

Contemporary Nigerian Poetry in English: Context and Form

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Abstract

The importance of contemporary Nigerian poetry in English does not lie merely in its consideration as a point of historical construct within the conceptual framework of modern Nigerian poetry, rather, it must be construed more significantly vital as a social credo of poetic engagement, set apart, for instance, from the self-reflexive indulgent attitude of the earliest Nigerian poetry of modern era. Consequently, this paper aims at examining and determining through systematic outlay, firstly, if the expressive character of poetry purely must be a verbal act with strictly aesthetic function or, a functional statement of a social act. From that foothold, this paper proceeds to specifically examine by theoretical application, the Nigerian poetic instance in order to establish a possible conceptual framework for the poetry written by contemporary Nigerian poets.

Keywords: Poetry, Nigerian, Contemporary, Verbal Act, Social Act

1. Introduction

Language, religion and poetry are children of the same mother – man’s expressive needs. The first arises from the need to make human experience meaningful through communication; the second, a result of man’s helplessness in the face of overpowering forces of nature which he neither could explain nor profitably predict, and the necessity of subjecting himself to the protection of such superior forces. Thus, Haralambos (1980) asserts that:

... awed by the power and wonder of nature, early man transformed abstract force into personal agents. Man personified nature. The force of the wind became the spirit of the wind, the power of the sun became the spirit of the sun. (454)

And according to Skelton (1965:37) “he regarded them (language, religion and poetry) as divine and worshiped them.” The third among these three children, poetry, is man’s attempt and indeed a need, after the initial helpless resignation to the whims of his assumed superior forces, to limit the limitlessness of his world, to enclose the vastness of the universe within comprehensible limits and, ironically, to reach beyond himself and capture the hidden meanings of experience. The earliest of this attempt, it is assumed, manifests in magic. One must point out, however, that there is no suggestion in whatever way that these three phenomena have evolved in the order in which they are discussed here. For instance, if indeed man came into an awesome world, a stranger both to himself and his environment and if indeed language, as we recognize it today is a later communal development, then there must have been a religion before there was language, since the need to come to terms with the awesomeness of the world must have preceded the need to communicate. Therefore, according to Dasyva and Jegede (2005):

Language . . . is a cultural production. In order words, poetry subsists in expressed words (spoken or written). By implication, certain developments become perceivable, such as increased capacity for mental retention of poetry; refreshing poetry as a specialized (verbal) act, as well as sophisticating its many aspects.

It would be seen from the foregoing that although, at the root, poetry is primarily an expressive gesture, yet, in its realization as a verbal category, it became a functional imperative of a social act, deriving from man’s attempts at transcending the limitations imposed upon him by his environment and also his desire to overcome his own excesses. This is why Akporobaro (2004) argues that:

. . . although poetry is universal, the forms and convention within and through which it manifests itself vary from society to society . . . period to period and from culture to culture (359)

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework within which this study is situated is found in the expressive character of poetry both as purely a verbal act with strictly aesthetic function and also as functional statement of a social act.

3. Poetry: A Verbal Act or A Social Act?

The question of function certainly cannot be said to be peculiar to the poetic genre within the literary corpus. Rather, while the problem of determining the essence of literature itself as a functional imperative may appear most manifest in the category, the question is one that is significant to drama as well as to fiction, as it is to poetry. Yet, the question becomes much more fundamentally significant to poetry when it is considered that poetry is not a process of perceptible reality, but a response to it. Because of this, it is not as large a canvas, in

terms of space, as the two other genres, in exploring such perceptible realities as will make a possible social existence, expansively spread to capture in minutiae the terms of social experience in a single poetic stroke, for instance.

The second reason might appear less compelling, yet its importance definitely must not be underestimated. For example, it will appear that it is in compensating for its own limitations that poetry seemed to have devised its peculiar process of evocation of sensations and visual effects such that the world presented by a considerably sustained narrative, for instance, can be spread before a reader within a short breath of condensed, yet highly suggestive and evocative poetry – that is of course assuming high degree of imagination and a remarkable level of sensitivity on the part of the reader. The process of evocation is part of the terms of reference in poetic aesthetics. The question – “Poetry: A verbal act or a social act?” appears definitely demanding. Between the alternatives provided in it, there seems to be something finite; the kind of choice which when made excludes the other, yet one is inclined to think that such choice alternative is hardly ever obtainable in poetic engagement.

At this point, it becomes apparent that for any meaningful and gainful achievement of purpose, it is important that certain concepts be directly addressed within a specific theoretical focus. For instance, for a precise projection of the scope of analysis, it should be deemed necessary that the terms – “social act” and “verbal act” be located within the theoretical context of this paper. The term “verbal act” assumes a dimension far beyond its literal domain. Intrinsically, the word “verbal” portrays and indeed intones a certain cult of expressive attitudes which in fact forms the basis of its use in the given context. More in the main, however, by a verbal act, the poetic impulse becomes interpreted as a structure of codes.

As a “social act”, on the other hand, poetry becomes an interpretation of life. Within the matrix of social understanding of poetry, therefore, such external factors as cultural, economic and political considerations which define man as a social being are taken as part of the total scheme of social existence. As a social act, poetry becomes not merely an imitation of life, but also a redeeming act, an instance of man’s own recognition of his shortcomings. While the question of poetic function in literary theory is generally traced to Plato, poetry, certainly, cannot be assumed to have possibly existed in a functional vacuum. Percy B. Shelley in his essay, “A Defence of Poetry” affirms that “. . . poetry is connate with the origin of man . . .” (Kermode et al [Eds] 1973:746); and at its birth, poetry was evidently an expressive imperative, a verbal representation of experience.

However, with the development of what should be regarded as the totality of human culture, poetry assumed immense social significance, manifesting in its relationship with dance, songs etc. As a urge toward expression, therefore, poetry can be regarded, in its most simplistic sense, as a verbal act. Though it may be argued that poetry, is itself part of that complex human awareness that is experience, but this may not be so. This is because the poetic – that which is expressed – is a product of experience and as such, cannot be part of that process. More rigorously, from Plato to the extremely experimentalist modernist sensibility, the argument has been as varied as the base-ideologies that could be said to have informed them. There seems, however, to be two apparently discernible extreme attitudes which correspond to the two aspects earlier established as the character of poetry: that poetry is a mode of expression and that it is also that which is expressed. The one attitude sees poetry as a formal entity, a verbal gesture defined as a structure of codes, and the other, as a social category which, like other social elements, must address society and in fact function for definite social ends.. The second attitude is indeed mostly manifest in the Marxist literary orientation.

The utilitarian perspective to poetic function in contemporary literary ideology perhaps finds its loudest expression in Marxism. Critically, therefore, any choice between poetry as verbal act or social act appears a mere reductive, separatist engagement, sheer artistic pretence and indeed illusory. This is because there is something inclusive in the two attitudes, which defines the true term of poetic function.

The literary terms of “form” and “content” must necessarily be correlatives respectively to our concept of “verbal act” and “social act”. This is explained by the fact that as a verbal act, poetry being an act of interpretation which structures the poetic impulse as codified expressions of an inner activity, the “how?” question in the critical process becomes the point of emphasis; and as a social act, poetry being indeed a reflection upon society, the critical question “what?” becomes the basis for evaluation.

Now, if “form” is how “content” is said, their relationship cannot be said to be exclusive, because in the idea of content is included the idea of form and vice versa. Indeed, Cairns Craig (1982:10) confirms that “it is one of the canons of modern criticism that there can be no divorce between form and content” although he is quick to add that “this is rarely adhered to with any rigour”. The implication is simply that the “what?” question which cannot be regarded as the basis of a social act necessarily includes the “how” in a verbal act. Even the Russian Formalists in all their extreme pronouncements still conceded generally to art and indeed poetry its “great social function” (Wellek, 1982:129). The major thrust of these, according to Rene Wellek was posed against the didactic nature of Russian ideological tradition of criticism.

4. The Nigerian Experience

Historical consciousness lends itself up too easily as an instrument in delimiting the rather tenuous borders of the Nigerian poetic space. Very easily, it can be argued that there is hardly possible such delimitation in a complete sense of historical consideration. Much as it lends itself easily to hand however, the historical consciousness is, in this specific context, merely a way of looking into the whole gamut of the Nigerian poetic instance to make statements of times and ends, or in the alternative, the shades and temper of the poetic engagement at given periods on the historical draw-line. And the purpose of the attempt here is simple: to determine the historical scope of the term “contemporary”.

Emevwo Biakolo’s attempt to situate modern Nigerian poetry based upon what appear mainly the different shades of temperamental disposition which indeed inform its categorization into four periods invariably becomes significant to this aspect of this paper. In his “Explorations in New Nigerian Poetry”, Biakolo disregards the usual convenient historical classification of Nigerian literature generally into the old and the new generations for the sole reason that it is “rather nebulous” (The Guardian, January 20, 1990:12). He there from proceeds to argue that indeed, with equal justification, it is possible to categorize modern Nigerian poetry into what he calls “four putative periods”.

The first of the periods embraces the pioneer poets whose significance is not only historical but also significant in terms of mobilizing for mass participation in the then socio-political scenario. It is with the poets of the independence period – the second period, that the question of sensibility as it moulds the poetic impulse actually began assuming a definite shape in the history of Nigerian poetry. The third period is characterized by the effects of the pain and ravages of the civil war upon the creative consciousness of the poets. It is in the last of the periods that we find what is generally referred to – as indeed Biakolo himself does in his article – as recent Nigerian poetry.

In the same vein, Dasylyva and Jegede (2005:133) see the poetry in this category as “present or current” with a hybrid quality of combining “both the indigenous and foreign techniques” with one complementing the other. They argue further that within the contemporary category could be found two generations of poets – the first representing the pioneers which include Clark, Okara, Soyinka and Okigbo, the most successful I suppose, who started the “phase of imitativeness”; the second representing the younger poets whose poetic fervour tends towards what Fashina (1997:124) calls an “attempt at reasserting African identity . . .” We must, however, be cautioned by the assertion of Biakolo that in this category:

. . . only a couple of works possess sufficient sensitivity and/or the discipline of thought and emotion, to belong to the true engage tradition. (160)

In this group of younger poets are Harry Garuba, Emman Usman Shehu, Esiaba Irobi, Odia Ofeimum, Sesan Ajayi, Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare, with Osundare regarded as the link between these two generations. It is, therefore, with the second generation of contemporary Nigerian poets that this article shall concern itself, focusing on Harry Garuba, Niyi Osundare, Emman Usman Shehu, Esiaba Irobi and Tanure Ojaide. However, relying absolutely on this overt categorization of the poetic enterprise into what Garuba (2005) calls “over-categorical demarcations” along generations could be misleading for our purpose. According to Harry Garuba:

the term ‘generation’ is still an ambiguous, unstable one because in some instances it appears to refer to age and in others to the time of first appearance of the poet in the public domain. The ambiguity heightens when writers said to belong to one generation are still active and producing work two or three generations after the one to which they are said to belong. (52)

This classification is significant in order to properly situate the trans-textual and cross-generational temperament of the poets considering that there has been no significant change in the social space within which they operate. The challenges they had to contend with from the outset are still the same challenges contemporary Nigerian poets are contending with presently. That is why Tsaaior (2011) contends that:

[A]gainst this important backdrop, it is safe to state that by the very nature of their vocation, writers inscribe their distinct individualities and existential experiences within the fabrics of their writings as veritable members of their societies . . . by intervening in the tapestry of societal events in the ceaseless flow of its currents, interpreting its moods and temperaments, defining its present, and divining its future of (im)possibilities.(99)

5. Contemporary Nigerian Poetry in English: The Content

The lyric is the most visible form by which contemporary Nigerian poetry expresses itself, because the poetic impulse essentially responds to and expresses a social rupture of which is a pretentiously objective a further extension of this sense in which it is also a challenge of the society. What this means is that there is an attempt in contemporary Nigerian poetry at objectifying the primarily subjective in the lyric in the sense that the lyric poem is not just a quarrel with the self but is indeed a statement of the crises in the society. This pattern is a constant

feature of all the contemporary Nigerian poets. Indeed, Harry Garuba, a most sensitive poet of this period, strongly illustrates the point just identified about the lyric in the context of contemporary Nigerian poetry in his collection *Shadow and Dream* (1982) where the intensity of the persona's expression bears the wounded social memory of a larger communal consciousness represented in the "scars". In fact, this attitude to the lyric form is confirmed in "Estrangement: Kano 78" when the persona says that:

. . . surely the poet is estranged who cannot share his people's fount of being (9)

This image of its wounded memory constantly reminds one, in the words of Biakolo, of the psychological and spiritual wounds which our history of social and political malaise and injustice inflicts on the sensitive individual. (*The Guardian*, January 20, 1990:12)

It is clear thus, that the contemporary Nigerian poet in his task of recreating and reformulating decadent social values and ethos merely played a role as an instrument of social engineering. Perhaps, this is why Nesther Alu (2000) argues that:

Although equally experimental, these poets tend to avoid experimentation with Western forms, preferring oral African forms with a renewed sense of commitment (201)

Again, as an instance of the social act, contemporary Nigerian poetry exhibits another pattern of characterization, which is closely linked with the Marxist influence upon an ideology which speaks for the masses, the wretched of the society of whom Emman Usman Shehu (1988) must have said:

You have given so much of your soil in return for so little (17)

Against the backdrop of this preference for the utilitarian which has resulted in an emphasis upon the social act by contemporary Nigerian poetry, it is interesting to note that there is still a sense in which one can situate the theoretical position earlier made within the society. Specifically, one identifies the poetry of Harry Garuba, Esiaba Irobi, Niyi Osundare, Usman Shehu and Tanure Ojaide. These five poets have been singled out because of their definite social vision, though they cannot be said to be the only illustrations of this position. For these poets, it would seem that their stylistic choices and deliberate craftsmanship are in fact the defining factor of their social visions. In a manner which suggests a conscious attempt at maintaining poetic balance, Osundare, in *Moonsongs* (1988) focuses his sociological binoculars on the astrological element "the moon" which he imbues with the qualities of evil and good. The moon, here, thus highlights the class contrast between Ikoyi and Ajegunle. In Ajegunle:

The moon is a jungle, said like a forgotten beard with tensioned climbers . . . and nights are one long prowl of swindled leopards whereas in Ikoyi:
the moon here is a laundered lawn its grass the softness of infant fluff; silence grazes like joyous lamb . . . Little wonder then that Dasylya and Jegede (2005) see Osundare's poetic art as "an extensive polemic art" (159)

Esiaba Irobi's poetry is crafted with the same socio-polemic fervour. In *Cotyledons* (1988), Irobi, the youngest of these five poets, indeed shows a keen aesthetic awareness in spite of the depth and largeness of his social vision as it is obvious that he moves consciously through landscapes of poetic techniques which range from the narrative perspective of lyrical patterning to outright dramatic evocation. In "Rains", which is meant to be "the planting season . . . of swinging mattocks", Irobi speaks of some other kind of bizarre farming in which:

we are planting back into the entrails of the earth all the brilliant brains God sculpted from this earth . . . the planting season of spades and coffins, when the earth is red like something soiled by blood (47)

The choice of images and other evocative elements of aesthetic consideration by Irobi and those earlier mentioned is directly connected with the realization of their social experience and actually serve to punctuate the psychic involvement of the poets, as victims of social rupture.

6. The Context of Text

The context of the Nigerian poetic text has essentially effected a new sensibility and indeed conditioned a new awareness that determines composition. This point, again, really is not new especially when it is considered that literature generally derives its material from society and specifically, from human experience, because it is itself the vision of man, and as such, cannot divorce itself from the divergent forms of life. In considering poetry as a verbal alternative to experience, the Nigerian situation is peculiarly illustrative as it is indeed, the whole of Africa. This is because even in the twenty-first century, literacy is still largely a new experience, thus, the prevalence of reliance on oral forms. Therefore, one of the bases for a justifiable exploration as verbal act of modern Nigerian poetry in English taken as a whole even, is in the influence of the oral poetic forms, and that is in spite of the admission by Osundare (1981) that:

Writing is a vital means of domesticating man's barbarity into civilized creativity . . .

In a very rigorous sense, among the contemporary Nigerian poets, Niyi Osundare appears to be the one who has developed a peculiar medium of poetic expression from the materials of the oral forms available to him in traditional poetry. In fact, we can say of him that his collection, *The Eye of the Earth* 1986, arguably, remains

to date the most enduring illustration of this observation, among his works. Osundare clearly, it will seem, has come to recognize the significance of the verbal structures in oral form, and indeed has brought this to bear immensely on his poetry. As in the oral tradition to which an important character is the presence of an audience which not merely listens but is in fact part of the poetic moment and also part of the construction of the poetic experience, Osundare's poems often anticipate an audience for which it adequately make provisions through the deployment of rich dramatic effects. In *The Eye of the Earth*, it is the formal properties of the praise poetry which have provided the pattern of structure. He, therefore, "uses rara, oriki and //a/a rhythmic patterns" (Jegade, 2003:157). This is found in almost all the poems in this collection. A graphic picture of the earth is presented in "Earth", through "metaphors and extended praise names":

Temporary basement and lasting roof first clayey coyness and last alluvial joy
breakfast . . .

In his deployment of sound and musical resources as seen in *Moonsongs* where a poem takes even rhythmical pattern from "a persistent sound of pestle in mortar" (Osundare, 1988:29) as well as in *The Eye of the Earth* where the use of drums and flute all combine to accentuate the dramatic effects of the poems in the truly oral sense, one continually feels a sense of presence. Harry Garuba also manifests this trait in his collection *Shadow and Dream* in his use of the four folk figures – "Cock", "Lion", "Snake" and "Tortoise" as poetic symbols. Tanure Ojaide is yet another poet whose aesthetic impulse commands great intellectual attention. Olafioye (2000) describes him as:

. . . a product of pastoral and endemic rurality. . . where he imbibes the content and
depth of cultural philosophies, traditions and other ways of life (46).

This is true of Ojaide because cultural properties such as festivals, Urhobo folklore, Udje songs and dance, gods and ancestors as well as legendary characters such as *Ogiso*, hold a peculiar fascination for his craftsmanship. *Ogiso* was a maximum ruler on whom his people's existence depended. The height of his tyranny was the execution of a pregnant woman for some misdemeanor. In "Elegy for Nine Warriors", a poem in *Delta Blues and Homesongs* (1998), *Ogiso* represents the grandparent of the "Butcher of Abuja" or, if you like, the tyrannical Nigerian president:

The butcher of Abuja dances with skulls
Ogiso's grandchild by incest digs his macabre
steps in the womb of Aso Rock (26)

The nine warriors hanged are described as "upright ones", "fellow singers" among whom was the "muse favourite son", "the eagle" and "totem bird". One imagines that the nine warriors here are the famous "Ogoni Nine" while the "muse favourite son" is Ken Saro-Wiwa. Though the poet regrets these killings, he celebrates an envisaged reunion at "Urhobo gate, which to Ojaide is:

. . . the welcoming station of spiritualities and completeness . . . a cosmic point of
destination (26)

thus reminding us of Christopher Okigbo's "*Heaven's Gate*".

As mentioned earlier, gods and ancestors are an integral part of Ojaide's poetry. In *Delta Blues*, *Aridon* is the god of memory who is invoked in "Waits" to help in the poet's resolve to internationalize the mourning of his subject of lamentation, Ken Saro-Wiwa:

Aridon, give me the voice To raise this wail Beyond high walls. In one year, I have seen
my forest of friends cut down now dust taunts my memory. (1)

Uhaghwa, the muse, is also invoked to:

. . . give me the insuppressible voice to raise this wail to the world's end. (19)

Even "At Oxford", *Uhaghwa's* salutary essence could be felt as the persona brings to Oxford:

. . . greetings from *Uhaghwa* with whose feather I write. (17)

However, the terms of the verbal act in contemporary Nigerian poetry cannot be easily restricted to the influence of the oral poetic form. Consequently, the question of an informing vision becomes significant, and this is the urge to speak for the society. The form which this vision has taken for its expression is the lyric which relies upon the nature of the vision which it expresses such that the different modes that could be said to exist have evolved. Basically, two categories which determine these modes are *temperament* and *purpose*.

Temperamentally, contemporary Nigerian poetry will seem to have evolved two classifications of form, namely: (i) the militant and almost violent and (ii) the reflective and sometimes meditative. A distinctive characteristic of the first category is always the loud sense of urgency which the poetry exudes, often explained away as revolutionary. We are not likely to find readily, illustrations of this instance in one compact whole, rather, they are more likely to be found scattered as we are to find in a collection like *Poets in their Youth* (1988) edited by Uche Nduka, and even sometimes, in some of the earliest poems of Osundare.

A second mode discernible which has evolved from the lyric type in contemporary Nigerian poetry is the pastoral which is a major feature of Osundare's poetry as he seems to derive his images from the very texture of experience that is the lot of the rustic life. However, there is another discernible interpretation of the pastoral in many of the contemporary Nigerian poets in the sense of expanding the meaning of pastoral to include poetry

about the lowly even in urban setting. Emman Shehu's poem, "Maradun", especially exemplifies this tradition. In this category of the pastoral, the vacant essence of the poor becomes the concern in poetic response.

In this category also are the eco-poets whose poetic activism is triggered by the environmental degeneration occasioned by the activities of crude oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To make matters worse, the wealth derived from crude oil is unequally distributed, resulting in the underdevelopment of the oil producing communities, who are mainly fishermen, with less than 30 per cent of the people having access to basic amenities such as electricity and safe drinking water. With the waters and air polluted as a result of oil spillage and gas flaring, life becomes miserable for these vulnerable folks. It is on this account that the likes of Nnimmo Bassey (2002) and Ogaga Ifowodo (2005) become the mouthpiece of the region. In *We Thought It Was Oil but It was Blood*, the poet catalogues the woes of the coastal communities and instigates them to rise up in arms, if possible, against the authorities.

Writing on the significance of Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil but It was Blood*, Sule E. Egya (2013) states that:

[I]n a mode characteristic of Bassey's poetry, the (title) poem shifts between past and present, first recalling a time when people "danced in the street" (2) because of the discovery of crude oil which had seemed to assure their future prosperity. This early optimism, however, is abruptly curtailed, as the reader is informed of the "Three young folks" (5) and the "Countless more" (6) who collapse under the fires of the "Red-hot guns" (11). In a single stanza, the poem transports us from an idyllic past to a violent present . . . (63)

It is with the same combative determination that Ifowodo (2005) engages the collective memory of the Niger Deltans. In *The Oil Lamp*, Ifowodo chronicles the common disasters that befall the communities where crude oil is explored. One of such disasters is the incessant fire outbreaks resulting from pipeline vandalism by the locals who feel compelled to steal refined petroleum products in order to survive, not minding the dire consequences. This is vividly captured in the section of the volume titled "Jese" made up of 15 sequences. Here, all we see and feel include the "venomous scent of charring bones, / the dripping and drying fat of breasts and buttocks" (169-170). The effect of the destruction is so vast that, according to Egya(2013):

[W]hen the fire eventually dies out, both humans and non-humans have perished. The earth has been deeply wounded, and all because it contains crude oil. (67)

Another (verbal) characteristic identifiable in contemporary Nigerian poetry is the satiric gesture. This mode distinguishes Femi Fatoba from the other contemporary Nigerian poets in his sometimes detached but largely sympathetic and sometimes out rightly bitter and uncompromising ironic posture. In fact, Fatoba seems to represent the two attitudes to the satiric mode present in contemporary Nigerian poetry: the *Horatian* "gentle and broadly sympathetic" and, the *Juvenalian* which is basically "biting, bitter and angry" (Holman [ed.], 1972:474) found also aside from Fatoba in Odia Ofeimun, Esiaba Irobi and Tanure Ojaide.

Of importance, however, is Ojaide's brilliant use of the traditional Udje songs and dance of his Urhobo culture as a literary tool for satire. This is like the Yewa/Awori/Ketu Efe performance. According to Ibitokun (1993):

. . .there is room for social comments and satire or jokes . . .in non-dirgeful occasions . . .and it is this comic-satire (moralizing) aspect that young participants like most. (123)

In the same vein, the Udje songs and dance, especially during festivals, become an instrument for corrective discipline. And as it is with the Efe, even when the songs are disguised, the object/subject of the composed song is often known by the community. That is why, for Olafioye, (2000):

The objective of the Udje's satirical lyric, therefore, is to insult and hopefully, goad the ridiculed towards conscience of retrieval (76).

This is what Ojaide does in "Odebala" in *Delta Blues* where he pokes scathing fun at bloated ego:

Odebala boasts he's rich I only hope he knows what wealth provides. Odebala swaggers, puffs out his shoulders, because he day-dreams his wish boasts he's the town's millionaire . . . who knows what he eats. (78)

In "My Townsman in the Army", Ojaide takes a swipe at an army General whose rise in the army is facilitated by his ever "generous" wife:

I will prefer to remain a Captain than the Major-General whose stars Udje flaunts before the world He thinks he deserved his position but we know who clears the way with her body for his rapid advance . . . And I hear he loans rifles to armed robbers who brings him returns from their loot. (74)

In Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, we find another poet whose caustic eyes capture the very essence of the Nigerian inanity. In *Dancing Masks* (2014), the opening poem sends shivers down the spine and raises concerns over global warming and the "disaster" that "looms" in this weird world, akin to human beings sitting on a time bomb, waiting to explode even as "time crosses the abyss of hope" and "poor nations await the guillotine".

In "Casualty", both young and old share their sentiments towards one another. For young casualty, her

worry: “Why do you have to travel and leave me at home?” For Old Casualty, the desire to succeed in this profession of “publish or perish” roused her ambition for good prospects across the borders. The “mad competition to excel” in “this land that kills initiative” could better be the divine excuse for a year sojourn elsewhere? Nonetheless, the niggling trepidation for Old Casualty hangs in the balance; the fear of young casualty metamorphosing into “drug addict, rapist, thief or terrorist?” Could it then be argued that the insurgence of terrorism in recent times stems from the absence of proper parental care of young casualties?

In this collection, Ezeigbo legitimately recommends herself as a poet that cannot be ignored in the criticism and evaluation of modern Nigerian poetry. In *Dancing Masks*, Ezeigbo reveals her maturity from her first three collections of poetry by presenting a superior socio-political vision for which established poets like Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Tayo Olafioye have variously received critical reception. A semiotic analysis of the *Dancing Masks* renders a spectacle of people, grappling with floods of socio-political aberrations that are masked in hope and humour, signified by two dancing masks on the front cover page of the collection. By this token, the masks become a motif through which greater insight is provided into themes of social relevance in contemporary Nigeria. Ezeigbo presents us with a mask behind which most people live, and “behind which certain human tendencies are disguised”.

7. Conclusion

The content of contemporary Nigerian poetry which is largely identified as the social situation indeed has conditioned its text and even, the verbal patterns that could be said to have evolved. Considered as a verbal alternative to experience, the influence of the oral traditional type upon contemporary Nigerian poetry has opened up in a greater way, the scope of choice of pattern in the poetry. The informing vision of this poetry is established essentially as the urge to speak for and to society and by adopting the lyric, this vision has evolved modes which can be said to define its expression as a patterned phenomenon: temperament and purpose. In terms of its purpose, however, the use of the lyric in contemporary Nigerian poetry is classified into the confessional, the pastoral and the satirical, each with its own contextually identifiable tone and verbal character. Therefore, any attempt to formulate for the poetry a conceptual framework will show that contemporary Nigerian poetry certainly cannot be described as a generic formal entity.

It is imperative to mention, as a final note, that the issues treated in contemporary Nigerian poetry have been, in the main, political. This may not surprise us since the crisis of the Nigerian society since independence in fact, has been that of political corruption. Thus, while this concern cannot be made exclusively to the contemporary Nigerian poet, the relevance of our engagement with the issue here will rest in the observation that as a result of what appears the political urgency in contemporary Nigerian poetry, statements for political ends and the intrinsic aesthetic value seem to become even a hindrance to its process of articulation.

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