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EXCORIATIONS AND RESOLUTIONS ON NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE FATE OF VULTURES & OTHER POEMS*

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Abstract

Studies on Tanure Ojaide's poetry have focused more on his denunciation of bad leadership, exploitation and despoliation of the Niger Delta, poor socio-political conditions in society and exploration of the oral culture in that order with only tangential attention given to the resolutions or solutions he proffers in the poems to counter or overcome the conflicts he critiqued. This overemphasis on the problems or challenges instead of the solutions he offers leaves out a vital aspect of his poetics – using literature to explore practical solutions to problems of society. It is this aspect of Ojaide's poems on national leadership that this paper examines in *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* on the premise that the resolutions he offers to the conflicts he highlights in his poems contain practical roadmaps to resolving Nigeria's myriad of challenges. This paper contributes to criticism on the reformative function of literature in society – poetry in this instance. Its main objectives therefore are to scrutinize Ojaide's perception of national leadership in Nigeria and draw attention to the resolutions he proffers for Nigeria's regeneration and ultimately, her socio-political emancipation; and to deploy New Historicism as a critical tool in the analysis of *The Fate of Vultures*

& *Other Poems*. New Historicism is our critical compass because it enables the study of literary works as products of the time, place and historical conditions of their production. We also underscore major motifs in the poems connected with Nigeria's past and present socio-political realities and their impact on national leadership.

Keywords: Tanure Ojaide, Nigerian poetry, national leadership, resolutions, New Historicism

Introduction

Tanure Ojaide is a second generation Nigerian poet of Urhobo extraction who alongside Niyi Osundare is generally considered a very significant voice in Nigerian and African poetry. The socialist ideological slant of his works is indicative of his commitment to the enthronement of social justice by tackling and dismantling all institutions of oppression and deprivation in society. However, as he critiques the social and political problems in Nigeria, he also articulates resolutions to ameliorate them. A key objective of this study is to foreground these resolutions and interpret their implications for society.

Historically, Nigeria is a country often plagued by socio-political crisis. A few years before her independence, the crisis of leadership that developed in the multi-ethnic country was laced with regional and ethnic sentiments, as each of the three dominant groups in the three regions – the Hausa in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East – contended for the soul of Nigeria. Many nationalists claiming to build national consensus and identity clandestinely grappled with one another to dominate the political space in readiness for the impending departure of the British.¹ For instance the Action Group was formed, according to Chinua Achebe, because “over the years Awolowo had become increasingly concerned about what he saw as the domination of the NCNC by the Igbo elite, led by Azikiwe” (45). The Northern People’s Congress was equally floated for a similar reason as Ahmadu Bello, after a long effort, succeeded eventually in spreading “his ever-effective mantra that in order to protect the mainly feudal North’s hegemonic interests, it was critical to form a political party capable of resisting the growing power of Southern politicians” (Achebe 46). The country’s new postcolonial leaders were so engrossed with consolidating their powers and influence in their new political domains that they neglected other vital ingredients of national integration, such as advocating tolerance towards cultural, religious and ideological minorities in their various spheres of influence.

However, later developments showed that Nigeria’s post-independent leaders would not have stabilized the tottering ship of state even if they had ‘considered’ these vital elements in the polity without comprehending what Ball and McCulloch (1996) describe as the paradigm of cultural distinctiveness, which recognizes that “each culture has its own sense of beauty that has been developed through

history and is composed of attitudes, values, and related behaviours” (qtd. in Asgary and Walle 58). It is not far-fetched therefore to argue that both Nigeria’s colonial masters and their postcolonial successors are collectively responsible for all the ills resulting from a mismanagement of the Nigeria project from the very beginning. Nonetheless, a common legacy that arguably defines virtually all Nigeria’s past regimes is corruption. Regrettably at each change of government, the infection appears to transform into new, more daring and more callous pillagers of the national treasury driven by “logic of self-service . . . in the pursuit of selfish and personal goals at the expense of broader national interests” (Ogbeidi 3).

Tanure Ojaide’s poems have elicited several studies that address diverse aspects of his poetry. His zealous advocacy of the Niger Delta environment and ecosystem has birthed a number of introspective analyses (examples are studies by Enajite Ojaruega, Niyi Akingbe, Ofure Aito, Sayed Sadek, Nesther Alu, Friday Okon, Uzoechi Nwagbara and Charles Bodunde). These studies analyze the resistance element in Ojaide’s poetry and explore the perspectives the poet reveals on the exploitation of the natural resources which has left the environment devastated beyond imagination. These studies focus on the conflicts of interest between the government’s drive for economic solvency and the Niger Delta people’s quest for resource control and a stoppage to the environmental degradation of their flora and fauna. None of them focuses on Ojaide’s resolutions on national leadership as the current one does.

Some studies have also highlighted Ojaide’s concern for the lot of the people, especially the downtrodden, because in many of his poems he critiques the poor socio-economic conditions of Nigerians,

problems he believes are caused by failure of national leadership (such studies include those of Friday Okon, Ogaga Okuyade, Bassey Bassey, Kola Eke, Bate Besong and N.J. Udoeyop). These studies explore the techniques the poet deploys to perform the role of watchdog of society. Eke's study is one of few that look at the solution Ojaide offers for a specific social challenge. Beyond exploring the graphic images of poverty that Ojaide depicts in his poems, the study highlights the answer the poet offers to ameliorate the problem and concludes that the poet's recipe of hard-work and formal education as means of eradicating poverty in Nigeria is a positive response. Similarly, Udoeyop investigates the politics of salvation in Ojaide's poems and devotes adequate attention to the poet's call for a revolution as a panacea to the degenerative trends in society. However, these two studies do not focus on resolutions on national leadership which is the focus of the current study.

Ojaide's exploration of the rich repertoire of the oral culture and tradition in his poems is a serious area of interest for many studies on his works (for instance, studies of Tayo Olafioye, Enajite Ojaruega, Ogaga Okuyade and Charles Bodunde). His deep knowledge of the myths, folklore, customs and linguistic nuances of the Urhobo has enriched his poetry so much that it is considered a compendium of Urhobo history and culture. Studies on this area of Ojaide's poetics explore mythic and cultural elements, as well as the texture of the Urhobo folklore and language in his poems and identify universal archetypes in personages like Ogidigbo, Aminogbe, Arhwaran and Ogiso among others, and comparing them with contemporary Nigerian leaders.

Scholars have also explored postcolonial issues in Ojaide's poetry

ranging from discourses on exile and migration to globalization, cultural identity and notions of home (examples are studies of Sayed Sadek, Uzoechi Nwagbara, Terhemba Shija, and Senayon Olaoluwa). These studies focus on constructions of exile and migration and images of frustration, alienation and home in Ojaide's works. They explore in the poems harrowing experiences of exiles in foreign lands who after escaping tough socio-political conditions at home become victims of exploitation struggling to survive under the double yoke of want and denial of rights.

The thematic thrust of Ojaide's poems aligns with ideological views of earlier African writers (such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ama Ata Aidoo, and contemporaries such as Niyi Osundare, Akachi Ezeigbo, Odia Ofeimum, Femi Osofisan, Tayo Olafioye and Hope Eghagha) that literature and society are so interdependent that one cannot do without the other, especially in Africa where there are pressing challenges of leadership, nationhood and poverty. This is why Achebe has proclaimed that "in Africa the tendency is to keep art involved with the people" (56).

However, Ojaide's poetry has been spurned by some critics. For instance Alu and Suwa have disparaged the poet for the religious ambivalence he reflects in his poems. They are fazed at his effort to blend patently antagonistic faiths in his poetry (traditional African religion and the Catholic Christian faith). They declare incongruous his "proclivity to traditional religious worship even when he nods to Catholicism" (142). However, this rather harsh assessment by the duo is hardly tenable considering the fact that Ojaide's poems are highly influenced by the Urhobo oral culture.

New Historicism

Stephen Greenblatt, one of its chief advocates, describes New Historicism as a textual practice or method of reading which examines textual traces of the past integrated with contemporary narratives on the supposition that the past can only be accessible to us through textuality. Significantly influenced by Michel Foucault, New Historicism is eclectic in approach and borrows a lot from other literary theories because as Robert Weimann explains, it is “fragmentary, spontaneous, and unstable because none of [the] contributions to it has developed a comprehensive consciousness, let alone a methodology, of the full correlative connections between literature and history” (263). New Historicism dismantles the distinction between text and context and views social contexts as narrative constructions informed by extant power relations; thus, the idea of literariness and cultural value can be contested and reconstructed. The textual practice of New Historicism is popular among critics of Romanticism such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler and David Simpson, and critics of Renaissance Studies like Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg and Louis Montrose among others. However, it is the perspective of Jerome McGann that we apply in this paper. According to him, “Poetry and poems are . . . trans-historical, but they acquire this perpetuity by virtue of the particular historical adventures which their texts undergo from their first appearance before their author’s eyes through all their subsequent constitutions” (131). This trans-historical quality is present in Ojaide’s poetry because the issues addressed in them remain relevant in the past, the present and the future. Again, McGann explains that, “New historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific poetical works, [and] in specifying these

unique features and sets of relationships, it transcends the concept of the-poem-as-verbal-object to reveal the poem as a special sort of communication event” (131).

Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* is treated in this paper as an entity that is more than a verbal object that expresses the thoughts of the poet in a reactionary manner; rather, the interpretation we apply to the subject matters of the poems is premised on our conviction that they embody a blend of human experiences that foregrounds conflicts and challenges confronting modern society. Therefore analyzing the solutions Ojaide offers to each conflict is by extension an appraisal of the poet’s vision on how to advance society. We also view these solutions as the poet’s response to the power structures in society in the past and their impact on the nation.

Excoriations and Resolutions on National Leadership

The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems is a critical appraisal of Nigeria, which after several years of independence from Britain has become like a patient in dire need of a major surgery to remain alive. However, beyond this assessment it offers redemptive steps to reverse the socio-political decay that has been entrenched in the polity. The volume opens with a poem with a catchy title, “The Music of Pain.” This label immediately catapults the imagination to disturbing heights as it grapples with the incongruity of associating ‘music’ with pain. Music is typically associated with celebrations or joyful events, and atmospheres of love, peace, meditation, worship etc. except at burials. Pain is hardly celebrated because every creature avoids it. Though ‘pain’ is the poem’s subject matter, the idea of juxtaposing it with music is a captivating oxymoron. Ominously, Ojaide proclaims the cast of his orchestra – “the chorus of resistant voices” – the common

people at the receiving end of injustice, deprivation and maladministration in all human societies throughout history. This is the segment of society groaning under the yoke of social-cultural and political oppression brought about by postcolonial conditions. It is in defense of this mass of humanity that Ojaide invokes "Aridon," his guardian spirit and poetic muse, to aid him achieve "Trails / of victories against overlords / who clamped reins upon the jawbones / of upright words" (6-9). Militantly, the poet warns that though he is submissive to 'Aridon,' the oppressors must not take his words with levity as they are barbed "with steel shafts / for a long hunting season" (10-11), because history has shown that the struggle against social injustice is a battle of attrition. His words are therefore framed "to shame chiefs of selfish rule" (13). In Nigeria where silence is the only armour against oppression, Ojaide declares that "My songs became the land's infantry / drawing into its veins / the strengths of millions" particularly as all vocal resistance have been permanently subdued by tyrannical leaders. Ojaide warns in this opening mantra that such leaders must heed his warnings, especially those that ask "what can songs do?" He recommends therefore that Nigeria's national leaders must respect the people's right to speech unhindered by intimidation or fear from any quarters; and they should respond positively to the needs and yearnings of the people who legitimize their stay in power because without them, they stand on nothing.

Similarly, "When soldiers are diplomats" is a poem that derides the absurdity of the military institution that reneged on its traditional functions to dabble into areas alien to its conventional duty which is to fend off external aggression against the state. Ojaide likens the situation to putting "a savage in a suit" and "his blood-tinted teeth" (24-25) would not fail to reveal its

true nature because the military are trained to destroy, not build. He also equates the aberration of politicians and intellectuals scampering around military leaders to get political appointments to prostitutes jostling for clients. It is a vicious cycle that plays out each time there is a coup that ousts one government and enthrones another; though such opportunists are used and dumped by the soldiers after they had bartered their integrity for pecuniary gains. Ojaide warns therefore that "Diplomatic soldiering / is [so much like] living by the neon lamppost / waiting for the next caller/ to be skinned, unmoved" (31-34). The poem reprimands Nigerian politicians who encourage the military to dabble into politics by blatantly running the country aground. There is a palpable sense of morbidity throughout the poem with references to 'blood,' 'the dead,' 'cannibal,' 'fangs,' 'savage,' 'bedbugs' and 'whore' among other negative images that describe the predatory and destructive character of the military. Ojaide's dream Nigeria is one where the military would remain within the confines of their constitutionally designated roles – well outside politics. The motifs of displacement and death in the poem are deliberately overemphasized to rouse society to choose freedom, justice and equity over military rascality and its attendant dictatorship and oppression.

On the other hand, "What poets do our leaders read?" indicts post-independent African leaders for their callous and inhumane styles of leadership. Ojaide condemns the tyranny and irrational witch-hunting of political opponents by leaders insensitive to the cries of pain and deprivation of the people. He is perplexed by the kind of leaders thrown up in the continent and wonders:

What headgears do they wear
that their ears do not show in the picture;
what strings do top ones hold to
that they always dangle sideways,

never staying with the people?
 In the court of fanfares, who cares
 for the glowing steeple of earth's breast
 or the swathing blue of the sky's divine
 sheet?
 They never ever want to be caught
 undressed,
 but you can see the cape in their mitred
 shave. (11-20)

The poet is anxious to understand what political doctrines influence post-independent politics in Africa that thrive on so much bloodshed; and who propounded and developed such ideologies that send national leaders into spasms of anger when they hear the groaning and wailing of the people they lead. Whether these actions signify pain or distress or even relief is irrelevant to the irrationally suspicious leaders who “kick the air, demon-possessed / and need blood to still their spasms” (24-25) even though they expect these same people they brutalize to accept as “infallible” their insanely distorted judgments made in fits of anger (26-27). Ojaide's roadmap for Africa's progress can be inferred from the poem. His message is that the people must resist all dastardly actions of their leaders because leaders are accountable to the people. In other words, the led ought to watch out for and stand firm against vain leaders who take pride in their capacity to witch-hunt and eliminate all oppositions. Again, “The fate of vultures” evokes memories of the hardships experienced by Nigerians during the second republic. It echoes the gross maladministration of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) Federal Government and its attendant plundering of the public coffers at all levels of government.² It opens with an invocation to the poet's guardian god, ‘Aridon’ to intervene in Nigeria and recover her stolen wealth from those who looted them. The poet denounces the affluence and

wastefulness that were hallmarks of the Presidency of Shehu Shagari and Alex Ekwueme from 1979-1983. He petitions ‘Aridon’ to incinerate “the hands that buried mountains [of stolen wealth] in their bowels / [and] lifted crates of cash into their closets” (5-7). Unlike Achebe at the end of *A Man of the People* (1966), Ojaide did not celebrate the military who swept the unbearably corrupt politicians into the waste-bin of history. He would not exonerate the self-appointed redeemers he described as “hurricane” and “whirlwind” because of their notoriety for wiping off both the good and the bad in the system once they choose to take over the leadership of the country, leaving “misery in their wake” (11). Ojaide puns the names of the top two leaders of that government by re-christening “Shagari” to “Shamgari, Shankari, [and] shun gari” which was what his Presidency imposed on Nigerians. The last label is an obvious insult because any government that forces Nigerians to shun ‘garri,’ – the staple food in most Nigerian homes – is calling for rebellion. Alex Ekwueme becomes “Alexius, architect of wind-raised mansions, / a mountain of capital. / Abuja has had its dreams” (29-31). This derogatory description questions the professional competence of Alex Ekwueme as an architect. The poem ends on a sardonic note by indicting the profiteers of the corrupt civilian regime and their military successors, opportunists that rose overnight from nonentities to instant millionaires. Ojaide derides their lifestyle conditioned by a morbid sense of fear and insecurity and foretells their downfall:

Pity the fate of flash millionaires.
 If they are not hurled into jail, they live
 in the prisonhouses of their crimes and
 wives
 and when they die, of course, only their

kind
shower praises on vultures. (42-46)

The poet's ultimate condemnation of these characters is that vultures of their kind – those who wait for opportunities to scavenge – would also await their demise to loot their ill-gotten fortunes as they have done to Nigerians. Ojaide's recommendation in the poem is that good leadership pays for the tranquility it engenders and most importantly, the security it assures for both the rich and poor so all could maximize their natural rights to attain happiness. Leaders who adopt this vision are eagles, while those who reject it are vultures. Leadership that is not accountable to the people, the very basis of its legitimacy, would degenerate into perfidy as was witnessed in Nigeria during the Second Republic, when those in power looted the treasury with impunity. He counsels that the people must take charge to prevent its recurrence.

"Players" is a satire on Nigerian political leaders who take the country as a mere stage where they act out their various fantasies about governance. Ojaide calls them players because like actors they are difficult to predict. It brings to mind a misguided military character goaded by personal ambition and a surreal vision to transform Nigeria by inauspicious policies that inflicted so much hardship on the people. Ibrahim Babangida was a military President infamous for his flamboyance and penchant for changing his mind at will on national issues. The label 'player' sits well on him because he toyed with the sensibilities of Nigerians during the politically turbulent years of his presidency from 1985 to 1993. Like an actor on stage he could settle into any character to cajole the nation to believe and accept his political gimmickry. He became so notorious for changing and dribbling his way around controversial public matters that the press nicknamed him

'Maradona' after the most skillful footballer in the world at that time, the Argentine Diego Maradona. Ojaide warns at the end of the poem that others after him will not be different because they are all players and dreamers who take advantage of the postcolonial environment of Nigeria. Thus, the people must therefore choose realists to lead them, not dreamers. It is also against such personalities that he warns Nigerians in "When tomorrow is too long" so the people can be vigilant not to fall into their snares, and recommends that such tyrants be weeded out mercilessly as they would a 'cobra' lying in wait for them on their doorsteps.

"Our worth" takes up recurrent themes of wastefulness and complacency imbibed by Nigerians in the past of plenty. Ojaide condemns the millipede pace of Nigeria's development as a nation after the riotous merriment of the oil-boom years and blames the lack of planning by the country's leaders in times of plenty for the present predicament. He regrets that all that is left are "feathers scattered by a trap" which is nothing in terms of concrete achievement. Till today, Nigeria continues to rue the years "we drank every brew without getting drunk / consumed every dish without constipating / and saw ourselves picnicking in the moon" (29-32). Matters are made worse by the sliding price of crude oil (the mainstay of Nigeria's economy) which has resulted in government's inability to pay workers' salaries while the national infrastructure are in a state of disrepair. His counsels that things would change for the better when Nigeria's national values are reassessed to focus more on the culture of prudence, labour and hard work than reliance on how much countries of the West would pay for our crude oil.

Conclusion

This study has explored Tanure Ojaide's criticism of national leadership in post-independent Nigeria as well as the resolutions he has taken on the issues explored in *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* using New Historicism as a critical tool. It has also analyzed his pronouncements on how to re-condition and redirect Nigeria to the path of progress. It has succeeded therefore in establishing the poet's concern for his society and showing on which side of the socio-political divide he stands between the leadership and the people. The study has therefore achieved its objectives to highlight the sore points identified by Ojaide to be responsible for Nigeria's socio-political and cultural inertia on the path of development; and to show that *The Fate of Vultures & Other Poems* articulates the challenge of national leadership in Nigeria, a nation struggling in the web of socio-political deception, corruption and bad leadership by misguided political and military leaders.

Notes

1. The leading political figures prior to Nigeria's independence in 1960 were Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo and leader of National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC); Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba and leader of Action Group (AG); and Ahmadu Bello, leader of the Northern People's Congress (NPC). For many years these political gladiators slugged it out at elections to rule Nigeria.

2. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) led the Federal Government in Nigeria from 1979 to 1983. The government was infamous for its profligacy and harsh austerity measures it introduced to offset the huge national debts it incurred from taking foreign loans.

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