

Beauteous Birds Under Africa's Burning Skies: A Perspective on the Praxis and Exegesis of Popular Literature in Contemporary Nigeria

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Introduction

The title of this paper is derived from one of Odia Ofeimun's poetry collections for dance drama entitled: *Under African Skies*. This collection is paired with *A Feast of Return*. It was launched in March 2000 in Lagos when Ofeimun clocked 50. Also launched on that day were two other collections of poems: *Dreams at Work and other Poems* and *London Letters and other Poems*. While the former among other subjects, pays tribute to renowned activists and artists all over the world, from Dambuzo Marechera to Che Guevara, Ortega y Gasset, Vaclav and John Muafangejo, the latter captures Ofeimun's diasporic adventures in Britain, couched in rhythm and trope of love with banter. A poet and political activist, Ofeimun stood tall throughout those decades of military dictatorship in Nigeria and other parts of Africa; his graying beard a living witness to "decades of living through whispers/decades when only poetry could make things happen/on streets and squares in a dialect of flowers" (Ofeimun, 29).

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Diversity in Unity of Nigerian Letters

Looking back at the state of Nigerian literature, especially between 1980 when LSN was formed and now, there is no doubt that ours is the proverbial traditional market with innumerable entry points or access paths. Many positive developments have taken place as registered in the multiplicity of voices, varieties of genres and modes, diverse thematic engagements, different modes of production and consumption as well as different ideological commitments. From thousands of literary creations produced in the past four decades, one acknowledges the prodigy of energy and abundance of talents being exhibited by Nigerian writers across generations.

Issues of postcoloniality and migration have engaged the attention of writers and critics while some writers like Tanure Ojaide in *Delta Blues*, Kaine Agary in *Yellow Yellow* and Ahmed Yerima in *Little Drops*, have focused on the evils that humans do to the environment and the devastating responses of the environment to

these evils. These include deforestation, desertification, oil spillage and pollution. The adventure of the military in postcolonial politics of Africa, giving rise to dictatorship, repression, civil war and parlous economy has been fictionalised in Odia Ofeimun's *Go Tell the General*, Frank Uche Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh*, Olu Obafemi's *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit* and Ojo Rasaki Bakare's *Drums of War*. Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and Soyinka's *King Baabu* are some of the canonical representations of the military rule experience in Nigeria's imaginative literature.

The oil crisis in the Niger Delta as well as the recent upsurge in violence, due to Boko Haram insurgency, terrorism, armed banditry and farmers-herders conflicts especially in Northern Nigeria, resonates in drama, poetry and fiction. For instance, an anthology of short stories and poems has been published by Malthouse Press on the Boko Haram insurgency-*The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Baka Haram*. It is edited by Tanure Ojaide, Ramat Mohammed, Abubakar Othman and Hyeladzira Balami. This anthology captures with benumbing verisimilitude, the ordeals of people in areas ravaged by Boko Haram terrorism. We see the irony of insecurity and helplessness of citizens and security agents in those areas with seemingly water tight security. There are echoes of abduction and kidnapping of students from Chibok, Dapchi and Boni Yadi. Thus, terrorism which used to be like faint whispers in the news from distant lands in the Middle East like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Syria for decades has now become a steaming hot subject agitating the muse of contemporary writers, young and old.

Many Nigerian writers contend with failures of post-independence governance. However, what is constant is the issue of corruption, decayed infrastructure, and parlous economy which often serve as a basis for military intervention in politics or as a justification for return to civil rule. Between Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*, Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*, Ifechi Jane Odoe's *Edge of the Brink* and Yemi Atanda's *The Vomit*, Nigerian literary drama has relentlessly censured the excesses of government officials and lethargy of the citizens in military and civilian regimes.

In the realm of literary criticism, scholars and critics have adopted various theoretical framework for interpreting and evaluating literary productions, from Structuralism (Sunday Anozie) to Semiotics (Ropo Sekoni), Marxism (Omafume Onoge, Chidi Amuta, Biodun Jeyifo, Olu Obafemi) Post-colonialism (Remi Raji-Oyelade), Feminism (Catherine Acholonu, Tess Onwueme, Mary E. Kolawole, Irene Salami, Mabel Evwierhoma and Akachi-Ezeigbo), Psychoanalysis (Segun Oyewo), Archetypal theory (Femi Euba) and Genre and Phenomenology (Oyin Ogunba,

Ernest Emenyonu, Abiola Irele and Dan Izevbaye), among others.

In the last four decades, many significant accomplishments have been recorded at individual and collective levels in terms of creative and critical works. Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature on account of his drama of existence. That was in 1986. Other writers such as Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Biyi Bandele and Chimamanda Adichie have also won various international laurels for their creative works. Indeed, so many beauteous birds have been flying and perching under the crisis-ridden skies of the African continent. Nonetheless, in a bid to address the broad theme of this conference, "Celebrating the Diversity of African Literature" with especial focus on Nigeria, the paper has decided to engage one aspect of literary tradition that is a vital expression of creativity, imagination and entertainment-popular literature.

There is no doubt that popular literature is curiously occupying the periphery of literary criticism and pedagogy in our academy today. This is more evident in the curricula of literary studies across Nigerian Universities, public or private, whether we talk of National Universities Commission's Minimum Standard or Internally Generated Reworking (IGR) of it. Attention to popular literature is dwarfed by the dominance of drama, poetry, prose narrative, orature and literary theory. Even in the study of theories, popular literature is hardly the favourite for textual illustrations or exemplifications. It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that popular literature deserves as much attention as other genres of literature. This is because like other literary genres, popular literature is not only an expression of people's emotions and experience, using creativity and imagination, it also deploys figurative and rhetorical devices to represent the experience of common people in confronting the challenges of everyday living. Thus, as we celebrate laudable expressions of creative muse in drama, narrative fiction, poetry and orature, we need to embrace in our celebrative ardour and bring on board to the arena, the creative genius of artistes who have chosen the mode of popular arts to entertain, educate and document living experience of the people over the years. The celebration will not be complete in the absence of a well-deserved attention given to those screen shots of daily experience of the ordinary people on the streets, in urban slums, city fringes and countryside as well as how their lives are shaped by and how they in turn consciously influence politics, culture, gender, economy, environment and other imperatives of contemporary life.

Popular Literature in Nigeria: Perception and Praxis.

Popular literature is a medium through which the "silent" segment of the population finds its voice. As an essential part of a people's popular culture, popular literature

adopts as a vehicle of expression, any form that is widely admired and endorsed by the people at a particular moment in history, hence, its dynamic and protean nature. It is particularly different from elitist literature that panders to the taste and sensibilities of the ruling class. The former is deemed suitable for the common people because they can easily access such creative products, not only in terms of monetary costs, but also in terms of form, language and style of composition. The preference is for a proportionate blend of simplicity and complexity in the form and medium through which the popular literary product is created and packaged for the audience. Sourced in Latin "*populus*" or "*popularis*", popular literature is produced by and for the great masses of the people in a community, the social category that ancient Romans would refer to as "plebeians". Quite central to popular literature are the common people whose existential struggles constitute the raw materials for artistic and literary productions and who also constitute the target/audience of such works of folk ongm.

From the foregoing, it is decipherable that popular literature is characterised by affordability of cost, simplicity of style, accessibility of language, ease of mechanical operation, topicality and relevance of subject. It manifests in narrative, dramatic and poetic forms, yet, it takes on other communicative modes such as music, dance, cartoon, film and video. It also takes as its legitimate tool of expression any technological innovation prevailing at a particular age. Today, technology is the soul of popular literature; hence, the idea of text as prints held from the invention of the printing machine in 1485 by William Caxton, is stripped of its fixity. Interestingly, our notion of the "text" has been liberalized to include extended oral forms and performances in audio-visual mode. As Frank D'Angelo observes, "in the English Departments today, the objects of criticism include imaginative literature. But they might also include philosophy, history, mass media texts; the texts of popular culture and so on" (31). Thus, a text, he argues, is a rhetorical exercise since it is a form of communication and to that extent; it is "multitudinous" (Scott and Brock, 7). A text uses some devices to affect the thought, actions, or emotions of an audience" (4).

Apart from the radio, popular literature is also disseminated through other media such as television, cartoon, film and video and the Internet. While some people tend to look down on graffiti as an ignoble art meant for the frustrated and undistinguished members of the lower class, it is a means of capturing the sensibilities, emotions and thoughts of its contributors on social interactions and goings-on in the socio-political sphere. One can also add the burgeoning tradition of spoken poetry and popular songs on the streets, especially reggae and hip-hop in

contemporary Nigeria.

The revolution in Information and Communication Technology has taken to another level, the notion of the text as writers disseminate their creative works through blogs, personal and institutional websites, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and other means of communication across a borderless Globe. For instance, while Odia Ofeimun experiments with stage performances of his poems as dance drama complete with music and choreography, the new generation of Nigerian poets explore the burgeoning art of spoken word poetry, using personal blogs or group platforms to disseminate the products of their creative reflections.

However, the concerns of popular literature and the essential elements of poetic aesthetics are evident in the works of writers across generations. They all address topical socio-political issues as they affect the common people in their everyday living and in their relationships with their rulers. Issues of exploitation, social inequality, oppression, marginalisation and social injustice are also addressed, using appropriate images and symbols in this genre. One agrees with Karin Barber when she remarks that popular art is usually "a site of contested evaluation objectified with the low class" (9). Since popular literature emanates from the people, it serves their interest by opening their eyes to the historical condition of their existence. Sometimes it offers solution to problems confronting the people in the course of their social relations.

Apart from the impact of revolution in ICT on popular literature, its rise is also facilitated by the fact that the boundaries between the elite and the populace in Nigeria's cultural context are quite fluid and tenuous, hence, we find the rich and the poor consuming works of the same artistes or of the same genre, even though in different social landscape. Apart from these, the project of democratisation which guarantees rights to free speech, association and movement among other fundamental human rights also expands the scope of opportunities for artistes to freely express themselves and realise their artistic vision.

The harsh economic conditions in the country as indexed by poverty and high figures of unemployment compel people to be more creative in their bid to eke out a living and combat the twain evil of joblessness and penury. Rather than waiting for elusive white collar jobs, some young people seek opportunities in the private sector, using their talents. Their efforts are seen in contemporary music, visual arts, choreography, fashion, film and so on. These ventures bear imprints of their indebtedness to local sources while they adapt foreign influences (from Europe, Asia and America) to suit local situations.

In terms of language, the producers of popular literature in Nigeria explore

resources of indigenous languages such as proverbs, idioms, myths, panegyric, chants, sarcasm, invective, repartee, repetition and other rhetorical devices. One is struck by the sheer dexterity in language use, quaintness of imagination, adroitness of composition strategies and the blend of fantasy with reality in a way that lends the works topicality, universality and unending freshness. They also draw materials from their street experience codified in popular slang and cliches through which they capture new realities that confront them daily as *hoi polloi* in rural areas and urban communities. Whereas, in an ideal sense, urban areas offer much hope for fulfillment and "living a good life" with the presence of indices of modernity, and "civilized" living, in the case of Nigeria, the urban is an extension of the tension in the rural while the rural remains unattractive for its retention of misery and tension.

In view of the abundance of materials on popular literature and its social values, we need to give more attention to this genre in our activities as literary scholars, teachers, researchers and critics. Some efforts have been made in this direction and one should acknowledge the seminal works of Tejumola Olaniyan and Sola Olorunyomi on the music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Olaniyan on African political Cartoons, Emmanuel Obiechina on Onitsha Market Literature and Abdallah Adamu on the emergence of the Hausa written literature known as *Littattafan Soyayya* (love narrative or romance fiction) in Kano. Also known as Kano Market literature, it is one of the antecedents of contemporary Kannywood film tradition. Equally worthy of note are the works of Hyginus Ekwuazi, Shaibu Hussein, Jonathan Haynes and Adeshina Afolayan among others on Video films. However, there is still much ground to cover, hence, the contention that in celebrating the diversity of African literature, it will require popular literature being accorded a place of eminence on the high table, just like its kin - drama, poetry, prose fiction and orature.

Let us take some specific illustrations to stress the point further and show the values of literary experience embedded in popular literature. These include Stand-Up comedy, short videos online, popular music and cartoon. All these cultural productions are beneficiaries of new media technology in their realistic presentations and distortions of everyday living. Apart from interrogating political, social, economic and cultural situations, they also disseminate moral precepts, offer practical guide on daily living habits and provide psychological relief from harsh economic realities.

Stand-up Comedy

The entertainment tradition known as stand-up comedy is an educative and a socially relevant popular art in contemporary Nigeria. Its fortune has been rising since 1995,

a period that coincides with gradual decline in live theatre performances and reduction in sponsorship of soap opera/television drama series. It is essentially improvisational, fictional and factual in nature. According to Helen Paul, Stand-up comedy is a solo performance of a comedian who sets out to entertain and educate his or her audience, while critiquing certain inadequacies noticed in different strata of the society. In this regard, like satire, the targets of Stand-up comedy are individuals, groups and social institutions from where the artist draws his creative materials for storytelling and laughter inducing offerings. The performance can be solo and it can feature a group of two or more artistes. It has as its antecedent the *Awada* tradition of Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre epitomised by Moses Olaiya Adejumo (Baba Sala), Ojo Ladipo (Baba Mero), Ola Omonitan (Ajimajasan), and Babatunde Omidina (Baba Suwe), among others. It also draws from television drama series such as *New Masquerade* (featuring Chika Okpala as ChiefZebrudaya and Claude Eke as Clams); *Samanja* (Usman Pategi) *Hotel de Jordan* (Sam Loco Efe) and *Koko Close* (Olumide Bakare as ChiefKoko).

Stand-up comedy has risen from its supporting roles as fillers or interlude in public events to an autonomous popular form with its own structure, style and subject. It offers opportunity for performance experience and literary encounter. Though the youths constitute the bulk of its audience, its appeal cuts across generations. The antecedent and development of the tradition from indigenous narrative and performance traditions should interest scholars of literary history, just as it can sustain theoretical inquiry, using different literary theories. One recalls *Happiness Edition Series* (2014-2015) produced by AY Live (Ayo Makun) and *Stand Up Nigeria* (March to September, 2012 edition produced by Bunmi Davies (Paul 2019).

Some of the contemporary practitioners of Stand-up comedy include Late Gbenga Adeboye (Funwontan), Ayodeji Makun (AY), Atuyota Akpobome (Ali Baba), Bright Okpocha (Basket Mouth), Helen Paul (Tatafo), Gbenga Adeyinka I, Bosede Ogunboye (Lepacious Bose), Okechukwu Anthony Onyegbule (Okey Bakassi), Olorin Kehinde Peter (Kenny Blaq), Francis Agoda (I go die) Afamefuna Igwemba (Klint the drunk). Bunmi Davies, Mark Angel, Jephthah Bowoto (Akpororo), Oworitakpo (with his funny cartoon comedies) and KC Brown.

As literary critics, it is our responsibility to expound on the narrative strategies, performance techniques and communicative devices adopted by each Stand-up artiste. Such efforts should bear in mind salient issues often addressed by the artistes, from the battle of sexes to generational conflict, racial and ethnic relations, sports, economy, religious hypocrisy and contemporary politics, especially criticism of

government policies. It is not surprising that politicians, bureaucrats and religious leaders are often captured as butts of Stand-up strictures. Musicians and fellow artistes too do not escape their caustic humour as no subject is too sacred or profane for their penetrating eyes, wide ears and sharp tongues.

Usually, the Stand-up comic is a versatile and supple personality whose voice and body manipulations facilitate the playing of multiple roles with remarkable plausibility. This contemporary comedic art thrives on a juxtaposition of incongruous things, distortion, exaggeration, parody, lewd innuendo, ribaldry, pun, mimicry, ironic musing, repetition, pause, silence, interjections, obscene gestures, inflections and other devices of humour. Generally, the humourists attempt to cultivate close rapport with the audience to achieve maximum effect that will elicit laughter of derision and applause from the audience. Thus, in looking at the origin and nature of Stand-up comedy in Nigeria, critics must acknowledge its contributions to the epistemology of comedy as a popular literary subgenre in Africa and across the globe.

As in other genres of literature, the interconnections between art and society are well illustrated in Stand-up comedy. There is a link between the performance text, social context of their arts and performance mechanism adopted by each artiste. It is quite in order to embark on a comparative study of comedic arts of Nigerian Stand-up artistes and those of their peers in other parts of the world such as Raju Srivastar and Kapil Sharma of India; Frank Fay, Fred Allen and George Burns of the United States; Miguel Galvan, Adal Ramones and Eugenio Derbez of Mexico; Ignatius Farray and Alexiss Valdes of Spain; Luiz Franca and Fabio Rabin of Brazil.

Film and Video

From celluloid to video and now digital film medium, the screen, like prose narrative or drama, is being used to tell African stories. The film medium in Nigeria has gained much recognition as a means of "textualising" people's experience of culture, politics and everyday social life. From the early attempts in feature films by Francis Olatunde in shooting the film version of Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* on celluloid to Ola Balogun, Adamu Halilu, Jab Adu, Eddie Ugbomah, Ade Afolayan and Hubert Ogunde among other pioneers, the film tradition has developed remarkably. It is a medium of transposition and adaptation, from the oral or printed text to the screen. Some Nigerian writers have explored this medium to disseminate their works to wider audience and expand thematic concerns of the original text to suit contemporary realities. One recalls in this regard, the representation of Femi Osofisan's short story, "Cordellia", serialised in *The Guardian* Newspaper and

produced as a film by Tunde Kelani's Mainframe Film and Television Production. The film version is entitled *Maami*. Other examples include Akinwumi Isola's *Ole Ku, Ko See Gbe, Saworo Ide* and *Efunsetan Aniwura*; Adebayo Faleti's *Sawo Sogberi* and *Basorun Gaa* and Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, adapted from a novel of that title by Chimamanda Adichie.

Beyond adaptation, there are re-presentation of history through the screen as exemplified in Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* and *Adesuwa*, Kunle Afolayan's *October 1st*, and Biodun Ibitola's *Afonja* and Ali Nuhu's *Queen Amina*. There are thousands of original stories on love, politics, culture, religion and family relationships produced in various indigenous languages and the English language. Each film, like a novel or a drama, presents a perspective on a given reality by the director and producer. It is logical, therefore, that the film medium should be approached and critiqued from its literary dimension, even while acknowledging the fact that film, as an art form, has its uniqueness and a literary critical approach alone might not capture its various dimensions. Admittedly, there have been many works on the film as performance rendered through technology by scholars of theatre, film and communication studies. Some of these include Ekwuazi, Haynes, Okome, Adamu and Bhadmus. However, equally of interest here are the issues of language (verbal and non-verbal), images and imagery, music and sound devices, flashback, symbols and other semiotic codes, in the literary critic's attempt to generate fresh interpretation and clear insight into the film text.

An outgrowth of the video tradition is the expressive video clips of skits, usually disseminated on line through *World Wide Web* sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Tik Tok*, *Vskit*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*, among other options. The smart phone technology especially Android phone has boosted the popularity of this thriving and trending entertainment tradition. There has been concern among individuals, government and non-governmental organisations about misuse of the social media as it is prone to much abuse. It is often criticized for disseminating fake news or misinformation, with grave consequences for personal, national and global security. However, the online short video tradition provides some calm amidst cacophony of distortion, fabrication, falsehood and hysteria. Among artistes who have explored this medium of comedy skits are some Stand-up comedians and others outside the calling, including Oworitakpo with his funny cartoon comedy, MC Tagway whose comedy is based on stock characterisation and mimicry to generate humour, KC Brown and his series of comedy videos under "Komedya Komer" and Gbadamasi Agbonjor Jonathan popularly known as MC Edo Pikin.

MC Edo Pikin's style is that of interview. It takes the form a question and answer session between a journalist and a knowledgeable fluent expert. The subjects for discussion are usually two seemingly related but disparate issues. For instance "What is the Difference between Naija and Nigeria?" "What is the difference between Police and SARS?", "What is the difference between wind and breeze?" "What is the difference Between Sex and Romance?" and "What is the difference between Ebola and Corona Virus?". The pace of delivery of the answer is usually fast in a manner of repartee, filled with paradox, pun, rhyme, irony and fluid allusion.

Seun Shamsudeen, popularly known as Samo Baba, is the creator of digital comedy skits in Yoruba based on Indian films (*Yoruba Bollywood*). It is a series of comedy skits in which Yoruba language dialogue is superimposed on actions of characters in Bollywood films. Some of the titles include "Child Abuse", "Overstaying Your Welcome", "Don't Bite More than You can Chew". "Merry Xmas", "The Child does not want to be Birthed in Nigeria", "Do Unto Others", "When you Loose (sic) an Election", "Popsie Calm Down Na", "Let Love Lead", "Child Abuse", "Valentine Disappointment", "Politics Everywhere", "When a Debtor Promise Next Year", "Harmattan Wahala", "When Money Ritual Backfires" and "Beggars with Taste". The films carry subtle messages on morality and proper behaviour in an urban but still culturally rooted setting.

Emoike Zina who is the face behind the mask of Sergeant Efosa of Kingzina Comedy series is another notable contributor to the video skits under "Justice Crack" label. Efosa is a Police Officer who accosts and arrests citizens on the flimsiest excuse, using trumped up charges that do not necessarily exist within the law but strictly within his own exploitative imagination. The offence for which a citizen is under arrest for taming can be as outlandish, ludicrous or simply bizarre as for being unemployed and, therefore, "wasting knowledge", "for eating alone", "for early planning of a comedy show", "for fooling yourself", "for sweating too much in the rainy season", "for marital delay at age 40", "for thinking" and so on.

Other renowned artistes using the medium for their rib cracking humour are: Williams Uchemba, Owori Takpo of Takpo TV, Aluta Emir Princephelar, Iamdrwhiteberry, Gbenga_laughtercastle, funngee_entertainment and Mr. Macaroni, the lecherous but pretentious womanizer. Three Clips below are presented as examples.

Clip I

It is the rainy season and after a heavy downpour, a man is walking on an obviously bad road with pool of water. A car is navigating the puddle on the road and ends up

splashing the dirty water on a young man who is on his way to a party. In anger, the young man scoops water from the puddle, splashes it on the car and abuses the driver. The car stops and the driver opens the door. To the man's shock and surprise, the driver is a soldier. He is immediately overwhelmed by fear and in an instinctive act of self-debasement, he begins to drench himself with the dirty water. He later removes his shirt and dips it in the puddle just to show remorse to the soldier and express his regret for "disrespecting" the officer in uniform.

The clip shows how the fear of the uniform on the part of citizens has sustained military dictatorship for about three decades in Nigeria's postcolonial history as well as in other parts of Africa. This issue is the concern of Soyinka in his satiric plays such as *Opera Wonyosi*, *The Beatification of Area Boy*, *King Baabu* and *Alapata*, *Apata*. The young man's action in the video clip shows his acquiescence in his own oppression. While he gives expression to his fear, the soldier sits down in the car, calmly savouring with sadistic amusement, the self-imposed ordeal of the man. The camera angle manipulation produces close shots of the characters and the environment, to show a contrast between the image of a cowardly and agitated bloody civilian and that of the calm soldier in a servant-master or oppressed-oppressor relationship. The centre-margin contestation is exemplified in the video in a manner that will interest the postcolonial critic. The clip has useful illustrative textual materials for a semiotician, a Marxist critic or a scholar of literary studies with interest in eco-criticism, judging from the portraiture of the environment. It also shows social inequality and class difference in the setting. There is an evidence of a wide gap between poverty of the common people and opulence of the privileged minority. In another sense, the setting brings out the contradictions of urbanisation in Nigeria where the cities bear visible marks of underdevelopment, just like the rural areas. From the decadent infrastructure displayed in the skit, it speaks of an urban slum or a city fringe.

Clip2

The clip presents Sergeant Efosa, a stock character in the manner of Baba Sala, Chief Zebrudaya and Samanja. The clip clearly demonstrates the perception of many Nigerians about the Police as an Institution. In his police uniform, Sergeant Efosa is always out to intimidate or "tame" his victims whom he always accuses of imaginary offences and he subsequently subjects them to arrest. His operation is contrary to the much advertised slogan of the Nigeria Police that "the Police is your friend". Even when he appears initially friendly, it does not last as he slams the person accosted with a concocted offence that is hardly in any known book of Nigerian law, whether

the criminal code or the penal code. He tries to get the person off balance with the confident delivery of his accusation, however clearly strange to common sense and law his position appears. Then, he declares peremptorily: "You are under arrest o!" The strategy is to wear out the victim until he or she accepts guilt and in his state of helplessness, he negotiates the bribe to be paid, so as to retain or regain his or her freedom.

Sergeant Efosa excites derisive laughter at the expense of exploitative, greedy and corrupt Police officials. In the clip, Sergeant Efosa stops a driver to check his vehicle papers. After checking, all the papers are complete. He asks of the blood group certificate which is a strange demand because it is always provided at the point of registration for driver's license. Having no genuine offence to arrest the driver for, Sergeant Efosa begins to ask the driver what he calls "sacrosanct questions" including the name of the first and current Inspector General of Police. The driver gets all the answers correctly, but Efosa eventually catches him off guard when he asks of his place of work and the driver says that he is unemployed. That instantly becomes an offence in the charge book of Sergeant Efosa. He declares that he is under arrest "for wasting his intelligence" because he has no job. "With all your intelligence and sharpness, you have no job - you are under arrest o!...for wasting knowledge".

Beneath the rib-cracking humour is a critique of the situation of mass unemployment and poverty in the country. The skit also touches on arbitrary, oppressive and exploitative behaviour of some members of the Police Force. As part of its literary devices, the skit uses suspense, incongruity, repetition, and a blend of fantasy with facts. The costume of Nigerian Police Officer enhances the realistic portrayal of characters and verisimilitude which the producer sets out to achieve in the video. These are salient issues that should interest a critic who is inclined towards phenomenological study.

Clip 3

This clip is produced by Edo Pikin on Corona virus pandemic that is ravaging the whole world. Using the question and answer or interview technique, Edo Pikin, who plays the role of a learned expert, offers illuminating definitions of Corona virus, wrapping it with a biting satire on the government of the day in Nigeria. He is being interviewed by a journalist on the difference between Ebola, an epidemic that raged in some countries of Africa in 2014, and the Corona virus disease that started in 2019, code named COVID-19. Corona Virus broke out in Wuhan, China, but within a short time, it had claimed thousands of lives not only in China, but also in other countries

of the world such as the United States of America, Italy, France, Britain, Germany, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and so on. His response is worth quoting at length as we pay attention to elements of humour, topicality and social criticism:

Ebola is an outdated Corona, Corona is an updated Ebola
Ebola is an old artist that does not have a stage to perform,
Corona is the new artiste, the rave of the moment; he is going on different tours
Ebola has seen its menopause, Corona is a slay queen
Corona is made in China and their product does not last
If Corona knows the amount of roots and *agbo* that we have in this country,
Corona will go and squat with Ebola.
The *oga patapata* of them all,
The General Overseer of them all is bad government-
Bad government is the *oga patapata* of them all.
The problem of this country is this country.
Do you know that immediately Corona enters into Nigeria;
Nose mask moves from N600 to N6000?
Even hand sanitizer moves from N500 to N7, 500.
You want to cash out for people to pass out
You want to make profit so that people will go six feet
You and the Corona, which is more deadly?
Do you know that when Corona virus got to the airport
And saw the Nigerian government, Corona said
"uhn- no need to enter this country
because our senior colleagues are here already"?
The greatest mistake Corona made was to come to Nigeria.
We cannot have two diseases in one country
It's either Corona stays and bad government goes
Or bad government stays and Corona goes
You can wear nose mask to prevent Corona virus
But can you wear nose mask to prevent bad leaders?
Some virus are infected
While some are elected
Do you know that Corona leaders
Have killed more people than Corona virus?
Bad government is the *oga patapata* of them all
Bad government is the General Overseer of them all
Bad government does not live abroad
Bad government lives here in Nigeria.

Edo Pikin delivers a pungent criticism of corruption, power abuse, and other socio-

political infirmities in contemporary Nigeria. The tone of the presentation is generally hyperbolic and ironic. Bad government is depicted as a vermin that destroys the polity, eating away at its wellbeing like a virus. The ordinary people are always the victims of the rulers' misdeeds. According to him, "The problem of this country is this country".

The artiste uses a string of paradoxical statements delivered in rapid succession for poetic and performative effect. He uses this repartee form to secure the interest of the audience and sustain it till the end. The aim is to increase the audience's awareness about certain social problems. Among other devices notable in the poetic locution adopted by the artist are incongruity, repetition, rhetorical questions, irony, parody, pun and allusion. The overriding device is personification as he describes both Ebola and Corona diseases in human terms. Bad government is also personified as the "*oga patapata*" (master or General Overseer) of the two diseases:

The General Overseer of them all is **bad government**-

Bad government is the *oga patapata* of them all.

Using rhetorical devices of poetry, MC Edo Pikin constructs a similarity between Corona, a pandemic and Ebola, an epidemic on the one hand, and between Corona, a deadly disease, and bad government. It is shown that bad government is as deadly as Corona virus, if not more deadly. Hence, the statement in this paradoxical couplet with seductive rhyme:

Some virus are infected

While some are elected.

Apart from the devices above, MC Edo Pikin uses exclamatory interjections by popular artistes to punctuate his delivery at strategic intervals to achieve desired responses from the audience. These artistes give appropriate reactions to each statement for the purpose of emphasis and verisimilitude. Renowned artistes whose interjections are used include Sam Loco Efe, Odunlade Adekola and Funke Akindele.

Popular Music

There is much that is going on in the realm of popular music in different genres that should interest a scholar of popular literature in recent times. A careful examination of recurring issues in the lyrics of artistes would reveal inherent poetry in their compositions especially reggae as exemplified in the works of artistes such as Majek Fashek, Blackie and Ras Kimono and of late, Kiss Daniel, Wizkid, SeunAnikulapo-

Kuti, Femi Anikulapo-Kuti, Small Doctor, Tu-Face Idibia, Davido and Q Dot among other hip-hop artistes.

In the past, FelaAnikulapo-Kuti blazed the trail in fusing musical artistry with political activism as a Pan-Africanist and cultural revolutionary. His music explores African music traditions along with Euro-American jazz and rock music traditions. Carlos Moore, his biographer, describes him as "a brave pan-Africanist who confronted multiple forces of oppression with the force of an imperishable music" (2010). His immense contributions to African music and politics have been documented by literary scholars like Olorunyomi, Olaniyan and the ethnologist, Carlos Moore. Similar studies on contemporary popular arts in Nigeria are imperative at this time.

Apart from probing conceptual issues of artistic intersections in music and poetry, there is abundant poetry in the music of reggae and hip hop artistes who engage contemporary issues **in** the nation and the continent. Let us take for instance, an excerpt from Majek Fashek's "Majek Fashek inna New York":

Lead: We are humble

Chorus: We are humble

Lead: We are humble

Chorus: We are humble

Lead: Me no want no trouble

Chorus: Me no want no trouble

Lead: If you want my trouble

Chorus: If you want my trouble

Lead: I'll give it to you double

Chorus: I'll give it to you double

Apart from the end rhyme adopted **in** the lyric that links it with poetry, the use of colloquial English in the lyric shows the multiculturalism of the metropolis that Majek Fashek, popularly known as "Rain-maker", is out to subvert and demystify. Whether in the sense of the black man confronting racial oppression in Europe and America, or the common man challenging oppressive power elite in Africa, Majek Fashek is sending a warning that the oppressor in both contexts should not mistake the civility of the oppressed for docility and stupidity. The oppressed is rather capable of responding to the challenges of oppression even in a more virulent manner. The song proves prophetic because about two decades after the release of the album *Spirit of Love*, the "#Black Lives Matter" protest that engulfed the United States and reverberated across the world after the brutal murder of George Floyd by a White cop and the #End SARS protest that raged across Nigeria in October, 2020 show that the

oppressed is capable of giving back to the oppressor "double" dose of hassles.

In the manner of postcolonial literary discourse, Majek Fashek somewhat "writes back" to the empire in the song as he subverts the familiar image of America in popular culture as the metropolitan paradise, the green pasture and the epitome of order, serenity and civility. Contrary to these alluring images of the metropolis that often attract unwary citizens of the Third world, according to Majek Fashek, beggars, homeless people and jobless people are also found on the streets of New York. "When you look to the right, look to the left, what you see is confusion. When you look up to the north and down to the south; when you look down to the south and up to the north, what you see is distraction"... What you see is illusion". In colonialist literature, Africa is the land of hunger, want, chaos, poverty, dirt and disease. However, in Majek's lyrical text and context, America, the *El Dorado*, has its own shocking share of these social irritants, as they are not the exclusive preserve of the Third world or sub-altern nations.

One cannot easily forget the uncanny imagination and aptness of imagery displayed by Small Doctor (Adekunle Temitope) when he says of his detractors/adversaries: "*Won ti gba penalty wo throw-in*" (they have played a penalty kick out of touch, for a throw-in). A penalty kick in a football match that not only goes off target, but also calls for a throw-in, is egregious. The player here is awfully incompetent, and deserves to be sternly reprimanded. In this sense, the artiste's adversaries are full of ill-will and animosity; it is not surprising that their machination backfires. Beyond the text and context of its original production, this metaphorical expression captures the leadership crisis that has bedeviled Nigeria since independence. Whether military or civilian, leaders in successive administrations have been accused at different fora of incompetence and cluelessness, hence, the persistence of Nigeria's problem of underdevelopment, decades after independence. It also draws attention to the issues of corruption in governance. When one sieves substance from obscenity, vulgarity, lewdness and bawdiness that people speak against in hip-hop music of today, the lofty grains left are songs of love, amity, conscientisation, culture edification and literary appeal as evident in the works of Lagbaja, Asa, Tu face Idibia and Yemi Alade among others.

In the realm of politics, there is a lot to interrogate in Nigeria's electioneering process and party politics as documented in songs and sloganeering during campaigns by various political parties and their candidates in the heat of elections. These songs are couched in indigenous languages, Pidgin English and Standard English with permissive use of code mixing. There are poets in indigenous languages who explore traditional orality in the new medium provided by innovations in

technology to reach the masses of the people on topical socio-political issues in the current dispensation. The poetic arts of Lanrewaju Adepoju and Kunle Ologundudu, two contemporary Yoruba poets with fiery anti-establishment verses are worthy of note in this regard. Ogundipe (2015), for instance, gives significant attention to Adepoju's combative poetics. Similar popular aesthetics are exemplified in the works of Urhobo song-poets of popular music tradition as documented by Peter Omoko (2015). According to him, Urhobo popular artists as represented by Ogute Ottan and Johnson Adjan, use their arts to bring the people's problems to the fore of discourse as they comment on domestic and trans-national issues. They sing of marginalisation, oppression, tyranny and economic dispossession. In his words: "The Urhobo popular artists do not only use their arts to project the people's identity but also redirect their collective vision and aspirations" (133-134).

Cartoon

The editorial political cartoons of various national newspapers and magazines are worthy of consideration. The cartoonist is a painter and a poet fused together. The result is an expressive image of contemporary daily realities. Nigerian Cartoonists address sundry issues of economy, politics, family relations and violation of social mores. Among them are Omooba (Tayo Fatunla) in *The Punch*, Ake Didi Onu and Obe Ess (Seinde Obe) in *The Guardian*, Muyiwa Adetula of *The Nation*, Mr and Mrs (Dada Adekola) of *Vanguard* and Segun Adeeko of *Nigerian Tribune* Graffiti (Franklin Oyekusibe) of *Tell Magazine* among others. Tejumola Olaniyan (2012) has subjected the matter and manner of African political cartoons to serious critical inquiry and theoretical postulations.

The appeal of cartoon as a means of social and figurative communication is quite significant and understandably, it has earned much space in Nigerian newspapers and magazines. The newspaper cartoon art is defined by "eloquence in terseness, ability to sieve humour out of the unthinkable gloomy, down-to-earth chastisement of misconduct across social strata and political consciousness" (Gbemisola Adeoti). Daring, creativity, imagination, profundity, good draughtmanship and humour are the assets of a good cartoonist. A cartoon is a product of a good grasp of social reality and clear perspective of its various political and economic dimensions. In this case, the cartoonist tries to blend artistic elan with hilarity. There is no doubt that the craft of humour and wit is essential to a good cartoon. However, also important are pun, irony, innuendo, sarcasm, parody, caricature, incongruity, hyperbole and burlesque. It is aimed at influencing opinions and shaping thoughts on matters of domestic, national and international importance.

Cartoonists tell their own stories in a series of drawings each depicting a development in a plot sequence. The intention of the artist comes out in the end when the drawings and the dialogue (text) are synchronised. Sometimes, the aim is to satirise certain foibles and arouse laughter at the expense of the butts, especially those considered as public figures.

Cartoon art, like other popular art forms, is open to semiotic interpretations apart from the generic approach that focuses on its classifications and constitutive elements. Its rhetorical and graphical strategies are similar to those of the poet. It should, therefore, be of interest not only to the art historian, but also to the scholar of popular literature.

Conclusion

In its reflections on the state of Nigerian literature, the paper acknowledges the abundance of talent, skill and craftsmanship in various aspects of literary productions. From its inception in orality to the printed and performed texts and now, to the era of spoken word poetry, film and the internet, the values and achievements of Nigerian literary arts have grown significantly. While the paper duly recognises the enormous creative products of Nigerian writers especially in the genres of drama, poetry, prose narrative, children literature and oral literature, it also attests the great efforts to capture the experience of ordinary people and their daily living through various modes of popular artistic expressions. However, more attention needs to be offered popular literature in terms of pedagogy and critical exegesis. That popular literature has been thriving in its various forms is not in doubt, but this needs to be complemented with more critical and theoretical consciousness. As illustration, the paper draws attention to popular artistic modes such as Stand-up Comedy, video film, short video film, popular music and cartoon. A popular literary "text" can yield as much meaning as there is theoretical framework for the perceptive critic and informed theorist to analyse. Among other things, "text" in popular literature bears eloquent evidence of immense diversity that characterise Nigerian literature. Popular literature should, therefore, no longer be seen as a peripheral preoccupation. Rather, it should share the centre stage of interpretation and analysis along with other literary genres. Critics should deploy appropriate methodology and theoretical approach to bring to the fore its literary essence of popular literature. As Odia Ofeimun is wont to say: "to take popular literature seriously is to take Nigeria seriously".

Videography /Discography

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