

POETICS OF PATHOS: ACHEBE'S WAR POETRY

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Introduction

Most emphatic and riling poetry that move us to feelings of sensitivity and sympathy are hinged on pathos. The debacle of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 which saw the apparent demise of the secessionist defunct Republic of Biafra was characterised by much suffering, horror and death on the part of the Biafrans. This was vividly portrayed by heart-rending tales and luridly obscene pictures of impoverished and malnourished people, especially bloated-bellied children with kwashiorkor whose images left long-lasting psychological scars on both survivors and spectators. Most of the world reacted; some albeit half-heartedly, probably checked emotionally by distance, indifference and politics. But the gruesome and pitiable images coming out of the barricaded enclave of Biafra deliberately deprived of food and basic necessities, continued to trouble the consciences of the rest of the world. The Igbo, the major ethnic group of the ill-treated South-Eastern Nigeria were forced to secede because of the genocide and pogrom meted out to them and their neighbouring minorities largely due to the repercussions of an ill-conceived and largely misunderstood coup d'état. As a young nation, Biafra had its own crop of technocrats, politicians, soldiers, scientists, writers, diplomats, etc, who all gave their mite and might to the war effort. One of the most notable of this avant-garde citizenry, the novelist Chinua Achebe, left his prose comfort zone and plunged into poetry; perhaps to capture more poignantly the horror around his people. His verses in true reflection of the horrific ordeals his people were suffering were loaded with sorrow and pathos.

On Pathos and Poetics

Pathos, simply put, is a communication technique used most often in emotional appeal. The success of pathos depends largely on metaphor while in the delivery of speech; the speaker's passion is also a great vehicle for pathos. According to *The New Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, pathos is 'evoking an audience's emotions in order to use them as a means of persuasion' (889). Given the need to involve the outside world emotionally in Biafra's case, Achebe explores the smooth synergy of poetry and pathos in his war poems. The encyclopaedia underscores this ancient relationship: "The importance of pathos as a means of persuasion – or As it is commonly referred to today, audience appeal – has never diminished in the study of rhetoric, or in rhetorical approaches to poetry" (890).

Achebe the poet understood this and applied them deftly to produce poetics of touching lines designed to persuade the world and relief agencies to engage in dangerous, risky and night time sorties of relief drops for the suffering Biafrans.

Poetics broadly concerns the theories of literary forms and literary discourse. But here, we are more interested in Jonathan Culler's description of poetics in his *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* where he says that "Poetics is distinguished from hermeneutics by its focus not on the meaning of a text, but rather is understanding of how a text's different elements come together and produce certain effects on the reader" (emphasis mine)

Again, *The Encyclopedia of Poetics* lends credence to this strand of poetics:

The aim of *Poetics* (is)...to move audiences... 'to discover how a poem, produced by imitation and representing some aspect of a natural object – its form – in the artificial medium of poetry, may so achieve perfection of that art form in the medium that the desired aesthetic effect results.' As for the 'aesthetic effect', Aristotle is obviously aware of the issue, since the *Poetics* discusses the effects of tragedy on the emotions of the audience. (934)

The allusions to Aristotle's seminal work and Howell's commentaries and the ultimate line, 'the effects of tragedy on the emotions of the audience', are all in line with the symbiotic synergy of content (pathos) and method (poetics) which Achebe advantageously employs. Poetry as a literary art is a forceful means of expression and persuasion; whether in peacetime political rhetoric or in wartime subversive propaganda. Bearing in mind the import and applicability of Albert Einstein's famous quote that 'peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, of law, of order- in short, of government'; a reconstruction of the quote: 'politics is the absence of war', brings a wry understanding and appreciation as to the use of the power of persuasion of the populace – whether in war or peace. Persuasive texts could engender war or endanger peace; they could also on the flip side, win or lose wars. They can also curry favour or evoke sympathy; the latter being what the wartime diplomat and poet, Achebe, adopts and applies. The sorry case of Biafra during the civil war was not something he could ignore – the world had to know what was going on.

Achebe and the War

That Chinua Achebe like most of his fellow easterners was devastated by the organised riots, killings and pogrom against people of eastern extraction (especially Igbo), is an understatement. First, he was forced to flee Western Nigeria (Lagos specifically) where he worked for the Nigerian government as the Director of External Broadcasting for the Broadcasting Corporation when soldiers started sniffing around for him. The hostilities against the Igbo had spread from the north to other parts of the country making him to spirit his young family away to the east (Port Harcourt) through the sea since roadblocks had been mounted to search out and kill the Igbo fleeing to their homeland. Ezenwa-Ohaeto captures the genocide in *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*:

He (Achebe) was shocked into awareness that a large-scale massacre of citizens of Eastern Nigeria living in other parts of the country had ensued. The Eastern Nigerian army officers were slaughtered (among them was Achebe's cousin); then ordinary soldiers from the same part of the country were killed; the massacre then extended to senior civil servants, ordinary workers, teachers, business people, technicians, traders, medical personnel and students. The tales ranged from pregnant women with stomachs cut open, to men, women and children locked inside houses that were subsequently set on fire. (115)

To drive the impending doom home, Achebe received a phone call from a worker advising him to leave his house for his own safety. Even his director-general at the broadcasting house called to tell him: 'You better leave immediately' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 115). At this point, he left. Back home at Ogidi, his home town, he later said this as a result of the killings and the love he had for his people: '...i finally decided to throw in my support for

with these people, the Eastern Nigerians, it was not really a matter of having an option. There were no options' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 118).

His support turned out to be an active one. He became an ambassador of sorts; frequently travelling on behalf of his people: 'In early 1967 Achebe decided to get involved in the affairs of the Eastern Region. The events had made it inevitable for him to consider another career' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 120). He travelled to Europe, USA, and countries in Africa, pleading Biafra's cause, granting interviews and working as a diplomatic emissary for the young government. Anytime he was at home, he got engaged with the war effort on many fronts which included starting the Citadel Press with Christopher Okigbo and joining the University of Nigeria (renamed University of Biafra) again with Okigbo for the commencement of an institute for African studies. But even with the patriotic zeal for Biafra, he could manage not to make his art propagandist. He could separate his art from the much-needed propaganda. According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto '...Achebe was still conscious of his values. "I don't think I could function effectively as a paid government propagandist", he declared' (126). As the war wore on, Biafra's territory continued to dwindle and more horrors became nearer and frightening as they were commonplace and more affecting. Towns fell one after the other and people got closer as they fled the fallen towns. Writers and poets also got closer. Quoting Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Achebe says:

I remember very well one day that Christopher Okigbo had with him a traditional poet from Ikwerre. I don't know how he found him. One day he shouted across and said: 'Chinua! Come and see a genuine poet. We are all wasting our time!' So i went in and saw the genuine poet, and he was genuine. (122)

Interestingly, Achebe was not inclined to writing or creative output at the time probably because of his involvement in the war; but according to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, it later got him: 'The creative bug also bit Chinua Achebe in Aba, but he only found it possible to create short pieces like poems' (130). However short the pieces he created were, he did them because he believed in a cause; for him,

The artist, 'is a human being with heightened sensitivities; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations' and 'the African writer cannot therefore be unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer'. (137)

Achebe's creative responses to desperate times as were in Biafra gave birth to poems such as 'Air Raid' and others.

War Poetry and Achebe's Art of Pathos

Occasions of war all over the world have historically instigated creative verses of poetry especially from soldier-poets. Though the term was previously used to describe a soldier's experiences in battle or about battle, it is now used for poetry by any poet about war. Notable war poetry include Alfred Lord Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', Thomas Hardy's 'The Man He Killed', Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est', 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', Siegfried Sassoon's 'Suicide in the Trenches' and so on. It is important to note that apart from Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' which was morale-boosting for the soldiers at the time, the rest listed above in various tones drew sympathy

(some cynically) to the plight and horrors of soldiering, while others condemned outright the vainglory of war – cf: Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.

In the Nigerian context, what passes for war poetry is broader and more encompassing. Poems that foresaw and forewarned the populace a few years before the civil war of the impending conflict, such as Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* and Wole Soyinka's *Idanre and Other Poems* are included as war poems. At the end of the war, more poets were to appear on the scene; many having participated in the fighting while the others were mostly first-hand witnesses of the general horrors of wartime. According to JOJ Nwachukwu-Agbada in his 'Songs of Thunder: Nigerian War Poetry':

At the end of the war, more poets were to emerge with experiences of destruction, alienation, degeneration and degradation. The youths who exuberantly participated in the shooting war came out of it frustrated and embittered over the irresponsibility of their country's leaders. (106)

This varied group of war poets in addition to Okigbo and Soyinka also included Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Pol Ndu, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun, Chinweizu, Obiora Udechukwu, JP Clark, Catherine Acholonu, etc. Another sub-group worthy of mention is that of professional soldiers of the Nigerian Army whose themes are slightly different for they concerned themselves more with actual scenes of battle, the glory of soldiering and critical assessments of the civil war. Mamman Vatsa, PO Atuu, Olu Akinyode and Domcat Bali belong to this group. Nwachukwu-Agbada writes:

In 1978, Mamman Vatsa, then a colonel organised the soldier-poets, most of whom were below his rank, to articulate their experiences of (the) war, soldiering, death, life and love in a collection entitled *Voices from the Trench*. Some of the soldier-poets might not have participated in the Civil War but they were aware of the dimensions of its tragedy, they being of the same age-bracket as the civilian poets of post-war Nigeria. (122)

From the defunct enclave of Biafra, another slightly different yet peculiar type of poetry was born. The peculiarity here lies in the inclusion of oral and traditional verses about the war by the Igbo. Poems such as 'Nzogbu Nzogbu' (Stamping to Death, Stamping to Death) which according to Afam Ebeogu in his 'The Spirit of Agony: War Poetry from Biafra' is ' (a) song of manly vigour...in moments of masculine exuberance to celebrate heroic triumph' (37), 'Mama m amutala m kpoo m soja bi n'ime ohia' (My Mother has Given Birth to Me and Called Me a Soldier who Lives in the Jungle) which reflects the eulogizing of soldiers and their indifference to death and hardship, and 'O lee mgbe e?' (is it When?) which speaks of the weariness of war (37), all show the different moods of Biafrans and their soldiers as the war dragged on. An important one is 'Dibee, ndidi ka mma' (Have Patience; Patience is Better) whose philosophy reflects the obvious wishful thinking and hope for Biafra's victory towards the end of the war (38). Ebeogu summarises:

The oral poems of the Biafran war were spontaneous in composition and immediate in their relevance. They tended to reflect the varying moods of the moment. There was no time lag between the experience and the songs that embodied that experience....their metrics and their

rhetoical thrust bore witness to the strains imposed upon any language during traumatic situations. (38)

Achebe's contribution to the trove of Nigerian war poetry though relatively slim in volume, is immensely profound in impact as he brings to bear his characteristic stark frankness, descriptive powers, lucid diction and first-hand experience powered with the literary prowess of an accomplished writer. Thematically, his concern is with the deprivation, suffering, and horrors suffered by his people during the war; little wonder his sympathetic tone. His language is relatively simple; devoid of the tortuous convolutions associated with most other Nigerian poetry. This is perhaps to enable his feelings and views to be more directly felt. On the 'Comments' page of his collection, *Beware Soul Brother*, Donatus Nwoga calls his poems '...poetry of simple language' while Bodunde Bankole refers to it as a sympathetic response to life....'

The poem 'Air Raid' which describes in ten short lines an instance of an air raid on Biafra by Nigerian war planes, features a normal day where 'A man crossing the road/ to greet a friend/ is much too slow' (15). An air plane attack which '...comes so quickly/ ...from evil forests of Soviet technology' has his friend cut in halves' (15). The diction is simple but the stark terror is profound. The abrupt opening of the poem jolts the reader to startling wakefulness: 'It comes so quickly'; and the metaphor 'the bird of death' sets the mood. The pathos is complete when we consider the last lines: 'His friend cut in halves/ has other worries now/ than a friendly handshake/ at noon' (15). The juxtaposition of a friendly handshake and a brutally fatal attack is effective imagery while the dead man's supposed other worries is ironical and calls for sombre pondering about the fragility of life and hope and the uncertainty of the hereafter. 'Christmas in Biafra' in the first stanza describes the situation in Biafra as 'sunken-eyed' and 'wobbling'; going down a 'rocky steepness on broken/ bones.../...of gathering sorrows in the valley' (14). This creates a picture of worsening conditions and despair; and to image that is supposed to be a Christmas with carols being sung in other peaceful lands. But Biafra of that period is an 'exploding inferno'. The second stanza describes the nativity scene cast in plaster at the hospital and Achebe the poet deftly juxtaposes this image with that of the poor woman's child: 'Her/ infant son flat like a dead lizard/ on her shoulder his arms and legs/ cauterized by famine... '(14). To achieve pity, he contrasts this the baby Jesus of the nativity scene who is '...serene, the Child/ Jesus plump wise-looking and rose-cheeked;' and finally captures the indifference and hopeless condition in the last stanza:

Now her adoration over
She turned him around and pointed
at those pretty figures of God
and angels and men and beasts –
a spectacle to stir the heart
of a child. But all he vouchsafed
was one slow deadpan look of total
unrecognition and he began again
to swivel his enormous head away
to mope as before at his empty distance.
She shrugged her shoulders, crossed
herself again and took him away. (14)

In 'Refugee Mother and Child', Achebe achieves perhaps his best application of the poetics of pathos. The opening lines allusively contrasting the serene picture of Jesus and his mother, Mary, with that of a suffering Biafran woman and her worse-off, dying child, sets the mood:

No Madonna and Child could touch
that picture of a mother's tenderness
for a son she soon would have to forget. (12)

With the personification in 'The air was heavy with odours / of diarrhoea of unwashed children' and the continuing lurid descriptions of
with washed-out ribs and dried up
bottoms struggling in laboured
steps behind blown empty bellies (12),

He achieves a nauseating image reminiscent of the excremental vision of Ayi Kwei Armah and the filth, ordure and putrefaction of Meja Mwangi; except that his evoke pity and sorrow. Lamenting, he describes the mother's hopeless but tenacious cling to hope:

Most mothers there had long ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair left on his skull and then –
singing in her eyes – began carefully
to part it... (12)

The paradoxical and oxymoronic expressions 'ghost smile', 'ghost of a pride', and the personification 'singing in her eyes', all tell the tale of loss, lost hope and the fruitless resistance to despair. He then presents the coup de grace:

... in another life this
would have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a grave. (12)

Achebe, the emissary of pain and suffering, the roving ambassador scurrying in and out of Biafra pleading the plight of his people, the novelist turned poet to let out agony, the African writer for the Biafran cause, the versifier who tugs with deft applications of poetic pathos at the strings of our hearts, had always known his responsibility. In "The African writer and the Biafran cause", a paper he first read at the height of the war in August, 1968 at Makerere University, college, Uganda, he opined:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 78)

Indeed Achebe's house was burning and his sole responsibility was to tackle the flames – by versifying pathetically.

Conclusion

War is a human phenomenon. It is devastating and leaves long-lasting psychological scars on the memories of witnesses and survivors. Writing is also quite natural to man; and literary artists, especially poets often take the lead in creatively recounting traumatic experiences such as natural disasters and war. Nigerian writers and poets reacted to the civil war of 1967-1970 in varying styles and modes of verse; all expressing their views and narrating and recounting their individual experiences about the war. Poetry from the secessionist and defunct Republic of Biafra was the most touching and sympathetic; given

their horrific experiences at the hands of their fellow countrymen. Emefiela Ezeani in *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot* has this to say:

Biafran propagandists believe that, though Nigeria had no basis for unity, as declared by Gowon..., the different ethnic groups would have continued to live as a single polity despite their united-divided relationship had periodic indiscriminate mass murder of Easterners not occurred. (46)

Achebe who was already a renowned novelist at the time of the war opted for poetry in order to match the changing times. He says in *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*:

There is some connection between the particular distress of war, the particular tension of war, and the kind of literary response it inspires, I chose to express myself in that period through poetry as opposed to other genres...these poems tell the story of Biafra's struggle and suffering. (3)

Achebe's ability as we have seen, to stir our innermost emotions and sympathy, is immense. His literary dexterity and humane empathy is felt throughout his war verses. It is evident that Chinua Achebe chose well with the poetic genre. In fact, it is universally evident – after all, *Beware Soul Brother* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1972 – a remarkable feat for a prose colossus.

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