrocentric.

Introduction

Nigerian literature, like its African counterpart, has always maintained and sustained its social rhetoric. As the nation's colonial and neocolonial realities stare us in the face, no committed Nigerian writer dare be apolitical. No meaningful literary work can neglect the historical cum social environment where it is produced and, in its place, talk about the esoteric (Osundare, 1991). In a nation of failed hope, a writer cannot but write about corruption, injustice, moral laxity, administrative ineptitude and infrastructural decay. In such clime, little wonder writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Osofisan, Osundare, Iyayi, Ojaide and Saro-Wiwa dominate the literary landscape with works which elicit cultural nationalism, revolutionary fervour and environmental consciousness.

However the 21st century Nigerian literature has occasioned new creative temperament. Instead of the nationalistic disposition of established writers, the post military era in Nigeria has given rise to a new crop of writers whose thematic engagements have shifted from serious socio-cultural themes. The high hope associated with civilian dispensation had, unequivocally, influenced their thematic thrusts which now centred on individuality, promiscuity, sex, women and wine. In no time, they flood the literary arena with themes which negate the core African values cherished by their predecessors. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009) argue that these writers are "a little bit more indifferent, a little bit more conscious of artistic restraint, a little bit less angry and a little bit more detached from his/her subject matter" (112), hence "appear more interested in getting the audience to appreciate them for what they are artists, and not as social crusaders" (106). In the same vein, Osofisan (2009) and Nnolim (2009) agree that new writers have taken a different route thematically. They link the shift in thematic preoccupation of these writers to the advent of civil rule and the so-called Uhuru associated with the demise of military adventurists. Osofisan argues that since sex is meant to be shrouded in the secrecy it demands, none of the earlier generation of Nigerian writers "dare venture, except in the deflected language of metaphor and refringent echo, into the contentious area of carnal experience" (39). However, he is at pain that contemporary writers have jettisoned the need for cultural nationalism and have embraced the 'bug' of Westernisation. On his part, Nnolim posits that these writers are misguided elements "for whom the pleasures of the flesh are of more moment than the essence of the spirit" (232). Finally, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010) assert that these writers have imbibed the tradition given impetus by the liberty enjoys by their Western counterparts. They identify writers like Onwordi, Dibia, Abani, Okediran, Adichie, Unigwe and others as 'eminent' representatives of contemporary Nigerian writings.

Ballad of Rage

Toni Kan Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage* (2004) tells the story of three estranged personalities whose troubled souls are entangled in the odious realities of contemporary Nigerian society. In a sustained attempt to articulate the futility of a deranged psyche to take rational decision, it depicts human species as not capable of coming to terms with

societal forces which impede his rational thinking mechanism. This largely underscores the existentialist disposition of mankind in a hostile environment. It employs omniscient first-person narrative technique to tell the story of rape, brutality, corruption, frustration, betrayal, infidelity and murder, with the protagonists telling their separate but related stories. These stories are, however, presented in a disjointed narrative manner which further accentuates the absence of cosmic harmony in the world.

An unnamed narrator is compelled by fate and circumstance of her barren situation to marry a frustrated “old” doctor. The marriage is that of convenience since the doctor has earlier vowed never to raise another family having lost his last to the infidelity of a wife. Rather than find solace in the company of a caring husband who loves her despite her unenviable past, she becomes a sex-maniac, addicted to the point of seeking sexual satisfaction wherever she can, and from whosoever is readily available! Perhaps to pay men back in their own coin, she relegates feelings and affection to the background in sexual relationship. She finds a willing accomplice in Jeff, a twenty-four-year-old cab-driver. It however proves fatal as the doctor murders her and damns the consequence! He has earlier threatened to kill her if she engages in extra marital affairs.

Apart from its philosophical underpinning which foregrounds the indispensability of fate in social engineering, Onwordi’s *Ballad of Rage* discusses sex, promiscuity, infidelity, lust and homosexuality without any modicum of decency. In a manner contrary to established literary convention in Africa where premium is placed on morality and values, the text displays graphic details of sex and sexuality in flagrant disavowal of highly-cherished African literary tradition. The doctor’s wife is an unrepentant nymphomaniac who sleeps with any man that catches her fancy. She sees no qualm sleeping with Jeff in her matrimonial home:

He took my shopping bags upstairs and after he set them down on the dining table he reached for me...I let him pull me down on the couch. I was a dry and thirsty land, he was a long sought water. I clung to him for dear life. A short while later, my whole body tingling. I stood on the balcony, his semen running down my inner thigh as I watched him drive away (28).

On a similar occasion, she visits his house for the now regular sexual ‘dosage’:

I craved for more. He lived at the back of his father’s house. Once we drove in and stepped into his room, passion would take over...Most times when there was a power outage or when our passion was spent, we would lie naked in bed, his fingers tracing circles around the dark aureoles of my breast (33).

Also, Jeff describes his first encounter with her in details:

She had no panties on. I remember that. I also remember that she was the one who lifted her skirt and lay on the couch with her legs spread open. I drove home not believing that it had happened. That I had just made love to a married woman in the sitting room of her matrimonial home, with the door open and the risk of discovery quite high (121).

However, a discerning mind can only wonder the lesson one stands to learn from these images. They merely portray Nigerian society as morally lax. The text’s penchant for art-for-art’s-sake philosophy forecloses hope in a society which seeks cultural rebirth and rejuvenation.

Even before the doctor’s wife meets Jeff, she has often been engaged in romance and sex outside wedlock against her mother’s entreaties to be wary of men on campus. When she meets Pam at “the department’s end of year party”, she allows him to have carnal knowledge of her “atop a knoll at Shere hills”. Also, her encounter with the doctor does not portray her as a worthy lady of integrity. Before they finally tie the nuptial knot, she has encouraged the doctor to make love to her when he visits her in the apartment she shares with a friend. Always the first to make a move, she practically lures him to bed:

I remember washing my hand, even though I can’t seem to remember why. Then when I was done I had asked for a napkin but instead of a napkin, she dropped her frilly panties in my outstretched palms...Still laughing she had dropped to her knees and kissed me, deep, hungrily. We made love for the first time that night and afterwards, as we lay naked in her small bed, Roberta Flack’s voice issuing from the radio had lulled us to sleep (43).

The only time she does not consent to sexual intercourse is when the policemen rape her and other girls on campus. It is interesting to note that sex outside marriage is frowned at in traditional African society.

If the doctor's wife is said to be a pervert, her lover, Jeff, can be described as a randy young man who is equally frustrated and disturbed. Having been rebuffed by his parents who turn down his choice of music as a career, he becomes a deviant. He drives a cab and smokes marijuana heavily! He therefore becomes an outcast in the family. Only the doctor's wife understands and encourages him.

The story of the doctor leaves sour taste in the mouth. The circumstances surrounding the death of his two sons almost turn him into a misogynist. He would not marry a woman whose children would remind him of the death of her sons! When he eventually comes across a woman whom he had earlier diagnosed of having ruptured uterus and damaged fallopian tubes, he has to change his disposition towards marriage, after all the chance of pregnancy for her is almost a nullity. However at thirty-two and being a pervert, he cannot meet her expectation in bed hence she seeks sexual satisfaction outside wedlock.

As a caring husband, the doctor provides his wife with whatever she needs. He is so convinced of his actions that when he eventually discovers her wife's infidelity, he has no regret killing her. Nonetheless, the circumstance of his falling from grace to grass does not deter him to offer his professional services to other inmates even in the prison. As the defacto 'resident doctor' in the prison, he accompanies inmate who has ulcer to the general hospital in handcuff, agrees to follow the injured captain of the Hard Men XI to the hospital, obeys the instruction of the chief warden to make a miserly list of drugs to treat inmates, and offers therapy to a sexually-abused Bernard in prison! However, these good qualities do not becloud the opportunistic inclination of the doctor. He capitalises on the awareness of his wife's bareness to lure her into marriage, knowing full well that he does not want to raise another family for personal reasons. Here, a discerning mind can only ponder on the attraction which the marriage holds for the doctor besides lust. Also on more than one occasions, he bribes the wardens to have access to books and other personal effects. He receives visitors occasionally in the prison and whenever he does, the wardens are ready to allow him spend beyond the stipulated time. He has the luxury of collecting his salaries while in the prison hence he is able to pay for his nephew's education and send a card to Rosa.

Besides sex and promiscuity, the spate of bribery and corruption in the system is quite alarming! Policemen take bribe at will, most of the time with reckless abandon. Instead of arresting Jeff and his lover who are caught with marijuana, they merely collect bribe and look the other way. On another occasion, they collect money from a bank's managing-director and throw his driver to jail for impregnating his sister-in-law! This reality is not uncommon in Nigeria and many innocent lives have been lost in the process.

As if bribery and corruption that permeate the system is only a child's play, officers and men of the Nigerian Police Force have taken brutality to a dangerous dimension. Having been sent out to perform their statutory duties of maintaining law and order, the policemen throw caution to the wind and engage in an act capable of further enmeshing the image of the Force in disrepute. A minor peaceful demonstration by undergraduates in the university has turned violent as the police arrive to quell the riot. Ironically while they fire teargas canister to disperse the students, many of them have ulterior motive behind the performance of their constitutional duties. They allow the boys to escape but rape the girls! This is a sad commentary on an institution which is trained and sustained by tax-payers' money.

It is not only the Police Force that is affected by the general rot in the system. The prison service is worse hit by general recession ranging from dilapidated structure to leaking roofs. Evidences have it that Nigeria's prisons are ill-equipped and over-crowded. The prison system is so underfunded that the nation's prisons have generally become haven for breeding criminals contrary to their supposed reformative role (Adelola, 1994; Atere, 2000; Okunola, 2002; Okunola, Aderinto & Atere, 2002). Although Okunola submits that a prison system is strategically designed "to remove the undesirable elements" from circulation, the reality on ground cannot justify this claim (363). These problems, in the opinion of Adelola have been compounded by the intimidating presence of significant number of awaiting-trial inmates. This development makes nonsense the perceived reformative role of the prison.

Meanwhile as an experienced medical practitioner, the doctor is disgusted at the ill-equipped nature of the prison. Although he does not seek a way out of prison life because he believes that he deserves his incarceration and inevitable execution, he is at loss about the reality of the prison. He keeps on wondering how so many sick people suffering from tuberculosis, herpes, ulcer, meningitis and the dreaded Human immunodeficiency Virus are kept

together in a cell without medication or doctor to care for them! Also hardened criminals like armed-robbers, murderers, homosexuals, cultists, petty-thieves and pick-pockets stay together. The doctor's testimony only confirms the general assertion that the commonest thing in Nigeria's prison is death by installment. The danger in keeping petty-thieves with hardened criminals and condemned inmates in the same cell is enormous. Besides the possibility of producing inmates who are more hardened than before, no one can rule out conflict and disagreement which may have fatal consequences. On an occasion, four 'remandees' are kept with nine condemned men in the same cell overnight. An argument ensues over space and, in no time, the condemned men have lynched the 'remandees'! Enraged by this gruesome murder, other detainees and prisoners swoop on them and lynch them in reprisal. Policemen have to be invited before the riot can be quelled.

Window-dressing can assume an absurd dimension in the prison. After the death of thirteen inmates, the government suspends the controller of prison and hurriedly constitutes a panel of inquiry to investigate the crisis and condition of living in the prison. So as to create the impression that all is well in the system, the chief warden invites the doctor to his office and instructs him to help equipped the sick bay with "essential drugs and items". He is therefore led to pharmaceutical stores where he purchases the drugs. As the panel of inquiry sits, the inmates are to smile and pretend all through. Even the hard labour and the condemned inmates have to bury the hatchet temporarily. No one is to rock the boat else he would have to face the consequences afterwards. This development is a pointer to the fact that even those in authority know what is good for those under their care. However, there is a whole lot of difference between knowing what is right and doing it. Nigerians are so used to fire-brigade approach to solving problems such that one cannot but wonder why we cannot take the pain to do it consistently before the day of reckoning. Such 'lousy' preparation to cover-up ones track has been subject of Osundare's scathing criticism in his "siren" and State Visit.

The case of double standard rears its ugly head even in the prison. Although it undermines the law of natural justice, yet it finds a safe haven in Nigeria. While some inmates wallow in deprivation in their over-crowded cell, the 'privileged' inmates enjoy unrestricted access to the outside world with various communication gadgets at their disposal! With the wardens at their beck and call, albeit for a fee, they live like kings and emperors in the prison. The political activists/detainees belong to this 'privileged' category. Having turned activism into a 'lucrative' venture, they seem to derive pleasure in their continual incarceration so much that they now savour the unprecedented benefits which accrue from their 'adventures'. Their cells are always bee-hive of activities with parties and merry-makings always part of their daily routine. Nigeria's postcolonial history is replete with the activities of several so-called human right activists who are merely after personal gains. Such individuals later outsmart their colleagues in the quest for pecuniary benefits. They are ready to discard their socialist credentials for capitalist ideology once their interest is taken care of. Their actions smack of greed and selfishness.

If the manner Nigerians observe the 'ritual' of worshipping in the church is juxtaposed with their corrupt and evil machinations, a critical mind would marvel at such glaring contradiction. One cannot but be awestruck at the level of 'religiosity' of these criminally- minded personalities from all walks of life. While they consistently perpetrate evil deeds ranging from marital infidelity to prostitution, bribery and corruption to nepotism, armed-robbery to drug-peddling, they, nonetheless, make it a point of duty to attend churches and other unorthodox places of worship! The doctor loses his first family owing to the infidelity of a wife who does not fail to attend Sunday Service in a church. In a clear case of non-compliance with biblical injunction which abhors adultery and fornication, she keeps a lover whom she brings home whenever she wants. Ironically, this adulterous wife often admonishes her husband to lay good example for the children to follow! In the same vein, even the criminals in the prison attend regular church services. The 'pastor' is an awaiting trial inmate who is detained for the murder of "his wife, her mother and sister". Yet he is described as a fiery preacher who regularly enjoins other inmates to believe in God!

Besides the themes of sex, violence and corruption, new writers adore craft-consciousness above socio-political commentaries. Employing "diegesis" as a postmodern device to foreground the futility of order in a hostile environment, new Nigerian writings are presented in a loose, fragmented narration. For instance, Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage* is written in a disjointed narrative technique. Three protagonists are involved in the presentation of several fragmented but interrelated stories. With special emphasis on omniscient first-person-singular narrative model, each protagonist tells his or her story in a manner which draws pity unto him or her. The doctor's wife tells the story of some randy policemen who rape her and other fellow students. This singular act, apart from turning her to a barren, leads her to the point where she now sees all men as 'articles' meant to be used and dumped. Her

husband has almost become a misogynist before he meets her. Unfortunately for him, his first wife is a lesser 'devil' compare to the new one. He has to spend the rest of his miserable life in jail where he meets several characters whose lives offer clear insight into Nigeria's situation. Even the lover boy, Jeff, is entangled in hostile family intercourse where he takes decision alone with no support from his parents. Therefore, these related stories are presented in episodic manner to depict the postmodern penchant for structural "diegesis". When they however, form a whole, the import of the novelist's message is not lost on the readers.

The philosophical underpinning behind *Ballad of Rage* can be likened to that of ancient Greek drama, particularly as exemplified by Aristotle's *Poetics*, where supernatural forces play tricks on man's destiny with little or no possibility of being exorcised from the dictate of the gods. In classical Greek tragedy, vendetta-seeking Greek gods lord it on mankind who are entangled in their furies, unable to wriggle out of their 'belligerent' dispositions. Man becomes a mere toy tossed up and down by the gods. His destiny is fatally tied to their pranks and antics. Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* offers an eloquent representation of man's inability to escape the wrath of the gods, despite the fact that such wrath may not have been occasioned by any fault of his, besides a divinely-inflicted hubris which justifies his inevitable fall. In the same vein, *Ballad of Rage* presents three protagonists who vainly seek to be set free from odious fate. Cruel fate has always led the doctor to marrying women of easy virtues. Besides Rosa, other women have always capitalised on his unalloyed love, cheating on him in the process. He marries a sex-addict whose insatiable sexual desire gets to the extent where she seeks sexual pleasure from anybody, anytime, anywhere, anyhow! The fatal consequence of her action leads her husband to the prison and, perhaps, a date with the hangman. His kind disposition offers enough clues to his attitudinal nuances as a gentleman. Ironically, fate plays a fast one on him.

Besides the doctor, his wife may be excused from her behavioural misdemeanour for obvious reason. Before the rape incident, she enjoys a blissful sexual life full of passion and devoid of any ill-feelings towards men. She cherishes the fond memories of her romance with Pam, her lover in her undergraduate days. She only becomes a 'monster' when the policemen assaulted her, passing her to one another like article. As if the psychological torture arising from her humiliation is not enough, she gets pregnant and while seeking abortion, has her uterus and fallopian tubes damaged! In a society where single mothers are viewed with contempt, nothing but Dilation and Curettage (otherwise known as D and C) would be worthwhile. Her fate, therefore, evokes pity.

Even the randy Jeff may not be a bad guy after all. Fate has given him parents who assume an all-knowing disposition, relegating his free-will to the background. They refuse to pay his tuition for choosing to study English at the university. Even on graduation, they stand their ground against his choice of music as a career. He comes to mind as a focused man who refuses to be distracted from his cherished dream of becoming a music star when he gets abroad. To achieve this, he drives a cab to save enough money for the trip. His problem, however, starts when the doctor's wife lures him to have sexual intercourse with her. He later realises his folly and, like the biblical Judas Iscariot, goes to meet the doctor in the prison to confess his misdemeanour. If none of his family members would understand his plight, who would blame his recourse to marijuana for succour? If fate offers him no hope, why would he not revel in the bosom of a woman who offers him emotional stability? Therefore the hard-line posture of Jeff's parents in a society where talent is downplayed and, in its stead, premium is placed on one profession over the other, is equally responsible for his action.

In similar vein, a morally bankrupt society can only produce youth who are morally inept and corrupt. The youth presented in *Ballad of Rage* do not comport themselves as capable of altering the rot and decadence in the society. Their activities range from cultism to armed-robbery, prostitution to homosexuality, violence to during addiction. They contribute ignominiously to the maladies in Nigeria. If the so-called future leaders are enmeshed in social vices of such magnitude, Nigeria's future can be said to be bleak. Therefore, the text does not make a worthy representation of value-conscious African texts, texts written to correct societal vices. Its depiction of African youth does not tally with the ideals expected from value-conscious African writers and critics.

In all, Toni Kan Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage* is written against the backdrop of the novelist's belief that the injustice, oppression and corruption in contemporary Nigerian society have the tendency to create monster out of Nigerians. As people struggle to make ends meet in a nation which does not take the plight of her people into consideration, nothing other than banality, moral laxity, marital infidelity, corruption, administrative ineptitude, official brigandage, infrastructural neglect and religious hypocrisy should be expected. In such a deranged society, no one can contemplate love, affection and relationship. People barely manage to survive hence survival is only for the fittest. In an interview with Henry Akubuiro (2009), Onwordi's attributes this "siege mentality" to incessant military interventions and the nascent democratic experiment in Nigeria's history. In his opinion, this reality

leaves much to be desired. It has, indeed, forecloses any fictional reflection of love and marital harmony. Thus, it becomes apparent that the socio-political experience in recent Nigeria's society informs Onwordi's treatment of themes which would be largely 'unheard' of in traditional African society. This marks Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage* out as a text sets in the postmodernist order where socio-cultural harmony is absent.

Conclusion

By and large, the thinking which informs Toni Kan Onwordi's *Ballad of Rage* does not conform to that of a nation in search of cosmic harmony! Its treatment of theme of marital infidelity in a nation bedeviled with escalating corruption, injustice, moral laxity and infrastructural decay is clearly at variance with the developmental aspiration of the people. A value-conscious nation would definitely discard any theme that undermines traditional assumption and core values, particularly themes of sex, rape, promiscuity and marital infidelity. Besides, its recourse to Greco-Roman ethos which privileges divinely-ordained fate as the sine qua non for social engineering is antithetical to the instrumentality of man as a potent agent for social change. Also, fragmented narrative style makes nonsense the stereotyped linear plot structure which is the established norm in African writings. This experimentalist posture forecloses hitherto established writing style in its entirety. Its exploration of disjointed narrative experiment, even if it underscores the futility of order in the society, may not be apposite towards achieving redress from the maladies which are evident in the society. These thematic and stylistic thrusts are clearly not in tandem with the developmental yearnings of African scholars. Therefore, the text may not appeal to a discerning African mind in the quest for social growth.

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