

Reminiscence of Repressive State and Violence in Olu Obafemi's "The Terror in Dark Hollow-Frames" in *Illuminations: Songs and Dances from Belly of Time*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Obafemi captures the inglorious regime of General Sani Abacha in *The Terror in Dark Hollow-Frames*, one of the collections in *Illuminations: Songs and Dances from Belly of Time* using a reader-response theory. The essay shows the extent to which the civil society was repressed and bloodied by the military. It also reveals the resistance mounted by the opposition to countervail the unprecedented brutality and senseless killings that characterized the nation's body-polity. Obafemi's commitment to social justice and to primal egalitarianism is glaring in the poem. The military incursion into the Nigerian political space was a painful experience that threatened the very existence of the nation. The need to take a retrospective glance at those events and their tragic implications, therefore, is too formidable a feeling to be ignored by the poet. This paper is a valuable addition to the corpus of critical essays that studies how resurgent poetry reveal the repressive state of Nigeria during the military era, a role that is often recognized but little studied.

Introduction

Obafemi's commitment to social justice and to primal egalitarianism is conspicuous in all his literary collections. The extent to which he will remain relevant to his society depends largely on how he continues to serve as its spokesman- exalter of its values, proclaimer of its woes, and bard of its hopes. The indictment of the unequal distribution of wealth in his plays, poetry and fictions is one of the great utterances of his heritage. A consistent radical vision constitutes a glaring perspective in his

creative consciousness. The radical aspect of his works resides in the choice of theme and in the re-definition of social justice. The radicalism is unambiguous and incontrovertible. According to Lucas (1996, p. 1)

Nowadays radicalism is associated with oppositional forces. It means resistance to orthodoxy, to the accepted. It is therefore, a term that implies marginality. Radical groups are minority groups, radical opinion is a departure from the norm, from the everyday, from common sense...Radical behaviour, whether genuine or ersatz, has its fascination and probably deserves a study to itself.

One conspicuous blind spot in the study of Olu Obafemi's radicalism in *Illuminations: Songs and Dances from Belly of Time* is absence of adequate studies on how his resurgent poetry reveals the repressive state of Nigeria during the military era, a role that is often recognized but little studied. This essay advances an argument that a great deal of resurgent poetry, with its formidable defiance of the state, constitutes a counter-hegemonic discourse. Thus, this paper focuses on how Obafemi's "The Terror in Dark Hollow-Frames" is poetically deployed to delegitimize the military state in the face of oppression and terror tactics. This poem provides evidence that Obafemi expands his range of poetic expressions without sacrificing his visionary ideology.

The period between 1993 and 1998 was marked by brutality and an overt repression of the civil society by the military regime of General Sani Abacha. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada (2007 p.104) a common image of the military in Nigerian literature is that of war-mongers who in turn are highly privileged because of the power of coercion at their disposal. As the contents of the vast corpus of Nigerian war literature reveal, the soldier's preoccupation is death. Five basic

principles of military behaviour while soldiers held sway in public governance have been identified in Nigerian literature. They are painted as inter-agent of godly intervention; a group which although they are empty, thrive on war-mongering and destruction; a privileged class of their own; a shadow of politicians who they had edged out; and a class largely protective of their own selfish interest. Thus, their image is that of interventionists without the anticipated magical salvific potency. Usman (1999.p. 16) captures this same feeling in his words.

So much have been said about the misrule of the late General Sani Abacha by those who know better. I will only add that he had the worst human right record, the most insensitive government for the plight of the masses. He committed the most unthinkable looting of the public treasury, involving almost all members of his family. He built the most cruel security network that made it impossible for the public to dare challenge or criticize him or his government. During his rule, Nigerians experienced the greatest hardship and suffering. He also isolated the country from the outside world, denying Nigeria the benefit of global interdependence. Worst still, he was hell bent to succeed himself as civilian president.

The repression of Abacha was countervailed by the intense resistance of the elite class represented by writers and the press. At the centre of resistance to the dictatorial regime was the creation of a guerilla strategy in which critical writings and a private radio station persistently attacked the repressive policies and ventilated societal grievances about the regime. The military incursion into the Nigerian political space was a painful experience that had threatened the very existence of the nation.

The need to take a retrospective glance at those events and their tragic implications therefore is formidable a feeling to be ignored by writers. The study of Obafemi's poetry is an opportunity for stock-taking and reappraisal as Obiechina (1971.p.vi) rightly observes "Out of every serious crisis in the life of a people, there comes a deepening insight into the true nature of man and human society". Wole Soyinka sees the writer as a reformer who draws from the past for significant lessons of the present. This is what he refers to as the reappraisal of the whole human phenomenon.

The core argument of this essay is that poetry is not only about its structural form, its rhythmic styles, although this is important. It is also about what poetry is able to tell us about ourselves. Obafemi engages with Nigeria's political history, specifically, the political space which had been defined by repression and brute intolerance in which all voices of dissent from within and outside the military regime were brutally eliminated. The ugly scars of Abacha's brutality and tyranny remain glaringly visible; hence the tone of foreboding and the brooding sense of historic doom recur in the collection. The poem delivers an indictment of Abacha's regime for hijacking the nation from its progressive ideals toward chaos and tyranny. Prominent human right activists and the press openly criticized the unbridled corruption and perpetuation of brute force by the military custodian of the state. According to Osuntokun (2005, p. 9):

Closer reading and reflection convinced me however that the the rebellious poets and underground journalists were only symbolic of a new form of discourse that allows civil society to define the image of its own evolution and to deliver itself from the shackles of official propaganda.

Abacha's regime was characterized by repression and coercion of the civil society. It was a moment of hatreds, killings and sufferings. The Nigerian state increasingly became dysfunctional and venal. Abacha built a power block which Goran Hayden in Ogude (2006, p. 3) refers to 'a unified, usually coercive political super-structure which worked systematically to co-opt or control, silence or detain, neutralize or eliminate any voices and figures of dissent from within the ranks of its regime-building.' The era was marked by mysterious disappearance of key opposition elements. It was this dark period of political history that Obafemi poetically captures in his collection. The poem reveals the political betrayal, detention without trial and political murders as well as other intrigues which depict the military cabals as the sole proprietor of the nation and they could deny ownership to those who did not dance within its orbit or dare question their monopoly over it. Like the colonial regime of the past, Abacha transformed every dissenting political expression into a criminal offence. He underscored his ruthlessness through a series of political assassinations. He thus stamped his authority on the Nigerian landscape through blood and terror.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts a reader response theory in the analysis of the poem. This approach to textual interpretation was propounded in the United State of America and Germany and promoted by Stanley Fish, David Bleich and Wolfgang Iser. This form of literary criticism considers literature as an expression of social reality. Literary work explores issues as they affect society in which writer lives. There is no art, according to Adolf Sanchez cited in Ampah (2008. p.1) that has not been unaffected by social influences and no art has failed in turn to influence society. This conceptualization underscores the symbiotic relationship between arts and society. As an extrinsically motivated criticism, the theory presupposes that the reader's interpretation of text is a valid mode of critical analysis. According to Bennett and

Royale (2009, P. 18), reader response theory emerged in the late 1960s and became increasingly influential in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The theory overtly jettisoned the principle of art for art's sake. Dobie (129) maintains that:

The audience was expected to shake off its deference to the authority of the text...and become an active participant in the creation of meaning. The focus moved away from thinking a work as a self-contained aesthetic object to considering the experience that transpires when the reader and the work come together.

Readers' response criticism recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts real meaning to the work of literature. This criticism argues that a work of literature should be viewed as performing art whereby the reader comes up with his own interpretation. The term reader-response tells the story. This approach to literary appreciation turns the spot light on the reader, without whose attention and reactions, the text would be meaningless. In one sense, the work would not exist at all. It would be like the proverbial tree that makes no sound when it falls because there is nobody there to hear it (Dobie. 129). The reader response theory negates the principles of formalism and the new criticism in which the reader's socio-historical milieu in textual analysis is ignored. The theory examines the scope and varieties of readers' reactions and analyzes the ways in which different readers, sometimes referred to as "interpretative communities" make meaning out of interaction with the text. Dobie insists that the reader brings to literary criticism such fundamental concepts as personality traits, memories of the past, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment and a particular physical condition. Because reader-response criticism demands introspection and reflection on our own values and beliefs, it can lead the reader to deeper knowledge and greater cultural awareness.

In a way, reception theory is an offshoot of the reader response criticism though; certain inherent difference exists between them. Reception theory recognizes that readers in different historical periods are not likely to interpret or critique a given work in exactly the same way because of their apparent differences.

Analysis of “The Terror in Dark Hollow-Frames”

As a genre of literature, poetry is a kind of discourse, a means of communicating feeling and thought that could hardly be expressed in an ordinary kind of language. Poetic diction differs qualitatively from the language of prose fiction though it conveys equally valid meanings. Theoretically, poetry defines and formalizes the qualities of poetic thought and language, utilizing the technique of close reading with special emphasis on the connotative and associative value of words and on the multiple functions of figurative language- symbols, metaphors and images. Obafemi’s poetic devices employ literature as a social instrument for the poet to criticize certain moral vices and reads thus:

In
Your time
You fed us torture and death
Our deserts were bombs and bullets,
The prison was the Five Star we knew
We drank *tanwiji* and guinea-worm
From our muddy ponds.

The diction here is simple and direct. Abacha remained steadfast and firm with tough and serious measures to ward off all forms of constructive criticism. The nation, therefore, suffered from economic ailments resulting to a near or total collapse of social infrastructures. Many Nigerians groaned in poverty, misery, confusion and helplessness. The government symbolized a clear case of chronic bad leadership, unpatriotic and bad moral

values. What further emerges from this stanza and assails one's conscience is the image of politically motivated killing and insensitivity. The mood is predominantly gloomy and the tone somber. The lines reveal the story of desperate Nigerians under political siege of a brutal military leader. The government had no sense of direction or clearly stated national goals.

Silence

Was the sole saviour of our soul
From more bread of bullets and truncheons
We did not know how easy
It was to appease you
While apples grow freely
In our un-weeded gardens
Of jobless women-folk
Many of whom have
Fled on self-hawking in papal shores.

The persona deftly depicts, with an apt poetic form, the brute force that constitutes the main preoccupation of this stanza. Abacha was a power seeker who brutally and ruthlessly silenced opposition so as to establish a formidable power base capable of curtailing the criticism of the civil society. As a dictator, Abacha considered himself as a leader that can mould the course of political event and determine the mode of citizen's behaviour.

You hounded the voiced to their graves Long
before their destined time
Those who still found their ways and their legs
Raced to alien lands
Armed with a load of ideas and anger
In their wounded hearts
They went away
Where your bullets and bombs could not hit
them

But where their words sent slings of arrows
As daggers to your serpentine soul

This stanza shows how Abacha perceived his various tyrannical activities as a lawful exercise for maintaining law and order. He became the greatest enemy of his fellow countrymen, having made himself the source of their misery and unwarranted exile. The non-conformist civil society fiercely challenged the dictatorial tendencies of Abacha. This resistance served a very useful purpose in the poem. It helps to show the hollowness of Abacha's self-perception whose personal interest is equated with that of the nation.

To warn the rest of us voiceless ones,
You litter our land
With the blood of dead heroes
To teach us to keep the graveyard quiet still
Those among us with minds and hearts
Carried our pens, off-prints and desk-tops
underground
Keeping our hearts beating for tomorrow
Though our voices make you bear your fangs
And you push out more dogs more bullets more
bombs

The stanza condemns Abacha's belief that he could use the apparatus of power to perpetuate evils and killings. The harrowing experiences of the citizenry wretches incredibly into higher a voltage with the senseless killings perpetuated by the military. Nigeria became an object of self-depreciation. The military cabals brazenly persecuted their fellow countrymen with extreme insensitive and self-indulgent. Abacha salivated his wickedness with impunity and a dismal regard for peoples' welfare. Nigerians resisted this political corruption which blighted their journey towards egalitarianism and national development. The oppositions invented a guerilla strategy in

which fierce criticisms were sustained. An invisible private radio station also mounted ceaseless attacks on the military junta. The intellectuals who were hounded into exile similarly constituted a strong oppositional group that ventilated their grievances about polity and openly condemned the brute force of the military custodian of the state. Wole Soyinka, who was a reputed member of the opposition in exile, underscores the resilient efforts of the press and other intellectuals. Soyinka cited in Osuntokun (ibid.p.29) maintains that:

The press, and let me seize this very opportunity to stress this, the press has been magnificent, heroic and of these days, when there is pleasure, we are going to erect a statue, I am going to see personally to this, that a statue for heroism of the press is erected at a prominent place in this country.

Soyinka's essential commitment to moral imperative was suggested to him by humanity's track record since Nigerian independence which was bleak and chaotic in the main. Each historical moment in the Nigerian experience has thus produced its own interpreters, whose discourse challenged bad governance and unbridled corruption. Olafioye (2012, p. 19) affirms that:

In terms of the African experience therefore, the poet's task demands involvement through his art to enlighten and promote encouragement. Any African critical literary theory needs to recognize the place of poet or writers as both roadside warriors and internal partisans. They cannot stand by the waste-side and watch events happen or use the prismatic objectivity of the periphery or the circumference of distance. They must record them and help polity with some ideas. The poet is a mirror that reflects his own day.

How many in such an incontinent environment are so trained, inspired, skilled or educated to speak physiognomically that which others harbor in their minds? Only the poet can say so much in so short a sequence.

Within the context of the growing propensity of Nigerian literature for social and political commitment, Obafemi explores the question of power and its moral imperative. Power is used to acquire more power and to protect powerful positions from other contestants for it. Power gives his possessor the facility to abuse others and reduce the civil society to puppets. The people's commitment became total frustration when leaders suddenly became misleaders, and insensitive oppressors. Abacha was criticized with justification for humiliated the civil society by a treason promoted or sustained and orchestrated by forces that lacked purpose or ideology beyond self-perpetuation through organized terror. The persona says:

Those with un-perishable words
Tell us in our agonies
That no bullets can kill ideas
No bombs can silence dreams
We perceived and pierced at the screen
Where you showed up once in a stray screen
To reach the eyes behind those thick dark frames

The suppression and repression of press freedom reached an unprecedented peak during the regime of Abacha. This was not without reason. Abacha sought to achieve, at all cost, the self perpetuation that his military predecessor failed to attain. The military cabal, thus, regarded any form of critical opinion and news report in the media as indiscipline. The government oppressed, repressed, and bloodied the civil society and opposition groups as every constructive criticism and helpful suggestions were responded to with terror, harassment and

detention without trial. In the words of Ogwude (2008, pp. 80-81) a major index of human rights abuse is determined by the extent to which writers are censored. Inevitably, censorship is followed either by the detention or imprisonment of particular writers, and all restrictions of this type constitute a despicable infringement of the victim's human rights. Ogwude states further that detention without trial is not only a primitive act of physical and mental torture of a few individuals but it is also a calculated act of psychological terror against the struggling millions since it means the physical removal of patriots from the people's organized struggles.

We did not know
That your eyes were lustful and hungry
Searching other screens beyond our shores
Searching for supple tasteless
The wise ones tell us
What a child loves most to eat
Are merely the poisoned berries of his doomsday
So, Adieu
Terror behind dark hollow frames
As you lapsed in the laps of lethal apples
If only we had known much earlier
Many of our heroes would still be with us here

Abacha eventually died in office through illicit affairs he was fond of as seen in the above stanza. The image of the military painted in this poem underscores the contention that the fight for the rights of people was usually met with irksome by the government of Abacha. The criticism mounted by the civil society maddened the military cabal run by a minority, but one with reckless concentration of power.

Conclusion

What Obafemi does in this poetry is to catalogue all sorts of unthinkable cruelty and grave inhumanity that Abacha unleashed on his fellow Nigerians. Nigerians were shown to have suffered

suppression, oppression, exploitation, deprivation, social degradation, brutal killing, socio-economic and political injustice, poverty, hunger and lack of freedom of speech. Rather than entrench egalitarian society through purposeful leadership, Abacha employed a heartless security network to silence all constructive criticisms and useful suggestions that could move the nation forward. The poet's awareness of this repressive state of our nation during the military era and the zeal to let the world remember this inglorious historical past compels him to embark on this collection. The poem launches a radical critique of the extent to which military in politics brutalise the civil society represented by intellectuals and the press. In the sphere of African literature, this study contributes to an understanding of writers' concern for nation building as aesthetically rendered by Obafemi.

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