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Poetry for Social Consciousness, Criticism and Change: A Study of Selected Poems of Ezenwa-Ohaeto

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Abstract

*For Ezenwa-Ohaeto, a poet and a critic of international repute, the idea of writing and reading literature (poetry) for its own sake, is, in the words of Chunalumogu Achebe, “a deodorized shit.” In consonance with Achebe’s views on the utility of literature, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, in most of his anthologies of poems, reveals himself as a man who is deeply and socially committed and sensitive, a poet who is profoundly perturbed by social ills and challenges in Nigeria. Of utmost concern to him is the blatant abuse of power by leaders at various levels of governance, poor leadership, unpredictable and faithless followership, poverty, insensitivity and falsehood in high and low places. As a kind of manifesto to his collection of poems entitled; *I Wan Bi President*, Ezenwa in a poem entitled; “*My Credentials*,” presents his roles as a poet*

and writer with social sensibility and commitment aimed at awaking the consciousness of complacent Nigerians in the face of injustice and oppression. In these lines, he tells the reader: I have taken the old gong, I have learnt the old song, If I fail to rouse the dogs, Their barks will not rouse the guards, The guards will not subdue the rogues. In accomplishing these onerous tasks, he employs satire through the medium of poems in pidgin and formal English to truly arouse the readers to the ever mounting challenges of injustice, greed, exploitation and dehumanization that are the bane of the Nigerian society, in the spheres of the economy, polity, education, religion and family relationships. The poems presented in this study, depict Ezenwa Ohaeto as a writer who uses his old gong and song via poetry to rouse the dogs whose barks are needed to rouse the guards timely, to enable the guards to really subdue the rogues in diverse aspects of the Nigerian society. The ability of the guards to subdue the rogues would engender a society where peace, law, order and justice reign supreme. At this level, poetry becomes an effective instrument for awareness and reformation.

Introduction

The thesis of this paper is that the literary artist (a poet, novelist or playwright), is the conscience and watch-dog of any society where he resides. The literary artist, unlike the Hemit, lives among his people. He acts as an uncommissioned town crier who creates social consciousness through his works by sensitizing the citizens of his country to be aware of and react against numerous cases of injustice, greed, poor leadership, embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds, abuse of power, insecurity, general poverty, oppression and deprivation (among so many other ills) that they would have ordinarily been insensitive to or complacent about.

Most often, the artists achieve the above aims by writing literary works that portray negative aspect of life in the society, with a view to condemning them and directly or indirectly recommending the positive aspects; writing and staging plays that satirically present absurdities on the stage with the sole aim of educating the audience through painful laughter and joyful sorrows, with a view to changing the audience to embrace the positive aspects of the society. In similar cases, poets such as Ezenwa-Ohaeto satirically praise evil through poems that entertain the audience through sugar-coated hemlock with a view to indicting the perpetrators of evil, for intelligent members of the audience to avoid social evils and pitfalls. The overall objective of the

literary artist is to overthrow evil and enthrone good in the society in order to achieve a society noted for rule of law, justice, equal opportunity, security and equity.

The aforementioned roles of the literary artist are clearly supported by notable creative writers and critics. For example, Chinua Achebe, in stating his role as a creative writer opines that:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of *re-education* and *regeneration* that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front...

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past-with all its imperfections- was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them (45).

So, the work of a committed literary writer or any writer for that matter is to assist in the onerous task of re-educating, re-directing, reforming and regenerating his people by sensitizing their ordinarily dull and complacent conscience for a positive action.

And by "Marching in Front", the artist acts as a General in the army who leads his officers and men into a battle field for victory.

Similarly, Ezekiel Mphahlele, in his book *African Image*, perceives the literary artist as "the sensitive point of his community". In his own view, William Abraham, a Ghanaian Philosopher argues that the literary artist should not for any reason, be excused from the task of re-education, regeneration and reformation of his society, just like African professionals in diverse fields are not excused. According to him:

Just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa; African political scientists concern themselves with the politics of Africa, why should African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves recognized as genuine? (45)

A critical analysis of William Abraham's social functions of African intellectuals and professionals reveals that the literary creators (as he called

them) perform the roles of scientists, historians and political scientists in the course of performing their work as literary writers because literature permeates every field of human activity.

In his own perception, Senator Fulbright ranks the work of a literary artist, especially a social critic as the highest demonstration of nationalism and patriotism. According to him, “to criticize one’s country, to tell her that it could do better, is to pay it the highest compliments.”

It is therefore not surprising when Wole Soyinka, in appreciating the inevitable and precarious tasks which literary artists and critics often set for themselves, argues, “I have one abiding religion-human liberty.”

The above is a great religion because any writer or critic whose ultimate religion or goal is to liberate humanity, the society and the individual must ironically forfeit his own liberty, or sometimes his life in order to liberate others.

So Wole Soyinka is stating in plain language the role of the literary writer/critic as an agent of social consciousness and reformation when he declared:

I believe implicitly that any work of art which opens out the horizon of human mind, and intellect, is by its very nature, a force for change, a medium for change (247).

In the subsequent part of this paper, efforts are made through a critical study of some selected poems from Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s anthology of poems, written in Standard and Pidgin English to prove that he wrote many of his poems mainly to sensitize his readers on the aspects of social injustice, criminality in high and low places, dehumanization, deprivation, deceit, poverty, abuse of power, purposeless leadership and impoverishment of the masses that often go unchallenged and unpunished. The thematic concerns of his poems are in line with the views of the writers and critics reviewed above. In his own words, Ezenwa-Ohaeto states his roles as a writer to include: a singer, a speaker, a seer, and a town crier, whose objective is to rouse the dogs to rouse the guards for the guards to subdue the numerous rogues in our society at various levels. These poetic manifestoes are specifically given vents in

some poems in his anthologies such as *If to Say I Bi Soja, Bullets for Buntings and I Wan Bi President*.

Poetry for Sensitization, Criticism and Change

In the poetry volume entitled: - *I Wan Bi President* and in the poem: “My Credentials,” Ezenwa- Ohaeto clearly states his poetic Mission and Vision as a poet and social critic. As a sensitive member of the Nigerian society, he gives his literary manifesto when he says that his task is to arouse the dogs with his songs in order to arouse the guards to subdue the rogues in the Nigerian Society.

He puts his entire literary crusade thus:

I have taken the old gong
I have learnt the old song
Deafness kills a child
Silence slaughters the adult.
I have seen and I will speak.....
I have presented my credentials (lines 1-30)

In this poem, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, through his years of education in various Universities and through extensive and intensive reading of literary works and travels, states his determination and preparedness as an “Adult” poet and critic, among children (insensitive and complacent citizens) to speak against the evils he sees in the society. And if the readers remain adamant and deaf to his clarion call for action against injustices, inequality, abuse of power, general impoverishment of the people, oppression and poor leadership, he like the Watchman in the book of Ezekiel Chapter 33:1-7, would not be held culpable for their ultimate suffering and destruction, because “He has seen and has spoken” (line 28). If the readers should perish because of lack of understanding, insensitivity, stubbornness, gullibility or complacency, the blood of the readers would be on their own head.

And in line with his self-imposed social crusade, Ezenwa demonstrates the profundity of his knowledge of the geographical terrain of his country, Nigeria and the level of the suffering of children, youths, men and women in various parts of the country.

In an absolute display of his knowledge of the importance of diction to the overall effects and beauty of any given poem, he plays with words as he

presents the troubles in Nigeria and the problems with Nigerians. In the poem: “My Credentials,” he observes:

A maid moaning in Maiduguri
Mumbles the massive scars of many mumps
A youth yawning in Yola
Yields to the yells of yearly yokes
A boy boiling in Abeokuta
Buries his body in a bottle of bitterness
A woman worrying in Owerri
Weeps of the weary wind in penury
A son suffering in Sokoto screams of a series of serious
sets of disasters (lines 12-21).
(emphasis on alliteration, mine).

In the poem, the poet’s diction indicates the diverse ways Nigerians of all ages, places and walks of life undergo suffering or hardship. The words that show the suffering by Nigerians include: moaning, yawning, yokes, buries, bitterness, weeps, weary, screams and disasters. The poet has therefore seen and spoken through the above words that possess negative connotation. The action, which is “to say no in thunder and in the face of oppression lies with the masses.”

Similarly, in the poem; “The inquisitive Idiot,” Ezenwa exposes, through satirical inclination, the various misunderstanding and application of the word POLITICS in Nigeria. For example, the material tendencies and inclinations of members of the executive, and legislative to politics’ are revealed through the questions on the meaning of politics to three group of people. In response to the inquisitive idiot’s question: “What is politics in Nigeria, the following responses: were got: for the senator, “politics is my fat salary.” For the legislator, “politics is my huge allowances.”

Similarly, while political leaders are in politics to get “several board memberships; the shameless intellectuals are in politics for “sycophant appointments.” Whereas traditional rulers and chiefs join politics “to receive gifts for persuading their subjects to vote for certain political parties, traders and business men are in politics because to them, “politics is lifted ban on goods.” While politics reminds students of their colleagues who were hacked down by law enforcement agents during students demonstrations against injustice and poor leadership in the university or country, politics reminds

young boys of their “fathers who were sacked from office in the name of retrenchment.” And for the villagers, politics symbolizes their numerous children who are dying of hunger and ignorance in the midst of plenty. And for the poet, the real politics is “this poem,” through which he tells the reader what politics is not and should never be or perceived to be.

Therefore, as far as the poet is concerned, the diverse perception and practice of politics in Nigeria by Nigerians leave a sour taste in the mouth. The moment the semantic implication of politics moves completely away from the realm of service to humanity through good governance, it becomes “poli self,” that is, politics of self, by self and for self.

In the poem in Pidgin English entitled: “Where God Dey?,” Ezenwa-Ohaeto condemns the fatalistic tendency of attributing everything to God and expecting Him to do those minor things which man can do for himself. In the poem, he detests man’s inability to “say no in thunder and in the face of oppression,” as Wole Soyinka would say. The poet sensitizes the ordinary citizens to challenge some of the obnoxious policies and injustices in the society by not accepting and attributing everything happening to them to God’s will. As he satirically but painfully puts it:

If dem carry you
Go thruway for prison
You go talk say God dey.
If dem carry bulldozer
Make your house disappear...
Take your wife,
Carry your daughter too
Go make rape for outside
I sure say you go talk
Tell people say God dey (lines 1-13)

In reaction against leaving what one can do for oneself to God, the poet calls his readers to take action instead of attributing man’s inhumanity to man to the will and opinion of God. He puts his call for action against one’s oppressors thus:

My broder make I tell you
You fit talk say God dey
Me I know say God dey

When person take him hand
Push him oppressor for ground (lines 19-23).

For the poet, it is worthwhile to sometimes challenge our oppressors, if we must be left with some liberty and opportunities.

Similarly, Ezenwa Ohaeto seems to have attained the peak of his satirical critical instincts in the poem entitled: "I Wan Bi President." In this poem, the poet tells his readers that he has been obsessed by a dream which he attributed to either acute fever or utopian or idealistic meditations. The dream which remains persistent at his various intermittent sleeping and waking was induced by hunger and thirst. The dream is that he wants to be a president. The thing that engineers this dream hinges on the various benefits and advantages that accrue to the position of the president. For example, the poet wants to be the president because presidents enjoy wealth, fame, unlimited freedom, and have direct access to power, money and women. Presidents enjoy free food, water, transport, clothing, servants, sycophants, accommodation, ladies and girls. All these obvious attractions associated with the office of the president act as a springboard that spurs the poet into the persistent dream of wanting to be a president.

However, the critical issues and messages in the poem is captured in the poet's categorization or grading of presidents. In the poet's usual ironical and satirical style, he unpretentiously states the type of president he wants to be. A critical reader however notices that he presents the kind of presidents which he would never ever want to be and which no sane civilized, and progressive society, town or association would aspire to have. As he puts it:

I wan bi President
Make my people enjoy too
Wetin bi federal character...
Wetin bi disadvantage area.
Wetin bi geographical spread.
Federal character na for person
Wey no get brothers (lines 55-61).

In the poem, the poet expects the readers to do two things: to be aware of the existence of the above unwanted president, to oppose his leadership through a collective action and to avoid aspiring to be like him, because he is an epitome of selfishness, injustice, inequality and social upheaval.

For the poet, there are presidents and there are presidents. He goes ahead to list the different kinds of presidents from which the reader can choose the one he wants to lead him or aspires to be. He satirically puts the categories of presidents thus:

President dey different different
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey make ideology
Dey look like person we no see food chop
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey worry make dem country better
You go see suffer for dem face
Some presidents dem dey
Wey dey kill person like dem bi flies
If you frown face na firing squad
If you say you no see food chop
Na bullet you go see chop one time
Some presidents dem dey
We don fat like person wey dey
Fattening room
Presidents dey different different. (lines 71 – 85).

The poet presents presidents who are human-oriented, issues and development inclined, philosopher kings and democratic and some presidents who are self-cantered, high-handed, brutal and dictatorial in outlook and action. He satirizes the presidents who are high-handed and self-cantered in these lines:

I wan bi president
Wey dem go dey praise
Every street go carry my name...
All the towns go carry my name
If dem publish magazine or newspaper
We curse me even small
Na bomb I go take tech dem lesson. (lines 129 – 138).

In the poem, “I like my kontri people” Nigerian professionals in high and low places are dissected, analyzed and criticized to show that the entire system is deceased and rotten. For example, the teacher who takes his teaching career as a part-time job, who teaches nonsense to learners; who embarks on

extracurricular activities is satired along with governments that pay teachers their monthly salaries in arrears and pay lip service to the business of education. As he put it:

I like my teacher well well...
Yesterday him go work for farm
Today him go ministry
Go see weder him last year salary
Don ready make e buy food.
E say two plus two na six
E go say na goat dey cause malaria
(lines 14 – 24).

It is noteworthy that Ezenwa-Ohaeto himself was a teacher at various levels of education until his untimely death from cancer related ailments some six years ago. In the same poem, he spotted some medical doctors who use General Hospitals as “mere consulting clinics,” attend work at these hospitals as part-time and pass-time workers while giving full attention to their private clinics and hospitals. The high level of unprofessional prescription and monetization of every activity and process in the General Hospitals gives the poet sleepless nights. He states the problems with the hospitals thus:

... For inside dis General Hospital
If you get small malaria
Him go give you aspirin
If you get even gonorrhea
Him go give you aspirin
If you wan see doctor for face
You go pay money quick
If you want hospital bed
You go pay money quick (lines 28-35).

In the same poem, the tendency of lawyers to encourage litigations among brothers, sisters and neighbours, just to ensure that lawyers make their daily income on professional litigants, does not please the poet. The essence of studying law is not to cause confusion, conflicts, quarrels among relations and neighbours. According to him:

If my brother slap me well
My lawyer go take me go court

If my neighbor open mouth shout
My lawyer go take me go court (lines 54-56).

Similarly, Ohaeto is concerned so much with the high level of religious bigotry, falsehood, division, conflict, violence and destruction of lives and property often aided and abetted by some religious leaders in the country. Particularly, the exploitative tendencies of religious leaders worry the poet greatly. He puts it thus:

I like my priest well well
I like my Iman well well
My priest say Islam na devil
My Iman say Christianity na devil
Dem go tell me make I kill my broder
I go carry petrol burn church burn mosque (lines 83 – 88).

He turned his searchlight on the armed forces who are often idle, reckless with alcohol, woman and power and mess up in the mess. He satirically acknowledges the negative contributions of the armed forces to a national development thus:

Our army dey strong well well
You no fit drink pass dem
You no fit chop pass dem
You no fit get money pass dem
You no fit go even capture women pas dem
As dem no see war fight
Na civilians dem dey fight (lines 98 – 117).

Finally, the poet subtly indicts the following groups and professionals for doing what they ought not to do: customs officials who allow contraband goods to cross the international borders freely, only to be confiscated in local markets, high ways and villages; Nigerian engineers who build bridges, houses and roads that do not withstand a single rainy season; armed robbers who robber with guns and golden pens; traders who sell fake drugs, used and spent tyres in the open markets; civil servants who hide people's files until their palms are greased; politicians who make false promises, keep fat foreign accounts and charge ten percent on contracts at the expense of good jobs; and the masses for gullibility, insincerity and silence in the face of oppression and open injustice.

In fact, Ezenwa-Ohaeto never spared any group of people in Nigeria in his subtle satirical criticism that calls for a change of heart, style, attitude and practice in order to produce a better society.

Similarly, Ohaeto, in the poem: “A Poet’s Probity”, compares what a poet does with poetry to what a soldier does with bomb, and what a farmer does with farm implements.

According to him, “poetry rescues minds from depths of sorrow.” And any attempt to strangulate a poet or proscribe poetry attracts the anger of nature. For instance, if governments in realization of the powerful impacts of poets in the society “binds the poet with ropes of venomous policies,” (lines 11-12) “the thunder will scream anxiously at mid day,” rains in the dry season will come unbidden to inquire the reason for your decisions”, “seeds will not germinate and the earth in temper would forbid the shoot to emerge”, as “trees of forests would turn in horror waving branches frantically at the sky” as “prison walls would crack spewing out concretes of fear and the moon would vie for the sky with the sun.” “Volcanoes would explode through the mouths of sane minds.”

So, in this poem the poet restates the roles of poets as mouthpiece and conscience of his people and that any attempt under any guise, to gag or imprison the poet would attract the vengeance of gods and nature. And in concluding, what poets should do to put the society in a better pedestrian, Ezenwa opines:

But the poet would also
Search his conscience
Our poems must talk
To the soul of the frightened
Our poems must speak
To the ear of the terrified
Our poems must confide
To the mind ready to know (lines 10-34).

Therefore, once the poet, through his poems, talks to the “frightened”, speaks to the “terrified” and “confides” to the mind ready to know, he has inspired, sensitized and ignited them to act, to question, to revolt, to react against all forms of injustices and inequality in the society.

So, it is not surprising to discover that he compares the impact of his poetry to the painful sting from a bee. In a poem entitled: “It is Easy to Forget”. Ezenwa-Ohaeto argues:

It is easy to forget
The sting of a writer
When he rots in the womb of penury...
They also bury sensitive minds alive
(lines 31-33)

Because of the shortness of human memory through forgetfulness, the poet calls humanity to action, by urging them to denounce oppression, high-handed leadership, by a frontal attack and confrontation with perpetrators of evil in the society.

This is why the poet suggests that the only “Messiah” the masses need for their survival is a collective action against their oppressors. According to him:

The only Messiah we need now
Is a bullet in the scrotum of a tyrant
The only Messiah we need today
Is a grenade in the anus of a dictator
The only Jesus Christ we need this minute
The only Prophet Mohammed we need this second
Is a fist that will smash the lies (lines 38-44)

From the above diction, poetry becomes an instrument for sensitization, awakening sleeping minds and dull consciences, for social cleansing, societal reformation and revolution.

So, when Ohaeto stresses the need to induce labour in a pregnancy that has lasted over a decade, the reader knows that he is calling men to action in his poem: “In a War Mood”. For him, his PEN is his bomb, his grenade and his AK47. These lines speak eloquently of his roles as a watchman, a crusader and a reformer. In the poem he argues that:

We must induce
From a womb labour
Swollen for a dreary decade

These are the signs
A murky mind in a murky body...
In this war mood
Pens must become guns. (lines 1-49)

Pens must become guns because “the pen is mightier than the sword”, through poetry, labour (bottled emotions of dissatisfaction, anger and grumbling) are induced by sensitizing and awakening complacent and gullible minds to rise and challenge social injustices that abound in the country.

Furthermore, Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s satirical, seeming blunt but sharp razor cuts deep into the Nigerian populace in general and the armed forces in particular in the poem: “If To Say I Bi Soja”.

This poetry volume, published in 1998, seems to have served as a forerunner and indictment to the Armed forces in governance and their eventual withdrawal from politics in Nigeria in 1999. The poet condemns the lawlessness, high-handedness, intimidation, unlimited privileges and immunities, self-centeredness and exploitative tendencies that characterized military administration in Nigeria.

Of all the “sins” of the military in governance in Nigeria, the intermittent coups and counter coups in the country seemed to have given the poet the greatest sleepless nights. The poet captures the scenario thus:

If to say I be Soja
I for don make my own coup
Put my broder as minister
Make my friend board chairman
Even my house boy go be some
Permanent secretary
I fit make this country
Follow any religion...
I for put everybody for detention
But I no bi Soja (lines 63-101)

The poet ironically would not aspire to be like Kaduna Nzeogwu, General Aguiyi Ironsi and Christopher Okigbo who “threw away” their lives at the altar of patriotism. They were not good and exemplary soldiers.

It is worthwhile to note that exactly one year after the publication of this poetry volume that condemns military intervention in the country, the army withdrew into the barracks and mess. Interestingly, they have remained there from 1999 to date. Whether it is by providence or co-incidence, the Army have been warned by the poet to stay away from governance in order to concentrate on their primary functions of defending the nation from foreign aggression and keeping peace in Nigeria, Africa and the rest of the world. At this rate, the poet has succeeded.

Conclusion

A close study of some of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poems (as we have done here) reveals that he is a poet with profound social commitment, a critic and crusader, who aims at awakening sleeping minds, sensitizing gullible hearts and igniting latent fire in the soul of the masses to rise up in unison to challenge obvious cases of injustice, inequality, dehumanization that abound in the society. The ultimate aim of the collective result is to stop keeping silent in the face of oppression, and to shout No in the face of thunder. These objectives would be accomplished when:

...pens must become guns
... where words strike faster than bullets
... where each land has a time for the birth of a rebel
... I saw what should be said
... I will say what I have seen
... for many moons, many suns
... the cooking pot lies on its side
... and idleness has married the heart
... Deafness kills the child
... Silence slaughters the adult
... I have seen and I will speak

Therefore, the pungent lines extracted from different poems in his anthologies speak eloquently of his poems as instruments of sensitization and awareness, call for action that would lead to positive social change.

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