

Ezenwa-Ohaeto and the poet's mission: Of vision and of hope

Ifeyinwa Ogbazi

Abstract

This paper makes critical analyses of four of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poems in the collection entitled, The Voice of the Night Masquerade – namely: “The Treasures at Home,” “On the Street at Night,” The Living and the Dead” and “Dancing for Tomorrow's Dawn.” Employing the postcolonial theory, it examines the poet's critique of the failures of many postcolonial nations of Africa-Nigeria inclusive. The paper investigates how the poet interrogates the prevailing realities as he depicts the different aspects of the rot that are common issues in these countries and highlights the travails of the people of the post colony. The paper examines the significance of the poet's representations and equally appraises the stylistics features that are discernible in the poems. The paper essentially argues that Ezenwa-Ohaeto, as a creative artist, responds to his mission of being the moral guide of his society. The poem analysed in this work proves the poet to be a harsh and compassionate critic, a forward looking visionary, and an optimist, since he does not leave scary prognostications. Despite the litany of problems in society, coupled with his admonishments, he adopts a futuristic stance by his consistence in rounding off the poems on a note of the hope of a more glorious future; thereby, living up to the writer's bidding of ultimately, offering hope to his people.

Introduction

It was Frantz Fanon who rightly pointed out that each generation had to discover its mission and subsequently would proceed either to fulfill it or to betray it. Oftentimes, the course that leads to the fulfillment of a mission is expectedly preceded by the articulation of a clear vision. "Mission" in the context of this paper makes reference to a duty bound responsibility, an achievement that has been targeted based on one's belief and conviction; while the term "vision" explains that which provides a road map for action; in this case, action that is geared towards the fulfillment of a mission. It strategizes perceptions towards the achievement of a proposed aim. Vision forecasts, predicts, projects into the future, and creates alternatives. For a vision to be efficient and appropriate, it is expected to be concretely visualized, properly formulated and vividly articulated.

Literary artists all over the world have this compelling responsibility of helping human society chart its course, and for decades now, African writers, especially those in troubled post-colonial countries, have played predominant roles in addressing the multi-pronged political, economic and social problems that face the continent. It could be argued that it is the paucity of vision, especially of the leaders, that has built up to the complex constellations of problems that the continent is submerged in today. Think of such countries like Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Angola, Botswana, Gabon, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, Zimbabwe and South Sudan, where political crises and poverty are so much highly pronounced. It is evident that in many African countries the blind-alley type of mission statements of leaders (that is, where there are any), are usually embodied in spurious and muddled visions that are already made suspect by wrong

values, corrupt systems, and fuelled by neo-imperialistic trapping - all manifesting against the background of a highly toxic environment. The current scenario, a typical example which can be illustrated with the Zimbabwe experience, has turned out, to be a faux pas that is embarrassing to decent societies of the world. While trying to buttress on the issue of vision with regard to African leaders, Philip Emeagwali succinctly illustrates it in this dialogue between a driver and a pedestrian. Herein, he highlights the point that without a clear focus, Africa stands the risk of "becoming like the driver who stops at an intersection and asks the pedestrian:

'Where does this road lead to?'

And the pedestrian replies, 'Where do you want to go?'

'I don't know,' the driver replies'.

'Then it obviously doesn't matter which road you take,' replies the pedestrian."

Emegwali goes on to enjoin that, "if we adopt the same attitude as the driver, Africa will have lost its chance to choose its future." It is for these reasons, among others, that Donatus Nwoga urges that for African literary artists, there must be "a sense of responsibility towards finding a solution to the internal and external problems of Africa, a sense of commitment" (26). In this respect also, James Adeola explains that: our literature must be seen as part of the struggle for the liberation of Africa, politically and morally. It must reflect a full respect for the value of human life, our

aspiration and that of humanity in general” (Nwoga, 26). Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s remarks in this respect is instructive. He points out:

Breyten Breytenbach perceives an interaction “between literature and national consciousness. A people is as much defined by how they see themselves as by the fact that they live within a certain frontier. Writing is a consciousness agent and if it is that it contributes to the structuring of a nation and its coming into being. (5)

No doubt, the colonial and postcolonial periods are evocative periods in the history of the African peoples. Hence, many writers from the continent have been pre-occupied, for decades with how the people in colonial and postcolonial Africa experience their new environment. Even after independence, it seems that the complex problems of the post-colonies have been so intractable. The poet whose poems are studied in this paper writes against the background belief that the multi-pronged problems which colonial rule in Africa precipitated do not just vanish by simply hoisting of the independence flag by the new African nations. It is in this respect that Ogbazi expresses the view that:

[...] postcolonial literature is not restricted to the literature that makes a critique of colonialism but also include works that indict the indigenous leaders after independence believing that the problems of many African countries after

independence can be traced to the historical experiences of colonialism. (49)

In his reference, also, to the poet and novelist, Kofi Awoonor, Prince Kwame Adika buttresses this view when he says:

His earliest creative works not surprisingly, are dominated by images not only of European imperial aggression but more importantly, its debilitating effects on contemporary African culture and people. For instance, several poems in his first, aptly named, major collection of poems, *Rediscovery* (1964), focus on the twin dynamics of colonial violence and the destruction it wrought on native cultures. (160)

This paper tries to explore to what extent Ezenwa-Ohaeto as poet has responded to the creative writer's challenge. In his collection of poems, *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, he dissects the many complex issues that have accentuated the dilemma in Africa generally. Imbued with great revolutionary poetic spirit, and coupled with his exceptional sensibilities, he addresses the many perspectives of the rot around him that have triggered off his imagination. Four poems from the collection – *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* namely - “The Treasure at Home,” “On the street at Night,” “The Living and the Dead,” and “Dancing for Tomorrow’s Dawn” will be used to illustrate how he has engaged in this vital mission of playing the crucial role of

changing particularly, his immediate African environment with its complexities and failings. Firmly by his belief in a glorious future, he captures the essence of the power of focus and its significance, while also proposing actions that will inspire and uplift humanity.

As regards the choice of the masquerade as a medium through which the poet's message is given, Ogonna Anugudo-Agu explains that in Igbo land,

Igbo Masquerade enactments is as diverse as there are segments of cultures in Igbo land, each with its own form of theatre, ranging from *egwugwu* masked figures with judicial powers, to night masquerades known for their satiric songs for lampooning social deviants. In other words, they act as social control in the community.
(97)

This view, no doubt, endorses the relevance of the poet's choice. As an "all knowing" agent, the masquerade is well aware of the troubling issues as they concern his people. He carries these issues as a burden- a burden troubling its spirit. He is as well properly equipped with the artistic vision with which to engage in this exclusive assignment. Very significantly, he possess the courage to interrogate the issues headlong.

The poet: His mission and vision

In the collection, *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, poet persona is coming from the land of the spirits. He has come from

the ant hole where he resides and he is visiting in order to express his views concerning erring man and his troubled society. In this instance, he is on a designated mission and this mission could be likened to that of the prophets of the Bible like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and John the Baptist who existed in the past and who played predominant roles in making revelations that were and still are crucial to mankind in all societies the world over. Hence, in *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, the poet has appeared to appeal to the people's conscience, to admonish, to correct, to counsel and to point the way forward. Paul Onovoh points out that, the 'stinging bee' (73) begins to sting the consciences of society, the society that opens its arms to cheerily welcome all sorts of 'idiot sons' forgetting how heavy it has been to carry a "viper, and willingly agree to cushion their heads with the 'cobra' (39). Having come from the land of the spirits, he has the singular privilege of seeing beyond the realm since the masquerade possesses this distinct capacity of searching the mind, probing human reasoning and actions, scrutinizing events more profoundly and correctly. The poet rightly tells us that:

the masquerade sees all
thoughts hiding in the mind
the inchoate thoughts forming
thoughts that drought the land, (60-61)

Of great significance also is the fact that his clear vision is evident in the way he articulates precisely the problem of his society. Exploiting his vantage position and employing appropriate linguistic items such as proverbs, parables and rhetorical questions that are "sharper than razor", he makes his

pronouncements, "searing the conscience of those that hear, warning them that the thief had taken enough and that now the owner feels loses [losses?]" (Onovoh 39). The shrillness of his voice is imbued with awe and it is equally commanding, imposing, intimidating, as it indicts wrong doings and dispenses justice, while also pointing to the direction that will lead to a more viable future.

The poem "The Treasure at Home" (19-22), is divided into four segments. In each of these segments, the poet develops the idea of the treasure that is central to the entire poem. In other words, treasure constitutes the nucleus of the poem; its binding force. The idea associated with the treasure is that the more authentic, valuable and enduring treasure which is at home has been forgotten as the people yearn for the treasures of other lands. This yearning takes the people across distant places and through numerous hardships like "burning deserts" and "surging seas". The description of the desert as burning implies that it is arid as well as shelterless, it is not fruitful, therefore, not a comfort zone. To compound this, the description of the sea as "surging" indicates that it is full of turbulence and therefore dangerous. These are affective imageries. The persona, thus, shows that the irony in this search is that the real treasure is forgotten at home while the searcher embarks on fruitless dangerous journeys. Invariably, the poet emphasizes the futility in exilic search for illusory, non-existent treasures particularly in the diaspora. The idea of traveling is further employed in order to widen the scope of the poem for it is related to the theme of the ceaseless and unnecessary struggles which man is often engaged in.

In the second segment of the poem, the nature of this treasure is explained as the poet asserts that it is not only inanimate but

also animate, in the form of human beings, which makes reference to the richness of the abundance of human resources. Nevertheless, even in the face of such abundance, the persona still seeks the treasure in the sanctum of shrines and other inaccessible and sometimes even sacred locations without success. The poet also, points to the humiliating experiences of the travellers. The fact that the priests are even searched at departure locations highlights the view that they are ironically untrustworthy as the keepers of the treasures and as figures and models of moral consciousness which is indicative of the extent the moral fabric of the nation has been so much destroyed. The images in this second section are used to stress the sense of loss and unfulfillment. The individual who weeds the farm does not own it and those who are alive merely exist. The persona/masquerade further extends this to include the idea of human dispersal as well as shadow existence since as migrants the people residing in foreign lands looking for treasures, are usually anxious, worried and afraid. The foreign environment attracts a lot of tension, uncertainty and insecurity. Those in the diaspora are essentially strangers who, in spite of their seeming affinity with their foreign base, nevertheless, remain unwelcome intruders. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu explicate exhaustively on the many complex problems that migrants grapple with in the diaspora (239-260).

However, we observe that there is a twist in the third section of the poem which ushers in a streak of hope. This is discernible from the change in tone as the persona reassuringly insists that the memory of this treasure is still available, although the technological gadgets like the radio and television, including the medium of newspaper, cannot convey any information on the

location of the treasure. Nevertheless, the persona yet assures the reader that the treasure is not lost. The question that is asked at this section concerning "whether ears are for adornments" and "whether one must strike a match to see the face of truth" coalesce to make the obvious point that "life is not a graveyard." Instead, life is meant to be lived to the full –wholesome life lived to the point of fulfillment. And this is only realisable when individuals of a nation have the propensity to visualise, if they have the vision of how best to identify, explore, and exploit the treasures to both personal advantage, towards the growth of their immediate communities, as well as to the benefit of the general society.

The subject matter of this poem, which is based on the fact that people usually undermine and forget the superior nature of what they possess while struggling strenuously to acquire an inferior object, which invariably demeans their image captures a general tendency in human interactions. Often times, man hardly cherishes what he has, coupled with the insatiability inherent in people especially Africans. This inner longing in the majority of Africans particularly the youth to belong elsewhere instead of accepting who they are as a people and appreciating their God given gifts; being proud of their heritage, recognizing what they have and making the best out of it, constitute the crux of the many unfulfilled lives that are lived in the continent. It is partly to expose these unhealthy trends in many African nations including Nigeria that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores extensively in her elaborate novel *Americanah*. Moreover, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu investigate the different images of the diaspora as represented by Adichie in her collection of short stories- *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Among these stories are: "The

Arrangers of Marriage,” “Ghost,” “On Monday of Last Week.” These images include:

The image of diaspora as alienation (240)

The diaspora as asylum (247)

The diaspora as illusion of superiority and opportunity (251)

The diaspora as metaphor for oppression and exploitation among Nigerians (256)

The poet is invariably making the crucial point that what the African youths need particularly in order to succeed are a clear vision and a sustainable environment which is the responsibility of leaders, in their various capacities, to ensure that these are obtainable. Thus, the thematic focus of the poem could be related to social, economic, and cultural affairs. In addition, this thematic focus could be located in the family as well as the wider community. In order to complement this theme of the unending search for treasures, the poet employs an appropriate style. It should be observed that punctuations are used sparingly as in

where are the treasures
that recall smiles at night
lighting up our eyes in darkness... (20)

A question mark would have brought a long pause after that stanza, but its absence makes the reading of the poem faster and almost makes the stanza endless. Therefore, the absence of a question mark rather than being a flaw is a stylistic technique that complements the theme of endlessness in the poem. In section three of the poem, the run-on line:

Their tired eyes have seen
Fires set to burn memories (21)

gives the poem a continuous feature which is in tandem with the theme of endlessness.

Very significantly, we have to note that in as much as the poet criticizes the lack of wisdom and vision that often generate failures in human activities, he nonetheless, encourages the readers by imputing that there is still hope once we, as a people, can remember, so far as we can still appraise values and situations correctly thereby appreciating what we are and what we have. With these, invariably, all is not lost. In this regard, Nwachukwu Agbada explicates on the essence of a creative artist being able to raise the hope of his people in this way:

Often times the creative writer strikes a note in our life by his touching the inner recesses of our hopes, fears or frustration. By so doing our hopes remain hopeful, our fear and or frustration turn into optimism because some other persons, through his writing, shares our despair. After all, the writer is a person who has hope in existence; indeed a person who does not share such a hope can hardly write. (qtd. In Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 106)

Essentially, the poet upholds so much the act of remembering, since in its commemorative effects, it offers the

opportunity for flight and transcendence of limits. He believes that the ability to recall and appreciate the past will help the people to grapple with their present predicaments. Possessing the capacity to remember has, as well, a comforting and rehabilitating effect that imbues them with the inner strength to forge. Coupled with these, it empowers them and enlarges their vision; ultimately, making them better and productive members of their society.

The setting of the poem, "On the Street at Night" (27-28) in terms of time is ostensibly in the night when everywhere has been enveloped in darkness. There is the implication, however, that in spite of the darkness, the persona because of his unique gift could observe, analyse and comment on the various characters that people the street. The poem begins with the view that history is hoisted everywhere. However, the personal histories of those characters on the street are not flattering. The observation of the persona is that the eyes of these people portray them as if they have taken the "drug of despair;" that is, they appear in a deep state of despair, of frustration as if they are drugged. It is this state of despair that the rest of the poem focuses on by highlighting its nature, causes, and effects. Hence the phrase 'glow with the drugs of despair' appears many times in the poem to suggest the frequency of this state or feeling of despair. It is implied that these people in despair are educated and that their expectations in a normal society are not extraordinary, but the crux of the problem is that those expectations are unfulfilled. The poet therefore comments that such characters do not exist in a normal society and as a result, they have ended up being a-religious, amoral, and only interested in the thrills of life that are associated with the Western way of living. In effect, the poet

argues that since they possess doubtful aims and are visionless, their anger in their state of despair makes them immoral and they become wastrels. Their hopes to fulfill their dreams make them aimless wanderers who are only preoccupied with mundane pursuits. Thus the histories of their lives are histories of "fragmented ideals" and "frustrated aims."

Moreover, part of what makes the despair acute is the fact that it is the result of an unfulfilled desire to acquire material possessions. But shouldn't the eyes pale in despair rather than glow? This a question prompted by the poet's recurrent use of '...eye on the streets glow with the drugs of despair.' Most probably, the poet believes that the vain things these youths do to overcome their despair give them a false sense of progress whereas they only get worse in the real sense. Hence, the almost oxymoronic use of glow and despair together serves a stylistic purpose. Towards the end of the poem the poet refers to the real cause of this despair which is the fact that "blind politics, lead blind leaders into blind alleys." The major implication of all these is that in a social organisation that is supervised by wise and visionary leaders this feeling of despair would have been erased. The poem closes with a statement that this feeling of despair is capable of metamorphosing into violent upheavals since the people in despair "now jump into the street."

At this point, the poet leaves us to wonder, whether the action of these characters, who harbor a streak of defiance, is merely reactionary or pro-active. The poet subtly questions the collective strong will of the people. The underlying question is: Do the people have the capacity to embark on a much needed revolution? In addition, we find that the images in the poem establish a theme of despair and suffering. Each word in that

image cluster expresses a painful action or experience and at the same time evokes a sense of despair in the reader. The imagery is re-enforced by the energy of the diction. For instance, the image that is evoked with the use of the word "blind" which principally denotes darkness; without light, is quite instructive. As a result, we find: "blind politics" - politics without agenda, without manifesto and without any sense of direction; "blind leaders" - visionless leaders, - leaders with neither sense of purpose nor well-articulated aims and with ambition that are not anchored on moral principles; "blind alleys" - avenues without light, leading nowhere, therefore the people can only grope along the alley. The intended effect of the poem is to illustrate part of the contemporary experience in Africa and other Third World countries – where nations only drift aimlessly without defined purpose and sense of direction.

The thematic focus emphasizes that there is frustration, as well as futility associated with the often aimless activities of the people-activities of both the leaders and the led and usually carried out against the backdrop of either impaired vision or a total lack of it. The poem gives a premonition of the consequences of such feelings, thereby implying that there is the need to eliminate such feelings in the people. In effect, the artist reminds the reader of the importance of hope and its effects on human activities in all forms. Therefore, here again, we find that the poem ends with a note of hope. In spite of the attendant darkness, it is never wise to lose hope as hope certainly sustains. Paul Onovoh highlights this aspect in his review of the entire volume thus:

The "Chant" of the Night Masquerade which is a beautiful presentation of the splendour of Igbo oral performing art leaves the audience with the certainty that all will be well. It is to be understood that as the great Iroko tree yields to the tiny teeth of the bat, so the oppressor will be forced out of his throne of injustice by the combined will of the masses.... (39)

In 'The Living and the Dead' (41-42), the poet addresses a serious issue: the connection between the living and the dead, the unbroken chain between the living and the cult of the ancestors. It is important to remember that the persona has just returned from the land of spirits, so he knows about spiritual things and has answers to spiritual questions. The poem begins with a question:

What bond links
the living and the dead?

and the rest of the poem is dedicated to answering this question. We read in the fourth stanza:

what bond links
the living and the dead
But the bond of memories... (43)

And in the tenth stanza:

A bond of memories

links the dead to the living... (43)

So, memories are the bond which links the living with the dead. And memories are hailed as being able to 'wipe away tears,' to 'cradle hopes' and to 'dust them'. The poet expresses the view that people should appreciate memories when they can because they are the bond that connects the living with the dead; not rituals, not worship, not reverence. The persona wields authority here because he is a masquerade returning from the land of spirits. He is now like a bridge, a mediator between the living and the dead; the passage to the two worlds.

The poem ends with a subtle piece of advice; that only the living can render help. We read:

I call on the living
I remember the dead
I prod memories— (42)

In a sense, this poem is a call for people to live good lives so that the memories the living will have of them after their death will be pleasant. For since memories are the connection between the living and dead, a dead person who leaves bad memories behind is readily forgotten.

In the fourth poem, "Dancing for Tomorrow's Dawn", (80-82) the image of the dawn is used as a metaphor for the hope which the poem highlights. This poem' begins with factual statements associated with necessary bodily functions like eating and excreting. These statements that are admonitory gradually change in tone as the poet makes aphoristic comments. Through

these aphorisms the impression is given that acts cannot be altered and that reality is like a "sharp knife" which cannot "carve its own hilt." Furthermore, the poet/persona uses several proverbial statements to reinforce the view that the nature of society's tribulation is known and that such tribulations must be eliminated. Thus, he insists that the act of eliminating such tribulations is like dancing a dance of expiation.

In the second segment of this poem, the persona indicates that in times of dire stress and extreme difficulties the oppressed are lucky if they can even get the physical assistance of human beings with serious physical disabilities; the lame, the cripples and even those with their arms cut off. In effect, the writer here illustrates that rather than allow the prevailing ugly situation to deteriorate to that of hopelessness, that there is need for unified action to prevent such terrible situations. Such concerted actions will make society a better place for human habitation. In order to emphasize this idea, the poet argues that one "cannot hold a cane and allow a dog bite one," and also that one cannot possess "a spade and dig a hole with fingers." In effect, the poet is buttressing the point that one must use one's energy, qualities and intellect to overcome one's difficulties which is why the poet/persona insists that "if you desire honey from rocks/do not ask the health of the axe." The rock is strong object and it blunts the axe, so, the poet infers that the energy or intellect used to make one's life and environment better may be weakened or diminished but that is not enough reason for inaction. The last segment of the poem that states:

Clear the weed
Till the soil

for those with teeth
must eat the com cobs
After the rain
the flood clears the debris
the debris flows into the streams
the stream struggles to the river
the river runs into the sea
the sea scrambles to the ocean
into the depth the debris is dumped,

depicts a number of chain actions and makes the hope encapsulated in this poem very vivid. For example, the persona perceives society like a farm which needs to be cleared of weed and the rain is also portrayed as an expiating agent that washes society clean. Ending also on a hopeful note, the view of the poet/persona is that the future shows that society will develop positively if efforts are made in the right directions. The poet-teacher instructs authoritatively that for this hope to be translated into concrete and fruitful results and consequently usher in a bright future, there are prerequisites which must be met. These include:

- There is hope if society purges itself of its excesses. That is to say that in order to wash itself clean and be healed, the expiation rite must be performed. For all to be clean, the expiating process is elaborated thus: "into the depth" of the ocean, all the debris must be dumped, leaving everywhere clean, fresh, for a new beginning - a new dawn to emerge.

- The people should be able to chart out a clear-cut focus; forging the right direction towards which the generality of the members of society are expected to channel their efforts.
- The people must possess a type of strong will with which they can stand against injustice, confront bad leaders and punish corrupt practices. In this sense, a kind of revolutionary spirit is necessary in order to checkmate the excesses of people in society and what Emenyonu describes as "the psychopathic personality of African dictators" (183).

The importance of people investing their collective efforts in what should be beneficial to the general society is also highlighted. Central to this unified action is the harnessing of the collective vision of the people that will invariably translate into a strong and enduring vision.

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing therefore, Ezenwa-Ohaeto can be dubbed the patriot and the optimist. Evident in the alarming prognosis he expresses in a clear voice, is the fact that of his perceptiveness as a poet – a poet who could perceive from the exalted position of a visionary - vista of a much improved and progressive society. He courageously denounces ineffective actions – those actions that neither lead to the productive growth of the individual, nor that of the general society. Just like some other distinguished poets, he envisions and crafts a new course - a bold vision that incorporates a new agenda that he artistically constructs. He fashions out a fresh identity which embodies novel ideals as well as proposes

new traditions that make demands on us to redefine ourselves as Africans and also re-direct our steps. In addition, he enjoins his readers to envision new ways of doing things.

We find that in these poems, especially, the poet has harped on the significance of the future because he believes that it is the future of a whole people that is at stake. Hence, in spite of the attendant hopelessness, the people must be mindful that the future must not be underrated; the future must be well predicted, properly planned, and collectively protected, because as Emeagwali explains, "our image of the future inspires the present and the present serves to create the future." It is in this connection that we discover that the poet stretches his imagination beyond the present ugly situations. In his optimism, therefore, he believes that a brighter future is still possible.

To a very large extent, therefore, Ezenwa-Ohaeto's art is a distinctive one that points to a new direction in line with Chimalum Nwankwo's statement that "a new direction must always be a new direction *in vision and thought, in aesthetics and craft*" (emphasis mine, 48). *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* is, no doubt a poet's struggle for the vision of a more dynamic and progressive Africa - a new Africa, and by extension a new world.

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Ogbazi, I. is an associate professor in the Department of English and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra, State, Nigeria.