

LITERARY PHYSICIANS: NIGERIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS AND THE ART OF CREATIVE WRITING

OMOBOWALE E. B.

Mr. Emmanuel Babatunde Omobowale BA(Ib), MA(Ib) is a Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Medicine is my lawful wife and poetry is my mistress; when I lose patience with one, I spend time with the other.

- Anton Chekhov (1860 - 1904)

There is no gainsaying the fact that in the developed countries of the world, which include the United States of America, England and Australia, the field of 'Literature and Medicine' has become a very important area of intellectual discourse. In the USA for instance, two-thirds of the medical schools now teach literature to medical students who are thereby exposed to different aspects of human activity. There are also courses designed to introduce the medical students to the art of creative writing.

In Nigeria, the first medical school was established in 1948 as a component part of the University College, Ibadan. However, while it is true that literature is not currently being taught in Nigerian medical schools, Nigerian medical students have been writing poems and short stories about different aspects of human experience. In this study, we shall be examining some of these poems and a short story which have appeared in recent volumes of DOKITA, an internationally acclaimed journal published by the University of Ibadan Medical Students Association, to establish the creative potentials of Nigerian medical students.

In recent years, some of the budding medical student-writers who have come from the different departments of the College of Medicine and who have published their literary works in DOKITA include Funmi Onabanjo ('Gifts from Above') Okechukwu Ogah ('A Child's Lamentations' and 'In Search of a Baby'), Nnebuchi A. Ochei ('The Tears of my Mother' and 'Paediatrics') Jimoh A. Kareem ('What Shall We Leave'), Olurinde Oni ('Dreams: How True to Life') and Aniete Okon ('Children of Africa'). The poems and the short story that we will be examining in this study were published between 1990 and 1997 in volumes 19, 21, 23 and 24 of DOKITA.

Essentially, these literary pieces present us with the 'other side' of the life of a medical student who is able to take time off his studying to engage in sundry activities which are not medically inclined. It should be stressed that our main objective is to humanise the personality of the Nigerian medical student who is seen by many people as an embodiment of arrogance and aloofness. In our own perspective, the medical student is not different from other students in Nigeria's tertiary institutions who still find time to participate in a variety of extra curricular activities (including creative writing) despite the rigorous nature of their academic training. A poem which illustrates our position on this issue most clearly is M.S.T. Tijani's 'Medical Traffic' (1990) which appeared in DOKITA, Vol. 19.

'Medical Traffic' is a very fascinating poem infused with a lot of humour which elicits laughter from the reader. A quick glance at the contents of the poem immediately reveals the overwhelming influence of medicine on Tijani's art, especially when words such as 'laryngoscope', 'neuroanatomy', 'hydrocephalus', 'stethoscope', 'organ', 'transplant', and 'ocular forceps' stand out so conspicuously.

In the poem, which is divided into four parts, Tijani operates in the garb of a chronicler, presenting his reader with different, but interesting images of the average Nigerian medical student. He speaks in an imperative tone and the emphatic nature of his statements confers on him an air of authority which elicits some measure of respect from the reader who becomes attuned to the idea that the poet has a good, in-depth knowledge of the issues he is discussing.

A lot of people in Nigeria believe that medical students do not have time for pleasure, are bookish in nature and are avid readers of sundry texts, especially those which discuss medical matters. Tijani debunks this erroneous impression in this poem. Medical students being human beings, are also susceptible to a variety of influences which determine their emotional responses to different issues drawn from the world around them. One of such issues revolves round how best to establish romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex. Thus, in the first part of the poem, Tijani talks about randy male medical students, who spend a lot of time assessing and savouring the physical attributes or endowments of girls from a sexually motivated perspective. The poet addresses an unnamed character, whom we presume is a medical student and says:

Your eyes were rusty nails
That tore a hole
In the denim - jeans
Of a church-bound girl

... ..
Your eyes with Zoom lens
That turns your neck triangles
180 degrees to the stepping
of Nazareth's daughter
to her fine wooden shelter

... ..
Your eyes (on the lips
of the girl with the pleasing hips)
were as quivering as the tornadoes
provoking a quiet riot. (DOKITA Vol. 19:99)

In ages past, especially the Biblical period, the people of Nazareth were renowned for their piety, naivety, simplicity and innocence. Tijani uses these attributes to also emphasise the inner and outward beauty of the girls who have at different times caught the attention of the male medical students of Alexander Brown Hall, the principal hostel of medical students studying at the University of Ibadan and which has been used as the setting of the poem.

The poet continues to address the medical student in the second part of the poem. The reader is aware of the fact that not only does this unnamed character continue to indulge himself by looking at women in a rather amorous manner, he also smokes, and this, apparently, is a vice that the poet detests. The poet contends:

Your eyes, one night

were dragon-flies that settled
on the Indian mangoes
Of an A - block soloist...
Your eyes were greedy
to tender them all alone!
Your eyes were smoke blind
to your low tar and cancer -
prone-brand
Your eyes at evening beer time
Are closed like a cased
Laryngoscope...
Your eyes...
were exceptionally immune
to the Surgeon-General's
warning? (Ibid: 99)

The 'Indian Mangoes' of an A-Block soloist is a symbolic representation of a girl's breasts and Tijani seems to be of the opinion that the medical student's infatuation with the girl has made him to lose his sense of reasoning, making him totally blind to the evils inherent in his smoking habit. Embedded in this section of the poem is a tinge of irony, as the poet laments in a very subtle manner, the exposure of the medical student to a debilitating disease like lung cancer.

In the remaining two parts of the poem, Tijani introduces his reader to the other side of the medical students, the serious academically-inclined part of his personality, which most people are familiar with. Here, we have a graphic representation of the medical student as he prepares for an exam and the reader is told of eyes:

... as fascile
as Hollander's lab works
on neuroanatomy of hydrocephalus (Ibid: 99)

Here, we find the poet talking about the ease with which the medical student studies apparently difficult subjects. Occasionally, in the middle of his swotting, the medical students' eyes fly up 'to the lonely roof of E-14,' which is presumably the abode of a female colleague. However, despite this seemingly innocuous distraction, the poet attests to the medical student's studiousness as he affirms:

Your eyes on your MBBS quiz
were as triumphant as
Freud's theory of psychic mentation. (Ibid: 99)

The phrase, 'Your eyes', is repeated twenty-five times and the constant repetition establishes the importance of eyes as organs of the human body, central to the well-being of man in all respects. Although Tijani functions from the position of an insider, he attempts to be objective in his portrayal of events and situations. The reader is given the opportunity to determine for himself his own impressions about the personality of the average medical student in Nigeria.

Okechukwu Ogah's 'A Child's Lamentation' (1993) is overlaced with pessimism and despair. Like the title suggests, it is a song of lamentation, a dirge which laments in a graphic manner man's inhumanity to man. The poetic persona is a baby who is the voice of other babies in different parts of the world, and who bemoans its ill-luck in coming to the world again. The reader gets the feeling that the poet believes in regeneration because there is

a suggestion that the baby had once been conceived before its new advent. A new birth in the life of a family is supposed to herald or usher in happiness, joy and bliss. Instead, the cries or wailing of the baby can be palpably felt by the reader as the former agonizes over its fate. The poetic persona repeats the refrain, 'This time I cry', four times in the poem and this repetition helps to evoke a feeling of pity from the reader. The baby talks of a world where 'Hate is now more than love' and where 'War is now victorious.' It also talks about its previous comings and of:

The time before I was aborted
Spontaneously at twelve weeks
A young girl with no means
Wanted to bring me into the world

... ..
The time before I was decapitated
A woman with no interest in breast-feeding
Would have given me fatal gastroenteritis

(DOKITA Vol 21)

In this poem, Ogah highlights some of the various socio-political problems existing in Nigeria and which have led to moral degeneration, a breakdown in the norms and values which had for ages determined the existence of each individual in the society and the concomitant rise in the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions as well as child abandonment. What now exists is a situation whereby an individualistic orientation to life is now the ethos which guides the existence of man.

It should be stressed that the issues raised by Ogah in this thought provoking poem also have universal applicability and it is not surprising that at the end of the poem, the poetic persona contends in a very sombre manner:

The world has turned upside down
Insanity has overpowered sanity. (Ibid: 95)

Ogah's next poem, 'In Search of a Baby'(1993) teaches forbearance, perseverance and hope even in the midst of utmost disillusionment. Its message is directed at barren women who are urged not to give up their dreams of bearing a child of their own. This poem is a direct contrast to 'A Child's Lamentation' where the underlying mood that pervades the whole poem is overwhelmingly pessimistic. In 'In Search of a Baby', the pessimism at the beginning of the poem changes to optimism and happiness at the end of the poem as the poet tries to rekindle hope in women who have given up on the idea that they could ever be mothers.

What the reader is presented with in this poem is the life and times of a particular individual whose rise from grass (barrenness) to grace (motherhood) is very spectacular and unique. The poetic persona speaks with the tone of authority, like someone sure of his facts that all hope is not lost for barren women. Invariably, a woman, who at a point in her life was presumed to be barren, becomes an apposite illustration to buttress the didactic quality in the poetic persona's message. He explains further:

I saw and met her
At the clinic
Depressed and unhappy, yet inquisitive
In search of a baby
Of her own womb
To avert in the family
Marital stress and instability
Polygamy and Divorce

Prostitution, social stigma and suicidal tendencies
She has had three
Previous mid-trimester abortions
Cervical incompetence suspected
Substantiated by ultrasound and HSG
Speculum examination and retrograde dilatation. (Ibid: 95)

The excerpt above reveals graphically how harrowing it is to be barren, especially in the Third World where children are deemed to be important cords which link various constituent parts of the family together. In Africa, for instance, a barren woman is stigmatized and there is a possibility that at a point in her life she might be hounded out of her matrimonial home and vilified as a witch. As the reader goes through the poem, he is exposed to different medical terminologies and concepts and we see Ogah's medical background asserting itself forcefully in this regard.

One interesting thing, worthy of mention is the fact that there is a hint that the woman's barrenness might have resulted out of her own carelessness. Today, a lot of women are barren because when they were younger they aborted pregnancies and abortions when wrongly performed can prove disastrous in future and lead to infertility. The barren woman in the poem admits to her doctors that she had had 'a previous history of D & C'.

The didactic nature of the poem is discernible here, as a message is directed at young girls, especially those who indulge in having abortions performed on them, whom the poet warns about the evil and risk which are inherent in abortion procedures.

Ogah gives the barren woman a second chance to have a new beginning in spite of her sordid background, as a means of emphasising his position that even the worst cases, when it comes to the issue of barrenness, are redeemable, if those involved can persevere. The reader learns:

The elusive thing late came
Though DVT risk
Boredom and back pain endured
Happiness, joy and fulfilment hers
The child of her womb has
arrived.
And to her husband and neighbours
She is capable. (Ibid: 95-96)

One interesting thing that is obvious in "In Search of a Baby" is the fact that the onus of responsibility is always on the woman to prove that it is her husband or partner that is sterile. For instance, in Nigeria, it is a common phenomenon for people to accept that when a couple do not have children, it is the wife who has a medical or spiritual problem that needs a solution.

Nnebuchi A. Ochei's works of art stand out as very unique literary creations. Her poem, "The Tears of my Mother" (1993) is also a song of lamentation as the poetic persona indicts members of the society as well as the government for being responsible for the high rate of mortality among infants. The poetic voice betrays the poet's sorrow and anger for the unnecessary deaths of infants which are occurring at a very alarming rate in the Third World. The poem is an address from a child to her mother who is mourning the death of her other children from diseases like measles, kwashiorkor, tuberculosis, etc.

In the first stanza, the poetic persona repeatedly asks his mother questions about the reasons for her cries. The third stanza shows that the poetic persona holds government officials largely

responsible for the high infant mortality rate in the society as a result of the mismanagement of government resources which should have been used to develop the society through the provision of a good health care delivery system, and equitable distribution of wealth that would have enabled the citizenry take greater care of themselves. He criticises the Nigerian government programmes like the Oral Rehydration Therapy and the Expanded Programme on Immunization for their ineffectiveness. The mother is enjoined to:

weep for the system that
throws us ORT, EPI
and their likes
without caring
to feed ...
people, or monitor
their growth. (Ibid: 96)

In the first three stanzas, the poetic persona speaks with a supplicatory tone as she tries to console her mother. However, in the fourth stanza, the poetic voice has become firm, aggressive and very defiant. In this last stanza, the poetic persona who now reveals that she is handicapped, makes a resolution to make a success of her life despite the odds confronting her. The moral embedded in this part of the poem is that physical disability is not tantamount to mental incapacity. The poetic persona asserts:

For though I am crippled
my mind is
still intact
I'll go to school
and read and pass
And so listen
Mother, for one day
I'll qualify MBBS
Then mother... Then I will
teach you and others
in this third world terrain
the proper meaning
of WHO HEALTH. (Ibid:96)

In 'Paediatrics' (1993) Ochei celebrates the achievements of the Paediatrics Department of the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan which has as its main responsibility, the care of little children. This Department is one of the best of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa, especially when it comes to infant care, and Ochei contends that in the hierarchical structure of departments at the UCH:

There is but one
almighty and none
mightier, than he;
The last stop
the bridge and
the eagle on the tree
Fear him, know him.
And call just his name
... ..
He is called
PAEDIATRICS
and forever
he will reign. (Ibid: 96)

There are two things the reader learns about the Paediatrics Department of the UCH. At times, parents come there to find solace and succour for their children without any success. Ochei does not accept that this detracts from the glory of this unique medical department because it is also a truism that in the game of life, 'you lose some and you win some'. However, Ochei also makes it quite clear that most of the parents who come to 'Paedo' wearing gloomy faces often leave with happiness and joy after having found solutions to the clinical problems plaguing their wards.

Apart from being a poet, Ochei is also a prose writer and a beautiful story written by her is 'A Mother's Letter to her In-Utero Child' (1993). The story is written in the epistolary style and it contains two letters, one from the mother to the baby and the second letter, a reply from the child.

The first letter conveys the mother's love and affection for her baby, twelve hours before its birth. The reader is given an incisive insight into what takes place in the womb after copulation or sexual intercourse by a man and a woman. The reader discovers that at a state in its evolution, the unborn baby changes from being a zygote into a foetus. Another information which is provided the reader is that during pregnancy, the mother is barred from taking alcohol and drugs. According to the mother:

I smile as I remember it was on such a night as this that you were conceived. Your father's soul meets mine on this fulfilling journey of love and we returned to my uterus with you in my arms. It's almost nine months since that magical moment occurred and you've changed from a little zygote through an embryo and now a big foetus getting bigger everyday... can you understand me when I say that you are my flesh and my blood. Actually, I am only a part of you - 23 out of your 46 chromosomes. (Ibid: 96)

The baby's reply also reveals its affection, care and love for the mother. It expresses its desire to leave the 'fluid-filled amniotic sac' to become its mother's child. It recounts tales heard in the 'Never-Never Land' where it comes from, 'about abortions, fetal malformations, intra-uterine growth retardations and their like.' The baby explains to the mother that in the 'Never-Never Land' babies have the right to choose the parents they want for themselves. At this stage, Ochei introduces ideas drawn from the traditional belief-systems of the Yoruba and Igbo tribes of Southern Nigeria into the story.

The baby talks about *Ogbanjes* and *Abikus*, spirit-children who are believed to possess the innate ability to die and be re-born. Among the Yorubas and the Igbos, rituals and sacrifices are often presented to gods by human beings who are desirous of children but who do not want the child to be an *Abiku* - which literally means born-to-die- or an *Ogbanje*. Thus, the baby tells his mother:

Mummy, I don't want to go that way. I boasted to my friends that I would never return for I liked you and daddy immediately I saw both of you above the crest of the bridge. Mother, I love you both and I want to be given a chance of life and chance of growing up and be (sic) educated and to teach others the meaning and secret of love. (Ibid: 100)

Ochei in a very simple way, through this story, explains to her reader the reproductive cycle and in the process, the reader is entertained, informed and educated about an important aspect of life.

In 'What Shall We Leave', Jimoh A. Kareem (1993) argues that in these days of monumental technological advances, man has proved to be his own greatest enemy. To establish his point convincingly, Kareem looks into the historical past and postulates the idea that for aeons of ages, generations of men have left monuments behind as a lasting legacy for generations yet unborn. For instance, he talks about ancient Egypt:

In the deserts of Egypt
Stand the mighty sphynxes and pyramids
as solid and imposing as ever*
Seeming to smile in triumph
Over the destructive agents of weather
And thus providing evidence
Of the revered Egyptian
Civilization. (Ibid. 97)

From the perspective of the poet, the people of today's world bask in the glory of these laudable heritages left behind by our forebears as a lasting symbol of 'human ingenuity'. He concedes that in the present generation, man has been able to improve on the legacies bequeathed to him from the past. Now we have magnificent skyscrapers, 'Majestic statues and amazing space crafts/ All dotting the surface of the earth'. However, despite the achievements recorded by man in the last one hundred years, the possibility of a nuclear war hangs over the world like a sword of Damocles, threatening not only this generation but the legacies of preceding generations with extinction. Suddenly, in the last few lines of the poem, the poetic tone is no longer that of celebration but of lamentation. The persona asks rhetorically:

Lo! What will become of all this and man
himself
Ask! What shall we leave a sign for our
existence
If there ever occurs the much dreaded but avertable
NUCLEAR WAR? (Ibid:97)

Today, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Kareem's questions in the extract above is food for thought for all lovers of peace everywhere throughout the globe. Through this poem, Kareem functions as a chronicler of past events and as a conscience of society, sensitizing his readers as we all await the apocalypse!

Anietie Okon's 'Children of Africa' (1993) is like so many of the poems already discussed, a song of mourning and the poet uses the collective pronoun 'we' to identify himself with the plight of the children of Africa who have been condemned to a life of agony as a result of the innate selfishness of a myopic few who parade themselves as political leaders in different parts of the African continent. According to the poetic persona, he and his peers:

... are an army of tots:
...
We are: the only evidence of God's
bounties to a forgotten continent
Bulging eyes, collapsed cheeks

Rusty spines and serrated lips

 We are an army of sorts:
 Victims of war in Somalia
 Starved in Ethiopia
 Dying in Sudan
 Crying in Nigeria
 Ill-fed. Unschooled. Uncared for.
 We are an army:
 The Children of Africa. (Ibid: 98)

It is on record that in Africa today, apart from the fact that thousands of children are dying as a result of hunger, famine and starvation, most of the soldiers fighting in Africa's various wars attrition are children. A very good example is Sierra Leone where according to Edward Barnes and William Dowell (1999), most of the soldiers in the rebel army, the Revolutionary United Forces (RUF), fighting the democratically elected government of Sierra Leone are:

15- and 16-years-old boys who looted and burned huge swaths of downtown Freetown. ECOMOG forces patrolling Freetown's main streets were continually harassed by Kalashnikov wielding teenagers who slipped from dark alleys, machined-gunned them for 15 or 30 seconds and then slipped away again. After sunset, many of the teenagers, many of them high on local hallucinogens, set houses on fire night candles, they called them to ward off the fearful dark... Nigerian commanders planning an offensive for this week worried about what tactics could possibly contained thousands of drug-added adolescents. Said a major: 'This is a battle between democracy and dementia.' (14)

It is therefore not surprising that with this kind of pathetic scenario presented above which is an example of physical and spiritual degeneration in Africa Okon's poem resonates with sounds of anger and despair as the poet presents vivid images of death, destitution, decadence and destruction.

The poems and the short story which we have discussed above have been sourced from Volumes 19 and 21 of DOKITA which were published in 1990 and 1993 respectively. In Volumes 23 and 24 of DOKITA published in 1996 and 1997, there are several poems written by medical students which also look at different facets of life. Some of the poems include 'On The Sands of Time' written by an anonymous medical student poet in memory of the Late Professor Benjamin Oluwakayode Osuntokun, a Professor of Neurology; 'My Contemporary Medical Hero' written by Akinyemi Ojesina is dedicated to Emeritus Professor of Medicine, Oladipo Olujimi Akinkugbe; and 'A hundred Years of the Drug' written by M.O. Ojelabi and which informs the reader that the first synthesized drug came into existence through the efforts of a German scientist called Hoffman on the 10th of August, 1897.

In these poems, we see the poets functioning as chroniclers, chronicling the life and times of important personalities in the society and also presenting, for the benefit of the reader, some of the important events which have occurred in the world. Other

poems which are published in these two volumes are 'Life is a Risk' by Kehinde Adigun, 'The Masquerade' by M.O. Akanbi, 'Wasted' by L.J.C. Anyanwu, 'By The Year 2000' by O.N. Enwere, 'I Have a Dream' by Bimbo Adewolu and 'The Yeast to Rise' by Akinyemi Ojesina.

Two of the poems, 'Life is a Risk' and 'Wasted', stand out distinctly as very good poems. 'Life is a Risk' (1997) has four stanzas. There is a repetition of the first two lines throughout the four stanzas as well as the repetition of the last two lines of stanza one in stanzas two and three. Through the use of repetition, the poet advises his reader to be courageous and bold at all times even in the face of difficulties which threaten to consume him. There is an attempt to show that in everything one does in life, a person has to take some risks hence any coward who refuses to strive hard to actualize his dreams will forever lag behind. For the poet, the struggle for survival is an innate part of man's existence. He speaks with a persuasive tone as he tries to convince the reader about the plausibility of his positions as presented through the poem. In stanza two, he avers:

Life is a risk
 Risk is life itself
 To have a gain in life
 One needs to go through
 The risks of venturing
 For nothing ventured, nothing gained
 Who then says
 Life is not a risk. (DOKITA: Vol 24:119)

In 'Wasted' (1997), Anyanwu presents a poetic persona who is suffering from a debilitating illness that has kept him bed-ridden, almost devoid of life. The underlying mood which runs through the poem is very sombre and grave in nature and this educes emotions and sympathy from the reader. The poet tells the reader that the poem is written in honour of two friends, Tolu and Grace, who died of cancer and this information further helps the reader to have a graphic picture of the pathetic nature of the sick poetic persona. He regrets his helplessness that has reduced him to an invalid and he laments:

And helplessly do I watch
 The flame of my life
 Slowly dying out
 The blood flows in my
 Vein but no more do I
 Receive its vitality
 Slowly my body is eaten out
 And life is sapped
 From within me
 And so do I lie here

 As the medics subtly
 Avoid me and load me
 With placebo ...
 (Ibid: 120)

There is no doubt that man is mortal which means 'it is given unto him to die' However, the bone of contention in this poem is that while death is inevitable, the poetic persona has not been able to achieve anything worthwhile in life before being afflicted with a terminal disease. Despite the feeling of despondency that

pervades the poem, the last four lines reveal the poetic persona's belief in the existence of life after death and he expresses a desire for divine strength in order to be able to bear the agony with fortitude before being translated into eternity.

In presenting their multifarious view of life through the forum of DOKITA, these medical student-writers have followed the footsteps of some of their predecessors like Femi Oyeboade who while still a student at the Ibadan College of Medicine published poems in DOKITA and was a regular member of the University of Ibadan Poetry Club. Today, Oyeboade has published five volumes of poetry namely: *Naked to Your Softness* and other poems (1989), *Wednesday is a Colour* (1990), *Forest of Transformations* (1991), *Adagio for Oblong Mirrors* (1993) and *Master of the Leopard Hunt* (1995). Onookome Okome, a leading Nigerian critic says this of Oyeboade: 'There is indeed no poet writing today about home (Nigeria) who writes with such lyrical beauty and an obvious touch of knowledge. None'. There is no doubt that the literary accomplishments of a physician-poet like Oyeboade serves as a guiding beacon for up and coming medical student-writers.

Our analyses of several poems and a short story in this study show in a very graphic way the artistic versatility of Nigerian medical student-writers who have used their observation of the world around them as a basis for proposing the evolution of very functional communes of people devoid of some of the socio-political problems plaguing the world today. In performing this role of conscience of society, the medical student-writers have conformed to William Wordsworth's description of a creative writer. According to him, a creative writer:

..is a man-speaking to men.. endowed with more lively sensibility... who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul... delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. (601-602)

NOTES

'Tijani was a public health student at the University College Hospital when he wrote this poem and this gave him an opportunity to interact with medical students. We have reviewed the poem principally because it gives us a firsthand insight into the personality of the Nigerian medical students, the main focus of this study.

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