

## **The Broom Takes Flight: Odia Ofeimun and the New Nigerian Poets**

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*I want to meet the truth tonight  
without visions armed to teeth  
to straighten knotted branches.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

ODIA OFEIMUN'S POEM "For Christopher Okigbo" attempts to define the importance of Christopher Okigbo – the pre-eminent Nigerian poet who died during the Nigerian civil war – in the context of modern Nigerian poetry when it sees him as an embodiment of hope that remained unrealized more than three decades after; and a symbol of quashed dreams that sometimes affect all those who try, albeit in vain to attain a height of what Robert Frazer calls "perfection of expression"<sup>2</sup>:

And the drum is silenced in mid-throb

And charged,  
beyond arms reach  
beyond the power of our ululations to recall  
you brandish your unripened selves,  
riddles, in the galloping peals  
of our derailed sun<sup>3</sup>.

Among the younger generation of Nigerian poets Odia Ofeimun may well have been that real embodiment of some *realized* hopes; not because he is still alive, unlike Okigbo, but because Ofeimun exerts a tremendous influence in contemporary Nigerian poetry, both through his own poetry and his political journalism. In Ofeimun eminent capacity as both an elder writer who, when other noted Nigerian writers, intellectuals and academics were forced into exile, remained in the country even during the height of military dictatorship; also in his capacity as a consummate critic on whom most of the younger poets depend for critical evaluation of their works in terms of critical reviews, forewords and introductions. And most importantly, in Ofeimun capacity as the one time secretary general of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) – the foremost writers body in the country. It was during his tenure that he initiated a literary renaissance which culminated in the publication of the significant anthology *Voices from the Fringe* (1988), where most of the present crop of Nigerian poets first saw their works in print at the time when almost all publishing outlets were simply non-existent, (they still are); and when even the collectivity of the Nigerian heritage was destroyed by military rule.

Ofeimun's highly controversial debut collection *The Poet Lied* (1980) not only, as Amuta<sup>4</sup> would want us to believe, establishes a fresh departure in modern Nigerian poetry from a stylistic point of view, when it uses poetry to criticise poetry, or metapoetry; but also because, starting with it, Ofeimun's lean but important oeuvre became a testing ground for what Gareth Griffith<sup>5</sup> calls in a memorable phrase "the dispute between the generations" of Nigerian writers. For, to such critics like Funso Ayejina<sup>6</sup> *The Poet Lied* best illustrates the relationship between the artist and his/her society. The significant title poem ("The Poet Lied") is a subtle, yet profound indictment of what Ayejina calls "opportunistic pro-establishment artists" who are always ever willing to enter into an evil alliance with those in power despite the apparent subjugation of the people; waiting to be honoured with the `spoils` of power from those they (the writers) curse themselves to praise. The book achieves this without necessarily being just what Stewart Brown<sup>7</sup> calls "message from the front" with the attendant clichéd language of protest that may undermine the other important poetic ingredients that include complexity and completeness of imageries, musicality, (as opposed to mere rhetorical outburst), and linguistic subtlety<sup>8</sup>.

But for Ofeimun, the major aim of a poet, especially a Nigerian poet is twofold: the first involves an act of purification, freeing the mind of all hatred and despair; and the second, upholding some form of political right: the blunt denial and refusal of the human mind to all falsehood:

I cannot blind myself  
to putrefying carcasses in the market place  
pulling giant vultures  
from the sky

nor to the flywhisks;  
how can I escape these mind-ripping scorpion tails  
deployed in the dark  
with ignominious licence  
by those who should buttress faith  
in living, faith in lamplights?

And how can I sing  
when they stuff cobwebs in my mouth  
spit the rheum of their blank sense  
of direction in my eyes  
—who will open the portals of  
my hope in this desultory walk?  
Yet I cannot blunt my feelers  
to cheapen my ingrained sorrow  
I cannot refuse to drink  
the gourd you hold to my lips  
a garland of subversive litanies

---

should answer these morbid landscapes  
my land, my woman<sup>9</sup>.

Unlike the unnamed `poet` of the title who draws the ire, through out the collection Ofeimun asserts that he is not going:

...to be left alone  
to spin his shallow legends, his shy songs  
out of the destardised living of his kind  
out of the spectacle of aged mothers  
defiled by maniacs  
under the noses of their first-born.

He asked this much; to be left alone  
to celebrate what his skin was too thick  
to absorb. And for this  
this and nothing else  
he would write his name on the sands  
and dare storms to blot it out .

Having declared this, Ofeimun goes on to express his unwavering belief that young writers may well succeed in addressing Nigeria's problems where others failed:

We hurtled down  
towards dunghills to bare  
the rancid fodder of our own,  
our father's ineptitude?

We hurtle down like maladies  
wishing to save and be saved  
from the drought in people's hearts  
breaking and getting broken on our way  
we are searching for answers<sup>10</sup>.

Elsewhere in his new collection *Feast of Return: Under African Skies* (2000) in the "Anthem of the Oak" Ofeimun compares the young (Nigerian poets) to the oak on whose great strength one can and should pin his/her hope:

We stand  
the great oak  
on whose bark  
the bulls break their horns<sup>11</sup>.

The young are not just endowed with strength, but are the essence of life itself; the voice constantly making clear the meaning and purpose of such life regarding which Ofeimun says in a radical, communal tone (reminiscent of oral verse):

We are the great oak  
whose foliage  
is the cloak of life  
we do not wear  
we do not tear  
[...]  
we make a forest  
even when we stand alone.

And with the same blistering, dark tone in "The Drought and Us" from his second collection *A Handle for the Flutist* (1986) which, like the first collection denies vehemently the spurious claim that poets and poetry make nothing happen, Ofeimun reinforces his militant stance further:

We cannot beat the drought  
bowed at the feet of rainmakers  
we cannot beat the drought  
leaving divination to the priests  
let the millions rise<sup>12</sup>.

The objective of this paper is to show how some younger Nigerian poets are searching for answers: how Ofeimun is himself criticised and celebrated, imitated and immersed in the annals of contemporary Nigerian poetry<sup>13</sup> by some five younger poets whose works are influenced in a significant way by Odia Ofeimun. These five poets are: Remi Raji, Pius Adesanmi, Toyin Adewale, Ben Okri and Promise Okekwe.

### **Remi Raji's "Duty (for Odia)"**

Raji's poem reads like an instruction manual to a would-be-poet. But it is dedicated to Odia who is already an established poet. Therefore, the poem is as much addressed to Odia (for Odia) as it is addressed to readers who may or may not know the implied reader, Odia. In this regard, it is a reminder of the ideal role of a poet: a role that perfectly fits the ones being carried out by Odia Ofeimun in his poetry. It starts with a curious enumeration of these roles: "A poet's first duty is to make love/To language, to land and to liberty<sup>14</sup>.

Three things are advocated here in place of one, giving an impetus to the fact that the duties of a poet defy number, hence the couching in the first place of a poet's supposed first duty in a triadic structure expressed in a symbol of love. It follows therefore that love is the manifesto of poetry. And poetry which is bound by duty is invariably the love

of language, (any language), and love of the land; and more significantly the love of liberty. The fulfillment of this first duty would lead to the second duty:

A poet's second duty is to sew philosophies  
 Into armpits of Time, to stammer by corn-ears of metaphors  
  
 To conjure, confound and arrest Power  
 To cause the conscience to cry.

The second duty is a bit ambiguous and not well defined as the first; it is even abstract. It is this: philosophising about the trinity of language, land and liberty. It is not just an aimless textual discourse; but an intellectual exercise that would be permanently etched on time and literally sewed to its armpits. Both the time of the poet and that to follow would be indelibly marked by the ink of the poet. And one way of doing that is simply through the language of metaphors—the interlocutors of the poet in the dialogue through time with the language, land and liberty. For metaphors are never docile, innocent scribbling. Through them a poet miraculously conjures, compounds and arrests the excess of power, questioning the ruling elite and bringing them to size by "caus[ing] the[ir] conscience to cry": "A poet 's third duty is to evoke a geography of bleeding images / And in an economy of space, speak of epics and mock-epics yet to be".

Evoking a geography of bleeding images involves a wide ranging frame of references about injustice around the world, a thing which is common with Odia's poetry that is being celebrated here. The field of reference is both textual and economic, since it has to fit into the circumscribed space of imagination and the pages; evoking epics unfolding and those yet to unfold: "A poet's forth duty is to mine the mind / And make fires in bushels of ignorance". Mining the mind ignites realisation in once imprisoned, dark minds. And it is the fourth duty of the poet, of Odia, to do that as a prelude to the last duty, which is not certainly the last: "The poet's last duty is to live beyond mortal wishes / And eternal kernel of utterance... heaving, sowing". A poet like Odia is immortal in the permanence of his voice, (if not in his life); poets like him are prophets, seers, agents of change as outlined above. They are beyond mortal wishes: their voice is forever haranguing power, heaving and sowing.

### **Pius Adesanmi's "Odia Ofeimun: The Brooms Take Flight"**

Taking up the challenge posed by Ofeimun's "The New Brooms" in which the young are accused of not making any attempt at securing a promising future for themselves and the country, Adesanmi's poem starts with a graphic picture of the political situation in Nigeria, a thing which may not appeal to all, not least the addressee: Odia Ofeimun.

Because in his land:  
 -politicians disembowel the central bank  
 -generals milk Deltas for foreign Molochs  
 -professors profess ossified theories

- students spit on textbooks, kiss the bottle, AK47 in hand
- Sango's recipe for light remains a mystery
- public taps belch continuously in their emptiness
- newly weds, deaf to ministerial sirens, become macadamised pulp
- ogun forges ferrous pythons in front of petrol stations
- ayatollahs decree drunken orgies of limb-chopping  
and public flagellation
- 120 million corpses pretend to live<sup>15</sup>.

Despite all these inhibitions, the poet Odia tries, albeit unsuccessfully to rise to the challenge: “-he tried to dream and was told/that the generals were allergic to dreams”.

The military dictators that savagely ruled this country are wont to condone any opposition, anything coming from such loathing figures could not have been serious. A poet to them is always a liar: “Because in his land/-a poet lied”. Here there is reference to Ofeimun's collection *The Poet Lied*. His `lying` is an indictment, signifying his failure, and there is the need to carry on the fight:

(We need new brooms  
to clear the rot  
and renew our lot).

Because those that are supposed to fight are preoccupied with other things, hence they are too frustrated, too weak perhaps:

Those who have ears are:  
-too hungry to hear  
-too angry to care.

Ofeimun is shown to have done his best to affect a meaningful change in Nigeria through both his poetry and his political journalism. He has experimented with different forms, going to different places, yet to no avail:

He went to work  
Crisscrossing deltas and savannahs  
In search of tender palm fronds  
Which he found in abundance  
In Ibadan, Lagos, Nsukka.

His work finds significance in others, in the ways in which it inspires younger poets (like Adesanmi, Ogaga, Nduka etc) to take the gauntlet and proclaim themselves as the new brooms that sweep better and prick the eyes of dictatorship; yet it is also a sad reminder to the fact that his work fails:

But his brooms, unable to sweep  
Because... because... because...  
Attached themselves to a stick  
And the broomsticks took flight.

The new generation of Nigerian poets who are here addressing Odia are young sticks that are now taking the fight out of the country for the same reason that ossifies Ofeimun's voice, making him only a mere lying poet:

Here we are his new brooms  
Warming frozen verses in wintry winds  
Sweeping already swept Ivory Towers  
In Germany, Britain, America, Canada.

Taking a hasty flight out of the misery of the country may not be the end of it all; for these poets simply "warm...frozen verses in wintry winds" in far away lands. The honour of exile is not a distraction to others: "(those at home await their turn to fly)". But the exiled ones still maintain contact with those left behind, especially people like Odia who holds a special place to them as this revelation from Adesanmi vindicates:

I phoned the maker of brooms yesterday  
Yanked him from the auroral grip  
Of his imagination at work  
"Ah, you foolish boy! When are you coming home?  
We have work to do".

Odia is elsewhere described by Adesanmi as someone who:

... erupt from Lagos  
Writing a hundred books one second  
Publishing two hundred the next.

is always conscious of the work that awaits all the brooms that took flight; because "the zombies are back in their lair", as always. Now he is back at his best, for "...his dreams are back at work". Adesanmi concludes with a prayer: "may they not encounter Olareyin / on their path to fruition".

### **Toyin Adewale's "Odia"**

This poem is different from the rest as it were. All others have titles: they are only dedicated to Odia in a tacit subtitling. Only Pius Adesanmi's poem attempts a similar thing. Here the poem is simply titled "Odia" which gives the impression that it is not only dedicated to him, but is also about him. Odia Ofeimun the poet and the person is imbricated in the textual ambience of the poem, allowing one to deduce that it represents

Odia in a way in which readers would see him. It opens with a startling pronouncement: "[d]ashing antelope". An antelope is a beautiful animal known for its speed, and here Odia is likened to it. The second line then immediately contrasted this image of antelope with a counter image that almost denies, or at best modifies the first: "turbulence of warring waters / bottled together"<sup>16</sup>.

The image of a dashing antelope may invoke a picture of stability and uniformity; but it is not. Rather it marks turbulence: the poet Odia is replete with myriad features that make the antelope, which he is dashing. He contains a multitude of self, like Walt Whitman. Only that his is that of competing waves, each fiercely independent and dashing; yet mixed inextricably with others, bottled together as quite appropriately as "ocean wave over ocean wave". Each of the strands of these different waves may be meaningful only in a context; they are ocean waves only when bottled together. Together they are so powerful that nothing can cleave them apart, not even the whirlwind. The poem ends with a note of warning: "now off". The persona is an antelope that is blessed with other equally enchanting qualities other than just being dashing. His voice as his craft is for ever bottled, suggesting a sense of unity that nothing can possibly undermine, not even a whirlwind which is bluntly told to vanish. It is an ambiguous, if not vague, poem, which tries to capture the turbulence of the creative process and subsume it in a poet of stature of Odia, who is, it seems to portend, a quintessential image of a poet.

### **Ben Okri's "Darkening City: Lagos, 83, For Odia Ofeimun"**

Like Adesanmi's poem, Okri's echoes an earlier Ofeimun's poem "Flight from Lagos: September 26, 1976" in which, aboard a plane, the poet sees the jungle that dotted the city he dearly loves and vows to destroy it and free the city in three days; but he leaves the city with dreams of his plans. Okri's poem is not only about his alter ego—Ofeimun, but also about the darkening city that Lagos is at a point in time, i.e. the year 1983. Lagos is the city in which Okri once lived and Ofeimun still lives. It represents the ambience, at once textual and physical, where both poets make sense of their lives through their experiences of it. It is also the setting where both poets are ruled with an iron fist by successive military juntas. Certainly it is where:

Acids boil outside  
Crooked towers of state  
  
Where politicians disgorge our lives  
In vomitoriums of power<sup>17</sup>.

Both poets are weak in the face of the chaos that Lagos is. They are only equipped with their poetic voices among the multifarious cacophony of voices. They find out that their "lanterns flicker at cross roads"; for "the mad city coughs its pollutions/on figures in the streets". The city induces frustration: "Wastage in wild corners/Breeds anger in others". Survival is difficult in such harsh environment: "We rush through heated garbage days /

With fear in morbid blood-raw eyes". The frustration in the city translates into disorder and lawlessness, so much that: "Mobs in cancerous slums/Burn the innocent and guilty".

In such a situation life itself is both difficult and purposeless: when the city is full of "angled faces in twisted/patterns of survival" who are daily "assault[ed] with bitter humour/ and money-madness". The poets are trying hard to hold their heads above water, since they are "the minds of exodus", the yardsticks with which to measure the depth of the crisis in the city, which Okri refers to as "the measure of fevers". They are, according to Okri not living up to expectation because they are cocooned in an unwanted idealism, secluded in their private undertakings, "gripped in self-seeking/ towers". It is a pity Okri seems to be saying that the intellectuals that both he and Odia are, are concerned so to say with other less important things: "We shore status and security/Against the mania". They are nothing more than lanterns that are twitching and baring while "the naked city [is] in wild seasons". Okri reminds all that all poets are inextricably linked to each other: "We are bound/ One to one to all", even in this "city of tainted mirrors!/ city of chaotic desires!". The bond is supposed to be unbreakable even:

In drooping flames  
And vicious spasm

With cloudbursts above us  
We hold future fires.

Poets like Odia hold the future, as Okri writes elsewhere that they "bless things even in [their] pain/ [they] bless them in silence". Lagos where they happen to live may be: "Darkening city of all our loves/Our lives", but they still:

... hold future clarity in ash of time  
And time of music

In an assault on our  
Birds of prey.

The poem ends with the tragic silencing of the poets; their "lanterns crushed at crossroads", the darkness consumed them, and what remains is nothing other than

An image fester[ing] in this landscape  
Of scattered passions;

Cameos of terror  
Tremors everywhere.

**Promise O. Okekwe's "Letters to Odia"**

Like the other poems discussed, especially Okri's and Adesanmi's, Okwekwe's poem starts too with an epistolary indictment masked in a revealing tone: "You lose your head in poetry / Legend of the ageless words of pain"<sup>18</sup>. And like the other poets, Okekwe holds Odia dear; for she finds inspiration in his poetry and politics: "The throes of a bleeding generation / Hug your vantage press seeking solace". Younger generation of Nigerian poets find solace in Odia because they sympathize with him and seek to relieve him, or at least lessen his burden: "For how long shall the poet / Bathe naked in the rain of pains?" It is this burden that leads Odia to literally lose his head in poetry:

Like a woman in labour  
Bemoaning the infant's strained entry into the world

You lose your head in poetry  
The soul's expression of inimitable groans.

Like other great men of history, Odia has to bear this pain. He is contrasted with Jesus, but unlike him, he curses as he walks towards doom, as he heads to his own Golgotha which his politics would ultimately lead to. Unlike Jesus, he does not submit:

Trudging to the Golgotha  
Unlike the lamb  
Spitting at the tribal of greed.

He is armed with nothing, like Christ but his lone voice whose effect is catastrophic:

In a long gruelling race  
Clutching the baton  
To a *promised* land  
Your voice like the volcano  
Crushing the rocks.

This volcanic voice of Ofeimun would in the end results in defeating the hypocrisy of the ruling elite:

Rolling through stormblast of words—  
Your clenched fists  
Sign your belief on the tide  
Beyond leaders with dual tongues—  
Your voice is clear like the gong  
Only it bleeds in parts.

To take part in this lofty project is to align with Odia, to parody and copy him thus:

I stand on the towers  
Of your sophistry, Odia

Lending my ears to the storm  
Which sings softer than the siren

This evening, I will sit by you  
As your storm rages  
Rushing out of you  
And filling me to the brim.

No matter what Ofeimun's voice so beloved to other younger poets will not be silent, for "it is not for you that/ the day refuses to break", and that

The birds in your nest  
Sing eloquently to dawn

You have grown large in parts  
Drinking fervently from quiet backwater.

Okekwe implores Odia to continue supporting the younger poets who will one day take over from him: "Brew me a dream / Wine-tapper of a distant age". For these younger poets, as in Adesanmi's poem, enjoy and depend on it:

The palm fronds  
As you tickle their ribs

With their fingers caressing  
The expectant contours as you climb.

Because it is only Odia that can ignite passion in them: "Only you, Odia can find / The hidden lips of the succulent palm". And the poem ends with a note of satisfaction, envisaging some more:

Tomorrow again as you rise  
Your keg is full of wild dreams

Shall halt before familiar faces  
For the sweet wine must go round.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas older Nigerian poets (such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark etc) with their elaborate, embellished diction and recondite allusions are contented and appeared at ease writing

about the miscalculations and misdeeds that affect social justice, the younger poets, (those that started to publish after 1970 to date) boldly represented by Odia Ofeimun clearly try to literally fight injustice by attempting to inspire and mobilize the masses to fight for their denied rights.

Ofeimun's poetry is characterised by a heightened level of lyricism and structural unity and an ever urgent tone which not only reiterates the collective apportioning of blame for the political and economic failure of the Nigerian state which, according to him is "a country without anthems or boundaries/ a native land where homelessness is bliss"<sup>19</sup>; but, as it were, it re-energises the close-knit relationship between politics and poetry. The younger poets, the few remaining broom sticks that try to sweep the nasty rubbish mounds that Nigeria represents are taking a cue from Ofeimun. There is no better way to end than with this startling moral stand coming from Ofeimun in the poem "Never Ask Me Why": "My corpuscles don't readily / Marry slogans"<sup>20</sup>, which provokes a reaction from none other than the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, "My Tongue Does not Marry Slogan", who sees slogans as sheer hypocrisy by "phrase-mongers [who] have indeed usurped the world, / and dreams come packaged, handy like a sausage roll", which Ofeimun is wont to take part in, for his

... tongue eschews the doctored mint  
Of slogans. Dirge it may  
But not invoke the wake<sup>21</sup>.

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