



## **Landmarks of Poetic Renaissance in the Works of Selected African Poets**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study is a survey of critical perspectives on a selection of modern African poets who concerned themselves with the socio-political problems in their various local set-ups and countries. The commonest thing to all of them is the belief and practice in the poet's activist role in the African polity. This group of writers believes that a radical approach to literature is a solution, which they think must consist of an awareness which would eventually culminate in a revolution. In diverse but related exploration of the poetic medium, they evolved avenues of enforcing functionality to their poems. Using stylistic features of radicalism-commonly believed to of the then popular Marxian metaphor they indict their governments that always operate on the naivety of the populace, who are usually victims of deceit by the pretentious and brassy-voiced agendas and promises of these "hollow-men" whose corrupt dispositions would never allow them see beyond their personal interests. It is for such a reason that these selected poets have taken up the challenge of answering the oppressors on behalf of the voiceless majority. It is a renaissance that has shed a palpable landmark on the tone, pitch and intensity of the poetic genre.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The "Art for art's sake movement in the later part of the nineteenth century England asserts that the "art" and "the artist" should be autonomous and secluded from socio-political and economic realities. It kicked against opinions that tended to associate art with any enlightening objective and social commitment. Palpable indices from prevailing realities today however come to substantiate the relevance of art to life in line with Chinua Achebe's declaration that all art is propaganda but not all propaganda is art because all

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artistic expressions (literature in particular) have come to have a direct bearing on human life and consciousness. Thus, literature, particularly in the Africa context, performs various functions, shedding impact on the lives of the people it serves. There is now a more conscious effort to communicate with a growing sense of commitment.

Scholars have confirmed a symbiotic relationship between the artist, his art and the society. Tanure Ojaide affirms that “the writer is not an air plant that hangs without roots” more so, as he is nationally and socially situated, belonging to an environment which is concomitantly historical, geographical, social, aesthetic and cultural. The writer’s environment therefore provides materials for his works which (to a certain extent) affects his style and point of view.

A writer responds with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society...for the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by history, (1972:47) There is also the neglect of the agricultural and industrial sector which snowballs into mismanagement and embezzlement of public funds which informs many of his poems along the subject of the endemic records of injustices and rape of the Niger-Delta.

Unlike his predecessors Soyinka-Clark-Okigbo, who had time to address cultural issues, Ojaide battles with endless cases of socio-political injustice? He particularly exhibits moral anger at what the political and military dictators have made of his country. He is inspired to create awareness in the society which could otherwise remain speechless. The following statement unearths his perspective:-

Literature might be devoted to leisure in the other cultures, but for us Africans who are experiencing the second half of the twentieth century, literature must serve a purpose; to expose, embarrass, and fight corruption and authoritarianism. Literature has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the have’s and the have nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights. (1994:17).

In spite of existing cases of contextual differences in the literary object, critics have identified that there is a ‘universal denominator’ in African literature. The socio-political and economic realities as well as cultural heritage indubitably play prominent roles in shaping a people’s literature as well as their religious practices. These, certainly inform the demeanor of the poet:

To accept corruption as endemic and thus insurmountable is to accept defeat. To accept the military trampling of justice and freedom without protest or resistance is to accept a cursed life and to skirt one’s responsibility. Not to act means hopelessness... However, indirect we may have to be in our struggle, we are

contributing to a dismantling of oppression and corruption. I have used the image of the struggle which collectively will destroy the oppressor. (1994:17).

## DISCUSSION

Tanure Ojaide is one of the Nigerian poets who came to limelight in the eighties and like other revolutionary poets his overt concern is the political and socio-economic situation of the nation. He identifies with the plight of the downtrodden who are in a majority. He could not afford to address anything else in the face of the threatening cases of injustice and corruption which followed the oil-boom days of the seventies through the early eighties which Bamikunle describes as “an illusion of wealth”. (1995:105).

In the process of the struggle for change, Ojaide suggests in a poem titled, ‘Theme Song’ that the nation can only succeed through collective action. He mobilizes individuals and groups to contribute to the question of nation building across the ranks-an idea he expresses in ‘Debate on Nation-Building’:

So I will talk to the trees, discuss with the birds parley with humans  
faced brutes and dialogues for salvation has to be kept going at the expense  
of traditional reasoning the search to bring back the cherished exile has to be  
kept alive in dreams to move (64).

There is the urge to mobilize the people of various interest groups into a formidable social force which would work as an instrument of change. Aderemi Bamikunle identifies the fact that the poet’s attention is focused on two major thematic areas: the poet’s role in changing the society, and the state of the poor which calls for a social revolution. These themes have influenced some of his texts particularly The Eagle’s Vision and Labyrinths of the Delta. Osundare’s poetry is strongly politically oriented; and is geared towards revolutionizing society. In line with which idea he was quoted as saying, “Genuine poetry raises political songs; political songs either directly or indirectly. It tells kings about the corpses which line their ways to the throne. It tells the rich ones the skeletons in their cupboards”. Interview (1994).

In a more detailed study titled “Poetry and National Development in Labyrinths of the Delta” Bamikunle describes Ojaide as a revolutionary poet,” The poet is not only an authoritative and powerful voice in African literature today. He is seen by many critics as the live-wire of the new breed poets. Biodun Jeyifo distances him from the pre-civil war Nigerian poetic vintage of Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Michael Echeruo and J.P. Clark. Jeyifo, (1988:316)

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He opines that Ojaide is radically different from his predecessors whose obsession with cultural themes the poet rejects due to the exigencies of his day for socio-economic issues. He asserts further that Ojaide's Children of Iroko reveals more indebtedness to the older generation of poets than to the younger. He identifies the fact that there is a shift of emphasis and a change of vision between Children of Iroko and Labyrinths of the Delta which is attributed to:

Concerns with the suffering of the under-privileged who are hit hardest by the economic realities came to dominate the poetry of writers like Ojaide and his literary comrades. Like many others, this poetry came to be marked by a mood and tone of solidarity with the poor and the exploited. (1995:16).

Bamikunle posits that the poet's outlook to life and history in Children of Iroko is rather cynical resulting in what he calls "guarded optimism" admitting the possibility of social change as hinted by Ojaide's perception of his new role as an avant-garde poet". Ojaide himself is conscious of his new role and that is why he was quoted as saying, "I loved it, but wanted to carry it to the streets and be different" Ojaide, (1994:16). This is in tandem with the poet's vision as a revolutionary writer who sees his art as a weapon for forging a new and ideal kind of society. This perhaps explains his rejection of those with yes- manly attitude - whom he likens to imbeciles- who keep, "yelping with part voices" Ohaeto, (1988:326)

Niyi Osundare is perhaps the most instrumental to the ground- breaking poetic-aesthetic style captured as Alter-Native Tradition in the eighties. Like Ojaide, he addresses the plight of the masses in his books. In Songs of the Marketplace, and Village Voices, where contrasts are made to the poverty of the masses with the opulent life of the less productive part of the society. The poet also shares the view that the social malaise in our society necessitates a social revolution.

A salient feature of Osundare's poetry is his association with socialist writers who emerged by the late seventies and early eighties. These writers usually see themselves as Marxist or leftist writers. They are usually radical in their criticism of the capitalistic economy. Based on which premise we may understand the poet's image of decay, spiritual and academic lethargy, social and economic oppression sustained by violence in A Nib in the Pond, and Songs of the Marketplace.

Osundare is socially committed in support of the have-nots, and an overt revolutionary: suffices to say that it was at this stage of the poet's socialist vision that he avoided all forms of obscurantism in his works. Like Ojaide, he believes that the masses have the power to change their history. Emmanuel Ngara discusses the socialist vision in his poetry. He says, the poet's poetic energy is devoted to the services of what he termed the "exploited African

peasantry”. The poet is shown to dismiss cases of aggrandizement where the proceeds make other men princes and others paupers:

The gold let us dignot for the glided cranium of hallow chieftains  
times undying sword awaits their necks who deem this earth their  
sprawling throne with the gold let us turn hovels into heaven  
paupers into people (not princes) so the world may sprout a hand  
of equal fingers. (*The Eye*, p. 14)

Ngara sees Osundare’s peculiar aesthetic ideology and his socialist vision as “new in post-independent African poetry”-likening it to “the poetry of the liberation struggle such as Agostinho Neto’s ‘We must return’ and poems of Carlos Chombo of Zimbabwe”. Ngara, (1990:184). It is important to note here that the critic identifies his disinterestedness in myth – making much unlike his predecessor (the Soyinka – Okigbo group). In “The Development of Niyi Osundare’s poetry: A survey of Themes and Techniques” Bamikunle points out that the poet’s concern is with social and political corruption, maladministration, deprivations and oppression suffered by the masses. It also concerns the third world situation and how it can serve the society. Bamikunle, (1995:123).

Osundare’s style has also changed over the year – from the very simple as in Songs of the Marketplace and Village Voices to the complex and obscure collection – Moonsongs and Waiting laughters. In identifying his point of departure, Alex Tetteh Larley in an interview with Niyi Osunare on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) sums up that The Eye of the Earth is a turning point stylistically. A look at another important and more detailed study of Osundare’s poetry, titled, “Form and communication...” Emmanuel Ngara reveals a peculiar aesthetic ideology in the poet’s works. He says Osundare’s style, raises his poetry to epic heights in both tone and diction with what he calls ‘intensity of texture and a lyricism of an elevated style’. The critic opines further that repetitions and parallelisms are other recurring features of the poem. He cites the poem ‘Rocks Rose to Meet Me’ which creates rhythmic beat rendering his poetry to public performance with drums and (or) other musical instruments. To this, the poet explains, “I compose with the idiom of the drum at the back of my mind and they are the harmonization of the sound in word and its meaning”. Interview: (1986, Nov.8).

The Zimbabwean critic however faults Osundare’s overdose of repetitions in poems like ‘Excursion’ and ‘What the Earth Said’ citing unpleasantness in the style and wishes there was more density of texture in the poems. Ngara admits though that the style could be tolerated if chanted aloud (which could be the author’s intention) and says that the poetry weakens on the printed page. Concluding however that, “Osundare has produced poetry with a sweetness and mellowness virtually unparalleled in African poetry...” Ngara (186-7). Similarly, Muazu Maiwada in his Master’s

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dissertation highlights that the poet's style is such that apathy conveys his revolutionary message:

In 'Not in my season of songs' the abuse as a skilled form of verbal riposte is employed. The structure of the poem takes the form where the persona pretends restraint while at the same time going on to heap invectives on his victim. The persona does not attack his victim by grabbing his throat directly instead, oblique references couched in wise-sayings are made in the first stanza. Maiwada, (1993: 15)

A Cheney-Coker is categorized with the third generation of African writers. A notable account of his poetic preoccupation is done by Eustace Palmer published in A Celebration of Black and African Writing (1975). Palmer says the poet is engulfed in writing poetry whose themes exhibit excessive anger. Earlier studies and reviews have traced this to his ugly historical past, his Creole ancestry which continuously reminds him of slavery and the degradation of the black man. The subject of the poet's genealogy forms part of his concern which is directly linked to his disgust with the Christian religion which he says is, "an unmatched exchange for resultant slavery". At a point the poet refers to Christ as "a eunuch" whom he said lied to him at Calvary. He depicts Christianity as having taken sides with the oppressor against the oppressed as in the 'Toilers' Consider how he juxtaposes the rich and the poor who are also presented as the privileged and the under – privileged.

M. J. Salt in a review of Concerto for an exile sees these poems as "poems of bitter meditation" and he places, the poet's pains and anguish of the present firmly in the past. He examines the poet's Creole society and his Creole identity in which he likens the development to as another false start, in African. In the poem 'Environne', he attempts shocking the readers out of a likely complacent attitude to the past history of Africa. (Salt, 1975:161).

Salt opines that the image of the storm in the poem 'storm' stands for revolt. It deals with the conflict between the privileged and under-privileged in modern African societies. The poet's peculiar condition and style is very impressive as the character of the storm is evoked economically but powerfully just as salt cites the following lines to illustrate the point, "A gathering of clouds to announce the coming storm the day lashes at the tress its giddiness of rage..." Cheney-Coker, (1975:19)

Like the other poets, it is important to note that the poet has the same or similar approach to his circumstance, particularly since the problems in African nations at the same period are virtually the same. He uses surrealism to define the nature of the storm: The day seas flex their muscles like giant anacondas... (p.19), we realize even as Salt says that "what Cheney-Coker calls 'black opulence' rules the roost to the detriment of the poor". The poem in itself is an irony of its title, since everyone is either toiling for nothing or for the wrong things.

In reviewing The Graveyard Also Has Teeth, Segun Dada points out that the collection is very edifying and interesting as the poet addresses diverse themes. He explains in an interview that the title of the book is derived from the Creole tradition when mourners show a deep sense of sorrow and pain at the graveyard, expressing in heavy words how the graveyard bites them. In Dada's work, he opines that to understand Cheney-Coker, it is necessary to understand his landscape, his experiences and mode of creativity. He says poems such as 'Songs of a ravaged country', 'The Executed', 'Hemorrhage' and 'Putrefaction' have complex images of birth, initiation, growth and death.

Like Salt, Dada believes that the poems in this collection "exude an admirable intricacy of language and ordering" stressing that some of the poems exhibit fierce, fluent and terse expositions. The reviewer also describes the poet as a nationalist- full of anger with those he addresses as cheats, fakes, dupes, dictators and with himself. Dada convincingly concludes that Cheney-Coker has been influenced by poets like Pablo Neruda, Vallejo, and the Cuban Padilla where he seemed to have borrowed his obsession with death. Segun Dada cites cases of his chants with death in 'Funeral dance', where death is celebrated to "conga" music and to the dance of the fireflies:

Let them bring my coffin I made panting with joy having no  
regret leaving the life that I have lived to return animal without  
that heart pissing out its oxidized blood let the gypsy woman play  
me my final concerto because I weep no more dressing in haste  
for my flight to the graveyard which has teeth Cheney-Coker  
(119).

Like the other poets' revolutionary postures, Cheney-Coker shares similar perspectives particularly in the poems 'Freetown' and 'Guinea'; Salt says, "here, Cheney-Coker captures what we might call the spirit of/revolutionary fervour" (p.161) The following lines are illustrative of this assertion:

They had hoped to enslave the peasants of Guinea as they did  
four centuries ago but oh the invincible armies of Alpha Yaya  
down the mountains of Foutah Djallon and my heart lights up like  
a burning flame in the night... (p.37).

Cheney-Coker's style is very distinctive, especially his use of imagery. In the poem 'Myopia' Salt affirms that, 'he tends to objectify the poet's personal feelings. The 'train of anguish image' is very "dramatic and forceful". (p.162) Although Cheney-Coker is not conforming fully to the said leftist ideology as does Osundare or even part of Ojaide's works, he has since proved his radical stand by embracing distinctively radical perspectives and style. His literary models (though western) are likely reasons for some of the marked difference between them:

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It is a poetry which puts before us the history of the man and his society and which makes critical statements about that society. The poet's weapons – evolved as shock tactics – are violent words and violent, surrealist images. (Pp.159-60)

In a similar way, Eustace Palmer attests to the powerful thought-evoking rhythms of his lines and concludes almost at the risk of generalisation that “Cheney-Coker is probably the most interesting of the younger generation of poets. Palmer, (1977: 255). He appears very violent and uncompromising with the roles played by the leaders and white men in his country. That is why he takes up a nationalistic posture emitting venomous songs directed against those he calls “cheats”, “fakes” and “dictators” governing Sierra Leone. Like Ojaide and Osundare he is very radical in his perspectives on the plight of the oppressed peasants in his country. Poems like ‘on being a poet in Sierra Leone’, ‘Songs for a ravaged country’, portrait’ and ‘Agony of a poet which deal with Cheney-Coker’s manifesto explicitly reveal his revolutionary stance.

Like both Ojaide and Osundare, Cheney-Coker sees himself as one saddled with the responsibility of seeking for a change of order in his country. No wonder he says, “A poet alone in my country I am seeking the verisimilitudes/ In life the fire of metaphors, the venom of verse ... a/ devastated landscape” (p70) His venomous songs are not for the fun of it nor are they elements of his defeat; rather, they are what he calls, “... my rage phallic with storm no ariflamme to drape/the violent pyres of my eyes and the maddening currents in my deep brows”.

Cheney-Coker like his Nigerian counterparts has his country and the plight of the oppressed, speechless population at heart. In “bloody perodactyl” whom he says come to the people in “the regiment of the pope” he laments, “what talons do they so firmly put in the flesh of my people/that they make my country a ghetto of silence” (p.61). Cheney-Coker would not permit him watch the helplessness and speechlessness of his people go unattended to.

Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet, is the author of Of Chameleons and Gods, appears to be the most neglected in terms of critical scholarship. This might not be unconnected with the censorship placed on literature in Malawi by the then dictator, Hastings Kamuzu Banda who eventually banned the volume in 1987.

Ngara states that Mapanje is a social critic with a strong feeling for art and the artistic object evident from the poem ‘Kabula Curio-Shop’. In a contrastive movement from the first to the second stanza where the artist is shown to expend so much energy in the art of creating his piece only to be abandoned in a tiny corner in curio-shop. This shows the poet’s indignation of the shabby treatment of art and the artists by the modern tourist industries.

The poet is shown to use lots of contrasts in his poems as in the contrast between images of bravery and cruelty in ‘Songs of Chickens’. Like Usman Madagali, Ngara says the poem is an allegory about a powerful politician



who has failed his people. He thinks rightly also that the chameleon is Dr. Kamuzu Banda. Ngara (1990:159). The poet has specially chosen to contrast the ideal and the unexpected as in 'The New Plat-form Dance' where traditional dances are shown as authentic dances of the past against a caricature of them in modern Malawi. This satirical commentator takes after Okot p'Bitek in Songs of Lawino.

Ngara sees the poet as a social critic who is dismayed by the way things are done in his society. He dares the readers to see the wrongs in Malawi and reminds the politicians of their misdeeds. In "Aesthetic Ideology, Form and Communication in Mapanje", he observes that Mapanje's voice is muffled, thus whatever he has to say, he says it carefully, indirectly and often in an obscure fashion which makes the poems difficult. This explains his resort to his people's myths and legends as vehicles for conveying his message, which necessitates the knowledge of these oral traditions.

Jack Mapanje on his part brings into focus the situation in his country as he raises a finger against the dictatorship of the then Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Faced with the strict censorship on literature, the poet has to delve deep into his people's oral tradition for forms of presenting his protest. In a desperate move to speak both to the oppressor and his victim, he employs allegory to ridicule the hawkish attitude of their master who at a time was seen as a champion of his people's freedom. The poet quickly unravels the fact that this chameleon twist in the leader is just to please his foreign visitors. This is another feature of the African problem (where the failed politician is presented as a compromiser with the western imperialists). The poem, 'Song of chickens', and 'The Tussle' are some of the poems that reveal the ambivalence of the leader. The political statement in the later poem is built on the story of the lion and the hyena as conveyed in Malawian oral tradition. The poet decides on a medium that would convey the message the people.

Although Mapanje's vision for a revolution and change is not as pungent as addressed by either Osundare or Ojaide, he encompasses a vision for change in his contrastive arguments on his people's cultural values as against the imported plastic culture of the west. That is why he advocates for a return to 'Re-entering Chingwe's Hole' and 'Glory be to Chingwe's Hole' - in quite a different way from the cultural poems of his predecessors and the negritude poets. Mapanje's approach to the past is more like Osundare's adoration of African positive values before the encroachment of western civilization and the attendant decay as in Okot 'pBitek's Songs of Lawino. The destruction of some African traditional beliefs and culture is to Mapanje the cause of the crises Africans are experiencing. He says the present state of disharmony and disunity in Malawi and the rest of Africa today is as a result of the importation of artificial western values which do not suit Africans. The individualistic culture of the west as in 'Messages', 'sketches of London' and 'Drinking the water from the source' has produced sycophants and alien values into black Africans removing them from their true foundation.

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What is clear about Mapanje's vision is that Africans and their world-view should change. He sees westernized African villagers caught up in a mirage – merely chasing shadows of things not meant for them. His picture of a failed leader is a “renegade” African who has failed to face African realities. Africans who have failed to appreciate their own ways for the western “half-life” has no future.

### **CONCLUSION**

The works of these poets portray the basic fact that an average African intellectual is faced with diverse complex and distorted problems especially within the breadth of African tradition and direct political and socio-economic realities facing the people in a globalised world. The survey of these poets works and the critical opinions on their poetry reveal that the genesis of the problem dates back to contradictions resulting from the history of the colonial and post-colonial state of affairs, more so as the continent is still tied to its mother – the west.

Unlike the earlier cultural standard bearers however, (who lifted African culture because of the undermining and demeaning influences of the west), this time, all the excerpts examined from these poets' works reveal clear indictments of African leadership alongside their stooges, affirming the fact that the degradation of Africa is done by the black man himself against his fellows. From the foregoing therefore, we can assert that African literature of the day is ideologically committed; produced, as it is, from a complex of social realities and antecedents of crippling history.

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