
THE UNSUNG SINGERS: OTHER 'NEW' NIGERIAN POETS

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Abstract

The many attempts by literary critics to bring “writers from the fringe” to the fore of critical attention have been invaluable in promoting literary scholarship in Nigeria. However, because the Nigeria literary landscape is fertile, there are “omissions” of “new” writers whenever there is a new anthology. This paper is another attempt to bring to critical discourse the poetry of some “new” writers including Anthony Ada, Moses Effiong, Onyekachi Onuoha, Mercy Envorh, among others. The newness of these poets lies not only in their entry into the craft but also in the focus on their craft for critical acknowledgement and judgement by those who should do so. The paper is concerned with their handling of themes and their deployment of linguistic resources for achieving this.

Introduction

It is incontrovertible that there is an outpouring of creative poetic enterprise in Nigeria by new poets. These poetic outputs are not often tended with the same critical inputs when compared with the attention to outputs by earlier generations of poets. However, to recognize these, attempts have been made, at different forums and times to “bring poets at the fringe to the centre”, to create a hearing for their songs (Nduka, Uche & Ike, ed. 1988; Osundare, 1996; Osundare & Nzekwu, 2003; Chin Ce, 2012, etc).

In 1988, Harry Garuba came out with the much appreciated and widely-acknowledged *Voices From the Fringe: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*. Before Garuba's work, the critical eye was mostly on established 'old' generation Nigerian poets like Soyinka, Clark, Okara, Okigbo,

and that immediately succeeding the 'old' like Ojaide, Osundare, Ofeimun etc.

Since Garuba's epochal work, others have followed with researches aimed at bringing to the critical audience, new entrants into the creative (poetic) world. Joseph Ushie (2000) did a comprehensive study of 'new' Nigerian poets. Using about sixty (60) collections, Ushie carefully selected poets who are 'new' both in the time(s) of publication and in their not really being the focus of critics (18). Ushie concentrated on the poetry of that “group of the Nigerian poetry landscape whose shadow has been noticed but whose works are yet to receive critical attention and characterization” (5). His study focused mainly on the style of these 'new' poets.

Others have brought out works with similar focus. The goal of *Five Hundred Nigerian Poets* (2005) is to publish the unpublished poets and to make the unheard poets heard.

According to the Editor, Jerry Agada, there are poets whose “works have been hardly read by majority of Nigeria critics...” (xxxi). Etiowo's choice of her case studies for a 2006 research was to explore the creative sensibilities of poets who have not really had critical attention. Etiowo's other works (2005, 2010) have exhibited the same bias, that is focusing on 'unheard' poets. It was also for the same purpose as above that Ismaila Bala & Ahmed Maiwada in 2009 edited *Fireflies: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*.

While attempts such as the above have done much in helping to sing the songs of these bards and make their voices heard, there is still much room for critical exposure. A number of factors account for the low critical patronage for the unsung singers.

The publicity and wide distribution network that the early poets and even up to the early 1990s took advantage of seem now to be lacking. Many published collections have become localized: operating and only known in the place(s) of publication and their environs or the University where the authors teach and/or reside. There is equally a shortage of reputable publishing houses with a concentration in the Lagos-Ibadan axis. Therefore, writers in this axis are the highest beneficiaries or possessors of new literary productions because of the presence of the publishing houses including Kraft, Mace, Malthouse, Service & Service, Update Communications, Stirling-Horden, etc. Kraft, for instance, has many poetry titles under its Kraftgroits. Even with these publishers, distribution is not as widespread as it was with the olden Heinemann (African Writers Series) or Longman (Drumbeat). Consequently, it has become difficult to notice or even come in contact with collections published by outfits outside the above or even the self-published ones.

In addition, most undergraduates of English and Literature and their senior-

colleague graduate students in Nigerian Universities still prefer to write their graduating essays on the first/second generation famous poets (Clark, Soyinka, Okara, Okigbo, Osundare, Ojaide, Ofeimun etc). They see these 'new' poets and their poetry as being experimental (even though beautiful) and lacking in critical literature on them to refer to. The undergraduate and graduate students are unwilling to break fallow critical grounds, thereby leaving these 'new' poets unexplored and unknown. They do not seem to realize that the critical works on older poets they want to refer to were efforts people like them and that their outputs on the unsung singers can become reference points for others after them.

Closely related to the above is the lull in reading culture among students. The steep slope in the culture of reading has degraded the capacities of students and 'new' literary critics for independent and ground-breaking contributions to the academic world. This has therefore led to the non-appreciation of these 'new' poets. Let it be acknowledged that the lack of attention to new poets is also playing out in the critique of other genres.

The Unsung Singers: Themes and Language

The aim of this study is to expose, to bring to the fore, some poetic enterprises that may have been more on bookshelves and have not really been subjected to intellectual debates or analysis. Some of such poets with whom this work is concerned are Anthony Ada, Moses Effiong, Mayo Mercy Envorh and Onyekachi Onuoha.

Anthony Ada's *Eve of Democracy* (2009) covers socio-political issues. The collection is divided into two 'tablets' (as the author calls them) - “Thoughts - Flow” and “Reminiscences”. Ada's collection is not so different especially in theme from most poets especially in their lamentation of the Nigerian socio-political landscape. In the title poem “Eve of Democracy”, the “White aluminum pots go ebony black” (5); White aluminum, the symbol of hope, of light, of confidence, of

strength, suddenly disappears into gloom, darkness, despair, disuse. Expectedly, “the kitchenette is famished”, “Food prices space-shuttle”, the flora 'decimated' and bleeding. This is just as “consulting clinics metamorphose into mortuaries/And giant Naira crash-lands/shimping into sea-level”(8).

As prophetic of the current political imbroglio between politicians in intra-party and inter-party skirmishes, the poet persona elucidates the consequences of political/politicians' rivalry and self-centredness. All sectors of the society and economy are adversely affected:

Look! Look! Two elephants at war

And grasses die in the sun

Extra-large agbada

Billowing structurally

To the dictates

Of market forces

Schools shut

Water taps parched

Doctors flee

Corpses pile

In our hospice

One step forward

Three steps backwards (14).

Language here is expressive. The scenario of the collapse of the system is clearly painted by the simple and lucid diction.

Religious hypocrisy and deviation from the tenets of faith found expression in the poems – “The Worshippers” and “Holy Mass”. Holy mass is:

SERVED for the repose

Of the souls of underserved

Heroes

And valiant's alike

Whose sole soul's request

Is a universal of holy masses

Holy masses of no virtue

To shield transgressions

The money for this mass's request

Emanate from voices

Stolen from the people's commonwealth (27).

The poet feels pained because “Mohammed and Jesus came/With a superglue of unity”. But for their worshippers:

They troop to holy sites

Chanting from holy books

What they do not practice

Each carrying a jar of inflammable liquid

Going to commune with God (21).

Ada's angst is not against the existence of religious institutions but the compromising stands of the practitioners – both clergy and followers – in not following the exemplary natures of the Holy Books. As a member of the society from which he draws his impetus, Ada's reflections here are drawn from the two main religions in the country as the mention of Mohammed and Jesus shows. This affirms the truism that literary art is birthed from the environment and the consciousness of the writer.

The title poem of Moses Effiong's *Echoes from the Quarters* (2009) encapsulates the contents of the collection which also dwell on his concerns with trends in the society. Images of political upheavals, the drowning economy, corrupt Judiciary, war and the

degraded environment dominate the subject matters of the poems. Like many poets before him (e.g. Clark, Soyinka, Marinho, Ojaide, etc), the problems that have beset the Nigerian society are what have kindled Effiong's poetic fire.

It seems the poet's manifestation of social consciousness is mostly prevalent in his examination of "the nature and methods of politics in Nigeria" (Afia, 2009). According to Afia, "Effiong shows the uncaring and insensitive nature of Nigerian politicians. The picture shows selfish, self-aggrandizing leaders who get to power by hook or crook and thrive on broken and unkept (sic) promises"(vii). Poems like "Politrickster", "The Confab", "The Quadrennial Show", etc are illustrative.

The theme of death is prevalent in Effiong's poetry. This may not be far-fetched. Having been an Officer of the Nigerian Army, Effiong's military training makes provision for death because the poet has experienced many of his colleagues dying. He describes death as "the dreaded boss" and "evil and greedy master" of sleep, "whose embrace is fatal". This, the poet demonstrates in his poetry. "For the Thirteen Patriots" is a direct reference and tribute to the thirteen Nigerian Army Officers who perished in a plane crash on their way to Obudu Cattle Ranch for an official retreat.

Before this particular loss, the poet acknowledges that death has dealt with the great, the mighty and the weak in the society. It "... Defied Hitler/Defeated Napoleon", deals with kings and even dared "the divine Redeemer" ("Death", 10). Death is variously addressed by the poet as:

Willing instrument of the wicked

An opportunist

A shameless double-agent

A coward and sadist

A persona-non-grata in heaven

An itinerant harbinger of sad news (10)

What is glaring in Effiong's treatment of the theme of death is the absence of the influence of African cosmological view of death as a bridge for continuity of another level of existence. This may be due to Effiong's Christian religious belief. In the poem above, he calls death "A persona-non-grata in heaven", an inference from the Christian notion that in heaven there shall be no more dying or death (Revelation 21:4). What seems important to the poet is, therefore, the immediate sense of loss and the consequences that death leaves behind.

Like Ada, Effiong's language is simply and clear, almost prosaic and not requiring the brain-racking effort needed to understand Soyinka or Okigbo. This does not however undermine the intellectuality of his poetry; it makes it reader-friendly.

Mayo Mercy Envorh's *Soldier Boy and other Poems* (2009) is a collection of poems for children. The title of the poems, their lyrical nature and illustrations, among other things, clearly explain the targeted audience – children. The poems deal with issues that are mostly children-centred: "The Assembly Ground", "My Pen, my Book", "Oh my Little Eyes", "Christmas Holiday", "The Pretty Bird", "Rain Bow", "The School Bell", etc. Every poem in Envorh's collection is illustrated. This style in itself is seen as a motif to encourage the readers (children) to appreciate the poems as they read them.

As pointed out earlier, the language is simple and lyrical. One does not need a dictionary to understand any of the poems, which can also be sung. Example is "The School Bell":

School bell, school bell,

Waiting for you all the time,

Love it much when you chime;

In the morning at noon,

Try and jingle very soon:

I will rise and shout for joy
 Running like my mother's boy,
 To my mother's cooking pot,
 Even under the sun so hot;
 Forgetting my books in the room:
 School bell, school bell,
 Waiting for you all the time. (9)

As in the poem above, the poet deliberately uses rhyme schemes that would appeal to children. In "My School Fees", the end rhymes could be given as 'abcd', thus:

You that keep me sound in school,	}	a
Fostering Friendship with my school,		
You that make me not a fool		
Filling me with comfort full		
My heart skips	}	b
My heart weeps		
When I have to leave my class	}	c
With exams ahead to pass		
Because my fee is yet unpaid:	}	d
I will not be so afraid.		
When my fee is all paid		

(10)

The rhyme-scheme consciousness is reflected in all the poems in that collection. Language in her poetry is also easily accessible even to the young reader who is indeed the target reader.

Rape, corruption, violence, religious deceit and intolerance are some of the social issues that dominate Onyekachi Onuoha's poetry. *The Heresy of Gossip* (2012) is reminiscent of the poet persona's school experiences as a student in the University. The collection recounts, with succinct

details, the activities of Nigerian students on campus and the insecurities they are confronted with in the pursuit of education and other dreams. In the poem "They", the poet exposes the hydra-headed evil in the Nigerian University system whereby some ill-willed lecturers influence their students to carry the former's intentions. The deictic words, "They", "their", "them" are used in the poem to generalize the images of the actors and the victims of unsavoury university system:

They achieve **their** aim

As the students become

The subtle tool

They are our mentors

Though they influence **them**

Into the dance of the spirit (12)

The referents of the deictic items above are recoverable exophorically from the experience the poet tries to share. 'They' and 'their' are the perverse teachers and 'them' are the victimized students. Through the rather unnamed perpetrators and victims, the poem captures some of the negative influences of lecturers on the students resulting in irrational immoral behaviour on the part of the latter for fear of dire and far-reaching consequences viz failing examinations.

The Heresy of Gossip also deals with a three-dimensional reality of the poet's socio-cultural, political and economic landscapes. The collection captures the poet's bewilderment at seeing the extent at which humans have lost sanity in their relation with others. He laments the insensitivity of consistent failure of successive generations as a result of self-centredness. The opening poem, which is the title poem, chronicles the silence that permeates the society as a result of dictatorship. The poem depicts the power structure in the society and how gossip becomes a medium of expression of the plight of the masses and ill-equipped young people

being peddled as future leaders:

When the words can't be spoken

It becomes a tale of gossip

When gossip is carried through

It becomes heresy against the power
(1).

Gossip is a rebellion and a means to counter oppressive University practices reminiscent of the military mentality, inherited by the University Administration to continue to suppress and subjugate the students. In the students' plight, silence becomes a form of protest against oppression. The poet demonstrates that "the gossip of existence is the gossip of heresy" (1). The oppression so very deep that the poet personae refers to it as a folktale highlighting the age of oppression that it becomes a form of narrative in the society that many in the society can actually identify with it. The poem demonstrates that gossip carries the content of oppression in our society and since the masses cannot speak directly to power, they gossip about their situation as a relieve motif.

The heresy of existence

Is the heresy against the killing trend

Of leaving the holy union

Oppression is a holy union that the poet seems to satirize as a killing trend for those who attempt to leave such oppressive construct in the society. Gossip is not definite, it keeps changing to carry the intentions of the poet persona and toward the end of the poem the poet sees it as a folktale of assistance.

Again, as seen in Ada and others above, language in Onuoha's poetry is not obscure or clandestine; it is accessible and interpretable within the surface spectrum. The lines of the poem immediately above can be written as free prose thus: *The heresy of existence is the heresy against the killing*

trend of leaving the holy union.

In other poems, concerns with the inertia of the University system continue to be expressed. "The Aluta" captures the helplessness of those who saw that gossip could not solve their problems in the hands of oppressive University Administrators and they decided to fight against it. However, at the end of the day they became double victims as the Head of the University uses his power to further subjugate them to the extent that their situation became worse than what they had protested against:

The alutas are back

Bearing the reminiscence of spilled silvers

Bearing the sweat of tent talent sufferings

The students are taxed for their uprising against power and oppression and they were betrayed to the extent that they had to come with spilled silvers that have the content of sweat and sufferings of their situation in the hands of their oppressors.

The alutas are back

Bearing the bag dint with sorrow

Bearing the burdens of their dare

Bearing the half heart sheets of plea

For the gains of readmission (50).

The poem captures the predicaments of the students who protest various levels of neglect in the University and they turn around to be taxed for crying out against various act of impropriety by some privileged few. Although the students plead for them to be readmitted into the University as the Powers that be dictated to/them, they did that out of compulsion and not free will. They, indeed, have no choice because in the equation of power, the powerless hardly win. The alutas are back:

With the feigned gone days of blights

Bearing the adrift sores of their wounded hearts

The alutas are back

In feigned smile of wrong

They tender their allegiance of loyalty

Loyalty sworn to papers (5)

The students bear the brunt of their action and were forced to demonstrate their obedience by a paper-sworn commitment to be obedient to oppression in the society. The narrative chronicles the physical and psychological abuse of the riot in the society on the weaker boys and girls who were led out and some were raped and maimed as a result of the riot. The plight of ladies who were raped is captured in the poem “The Sacrificial” and this shows the connectivity of the poet's thematic concerns:

The sacrificial were laid

Not in the bride price of tradition

Not even in the rosy bed of the groom

The sacrificial were laid

Some in the path ways of alien hood

And some in bushes of same alien hood

The sacrificial were laid

Not in the bed of rose of acceptance

Not even in the lust hood of a toast(6)

All approaches to the wooing a woman were abandoned. Rather, force was applied in an exercise that would have been the result of consensus. Ladies were exploited by these men who are represented as hood. The poem demonstrates that riot, which was orchestrated by the students and the University Management was part of a plot to exploit and subjugate the students in the campus, and, almost naturally, ladies became primary victims. The poet captures

it succinctly thus:

The sacrificial were laid

As they were led away by the chasing

Sounds of authority and power

The sacrificial were laid

In the dark walk of innocence

As they were led out from the protective walls

Of the hostels (6).

The poet is also outraged by the ills of the larger society. In the poem titled “In Calabar”, the writer elucidates on the failure of the social system in Calabar. Calabar is a metaphor for any part of the larger society where only deceit and hypocrisy thrive uninhibited. The poet depicts the harm that 'prophets' and 'prophetesses' have brought upon human beings and the erosion of family values and bonds as a result of the activities of these latter day seers in our society:

In Calabar

Where the diviner's tag is a child's stigma

In Calabar

Where the priestess' word changes the child's future (3)

In Calabar

Where the diviner's word

Fuzzes the woman's birth pang

And spank her in

Endless pain of her loss (3)

The priestess becomes a sort of goddess, as she uses her power of divination and prophecy to reconstruct the lives of the children and elders in the society. The priestess is so powerful to the extent that a mother can forget the bond between her and her child because the priestess has sown fear in her heart that she

had to let go of her child in the preservation of herself with the hope that God would give her a child that is 'witch-free'.

In Calabar

Where the priestess word

Builds the child's future

In refuse dumps and gutters

In alien works of confusion (3)

Religious houses in Calabar become a medium of disunity among parents and children due to the mode of its practice of recommending the sending away of a child as a preventive measure against the evil constituted by the presence of the child. The poet demonstrates that the actions of the priestess also have direct adverse effect on the society:

In Calabar

Where the diviner's word litters the streets

With the chased away fruits

That sour-leavens the city in crime (3)

The children that are sent into the street as a result of the priestesses' words suddenly become a threat to the society because they have to survive and, without upbringing, crime becomes a viable means of self-preservation.

Conclusion

The themes that preoccupy the new and unsung singers are not thunderbolts from the blues; they derive from the prevailing circumstances of their sociopolitical and economic landscapes. They are the expressions of their ponderous concerns about the attitudinal and systemic failures that have brought about the sadly constant degeneration of standards and performance in the society they belong to. The degeneration can be perceived in educational institutions as revealed by Onuoha, in political, religious and

government circles as revealed by Ada and Effiong. Envorh's collection is directed toward the sensibilities of the child faced with the inanities of the society.

The general approach to language by 'new' poets studied here is that of simplicity and clarity, in contrast to the opacity of some of the older poets. Their messages are unmistakable from the choices of familiar words, expressions and patterns, almost prosaic. These poets' choices are unlike the compact and elevated language of Soyinka or Okigbo or Okara which is steeped in obscurity. The sheer grandiosity of the language of the older poets was a scare for students of the subject who would prefer the other genres, namely prose and drama. With the new poets, language is accessible to all, thus making poetry reading a well-received venture. One can follow the flow of thought in their prose-like verses without needing to go into the inner recesses of the poets' consciousness. Perhaps, this is because the experiences they share are those the reader is familiar with and these are couched in language that is equally familiar.

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