

THE CONCERNS OF AFRICAN POETRY: A SYNOPSIS

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Abstract: *this survey navigates the African poetic landscape. It interrogates the major concerns of African poets, analyses thematic trends and quizzes the sensibilities of these artistic works. It came out that African poetry is founded on the appreciation of black power and culture as portrayed in Negritude poetry. It was then established that the most outstanding voice in African poetry is one of protest; that was mainly necessitated by European imperialism, so it came as a tool for mass mobilisation and conscientisation. Later on, the analysis inevitably moved to the battle front where protest poetry 'degenerated' into open struggle verses, characterised by heavy imagery and graphical war symbolism. Unfortunately, instead of celebrating independence, African poets got disillusioned by their new political systems, so they wrote expressing this sentiment. It sounds like going back to the trenches as a result of the climatic scenario brought about by independence. However, the survey has found a ray of hope in love poetry whose subject is resilient, and thrives throughout different historical moments of oppression, struggle and disillusionment. African poetry is not prophecy of doom, after all!*

Key Words: *conscientisation, negritude, colonialist bourgeois, indictment, romantic atmosphere*

Introduction

African poetry is about protest and struggle against injustice. Most poets focus on the colonial period where the blacks were oppressed, exploited and discriminated against by the white settlers. They discuss the deplorable working and housing conditions as a way of protesting. This moves further to the actual struggle, the very physical confrontation the African is fighting to liberate himself. Among this poetry is Negritude which has its emphasis on black consciousness, black beauty and the 'Africanness' of the black man, rooted in his culture. Later, African poets move on to comment on the post-independence situation, describing their frustrations and disillusionments since nothing really changed, if anything, getting worse. The unending woes of Africa are lightened by love poems, an area which Africa is naturally good at.

Negritude Poetry

First, we look at Negritude, best typified by Leopold Sedar Senghor. In Kesteloot (1974:102) Senghor explains that "Negritude is the cultural patrimony, the values, and above all the spirit of Negro African civilisation." It was formed against the tabula rasa theory which misguidedly

deemed that the African had “invented nothing, created nothing, written, sculpted, painted and sung nothing.” So the advocates of Negritude write poetry to disprove the haughty coloniser who is wallowing in his ignorance about the rich culture, creativity and general wisdom of the ‘undefiled’ African. For this purpose we shall analyse Senghor’s poem ‘TOTEM’ at length.

I MUST hide in the intimate depths of my veins
The Ancestor storm-dark skinned, shot with lightning and thunder
And my guardian animal, I must hide him
Lest I smash through the boom of scandal
He is my faithful blood and demands fidelity
Protecting my naked pride against
Myself and all the insolence of lucky races (Senghor in Kesteloot, 1974:105)

In this poem, the poet’s desire to prove to the coloniser that the Negro is not rootless has reached its zenith. He wants to portray, under the latter’s very nose, a concept he is unfamiliar with. Whereas the Westerners are cultured in the nucleus family, they have only ‘read’ about the African’s extended family. Not as simplistic as the white oppressors might imagine, there are deeper ties through their totems. Therefore, unlike the Europeans who are linked by nationality, Africans are cemented together through totems, across the entire continent. This realisation is expected to leave the coloniser perplexed and his urgent realisation why Africans unite to overthrow the settler regimes throughout Africa - they are in fact related through their totems.

Immediately, the persona introduces the most ‘African’ belief of hiding one’s totem from strangers. Yes, for it is none of the stranger’s business. In this case, the stranger is the European imperialist. In the African culture, going about telling strangers one’s totem can only lead to bewitchment. He is hiding this ‘in the intimate depths of [his] veins.’ So he is appealing to the concept of blood, a personal secret which a foreigner of a ‘different’ blood will never know. Therefore, this totem is something to be proud of, a secret known only to those of his blood, close to his heart. So the foreigner is likely to turn green with envy as he wallows in his ignorance of my totem.

Next, the persona talks about how he comes to belong to his totem that was introduced by his “Ancestor storm-dark skinned.” He capitalises Ancestor as if it is a proper noun. This shows much respect to his ‘departed’ forefathers of whom he is proud. His description of the Ancestor as “storm-dark skinned” further stresses his pride in his culture. Unlike the white man’s view of the Negro’s ancestors as pitchy-black, he, in actual fact, is ‘storm-dark’ a sign of prowess, bravado and valour. Not only is a storm dangerous, it can conversely give life through rain. So the persona’s ancestor is presented as a life-giver and a warrior, capable of protecting his young ones from danger (especially in form of foreigners).

The prowess of the Ancestor is further buttressed by the image of lightning and thunder. Only an African can understand the cultural significance of lightning. A European is ignorant of how lightning can be used not only to intimidate enemies but to destroy them when need arises. Lightning can easily be “sent” to the enemy’s homestead to cause havoc there. All these are enigmas to the white settlers.

Then in the third line, the persona calls the totem his guardian animal. This is in sharp contrast with the “Boer’s” religion Christianity premised on the belief that each person goes around with his guardian angel who protects him by his sword of fire. The white man is totally bamboozled that the same concept is there in the African culture, but only that ours is through “my” totem, an animal. Senghor here is not only proving that African religion matches the coloniser’s, but he actually shows that it outshines the latter because the ancestor (whom we really know) sends the guardian animal, just like an animal known to all, against the white man’s imaginary ‘angel’ whom he claims was once seen in dreams. So the African’s beliefs which are a reality transcend the white man’s hallucinations which he calls faith.

Again, the persona brings in the sacredness of his totem. He believes it should be hidden “[L]est [he] smash[es] through the boom of scandal.” The colonisers might not know the sacraments, may even look down upon them as superstition, but the persona’s business is not to convince the coloniser but simply to show him that he has his own culture, sacred as any other, if not more. Finally, he makes it clear that his guardian animal protects him from none other than the coloniser himself who assumes his victim to be cultureless and, hence, desires to impose his own on him. So this poem is a direct indictment of the coloniser at the same time cautioning him to keep clear of the native’s religious matters, for this is a dangerous adventure indeed.

In a nutshell, Negritude is a clear protest against the coloniser’s view of an African as miserable, rootless, cultureless and uncivilised. As has been demonstrated in the above analysis of Senghor’s poem, Negritude is a way of “showing off” what Africans really are. Everything African is a pride, anything black is beautiful. Negritude is taken further to a higher level in protest poetry.

Protest Poetry

The African poets in their protest poetry are not slow to spell out their cause in no uncertain terms. Horn (1994:49) describes protest poetry as that poetry directing itself “to the oppressor, to those in power, and to those who were seen to be able to influence those in power.” These are such conditions like miserable housing, general want of food and outright nakedness. According to Karl Marx, these are the basic elements, the principal needs to survive. In his poem ‘Farewell at the Moment of Parting,’ Augustinho Neto portrays the hopelessness of the blacks who “burn [their] lives in coffee fields.” He goes on to describe the ‘children of the native quarters/which

the electricity never reaches' where they feed on hunger and thirst. The working man's condition is the same throughout the world. Engels (1892) discovered the same in 18th Century as he describes it thus:

The poor man, no man has the slightest concern. Cast into the whirlpool, he must struggle through as well as he can. If he is so happy as to find work, i.e., if the bourgeois does him the favour to enrich itself by means of him, wages await him which scarcely suffice to keep body and soul together (61).

The idea is to conscientise those who are being maligned to realise their predicament so that they can organise and rise against the oppressor.

The same blood-sapping, back breaking labour in the work places is also described by the Sierra Leonean poet Syl Cheney-Coker in his poem 'The Hunger of the Suffering Man.' In this poem there is a deliberate repetition of the verb 'sweating' at the beginning of each line

Sweating between his fingers, the agricultural man
Sweating in his thorax the musician
Sweating in his lungs the runner
Sweating in the nausea the existential man (Cheney-Cooker in Moore and Beier, 1984:251).

This repetition is not only for emphasis of hard labour in everything the black man pursues, but also to create a rhythm, an orderly pattern. By implication, the poet is condemning the colonial regime for its well-orchestrated exploitation of the black man. Engels is worried by this inhuman treatment of the oppressed when he describes the lot of the working man as follows:

The lucky to work are deprived of all enjoyments except that of sexual indulgence and drunkenness, are worked every day to the point of complete exhaustion of their mental and physical energies, and are thus constantly spurred on the maddest excess in the only two enjoyments at their command (Engels, 1892:122).

In the same poem cited above, the poet alludes to sexual indulgence of the black man in a desperate search for any kind of relief, purgation of bottled emotion in the form of entertainment: 'sweating the woman whose urgent sex/brings me my brief joy/sweating the poor man whose house starves between the thighs.' When man is so dehumanised, he is reduced to the level of a beast of the wilderness, only looking forward to food and sex. When Africans protest, nay, shout themselves hoarse, they are left with no option but to be combative, to wage an armed struggle against the exploiter.

Struggle Poetry

From there, protest poetry assumes a higher dimension of struggle. Horn (1994) correctly observes this shift when he notes that “[p]rotest poetry turned into struggle poetry, the poetry of those participating in one way or another in the fight against apartheid” (52). He quotes Gwala’s poem ‘The ABC Jig’ that rhythmically asserts:

By detaining us
 They had sent us on a Black Holiday:
 By assaulting us
 They were teaching us hate;
 By insulting us
 They were telling us never
 To turn the other cheek
 We have no more tears to shed (Gwala in Horn, 1994:53).

In other words, Gwala is saying that the oppressor has stretched our patience to breaking point. This poem marks the beginning of physical confrontation. The time for complains and rhetoric is gone and now is the time for action. The reader cannot help but smell violence in the air. It is such a moment that Fanon (1963) calls a “moment he [the black man] realises his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory” (33). So protest is rapidly moving into violent struggle which is inevitable.

From here we go straight into poems of the actual struggle. Horn (1994) correctly advances that “[t]hese poems - written by blacks and whites – are not really speaking to those who watch the class-struggle from the hill” (55). Such a stance is shared by Engels in reality where he says,

Then there is another who has the courage and passion – enow openly to resist society, to reply with declared war upon the bourgeois, to the disguised war which the bourgeoisie wages upon him, goes forth to rob, plunder, murder, and burn! (Engels, 1892:114).

The Mozambican poet Jorge Pebelo provides a typical example of this scenario in his poem ‘Poem for a Militant.’ He says “Mother/I have an iron rifle/your son/the one you saw chained/one day.” The struggle has now reached its climax with poems directly advocating armed struggle. The Africans have no option and they find their salvation only in the gun. In the same poem, the persona says, “My rifle/will break the chains/open the prisons/will kill the tyrants/will win back our land/Mother, /Beauty is the fight for freedom.” (Pebelo in Moore and Beier, 1984:167). It is under such conditions that, as Giovanni (in Horn, 1994:57) advocates,

“there is no difference between the warrior, the poet and the people,” while the black poet functions as a “guerrilla fighter who can talk black English and ignore accepted aesthetics.” Thus, the militant poet wages war with his pen.

In this ‘battle’ poetry lies the pathopoeic verses which draw our pathos. The destructive nature of war, the eerie and horrific results of these inevitable battles is thus being indicted. The Namibian poet Sole gives us this touching poem “In the War Zone:”

The bodies pile in the morning
found in neat rows
next to the homestead palisades
In front of sights -
a six-month child, its face
blown away by the careless
gesture of a finger
a cast-off doll
that was his mother,
her chest tattooed with bayonet thrusts (Sole in Horn, 1994:59)

This tragic incident where even infants are innocently butchered is one among many. This makes us not only realise the cruel inhumanity of the colonisers but also makes us loathe these satanic beasts whose lot should be fate and mass destruction. In this sense African poetry serves as a tool of mass mobilisation.

From there we have a political honey-moon poetry celebrating African independence, pregnant with hope. However, in this analysis we have not bothered ourselves with this short-lived joy, hence the need to move straight into disillusionment poetry following African independence.

Disillusionment Poetry

Then follows the poetry of disillusionment coming with independence; these poems are themed against betrayal as the new leaders follow the footsteps of the colonisers with even more venom than their predecessors. Fanon (1963) critically analyses this scenario:

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and natural dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the

general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie (134).

This disillusionment is typified by Tope Omoniyi, the Nigerian poet, in his anthology Farting Presidents and Other Poems. In the poem of the same title, the poet complains about the abuses and mockeries of the post-independence African leaders. The title itself, obscene as it looks, is symbolic of the obscenity with which these dictators misgovern their countries. The poem is constipated with onomatopoeia, especially when words are purposefully pulled: ‘gooooooooof,’ ‘pooooooooop’ and ‘crrrraaaaaap,’ all mocking words but dramatizing the act of ‘farting.’ The persona here is mesmerised by the governed who ‘gulp.’ In fact, this leader is the type who boasts of ‘degrees in violence,’ for the whole atmosphere is characterised by fear. But the persona advises his audience that ‘farting presidents test the waters/before they shit on the head of all.’ So the audience are being alerted of the tactic used by a dictator of intimidating first before abusing them. He ends up by giving a wake-up call to his audience informing them that ‘silence sends signals of consent/spare the rod and spoil the president.’ Definitely this has a taste of *deja`vu* since this call to an uprising was the same call during the colonial era, which means that nothing at all has changed with the coming of independence, hence, this disillusionment.

In the same anthology, the poet presents the Rwandan 1994 genocide. One wonders at the cause of this fight between fellow black men. The persona bemoans ‘the world which turned its back/on Kigali/making way for a carnage’ This is in reference to the massacre of the Tutsis by the ‘hooting’ Hutus. These wild ‘birds’ become so witchy that they shed so much blood yet left to themselves by the world. So for the world to go to Rwanda today with humanitarian aid and conciliatory messages is what boggles the mind. In other words, waiting until a crime is committed and then try the perpetrator is as good (or bad?) as sanctioning the crime itself. Therefore, ‘there are no heroes/only actors and accomplices,/them and us.’ In this poem the persona is accusing the world of maintaining silence during the atrocities, behaviour tantamount to conniving with the Hutu criminals.

Another equally disillusioned poet is fellow Nigerian poet Tayo Olafioye. He is disturbed by the dictators feigning democracy as well as lambasting outright tyrants. He lists them frankly as: Mobutu, Bokassa, Idi Amin, Abacha, Moi and Mugabe. He observes that these leaders, *inter alia*, ‘appeared naturally black outside, but they became unnaturally dark inside; pitchy night would become lost in the depth of their chambers’ (Olafioye, 2002:89). In his anthology The Parliament of Idiots: Tryst of the Sinators, Olafioye explores the theme of governance in his poem ‘A tail of discomforts’ where he describes a ‘nationalist’ president who has a ‘heart of a viper/a bee that stings the dead.’ All this points to the naked cruelty of a leader, perpetrating atrocities on his own people. The splendour and excessive wealth in the midst of greatest penury is out rightly being condemned. His motorcade is described thus: ‘12 cars, police escorts/10 vans, body guards /12 riders, with status honus/20 cars, for area boys, cooks and laundry man/a

mansion, the people's sweat/6 doctors for emergencies.' Such lavish living in a land of insufficiency is the greatest betrayal of the people. The persona ends with what, to the dictator, is a warning, and to us, a ray of hope: 'He who over stays at the graveyard, /Must surely see a ghost/Death: their last official performance.' Therefore, we feel encouraged that after all they shall die, after all this debauchery and corruption will come to pass, but not before a prize is paid, a prize of one's blood against this self-styled, self-proclaimed liberator - turned tyrant!

Love Poetry

However, the African poet is not a politician through and through. He/she is also a lover. He/she can appreciate his/her lover. Olafioye, for instance in his poem 'George's love,' he describes George's lover yearning for him. 'Demobilised by his absence.' Likewise George, from where he is, 'too remains sleepless in his daze.' Such reciprocity in love is very encouraging. The two lovers love each other so much that '[t]hey seem an item/The meeting point of two circles.' They are inseparable.

Likewise, Christopher Okigbo in his poem 'Water Maid' describes his courageous woman as his '... lioness/crowned with moonlight.' This romantic atmosphere does not only present love as beautifully natural but also as a reciprocal emotion, not based on conquest but on interdependency. In the same spirit, Mzwakhe Mbuli (2004) in his latest album among protest music is a love song 'Wedding Day.' Here he discusses the marriage vows, describes love as a God-given gift and warns about deception in love. We feel relieved to remember the other social aspects of life such as love, which are universal to all - the oppressors and the oppressed alike.

Conclusion

Consequently, this brings us to the dimension that African poetry is about the desire to express the beauty in blackness, about protest against colonialism, the struggle and overthrow of the colonialist bourgeois regimes and, regrettably, the post-colonial disillusionment caused by neo-colonialism and betrayal by fellow black leaders. So what is devastating the African poets is the lot of the African proletariat who is short-changed by oppressors of different colours. It seems the black African proletariat is destined to die poor, doomed to drown in the mire of eternal penury. However, the poets are not hopeless of their situation since they continue writing to conscientise, to mobilise and even to incite. Poets like Olafioye and Omoniyi advise their audience that the dictators capitalise on fear. To lighten this heavy tragic atmosphere of the African's socio-economic-political life, the all-embracing poetry of love is also common. It serves as tragic relief, a consoling element that promises that at least there is something good to be found in Africa. Therefore, the continent is not doomed, after all!

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