

The Poet as a Cultural Ambassador and Social Critic

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is oral literature with aesthetic skills. It is a performative form of a cultural infusion of traditional and contemporary realities of the human world. Poetry in its true nature is political, economic, and sociological. Poetry is largely human. Previous studies have examined poetry as entertainment and poetic orature to neglect cultural significance and social criticism. Therefore, this study examines as poetry an embodiment of cultural identities and an element of social criticism. The anthology of Femi Abodunrin, entitled "It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors" would be examined. This is in a bid to see how a poet serves as a cultural ambassador of his/her country and, at the same time, a social critic. Femi Abodunrin is a Nigerian-born poet. Schechner's Performance, Freudian, and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyze the selected collections. The selected poems are subjected to performance and literary analyses.

KEYWORDS

cultural ambassador; social criticism; poetry; ancestors; performance.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is an age-long oral tradition with different paralinguistic features (Adekunle, 2009, Adekunle 2021). It is a spoken literature that examines societal realities (Adekunle, 2021:1). Poetry performative style is a unique aesthetic dramatization. To Raji (2013:11), poetry as a practical being of a baby comes by accident and by design. Raji reveals poetry has a spontaneous oral performance. Poetry is a memorial of timeless truth. This is why Oha (2019:13) avers that the poet takes a panoramic view of unfortunate happenings in global politics. It engages critical textual, verbal, and non-verbal that interpret and celebrate societal values and heroic deeds (Dasylyva 2022:117). According to Kehinde (2012:57), poetry is a form of writing that is meant to entertain, express, inform, and teach morals. It always makes use of sounds that are carefully selected and organized to give harmonious appeal through repetition, metrical patterns, and rhythmic flow (Dasylyva 2005:15). Dasylyva examines poetry as a product of human utterance. Poetry is a composition in verse form that expresses high feelings and thoughts in a condensed language, especially imagery (Oripeloye, 2017:39). The imagery is used by poets to achieve the aim of creating a resemblance between one object and another. Okpewho (2003:16) affirms that poetry is an oral poetics that is highly contextual in its delivery. Also, Ojaide (2014:109) opines that poetry is a cultural production that is often read or performed. Its diversity of reading and performance is high aesthetics through the pitch of voice, choice of stressed unstressed words and phrases, speed of articulation, and modulation. Akporobaro (2005:4) states that poetry is an actual performance embedded in accentuated speech act, rendered alive before a live audience through various dramatic gestures, pitch changes, and emotional tones. According to Babalola (1966), each genre has its distinctive style of vocalization or technique of vocal

performance. Ong (2002:1) observes that poetry revises human identities. Finnegan (1970: 1) believes poetry is an artistic culture that possesses both written and unwritten traditions. In the above analysis, many poetic scholars examined poetry from different dimensions of performative styles, but this article is examining poetry as a tool for social criticism and cultural sustenance by examining the poet as a social critic and cultural ambassador.

Theoretical framework

Psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and Schechner's Performance theory were used to analyze the poetic contents of the selected poetry.

Psychoanalytic theory

Psychoanalytic theory gives an understanding of human behavior and experience in a given society (Tyson 1999, Adekunle 2022). It emphasizes individual consciousness and collective unconscious that reside in the lives of the members of society. Personal and collective experiences that individual members pass through are psychoanalyzed. The experiences may be informed of eruption, displacement, condensation, interjection, sublimation, repression, and projection. The representations of the individual and collective experiences are societal patterns, icons, images, archetypes, and themes (Tyson 1999, Adekunle, 2020). The psychoanalytic theory examines human behaviors and experiences from childhood to adulthood in each family that links to the societal collective unconscious. It investigates the individual roles of every member of a given community to community aims and goals. These aims and goals are reflections of human activities in day-to-day realities.

Freudian Psychoanalytic theory

In this research, Freudian theory helps to examine the psychological state of mind of the poet in his collection. The theory assists in bringing the unconscious state into the conscious mind of both the poet and the listening/reading audience. The theory helps us to understand the sociological realities the poet discusses in his collection.

Jungian Psychoanalytic theory

The Jungian analytical theory reveals individual experience as a reflection of the communal behavior of a certain society. This existing individual behavior is a racial memory rooted in primitive roots that are also connected to contemporary human experience (Tyson, 1999: 27). The primitive inherited racial memory is revealed through unlimited residual of human experiences, stories, and images. Jung uses two theoretical terms to differentiate his theory from the Freudian theory. The two theoretical terms are introvert and extrovert. Introverts depend on themselves to survive, while extroverts rely on others to survive (Tyson, 1999; Adekunle, 2021).

The importance of Jungian theory to this article is that it helps to analyze individual behavior as a reflection of the collective unconscious of racial memory rooted in the primitive age. The theory helps to examine the cultural values and norms of a given society. These societal realities and values are examined in the poetic collection below.

Richard Schechner's Performance Theory

Schechner's performance theory compasses all human activities to societal norms and values. The theory examines drama, theatre, ritual practices, ceremonial festivals, hunting of animals, carnivals, performances and dramas, and other activities, such as sports, scripts, dance, music, plays, and games, as a reflection of day-to-day activities. This is why Schechner, performance theory is an inclusive term (Schechner, 1994: xiv). Performance

theory reveals the act of aesthetic performance, speculative ideas, and historical records as performance. Professional activities, like a workshop, training, spectators' satisfaction, rehearsals, and preparation, are also seen as performance activities and deep reflections of daily activities by Schechner (Schechner, 1994: xiv-xv).

In the analysis of this article, Schechner's Performance theory helps to examine a chain of societal realities in the purposively selected poetic collection. It helps to interrogate the use of paralinguistic symbolisms in the analysis of the poems.

RESEARCH METHODS

The anthology of Femi Abodunrin, entitled "It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors" was examined. This is in a bid to see how a poet serves as a cultural ambassador of his/her country and, at the same time, a social critic. Femi Abodunrin is a Nigerian-born poet. Schechner's Performance, Freudian, and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyze the selected collections. The selected poems are subjected to performance and literary analyses.

Data Analysis

Femi Abodunrin, a promoter and preserver of African cultural heritage, in his collection of poems entitled *It Would Take Time, Conversation with Living Ancestors* call for a re-awakening of African culture and civilization. In his propagation of cultural values and norms, he showcases the aesthetic values and beauty of African cultural heritage.

The poet illustrates how the transatlantic slave trade, fratricidal and internecine wars, colonialism, and neocolonialism have affected African socio-cultural, religious, political, and economic activities. The influence of European civilization and culture has downplayed African folklore, mythology, proverb, idiom, history, traditions, and ethics.

Writers, such as Ngugi Wa Thiong and Ulli Beier, have called for the resuscitation of African culture and civilization. This idea is reflected in Ngugi's book, *Moving the Centre* (1993) and *Forty Years in African Art and Life: Reflections on Ulli Beier* (1993). To these two writers, African culture and history should be mirroring and identification of African humanity.

In the poetic rendition, Abodunrin makes use of Biblical, historical, and classical allusions in carving out messages. Besides, he uses Yoruba mythology, cultural values, and traditional praise chant as an incantation to elevate the language of his poetry. There is a preponderance use of descriptive imagery to highlight different ideas. Apart from this, there is also an intensive appraisal of African and Nigerian progenitors who have labored for their societies through their heroic deeds.

The collection of poems is divided into the five parts listed below:

Part One: It Would Take Time

Part Two: The Drama of Consolation I

Part Three: Conversation with Living Ancestors

Part Four: The Drama of Consolation II

Epilogue

Each part is subdivided into phrases. The structure and style are the poetic compositions widely show the issues being highlighted by the poet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

African Loss of Linguistic and Cultural Identities to Western Ideologies

In the first part, Femi Abodunrin is solemnly calling Africans into sober reflection and genuine repentance from Westernized culture to the rich traditions of African people. The poet painstakingly reflects on how Africans were colonialized through European languages. He sees the linguistic mediums of colonization as African loss of cultural identities, that is, “the prison-house of language.”

I cited Nietzsche to convince you that
We have to cease to think if we refuse
To do so in the prison house of language.
You knew where I was headed and you called me names;
‘Which language, whose prison, in whose house?’ you blurted!
‘In My Father’s House! ‘You fumed.

‘For we cannot reach further than
The double asks whether the limit we see
Is a limit...’ says Nietzsche and I promise
Never to speak of the dead German again-never!
(Abodunrin 2002: 20-21)

In the first stanza, lines 1, 2, and 3, the poet metaphorically exposes how Africans are construed and distorted from proper thinking sensibility and, at the same time, strip-off cultural values and norms through Western linguistic colonization in African native soil. This is why the poet connotatively says: “In My Father’s House..! You fumed.” The use of “German” symbolically means European colonialism. Africans were colonialized “mentally,” “physically,” “economically,” “politically,” “socially” and “culturally” to the extent that they could think independently of the Europeans. They could not see anything best in themselves as revealed in stanza two.

Apart from this, the poet also showcases the religious imposition of the Europeans on Africans. He reveals hazard effects of religious imposition by Europeans on African traditional religious worshippers as follows:

And all I said, if you don’t mind me quoting another
Homo-Sapiens from Carthage are the amalgamators
Wouldn’t give a toss whether you and I were
Brown or white or whether we worship tree gods or the
Trinity

--that it is not our tribal peculiarity but our territory—
God-given, devil-oriented, sango-stricken Uh-hun-hun!
But our labor power that entranced them-like Latopa
At the entrance to Alasofunfun’s hut reeking of mischief!

At Lokoja they beheld our beloved confluence
Bewitched, like Peter on the mount of transfiguration
Chanting ‘It is good, oh! It’s good to build three tents’
Where we shall ordain the mythology of a tribal tripod
One for you, one for me, the other for our benighted neighbor
(Abodunrin 2002: 21-22)

In the above, Abodunrin poetically juxtaposes Western religion and African religion through the use of Biblical and historical allusions. The use of “Brown” or “White” or whether we worship “tree gods” or “the Trinity” indicates the modes of worship between the adherents of the two separate worlds or religions. The Africans believe to have been worshipping “tree gods” and the West believes in “Trinity,” that is, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A “tree serves as a medium of interaction and worship of Super-Being to Africans, while “the cross” symbolizes the act of worship of One Christian God that manifests Himself in three different ways. Besides, the use of Yoruba traditional gods, “God-given, devil-oriented, sango-stricken,” “Latopa” and their audience “Alasofunfun” in house worship were seen as a reeking of mischief! Abodunrin sees the notion of a reeking of mischief ascribed African to religion as religious relegation and religious bias.

Also, he shows how Western religion was introduced to Nigeria as a good religion during the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Nigeria in 1914. This is why he uses Biblical Peter’s expressions in the Mount of Transfiguration when he urged Lord Jesus to build three tents: “It’s good to build three tents.” Here, the three tents figuratively represent the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. He reveals how three different ethnic nationals were forcefully brought to live together on Nigerian soil. It sees the amalgamation of three tribes as a marriage of convenience for the Europeans’ benefit.

In the same vein, Abodunrin mockingly demonstrates how Yoruba traditional rulers were relegated to the background during colonial rule on Nigerian soil. This intrusion brought a paradigm shift of African monarchal order to Western political order during colonial rule and postcolonial era.

Apart from this, the poet sees colonial imperialists as religious hypocrites who manipulate their fellow black African nationals to suit their desires. In the excerpt below, the poet reveals them as goats in sheep’s clothing. He mockingly reveals them as “first goats” with “incurable misbehavior (incurable optimist). “Goat” connotatively signifies a suborn animal that wants to do or achieve her self-desires at all costs. This is the reason he says: “His specialty is staring at them floor like a sheep without uttering a word.” The imperialists had their converts among African people who sold their spirits, souls, and bodies in return. They gave all that they had to the colonial masters, including their daughters and sons, goats and sheep, and palm wine and palm nuts willing.

The first goat as you can see
Is an incurable optimist
His specialty is starting at the floor like a sheep
Without uttering a word,
He had his converts among our people
Worship is too simple a word
To describe their affection for him,
Scarified their daughters and sons
Goats and chickens, palm wine and palm
Nuts at the shrine they built for him,
Without his request (Abodunrin 2002: 41).

Neocolonialism and Corrupt Practices in Nigeria

The poet talks about neocolonialism in Nigeria. Fate of Nigeria in the hands of the political class after the nation’s independence. He sees the new era of self-freedom as “post-imperialist debasement.” It is the era of the nation’s humiliation and bastardization of socio-political life by the elite. He likens the political class’s lifestyle to a Yoruba first-class traditional ruler called, “Ladugbolu.” He reveals how Ladugbolu betrays his brother

"Eshubayi Eleko," in stanza 1, lines 5 and 6 in the poetic analysis below. The political class betray the trust people bestowed on them. The neo-colonials are seen as agents of "violence" in stanza 2, line 4. The poet supposedly assumed them to be "sensibility," and "mythic," but "mutilate" the course of their race for their self-goals as shown in stanza 3, lines 2,3,4 below. As shown in stanza 4, lines 2, 3, and 4, the Nigerian political class are seen as "irrational humans" who are revealed as "Iscariots of our race shrieking dementedly." They are exposed as bad image-makers of the people, "let us create the poor in our image!" They loot their national treasury at the expense of their people. They make their people "poor."

It took time, don't tell me for I know
To conceive this epic of our post-imperialist debasement
Just as it took time for Ladugbolu to grow into
A full-blown feudal ogre-for the story never began
From when he was asked to witness the travails of
His fellow brother-Eshubayi Eleko blurted in anger
(Abodunrin 2002: 22)

What they've done to make cultural clashes seem routine, and
Neo-colonial angst irreverent? How can I adumbrate
Your effusive claim that you neither partook in their
Org of violence nor consented to be knighted by them

-elder brother! Soon-to-be-remembered...! Child of my mother,
When it was you who had the sensibility, mythic or mutilated
To set the metaphysical boulder of our race on its course?
Where were you when they cried in unison-

Not like Peter building tents and bridges-
But these Iscariots of our race shrieking dementedly:
'let us create the poor in our image!
Imaginators of a world are spurious, unreal, and epileptic.
(Abodunrin 2002: 24)

Also, in stanza 2 of the above, the poet attributes to abuse of power to the breach of culture by the political class who collaborate with the West to mortgage the futures of the children. Inadvertently, society indirectly surrenders human rights power to the political class. Society is subjugated by the political class through the abuse of power and authority bestowed upon them by the electorate.

In the same vein, lampoons

Heroic Personage of Yoruba Traditional Leaders in Nigeria

Abodunrin in his poem entitled "The Drama of Consolation I," starts with a praise chant and appraisal of heroic personages of Yoruba traditional leaders as archetypical representations of African heroism and good leadership. These are the ancient kings who contributed greatly to the growth and development of Yoruba society. "Olugbo" and "Aresa" were great Yoruba ancient kings who ruled their kingdoms in peaceable and harmonious order that positively enhanced the development of their kingdoms without any ambiguity or shaded characters.

For Olugbo and Aresa, the matter was rather straightforward.
With Ijapa and Yanribo ambiguity was incarnated, but for us
'Two Ogboni, it becomes three' has been the watchword.
So children of today don't pelt the snail... don't!
(Abodunrin 2002:32)

On the contrary, “Ijapa” and “Yanribo” are animals called tortoises. They are revealed as tricksters in Yoruba parlance. The two are a couple who always aiding and abetting each other in criminal activities in Yoruba folktales. As revealed in the stanza, line 2 above, “Ijapa” and “Yanribo” are symbolic representations of people of “ambiguous characters.” These are the people without integrity. The poet, Abodunrin, juxtaposes the two binary characters from two different worlds. “Olugbo” and “Aresa” were two good kings whose lifestyles were worthy of emulation. This is why the poet in line 3 says: ‘Two Ogboni, it becomes three’ has been the watchword.” “Ijapa” and “Yanribo” were a couple whose lifestyles were full of fraudulent activities and unworthy of emulation. “Olugbo” and “Aresa” significantly represent contemporary leaders who have the mind of their people at heart. “Ijapa” and “Yanribo” signify political leaders with tricky characters. These are the leaders who behave like animals towards their people. In the poetic performance above, the poet uses historical allusion to Yoruba ancient kings and narrative folklore of tricky animals (tortoises) to create a healthy sensibility in the minds of the political leaders in his home country.

Another heroic persona is Mosunmola, a great warrior, veteran warlord, and celebrity among Yoruba people, in Nigeria. He is called “Abami-Omo Paraku,” that is, a “mystical child” whose life is sustained by “etutu meje” (seven ritual sacrifices) and Agbara meje (seven powers) to release him from the ethereal world of his kindred. He is revealed in the poem below as a heroic personage that needs to be emulated and eulogized for his heroic achievements and contributions to his society. He is a deliverer of his people from eternal forces.

Heroic Activism of Contemporary Political Martyrs and Freedom Fighters

Also, in a sub-theme of the collection entitled “Conversation with Living Ancestors” the poet examines the superhuman courage of living ancestors who had done greater exploits in the cause of serving their nation in the contemporary age. The celebration of heroic personae and legendary folks is predominant in the section of the poem. These are the people that sacrificed their lives in the cause of struggle to liberate their people from the hands of the oppressors. They were murdered or imprisoned for agitating for total freedom. A typical example of these freedom and political martyrs in the poem was M. K. O. Abiola, the Basorun and Are-Ona of Yoruba Land. He was a multibillionaire who was murdered for the cause of liberating his country's people from the hands of those who kept the nation in perpetual poverty as revealed in the excerpt below:

The age of Ogun, one of them said, is gone-long live the age of Abiola!
I speak about Abiola daughter of Iya-Sango who was impregnated at Ita-Baale.
Not to mention the Are-Ona, kinsman of the primordial Elesin, tethered like
Maami’s nanny-goat as a result of his legendary insistence to commit a
Reactionary suicide! Now the toads of culture-

Cannibalistic gloats in this age of Abiola
Have dared to raise their voices too.
In places as open as the market-place
They are saying that A-butcher
The Son of a sacrilegious nincompoop must be king!
That the Basorun must now lock horns with a renowned killer.
(Abodunrin 2002: 68-69)

In the poem above, the poet figuratively uses "cannibalistic gloats" to represent "political assassins" who murdered Abiola and his political aspiration of becoming Nigerian President in 1993. These were the political cabals who stood against M. K. O Abiola during his political ambition. This is the reason the poet says: "Have dared to raise their voices too in places as open as the marketplace." The use of "as open as the marketplace" symbolizes the "Nigerian political landscape." The cabals prefer "A-butcher," that is, a murderer to be a king (president) over them as metaphorically displayed in the poem.

Other political martyrs, activists, and freedom fighters are also eulogized by the poet. Abodunrin gives kudos to the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, Obatunde Ijimere, and Amos Tutuola, among others, who exposed the nefarious activities of ruling cabals in Nigeria. He acknowledges the involvement of Gaa-Faa, the upholder of social justice and the rule of law, in the Nigerian political landscape. Gaa-Faa is a lawyer that does not associate with any political hypocrisy or perversion of social justice.

In the dusty dungeon of Niguru
Gaa-Faa-aromatic beef that A-butcher's blade
Couldn't slice-remonstrance with the mummifying monster
In our midst, the history of laughter may never be the same Again!
Sebi, the dream of self-perpetuation of a contriving-Fatigued-Butcher
Like that of Bruno the pedophile, must of necessity come to Naught.
Employing the rule of law-Gaa-Faa-you castrated
A-butcher as you did Bruno the dog before him.
(Abodunrin 2002: 46)

Metaphorical Folktale of Power Tussles among Political Leaders in Nigeria and Africa

In part four of a collection titled "The Drama of Consolation II," the poet uses Yoruba mythological folktale to explicate power tussles among political leaders in Nigeria and Africa in general. The characters in the folktale are Lotaso—a manifestation of Esu-Elegbara, often describes as the trickster god; Alasofunfun—a manifestation of Obatala (god of creation) otherwise known as "white one;" Atunda--primordial slave and others. The setting is Oja-Oba or (King's Market) which is a center of intense activities where fortunes are made and lost. It is the scene of tense political and cultural activities. It is the place where "the dead," "the living," and "the unborn" cohabit.

The conversational technique used by the poet shows that there is a conflict of interests among the three gods. At first instance, Lotosa and Alasofunfun are battling for superiority and supremacy of power. Alasofunfun sees himself as Orisanla (arch-god) among the divinities. He is the god of creativity which moulds humans into different shapes. Apart from that, he is a god from the wielder of the rusty blade upon which civilization is embedded. While Lotosa is a god that possesses both good and bad traits. He is a man of binary character. During the conflict, Alasofunfun orders the Iroko tree to fall all its branches on Lotosa. Instantly, the Iroko tree obeys him by shedding all its branches on Lotosa. This action of the Iroko tree wounded Lotosa and Laroye. Because of the frustration and anguish encountered by Lotosa, Lotosa transfers his anger onto human beings created by Alasofunfun. All humans are creations of Alasofunfun and children of Atunda. On this notion, Lotosa rains curses on the children of Atunda. He pronounces that future generations of Atunda shall be subjected to slavery at home and abroad.

Lotosa
Because I will travel with your children
Across the sea!
Indeterminacy will be my essence
And in those days I will suffer with your
Children at home and abroad.
I will continue to dwell at marketplaces
My lesson in communal co-existence will be ever
More urgent.
And when religions, politics, and culture will be
Used to sway your children from the day to day
Realities of their existence
(Abodunrin 2002: 68-69)

In the excerpt above, Atunda's generation metaphorically means the African race. They are brainwashed by the West through religion, politics, and culture as expressed in line 10 of the poem above. Western culture and religion have eroded Africans' thinking sensibilities and consciousness in the day-to-day realities of their existence. Besides, Atunda's curiosity to know more about the futures of his yet-unborn generations makes him urge Alasofunfun to prophesize more. Alasofunfun assures him that there shall be revolutionary fervor through which Atunda's children will deliver and protect themselves from the hands of their oppressors through the "fiery temper of Ogun." In the Yoruba pantheon, Ogun is the god of iron. "Ogun's fiery temper" symbolically means "god of artillery and weapons of destruction." The poet connotatively says that children of Atunda will deliver themselves from the hands of their oppressors through "firearms" at home and abroad. "At home" allegorically means "African continent" while "abroad" means "overseas," that European continent. .

CONCLUSION

In the epilogue, Femi Abodunrin urges Africans to purge themselves from the colonial mentality and embrace African culture. He believes that is the only way Africans can assert their cultural identities and back to their roots. He also admonishes post-African imperialists to stop exploiting Africans. Besides, he implores African leaders to repent from their evil ways and take the path of good deeds.

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