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Nigerian Writers as Social Critics: A Study of the Poetry of Niyi Osundare and Ezenwa-Ohaeto

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Abstract

There is a close symbiosis between literature and society. One can say that both of them are two sides of a coin. Writers derive their inspiration from the society and this explains the social realities that pervade the literary productions of writers from Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. Since Nigerian independence, Nigerian writers have explored social issues that bedeviled the society. Notable among them is bad leadership and experiences show that bad leadership is the bane of Nigerian society. This research reemphasizes/re-echoes the menace of bad leadership in Nigerian Society and how Nigerian writers have made efforts at "righting" this anomaly through its condemnation in their literary productions. This paper studied *Songs of the Season* by Niyi Osundare and *Songs of a Traveler* by Ezenwa-Ohaeto. The analysis revealed that these poets under study are committed writers who used their works for the betterment of Nigerian society. The paper is hinged on Georg Lukacs' Reflection theory. The basic assumption of this theory is that a text will reflect the society that has produced it and this is what the poets under study did in their collections of poetry. The paper concluded on the note that bad leadership affects every section of the society. Again, it shows that some political leaders in Nigeria are found wanting in this regard. The paper suggests that all hands should be on deck to reduce its occurrence or better still, promote actions that will lead to its annihilation from the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Bad Leadership, Nigerian Poetry, Society, Social Reality, Anomaly

Introduction

There is a close affinity between literature and society. In fact, the relationship between literature and society could be likened to the two sides of a coin: one is never complete without the other. Umeh asserts that literature is "an imaginative response to Nigerian social reality which shapes and informs it, and in which it moves and lives" (vii). That is why literature is often viewed as a mirror through which we see the society. Writers are the hands that hold the mirror (literature) and it is what they reflect that we see.

Overtime, writers have argued on the need of social relevance of a literary work. The question has often centred on whether a literary work should be concerned with the issues pertaining to the society of the writer. The aesthetic movement that flourished in late nineteenth-century England (the art-for-art's sake) held the view that the art and the artist should be insulated from social realities. Egudu asserts that "They rejected any opinion which tended to associate art with a didactic objective and social commitment" (1). Those in favour of this artistic movement are not concerned with the various problems evident in their society. To them, art is autonomous and independent of society (Egudu 2).

In Nigeria, most critics are of the view that art (literature) should be socially relevant. African writers/critics like R N Egudu, D I Nwoga and a host of others are of the belief that literature must be socially relevant. According to Egudu qtd in Umeh, "…literature must have social relevance since the writer is a member of the society and since his work inevitably must be affected by his social reality" (20). The point of divergence is on the "how" this should be done. For Kola Ogungbesan qtd in Egudu, "the writer is a member of society and his sensibility is conditioned by the social and political happenings around him…these issues form a part of the substance of life within which his instinct as writer must struggle"(2). For Ogungbesan, the reflection of social reality in a work of art should be implicit and never explicit. He goes on to

argue that it is "betrayal of art for the writer to put his writing to the service of a cause" (Umeh 19). To him, literature should be socially relevant but not explicit on that.

According to Chinua Achebe, every society has its peculiar needs and it is the duty of the writer to identify these needs and proffer solution if need be. To Achebe, what Africans need to know and which is basic to them is simply that:

> "… African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all they had dignity (8).

So, commitment in literature for Chinua Achebe involves an interpretation of the "soul" of the society of its origins. According to Umeh, commitment for Achebe embraces "...the responsibility of literature to teach and educate the society of its origin…to regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (19).

Achebe's idea of commitment goes contrary to that projected by African Marxist writers. To the Marxist, literature should be a call to action (Umeh, 19). According to Ezekiel Mphahlele qtd in Umeh, "Every writer is committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of value not purely aesthetic, to a criticism of life" (18). Here, this "something beyond his art" represents for the Marxists, politics and the cause of the proletariat (Umeh 18).

From the foregoing, there is no consensus on the definition and the areas which commitment should cover in African literature. What is important is that African writers/ critics in one way or the other ensure that they reflect the concerns of their society in their works. They are of the view that a writer should be able to identify the yearnings and aspirations of the masses in his/her society. That is the crux of this research. It explores how two Nigerian poets (Niyi Osundare and Ezenwa-Ohaeto) respond to bad leadership that exist

in the Nigerian society through their collections of poetry (*Songs of the Season* and *Songs of a Traveler*). The research shows that the poets, in depicting anomalies evident in Nigerian society, perform their roles as the "righters".

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical Framework for this research is hinged on Georg Lukacs' Reflection theory. This theory is an off shoot of Marxism developed by the Hungarian critic, Georg Lukacs (1885-1971). According to Dobie, Reflection theory is "…based on the kind of close reading advocated by the formalist" but it is "Named for the assumption that a text will reflect the society that has produced it" (87). According to Abrams, Lukacs is of the view "that each great work of literature creates "its own world", which is unique and seemingly distinct from "everyday reality" (156). Dobie equally maintains that reflection theory is, "…for the purpose of discovering how characters and their relationships typify and reveal class conflict, the socioeconomic system, or, the politics of a time and place" (87). This theory also known as Vulgar Marxism differs greatly from the well-known traditional historical approach to literary criticism which provides "background" and context to a work.

Here, the Reflectionists are interested in discovering the nature of a given society with the aim of finding "a truer, more concrete insight into reality", and to look for "the full process of life" (Dobie, 87). To Lukacs, "modern capitalist society is riven by contradictions, by chasm between universal and particular, intelligible and sensible, part and whole" (Habib 212). He states further that "The realist artist expresses a vision of the possible totality embracing these contradictions, a totality achieved by embodying what is typical about various historical stages" (Habib, 212). For the Reflectionists, the literary work should reflect the society with all of its contradictions as well as the era that gave birth to it. This reflection of the real world or social realism by the Reflection critics/practitioners of Marxist theory is what this paper

is hinged on. The social reality (bad leadership) which this paper sets out to study is realized as a result of the fact that the poets under study painted a vivid picture of their society that the issue of bad leadership is seen throughout the poetry collections.

Bad Leadership in *Songs of the Season* by Niyi Osundare

Leadership could be seen as the power to lead. It is equally a social process of influencing, motivating and allowing others to contribute in their own way towards the success of a shared goal. Leadership is not all about formal authority but goes beyond that to include the ability to communicate and empower members of a team to achieve collective goals. When leadership is exercised positively for public good, it is called good leadership. When it is exercised negatively, it is regarded as bad leadership and the resultant effect is underdevelopment, bad economic policies, conflict and so on. Bad leadership has been identified as the bane of contemporary Nigerian society. Instances of bad leadership abound in the poetry collection of Niyi Osundare entitled, *Songs of the Seasons.* In the poem, "Crying Hyena", Osundare decries bad leadership as seen in contemporary Nigerian society.

One is confronted with the situation in which Nigerian leaders show indifference and lukewarm attitude to pressing issues concerning the people in the society. The poet employs the imagery of "the hyenas" to represent "dire situation that requires urgent action on the part of the leaders".

A tribe of hyenas broke lose
On his terrified kingdom
Tearing fathers up at noon
And eating their children
With twilight rage. (102)

Nobody escapes the terrific rage of the hyenas which ravage the entire land month after month and year after year. Because of bad leadership in his kingdom, the king does nothing. He is not even

perturbed over the crisis ravaging his kingdom for he has amassed so much wealth.

A king there is who owned a thousand thrones
And slaves numbering all the sands
Of a crowded beach;
He cherished crimson stars
In the noon of day (102)

When his people drew his attention to the menace of the hyena, he feels indifferent. Instead of calming them with words of comfort, he pours his anger on them.

Hyenas! Hyenas! Why must you people
Always find something to fret about?
I have never seen a hyena in this land
And my royal hunters have never caught
Sight of any such offending cat (102)

Leaders, especially Nigerian leaders are eloquent. They use this gift to their advantage and the poem carefully shows how this gift thwarts the purpose of the people in going to their ruler for comfort.Unfortunately, what stare before them are surprise and rejection.

Dejected and surprised
But more surprised then dejected
The people trooped back again
Each into their trembling huts (103)

The satire in this poem is very striking. Also, the poet downplays the seriousness of its tone by submerging the satire in the folktale narrative style he employs in the poem. He equally uses the poem to warn bad leaders in Nigeria of the boomerang effect of bad leadership. The poem warns that if they refuse to work towards bettering the lot of the masses, these problems will visit them one day.

Exactly one moon after,
A cock crowed in the height of noon
Royal hunters ran a mock
In their crimson skirts
Streets were silent, markets deserted

The king only son had just disappeared
Into the spotted beast's capacious stomach (105)

Osundare also raised the issue of bad leadership in his poem, "and Cometh the Bulldozer". In this poem, one can see that the policy of the government is what characterize their leadership and actually made them bad leaders. The poet brings it up for ridicule. From this poem, one can gather that our leaders are bad and insensitive to the plight of the masses. They are never considered while initiating the policy.

War on filth or filth on war
Clean the streets and paint the walls (17)

This poem is a literary reflection of the heartless demolition of shops and houses tagged illegal structures by the government in a bid to keep the nation clean. By attributing the bulldozer with the qualities of an elephant, the poet projects the imagery of destruction in the poem. This bulldozer appears to be deaf to the wails and cries of the people. In the end, this demolition exercise produces hunger and poverty.

Elephant heels on our fate and fortune
A jobless husband and a dozen kids
Eked a living from my kobo kiosk
Now reduced to rust and dust (17)

Hence, the people's means of meeting their social, economic, religious and so on responsibilities are totally destroyed.

The source of tithes and tax and tolls
And countless doles we are die to pay
Is now in ruins under the iron Heel (17)

Therefore, one can rightly say that the leaders (government) prefer their policy to the hunger ravaging the land. In criticizing the bad leaders, the poet invariably speaks out against the policy.

Also, in the poem, "Not My Business", Osundare demonstrates that indifference to pressing issues often boomerangs. Here, the poet satirizes bad leadership in the country which encourages oppression, intimidation and brutalization of the masses. He

equally lambastes those that feel unconcerned about these injustices by not speaking out against them. He uses three characters (Akanni, Danladi and Chinwe - three representative characters from the three main tribes in Nigeria) to show how bad leadership can be. The first stanza of the poem shows how Akanni was beaten up one fateful morning for no just cause and dumped inside a jeep. The simile "soft like clay" heightens the extent of injuries inflicted on him.

They picked Akanni up one morning
Beat him soft like clay
And stuffed him down the belly
Of a waiting jeep (140)

Similar thing equally happens in the case of Danladi. No one stood up for him as he was drafted out to a lengthy absence. Chinwe's plight is equally touching.

Chinwe went to work one day
Only to find her work was gone
No query, no warning, no probe
Just one neat stack for a stainless record (140)

Bad leadership thrives in evil. It does not reward hard work but brutalizes the innocent and the helpless. He equally shows that those who refuse to speak up against injustice will be over-whelmed by it,

And then one evening
As I sat down to eat my yam
A knock on the door froze my hungry hand.
The jeep was waiting on my bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence (141)

The poet persona has been enjoying his "yam" and never cared to associate himself with his neighbour's plight. It is his turn and he becomes petrified when "the jeep" came calling.

Osundare equally satirizes bad leadership in the poem "Only Four". Through this poem, the poet explores the state of mind of Nigerian leaders, especially her politician who does not accommodate opposing views nor have regard for people's lives.

The irony of the whole thing is that these politicians start their evil intent even before assuming these leadership positions.

When I become an emperor
I will slay the press
And hang all editors by their itchy pens (51)

This gang up against the Press is very scary and one begins to wonder what the offence of this important agency in our country is. In a sane country, the press is one of the many governmental agencies the government in power aligns with. The Press are charged with the responsibility of communicating the policy/ies of the country to the general public. Their work equally involves investigations on the happenings in the country and reporting such via the media so that the people and the relevant government ministries will be properly informed. Now, carrying out their legitimate duty to the country has incurred the ire of the bad leaders against them. Their only offence is in telling truth to power: telling them that they have intentionally massacred innocent youths who are protesting their bad policies. This incident started as a normal student protest against the government:

The students assailed my comfort
For just a few hours and I called the police to quell the row
And my guests fired their guns
…and a few students decided to die… (51)

This was never acceptable to the Press and they condemned this evil by calling it by its name: massacre. This angered the powers that be that they start downplaying the whole incident:

As if it was all a senseless massacre
But when I counted the corpse
They numbered a meagre FOUR (51)

He exonerated himself from the accusations of the Press by making their death a thing of number. To him, the Press is simply making a mountain out of a mole hole. After all, the death of FOUR university students out of thousands of them is really insignificant.

From the crowd of a dozen thousand

How can FOUR dead be such a crime? (51)

Unfortunately, this set of leaders are presently occupying leadership positions in our country today and this has enabled terrorist to attack people on a daily basis while they sit and look the other way. This goes to show that bad leaders have no regard for human lives. Even the way they threatened the Press with death goes to show that they can go any length to crush anything that opposes them even if that thing is legally acceptable by the constitution of the country.

From the foregoing, one can see that the poet, Niyi Osundare is truly committed to his society and ably captures the menace of bad leadership in the collection under study. In the first two poems analysed, he makes use of storytelling format, drawing vivid pictures with words that actually captures the situation at hand. The use of animal symbol in "Crying Hyena" makes it more apt. In the last two poems analysed, the poet was very sarcastic that one will not help but laugh at the excesses of the bad leaders.

Bad Leadership in *Songs of a Traveller* by Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Ezenwa-Ohaeto depicts bad leadership in contemporary Nigerian society in his collection of poetry, *Songs of a Traveller.* In this collection of poetry, he patterned it in line with Okot p' Bitek's "Song School". This school of thought weans poetry of all its Eurocentric tendencies, thereby taking back poetry to its enviable role. Originally, poetry in Africa appears in form of songs and Africa boasts of a large collection of songs on different issues in Africa. Thus, by calling his poems "songs", Ezenwa-Ohaeto re-affirms his African heritage and also, an acceptance of its pattern of poetry making.

Ohaeto's commitment to his society is particularly evident in this collection of poetry as he is always harping on bad leadership evident in the running of government affairs in his country,

Nigeria. In the poem, "A Song for Nigeria", he blames the political leaders for the bad leadership evident in the country.

We have kept the minor minutes
We have wasted the major hours (14)

In another stanza, he says:

From thrilling heroic actions
To palpable contradictory deeds (14)

He goes on to lament that many years after independence, Nigeria has nothing to show her citizens. There is no press freedom in the society.

On a platter of fraud
Intellectual stimulis is supressed (14)

This makes it impossible for social critics like the poet to voice out the ills in the society. Thus, he laments:

It may be difficult to speak
It is impossible to be silent
For ripples turn into a tide
In a crowd of fear bred by terror (14)

Yet, they find the means of helping those outside their domain. Fortunately, the poet persona finds his voice and begins to critique the leaders. They pretend not to see the people dying of poverty and hunger. The poets says:

Today charity begins abroad
Ask the reeling refugees of Ethiopia (14)

The above shows bad leadership as it is in contemporary Nigerian society. Also, the people's aim for the struggle for political independence has been truncated.

We have gained the power
We have lost the glory (15)

By' losing the power", the poet unwittingly attacks those injustices which stare us in the face in Nigeria. This is the situation whereby committee of elders now becomes committee of murderers. Nobody is interested in the other person's welfare and thus:

The dead now mourn the dead
With the magic of semantic

Princes only pass away
But paupers are said to die
And the earth swallows all (15)

Also, Ohaeto's "Racing Home" deals with bad leadership in Nigerian society. He presents his poet persona as a messenger who bears a message to his people. This message is important that he has to run faster than the wind to deliver it.

With the message I race
To beat even the wings of wind
I raced on the trips of hope
With a message trapped in my mouth (14)

The message he bears is very delicate and sensitive. Also, as a critic, the poet persona knows the power of information and the effect it could have with the right audience. He knows that when the people are properly informed, they can rise up against their oppressors and no leader, especially the bad ones wants that kind of protest or opposition. The implication as the harbinger of such message overwhelms him as he begins to reassesses the full weight of the task ahead and he asks:

Why should I bear this message?
Why must I be the messenger? (14)

The poet's allusion to Pheidepedes an ancient Greek man from Athens, equally heightens the destructive nature of the message

Pheidepedes raced to tell the news
And died soon after the delivery
What happens at my destination? (41)

From the above, one can gather that the message is about the ills in the poet's society. This is because what actually bothers the poet persona is what his state will be after giving the message. For the message to turn his body into a hot burning charcoal shows that the message is against the bad leaders in his society. These are the people who commit evil and do all kinds of thing instead of protecting the people's interest. The poet's persona's love for his father land makes him to bring good tidings to his father's land and it burns within him with zeal. The good this message will bring to

his people actually encouraged him to dwell on this way of thinking:

My eyes are fixed in the beacon
Drinking the glow on the horizon (41)

The poet ran home with the message. To him, he has a duty to protect the people but as a poet and critic he is, he sensed danger because the people (the bad leaders) message is against will rise up against him. The fear and doubt that assailed him made him to ask:

I strained to race to the destination
But will the message I bear
Turn me into a burning body
Destroyed by the mighty message? (41)

In "Rivers are not Afraid", Ohaeto equally touches on the theme of bad leadership. As the voice of his people, he observes that things are not done properly the way they ought to be done and that his fellow citizens are intimidated into silence. The poet persona reacts against this intimidation by asking:

Who says
We have no right to remember
The right of way?
Who says
We have no sense to sense
The dark tunnel looming large (38)

Thus, the people are aware of the dangers of bad leadership. They know the leaders are bad because they are very frivolous in their spending of the country's resources.

Who dares
Catalogue the frivolities (39)

The bad leaders are equally full of pretensions. They seem so religious and holy while their behaviour points them out as bad. They engage in all manner of electoral fraud in order to clinch power. This is very common in contemporary Nigerian society where politicians engage the services of touts and thugs to intimidate their opponents as well as the people in order to clinch the seat.

Who dares
Obliterate the apocalyptic fear
Of a victory that celebrates itself
With sirens, guns and bullets
And legalized assassination squads (39)

Thus, what we see as these bad leaders assume power is the killing of innocent citizens. The people's hopes are dashed in this kind of situation. The masses begin to ask:

How long shall we peddle sickly hopes
How long shall we mumble mournful moans
How long shall we assimilate sanitized news (39)

The poet uses this poem to show that bad leadership breeds hardship, lack of trust, hopelessness and so on in the lives of the people.

Where shall we turn
The sun is too hot
The rain is very heavy (39)

Therefore, there is no hope of salvation in the land. No one is courageous enough to release the people from the bondage of bad leadership. As a result, tension mounts as our leaders kept introducing variations in their evil deeds and never relenting on them. Nobody trusts each other and as such, we remain each other's enemies.

Who has got any friend
In this shark sharp world
Of economic politics? (39)

Finally, the poet in the second to the last stanza of the poem gives hope to the end of bad leadership. To him, the seemingly resignation of the people to the evil perpetrated in the country portends great danger as it will erupt with such a force that will consume everybody.

An under current of understanding
Flows beneath the veneer of resignation
It will erupt in wrathful force
To drown the verbal diarrhoea (40)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto in the poem, "Song of a Labourer" sub-titled, "If to say I be Soja" satirizes bad leadership and its negative impact on the citizens, especially the youths. Nigeria has witnessed coups and counter coups and how they have enabled people who have no business with leadership to be at the helm of affairs of this country. Soldiers are meant to be in barracks, charged with the duty of protecting the internal and external sovereignty of the country.

Unfortunately, some of these soldiers seize power from politicians and make laws (decrees) that guide the country. This brings about a situation where an illiterate soldier becomes the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria simply because a successful coup was staged and he becomes the president. From the point of view of the female character in the poem, a good husband is one whose one and only attribute is simply a soldier. This is because, a soldier has the possibility of changing her economic status. As we can see from the poet persona, those seemingly good attributes of a soldier were more of a satire on the military regime and how they have contributed in many ways to the eroding of morals among the populace. The poet, through the poet persona, satirizes the evil evident in these bad leaders in soldier's uniform. Throughout the poem, one sees intimidation and harassment of innocent civilians in this manner:

With gun for hand
Den I go follow road
Go her house make she sabi
Say soja dey wey pass soja (42)

In another stanza, the poet persona remarked:

My cheeks for don fat
Who for dey pass for road
If to say I be soja?
Who for talk for my face

One can see the level of intimidation and bullying that go on in our society. As long as some of these Nigerian soldiers are concerned, they are the sacred cows that no one touches. They embezzle

public funds which they stash away in banks overseas. The irony of making "/my Mama Farm/ one better palace so/" (41) and "/Na Switzerland for be kitchen/" (41) shows how far we have denigrated as a country that our leaders can embezzle public funds for mundane things like making a farm a palace. Here, Switzerland that is home to the World Bank is now meant to be a place one visits as if it is one's private facility.

Reading the poem from the beginning, one will think that the poet persona is ignorant of his actions and pin his rantings as that of one who is ignorant. The eight stanza of the poem shows otherwise. Here, the poet persona begins to mock the soldiers that did well but got killed as a result of the fact that they want Nigeria to be better than they met it.

I no go bi Murtala Mohammed
Wey carry him life throway
Sake of say e wan make country better (43)

In other words, good leadership is not something that is far-fetched but nobody is willing to pay the sacrifice. Some of the people that find themselves at the leadership position see it as an opportunity to enjoy the collective wealth of the nation and a pattern continues in which those outside the seat of power patiently wait, hoping that one day that position will get to them and they too can steal their own.

Why I no go be Soja
Abi Soja na from heaven
Him get de same head like me
Him get de same leg like me (44)

In conclusion, one can see that bad leadership retrogresses a nation, thus making it an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. The poets under study did not hide their abhorrence of this menace and as such condemn it in no light terms. This shows that they are truly committed to building a greater Nigeria and there is no better way to achieve this than to condemn the menace of bad leadership in their literary works.

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