

The Elegiac Poems of Odia Ofeimun

AGBONIFO ROSEMARY & EDAFE MUKORO

Abstract

One area that has received little or no criticism in the poetry of Odia Ofeimun is his elegies. Interestingly, one of the distinctive characteristics of his verses is the elegiac traits that run through them. This paper focuses on Ofeimun's poetic mastery as an elegist. It examines the manner in which he mourns the death of reputable Pro-Democracy political figures in the collection of poems entitled *Go Tell the Generals*. Using a blend of textual analysis that is anchored on the concept of elegy as its theoretical framework, the study underscores the agonies and grief of the poet over the death of three iconic Pro-Democracy activists - Alfred Rewane, Bola Ige and Kudirat Abiola. Moreover, our attention is also drawn to the consolatory effects generated by the legacies of these personalities that assuage the grief-stricken status of the poet. In the end, it is discovered that Ofeimun's mastery of the elegiac craft, elucidates the uniqueness of poetry as an effective tool for mourning.

Keywords: Ofeimun, Elegy, Grief, Rewane, Ige, Kudirat.

I. Introduction

Odia Ofeimun is one of the most prolific poets of the second generation of modern Nigerian poetry. His poetic reputation is as robust as those of his contemporaries such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan), Chimalum Nwankwo, Funso Aiyejina, Harry Garuba, etc. Apart from his alignment with that generation of Nigerian poets, Ofeimun's quest for socio-political change in his country (Nigeria) seems dominant in his poetry. One cannot fail to spot socio-political issues and demonstration of Marxist ideology in his collections such as *The Poet Lied* (1980), *A Handle For The Flutist* (1986), *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000), *Dreams At Work and Other Poems* (2000), *A Boiling Caracas and Other Poems* (2008), *I Will Ask Questions With Stones If They Take My Voice* (2008), *Nigeria The Beautiful* (2011), etc. However, a critical reading of *Go Tell The*

Generals, (hereafter *Generals*), reveals the elegiac mastery of Ofeimun's poetic acumen. In this case, the poet is pictured as a mourner.

The theoretical background of this paper is based on the concept of elegy. The term has been defined as "a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in a consolation." (Abrams and Harpham 92) The point that is expressed here is that an elegy denotes a suitable form of poetic expression that memorialises a particular person. Moreover, it is suggested in the words of Abrams and Harpham that the suitability of the elegiac genre in the mourning of the dead is encapsulated in the sustenance of the consciousness of loss and grief within the verse. The elegist in this case, takes advantage of the elegiac verse to pour out his sorrows and agonies in a "sustained" manner that reflects his heart's horrific sense of loss and sadness. In other words, the elegiac genre affords the mourner an opportunity to issue forth a lasting memorial to a remarkable personality.

Closely related to the above insight is the connection between elegy and "consolation." In the words of the critics, one could deduce that the grief of every mourner is usually assuaged through consolatory effects. By implication, the elegiac verse starts off with profound portrayal of memorials laced with sadness and grievous circumstances of loss. The painful cry is continued with diverse expressions and imagery that underscore the heavy heart of the elegist. But of more striking significance in the construction of the elegiac verse is the skilful infusion of consolatory language. In this regard, the enduring legacies of the deceased pervade the thoughts of the mourner in the verse. There is a stimulation of an atmosphere of succour and consolation that foreground the elegist's recognition of the legacies of the deceased. In a way, the consolatory effects of an elegy form the denouement of the verse - to quote Abrams and Harpham once again - "... the conflicts are settled, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding cleared away" (268).

The poetry of Ofeimun has received diverse critical attention. Romanus Egudu is struck by Ofeimun's "depiction of vicious as well as piteous spectacle." (79) Funso Aiyejina concentrates on the poet's demonstration of "grimness of the state of affairs in his country." (38) It is the view of Tanure Ojaide that the poet's "sociopolitical condition and intellectual climate of his youth and adult life... have ... goaded him into an activist poet's career" (199). Moreover, another critic has shown that Ofeimun's poetry is filled with "a passionate commitment to public issue and social causes." (Gamba 270) Okey Okwechime and Kola Eke are obsessed with Ofeimun's depiction of "societal problems" in his poetry. (169) Idaevbor Bello considers Ofeimun as a "revolutionary strategist." (85) Elsewhere, the critic is concerned with the poet's demonstration of "a diverse people's tortuous journey to nationhood."

(103) Yet again, Bello considers Ofeimun as one of the second generation Nigerian poets whose verses investigate the "representation of leadership." (135) Oyeniyi Okunoye considers the poetry of Ofeimun as one of the examples of "the growing tradition of post-colonial travel writing." (93) In a similar manner, Senayon OlaOluwa's criticism is focused on Ofeimun's protestation of "globalization" in his poetry (251); Ikechukwu Asika focuses on "poetry and militancy" (1), Mathias Orhero is concerned with "history and politics in 21st century Nigerian Poetry" (1), while Gabriel Osoba's criticism of Ofeimun's poetry is from a stylistic background (29).

What is evident, thus far, is that critics are more concerned with the socio-political, cultural, and linguistics perspectives of his poems. It is also pertinent to state here that none of them has acknowledged Ofeimun's poetic acumen as an elegist. This study demonstrates Ofeimun's grief on the death of Alfred Rewane, Bola Ige and KudiratAbiola to show that poetry is effective for mourning.

II.

One of the striking qualities of Ofeimun's elegies is the manner in which grief for the dead is demonstrated. In the case of the poem entitled "Ogidigbo (For Alfred Rewane)," one notices that he skilfully creates an atmosphere of agony and mourning through vivid picture of death. The poem reads this way:

And, when the hounds of death came in October
disguised in the myths of his own flour mills,
his mission, already met twice over
weighed tables against hunger in every home
with bread that assassins sought to wrap in a shroud
to give breadth that palled in a slush of ill-will
drawing dark vale through gates that led to charity
to hound, uphill and up river, the spine of loyalty. (*Generals* 22)

The title of the poem is arresting. The critical reader of the poem should understand that the term "Ogidigbo" alludes to a legendary Urhobo Warrior. This insight gives us an idea of the immense stature of the poet's subject of mourning. By way of information, Alfred Rewane was a Pro-Democracy financier, human rights activist as well as a Nigerian businessman. He was murdered on 6 October, 1995 at his residence in Ikeja, Lagos. The sad event is not unconnected with his vocal opposition to the regime of one of Nigeria's brutal military tyrants, General Sani Abacha. It is against this background that the image of "death" in the first line is underscored. To be precise, one must acknowledge the picture of wild dogs here to appreciate the

sombre thoughts of the speaker. In a way, the poem's elegiac atmosphere is charged with the hunting image to emphasize how Rewane is hunted down by the "assassins." The brutal killing is better captured through the mind's eye. In this connection, there is an appeal to the visual imagination to picture the "assassins" as "hounds" invading the habitat of their prey in "October." The fatal invasion of the "hounds" is euphemistically evoked through the word "came." Undoubtedly, the gruesome picture of death here is gripping to the senses.

As the poem continues in the successive lines, one could sense the speaker's consolation in the fact that Rewane had "already" accomplished his "mission." To Ofeimun, the legacy of the Pro-Democracy activist is a mythic representation of his business acumen. It should be recalled that Life Flour Mills is one of the commercial enterprises promoted by the deceased. In the context of the poem, the success of the commercial image is used to espouse the iconic accomplishment of Rewane against anti-democratic forces. He is said to have "already met twice over" his target of dislodging the "hounds of death." Yet, it is even more tragic that the speaker's mastery of language stresses the killing of Rewane through suggestive skills. In the poem, the elegiac atmosphere is underscored through the connection between "flour" and making of "bread." In this case, the packaging of "bread" in polythene bags is used to suggest how "Rewane" is wrapped in a "shroud."

The grievous atmosphere is further heightened in the concluding part of the poem through the personification of the "shroud." From all indications, the poem's ambience is suffused with sombre feelings as the "shroud" releases "breath" of agonies and "ill-will." Similarly, the "palled" atmosphere evokes a picture of thick "dark" clouds as well as "dark" shroud spread over the "gates" of Rewane's charitable and philanthropic deeds. These pictures paint a gory image of the assassination as well as the funeral of Rewane.

In another part of the poem, the haunting image of death is accentuated with horrific pictures. The cry triggers dark memories:

Ah! Dark dread was the confetti they spread
To still his world, beat freedom-fighting to the ground
They sent flints of horror, tracery of melting iron
Into the heart that beat for millions to have hope;
Songs that have become limbs of *abundant life*,
Sinew of the common touch, silo of faith,
Holding the sun's shine back to the sun....
Too late: the man was larger than bullet or tribute. (*Generals* 22)

It is quite interesting that the mourner here laces his cry with unusual imagery. The evocation of his mourning is invested with strange juxtapositions of two unlikely situations. In this regard, one is not only struck by the exclamatory tone of the speaker, but also the brilliance in using a wedding event to espouse the "dark" atmosphere of mourning. To appreciate this elegy better, the reader must use his imaginative experience of the razz-matazz of a wedding ceremony generated by the luminous effect of "confetti" in the air. However, the irony here is that the death of Rewane triggers a "dark" atmosphere of agonies. Moreover, the "confetti" assumes the image of "dread," as it becomes a dangerous weapon of "death." The fascinating point here is the artistic use of language in the second line to underscore the fatal powers of the "confetti." The euphemistic expression is invested with an indirect suggestion of Rewane's assassination. Yet, one is not unaware of the skilful infusion of personification. This time, the "confetti" is captured as a wrestler that "beat freedom-fighting to the ground." The picture is a vivid demonstration of the glorious exit of Rewane from the earth.

In the extract's third line, there is a concentration of horrific imagery of military bombardment to stress the poem's sombre atmosphere. The reader's visual senses must be alert to the military-style attack on the person of Rewane. The whole atmosphere is dominated with the missiles of steel, "flints" and sparks of "melting iron" directed "into the heart" of "Rewane." In a way, this is a graphic description of the release of "bullets" into the body of the Pro-Democracy activist. The consolatory effects of the speaker's language is seen in the successive lines. They reveal the place of optimism that Rewane occupies in the soul of "millions" of Nigerians. This symbol of "hope" is cast in the image of the biblical Christ. Is it any wonder that the speaker's reference to biblical allusion is very significant. In John 10:10, Jesus said " ... he is come to give abundant life." This unique quality of "*abundant life*" giver is what Ofeimun skilfully relates with Rewane in his poem.

Moreover, it should be noted that the actions of the killers have assumed auditory cadences. In a way, these "songs" have become the catalyst of change in the hearts of "millions." The people's heart has become emboldened in the process. The meticulous reader could sense the unity of the people through the biological and military imagery. These metaphorical expressions underscore the common purpose and "faith" generated as a result of the legacies of "Rewane." In the penultimate line, there is the skilful infusion of solar imagery to further stress how the killers are resisted. In the expression, there is the evocation of a fierce head-on collusion between both parties. The interesting thing in the line is that Ofeimun's consolation is encapsulated in a paradox. The expression is an indirect suggestion that testifies of

Rewane's greatness, even in death.

As the poem continues in another stanza, the qualities of the deceased affirm the consolation of the speaker. The lines read thus:

One man remains larger than every tribute
A timber with sated boughs towering above shrubs
Bark of resilience that broke the light of the bulls
In the stampedes of the Savannah he stood
An iroko against buffalos on the stomp,
Stout and tall in the halfflight of morning
Unbending to hooves and horns that took
Death claps to the roots of stubborn hope. (*Generals*, 41)

To the speaker, Rewane will remain ever green in our hearts. The image of the Pro-Democracy activist is here elevated beyond his unfortunate assassination. In fact, "every tribute" has become minute before his imposing legacies. The language of the mourner exudes that aural of agony interwoven with utmost respect for the deceased. Besides, the forest image in the second line suggests the colossal image of "Rewane." To appreciate this picture properly, one has to slip into the forest to capture the essence of the speaker's insight. Here, the late human rights activist is equated with a huge tree full of large branches "towering above shrubs." The "resilience" of the "timber" is brilliantly illuminated through the thickness of its "bark." One can only imagine the strength of this huge tree as it breaks the "stampedes" of "bulls" in the "savannah." This analogy captures the immense personality of "Rewane."

The graphological design of the poem in the fifth line is not for decorative purpose; rather it skilfully illustrates how "Rewane" single-handed "stood" as a formidable opposition "against" the "buffalos on the stomp." Besides, one cannot fail to acknowledge the "iroko" image in the poem. Its use gives further credence to the "stout and tall" image of the revered democrat. It is, therefore, not surprising that the "hooves and horns," as well as the "death claps" of "buffalos," could not withstand the *Ogidigbo*'s "unbending... roots of stubborn hope."

At this juncture, it would amount to literary injustice if one fails to comment on the expression "stubborn hope." The reference is an allusion to Dennis Brutus' poem of the same title. Although, Brutus' use of the expression illustrates the rugged resistance of the black South Africans in the hey days of apartheid in that country; yet, it is interesting to note that Ofeimun's skilful allusion resonates with Rewane's victory over anti-democratic forces in Nigeria, even in death.

III.

Another outstanding personality whose transition to glory provokes the cry of Ofeimun is in the poem entitled "Bola Ige." The political juggernaut, Bola Ige, was the star of politics in Western Nigeria before his assassination on 23 December 2001. The sad event that led to his death is not without warning. The warning signals of his impending assassination are what dominate the atmosphere of the poem, right from the start. The lines read thus:

If you step across the threshold,
the earth will swallow you,
dragon buds and petals will open,
fangs-ready, filaments clawing
and tongues lolling determinedly
to suck you into scented corruption and abuse. (*Generals*, 43)

The strength of this elegy lies in its language. From the speaker's diction, one can tell of its prophetic qualities. The use of apostrophe is not only brilliant, it also invests in the poem an atmosphere of impending doom. From the first line, one can perceive the danger of "death" lurking in the "threshold" of Ige. The warning informs us of the unexpected attack on his person by his fierce rivals in politics. In the second line, there is a prophetic use of euphemism to underscore the brutal death of the erudite lawyer. The expression paints a futuristic design of his internment. It is amazing that the "earth" is invested with throat muscles to "swallow" human beings. The elegiac atmosphere is further illuminated with daring image of the "dragon." Here, there is a covert appeal to the reader's visual senses to capture the taste "buds" and mouth tissues of death. The picture is of a wild animal with determined appetite to feast on its prey. Besides, the gory atmosphere of death is accentuated as the destructive instruments of the animal are pictured as "lolling determinedly/ to suck" Ige "into scented corruption and abuse." This poetic description strengthens the sombre dimension of the memorial.

As the poem continues in the succeeding stanza, Ofeimun demonstrates how "Ige" was lured into a corrupt government, thereby denting his personal integrity. To the poet, the political move is deliberate and calculative to destroy the "Ige" brand:

We shall lynch you with gifts, till your gap-tooth takes
only the manna from the Vomitorium of power
we shall salt and pepper your morsel with absinthes
to take away your memory of unfinished struggles
what bearing of sacred missions would you vouchsafe
after we finished turning your will to mere blubber. (*Generals*, 43)

The construction of the poem shows the intent and purpose of Ige's killers. The discerning reader of the poem can certainly sense the sinister moves right from its conception. The covert interests of "we" in the poem is to "lynch" the "gap-tooth" politician "with gifts." A careful study of the speaker's diction, underscores the trickery that culminated in the demise of the celebrated lawyer. Besides, one can appreciate the euphemistic value of the speaker's expression in the first line. It is not without doubt that the motive of Ige's killers is to subject him to their biddings. By so doing, there is the use of biblical allusion in the second line to stress their God-like mentality which is referred to as "the Vomitorium of power." The reference reminds us of God's use of "Manna" to feed the Jews in the wilderness in Exodus 16: 31-36.

The agonies of the speaker continue, as he uses poetic language to enunciate how Ige is further blackmailed by his political enemies. This time, one can perceive the deft use of culinary imagery, as the mischief makers use "absinthes" to season the "morsel" of "Ige." For the purpose of information, "absinthe" is a very strong green alcoholic drink that is probably made from aniseed. By implication, the purpose here is to influence Ige's thought through deceitful means. It is not surprising, therefore, that the politician's "memory of unfinished struggles" seems to be their target. To be more specific, the termination of Ige's "sacred missions" through a deliberate attack on his "bearing" of influence, heightens the speaker's cry here. The reader's heart cringes by the fact that the respected politician's "will" has become a "mere blubber" that is under the "turning" capacity of these vicious and corrupt persons in position of power.

It is astonishing to the senses that the mourning of Ige's predicament transcends his physical death. Ofeimun's brilliance in this elegiac construction is multi-faceted. One could decipher from different angles, the agonizing and deceitful imagery of sadness that envelopes the political career of Ige. From the language of the speaker, it is a thing of great regret and pain that there could be so much concentrated hatred and vicious attack towards a particular individual. The zeal to render his political vision rudderless and subservient to the opposition, is what generates the sombre atmosphere in the poem.

The mourner further demonstrates the opposition's devastating political blackmail on Ige's personal integrity in the following lines:

And when you seek to return to where you came
we'll set the parliament of dogs at your throat
with accusations darker than the fourteen plagues-
your loyal dogs will bark at you from your own door

your obedient servants hiss at your mere shadow
your consort turn her back at the mere rumour
of your coming, your voice, and things you have touched. (*Generals*, 43)

The sad thing here is that Ige seems overwhelmed from all possible angles. The strategic move of calumny is neatly instituted. There is so much brilliance built into the attack. From the words of the speaker, it is clear that the entry and exit strategies of the political assassination have been fully set out. The reader needs to be conversant with the degree of threat invested in line two of the poem. The expression encapsulates the might of the devastating political attack on Ige's personal integrity. Besides, it tells us of the heinous nature of these political assassins. To worsen the situation, one can perceive the stark blackmail orchestrated by "the parliament of dogs" against the image of the revered politician. One has to be familiar with the ten plagues in the Bible to grasp the enormity of the "fourteen plagues" of "accusations" instituted against one man.

A further reading of the poem's successive lines reveals the motive of the strategic political blackmail. As a result, one is not surprised that there is a disconnect between "Ige" and his "loyal dogs." Suffice it to say here that the speaker's use of language is very instructive. It is not mechanical that the speaker made symbolic references to "parliament of dogs" and "loyal dogs." The understanding of the poem from this perspective, would enhance how we perceive the intricate details invested in generating an elegiac atmosphere. This is further demonstrated in the poem as the "mere shadow" of "Ige" becomes an anathema to his "obedient servants" as well as his "consort." The whole structure of his personality is smeared with terrible scandal. This again strengthens the agony in the poem. One can only imagine the impact that this smear campaign has done to the image of the politician. The whole atmosphere is characterized by mourning and grief at the destruction of human integrity and excellence.

As the poem continues in another stanza, the speaker registers a note of consolation in the midst of the agonies of Ige. The lines are cast in a dramatic manner:

and when they asked you to bow to their gods,
you stood too erect for their sense of scandal,
you showed the higher pedigree of the deities
who bowed down to you at the market place,
and in the privacy of your estate; you revealed
which stalls held the daintiest stock
Not theirs, not their wands of deshabled wood. (*General 44*)

The first two lines of the quoted poem underscore the struggle for supremacy between "Ige" and his political rivals. What is, however, interesting is the doggedness demonstrated by the amiable politician even in the face of scandalous opposition. We take solace in the fact that the resolute display of instructive courage by "Ige" registers his unique "pedigree" in the political arena. One cannot but admire the strength of defiance demonstrated here. In a way, Ige's confidence serves a death blow to the opposition's "sense of scandal."

Again, it is comforting to the speaker that the "pedigree" of the democratic politician did not waiver. The comparison of his amiable qualities with those of the "deities," strengthen the consolatory atmosphere in the poem. To put it more clearly, it is implied here that one of the core strengths of Ige's steadfastness, is his adherence to the African spiritual values. Another point that is also noticeable is the speaker's reverence for Ige's display of standard democratic values. A careful study of the speaker's diction shows the attractive and alluring beauty of his dogged actions. To Ofeimun, it is amazing and quite puzzling at the same time, that someone could still hold on to his core beliefs and values, even in the face of daring and scandalous oppositions. It is also clear from the poem that the "deshabiled" status of the opposition politics is acknowledged through the "wood" image. This fight to remain relevant in the mainstream of politics, albeit, in an atmosphere of scandal and smear campaign, elevates the status of Ige's dogged political credentials.

The display of strength in death continues to generate consolatory effects in the closing stanza of the poem:

You, you sweated beyond bravado and bluff,
in your swank of Area Father, you moved deftly
sowing seeds, unshrinking from the stink of manure;
and when they saw the whistle planted between your lips
to rouse armies of ants to serpents in their grotto
their game saw no future but rotted fruitage
Their fear spoke, then, to assassins on the cusp
of Martyrs Day that will never give them reprieve! (*Generals*, 44)

The repetition of the pronoun "you" in the first line emphasizes the speaker's direct admiration of Ige's persona. It draws our attention to the quality of his personality. Moreover, it is striking to note that the vast dimension of Ige's grace extends "beyond" sheer confidence. In this light, it is inferred here that the tag of "Area Father" had a strong effect on his "deftly" movement.

At this juncture, it is only pertinent that one appreciates the speaker's further evocation of Ige's personality in the third line. This time, there is the use of

agricultural imagery to capture the true essence of his person. The interesting thing here is that Ige is invested with the image of a farmer "sowing seeds" in his farm. The dedication and commitment to his trade are suggested, as he is said to be "unshrinking from the stink of manure." Here, the observant reader must understand Ofeimun's deft use of language to illuminate the tenacity and persistence of the "Area father." From all indications, it is revealed here that "Ige" uses the farming principle of sowing and reaping to build up his "armies" of dogged, unshrinking and progressive politicians.

Furthermore, Ige's outstanding skill of political mobilization is further revealed. Here, we are intimated with how he rouses his "armies" of loyal supporters with his "whistle planted between his lips." The critical reader of the poem must be able to recognize the imaginative use of language there. Besides, the defiant character of the "armies" of "Ige" is vividly captured in the fifth line. There is every indication that Ige has successively sown his rugged boldness in his troops. In the mind of the speaker, these "armies of ants" are ready to clash with any force "deshabiled." At the same time, they "will never give them reprieve" as long as the "Martyr's Day" remains in the annals of Nigeria's political history.

IV.

Kudirat Abiola is another outstanding personality that attracts the elegiac cry of Ofeimun. Like her husband, Chief M.K.O Abiola, she was a Pro-Democracy activist and campaigner. She was murdered in cold blood on 4 June 1996, by a gang of six assassins led by Sergeant Barnabas Jabila (Sergeant Rogers), following orders from his superior, Major Hamza Al-Mustapha, of the Abacha junta. This unfortunate incident forms the memorial of Ofeimun in the poem entitled "The Heart Has No Bone." The Opening stanzas are charged with consolatory effects:

She was a mascot, fist, and luminous spine,
headgear tied as many pythons
around her waist, ready
to clap all fates to the test

She breached house-wifely tales to stand
up to gorillas dangling from silk-cotton trees
and Crocodiles at river-beds leering at her
as she climbed or swam against the tides (*Generals* 36)

The metaphorical language of the speaker here is very striking. One would need to ruminate on the descriptive words in the first line, to picture the amiable qualities of

"Kudirat." However, it is important that the reader takes cognizance of the serpentine image in the second line. It should be understood here that its suggestive use underscores the fury of the deceased. At the same time, one must appreciate the mourner's astute use of language to illuminate the African woman's demonstration of anger. The picture is of an angry woman who uses her "headgear" to tie her waist in preparedness for a fierce fight. Closely related to this, is the use of her hands to "clap all fates" at the face of her opponent. These analogical references are deliberate, to stress Kudirat's brutal confrontation with anti-democratic forces.

Another interesting thing about the Pro-Democracy campaigner is her unusual abilities to exceed "house-wifely" qualities. By implication, there is a subtle use of language to espouse the uniqueness of Kudirat's status as a wife. In the context of the speaker's linguistic choice, the Pro-Democracy activist has transcended the realm of a woman who stays at home to cook, clean, take care of the children, etc., while her husband goes out to work. These "tales" have become elementary and uninspiring to her; rather she prefers to "stand up to gorillas ...and crocodiles" Our understanding of the speaker's use of the imagery of wild animals is necessary here. It captures the true essence behind his mourning of the deceased. In the poem, we are imaginatively transported to the wild to visualise the surviving posture of Kudirat against the brutal attack from wild animals. The striking thing about Ofeimun's cry, is that it is laced with consolation that is anchored on poetic language.

In another part of the poem, the enduring legacies of Kudirat continue to dominate the agonies of Ofeimun. Hear him:

And, where weeds overtook main-streets
her plodding winnowed down their curse
her yearning firmed the implacable star
that crossed the twelfth day of the sixth month

in the third year of the ninth decade
of the century that walked tall in nightmares
... she dared the cross-roads full of spikes
to make dreams whole again. (*Generals*, 36)

The opening couplet above underscores the mourner's sombre reflections on the vibrant energy of the late Kudirat. In the poem, the "plodding" of the deceased is gifted with powers that "winnowed down" the "curse" of "weeds." The imagery is suggestive of a dominant personality. In this regard, one can picture how Kudirat dared the "curse" of the "weeds" of the military government in Nigeria. The reference strikes our imaginative senses with the visuals of a horse "plodding" its

way through "weeds" across the field.

Moreover, there is a skilful use of poetic language in the third line to underpin the strength of the human rights activist's strong emotional desire. In a way, Kudirat's dedication to the June 12 mandate has assumed a celestial dimension. In this connection, the celestial image "star" is invested with the symbolic value of June 12. One would need to slip into the world of astronomy to properly grasp the thoughts here. In the opinion of the speaker, it is the strong desire of Kudirat's campaign that solidify the iconic status of the "implacable" June 12 mandate. It is not surprising therefore, that the "decade" is said to have "walked tall in nightmares," thus making it an era of enduring grace in Nigeria's political and national history. This is not unconnected with the many calamities that came with it. Besides, the last two lines of the extract reiterate the daring qualities of the Pro-Democracy campaigner, as well as the consolatory effects it has on the poet.

Further still, Ofeimun expresses his extreme mental pain over the death of Kudirat, through memories that underscore her resolve in the "dark" days of her campaign for the restoration of the June 12 mandate. Hear him:

She vowed to walk promises home
from utterance to fruition,
out-distanced regret, while heroes
sprouted from her long intuition
The heart, she said, has no bone that breaks
nor does it tear at tendons when storms throw
bolts and branches to flatten resolve:
'as nothing can break our mandate
let no head erect think of bowing.' (*Generals*, 36)

It is amazing that the elegiac tone of the speaker is graced with admirable legacies of the amazon. The inspiration that flows from Ofeimun's mourning, is quite unique. The sombre atmosphere of the poem is charged with interesting expressions that show Kudirat lived a life well spent. One can deduce from the mourner's line of thought that the death of Kudirat is more of the celebration of a glorious exit than a mere event of death.

A critical reading of the opening lines of the extract reveals Kudirat as a woman of action; one who dedicates herself to the "fruition" of her "utterance." Moreover, her disposition is outside the realm of "regret," as she seeks to buildup "heroes" through her fierce struggle for democratic ideals. At this juncture, one cannot fail to comment on the word "sprouted" in the poem. Its use connotes two ideas. In the first instance, the word is suggestive of agricultural imagery. In this regard, it is inferred in

the poem that the human rights campaigner's "long intuition" has become the seeds from which "heroes" of democracy are produced. In the second instance, there is a suggestion that Kudirat is a life coach. She uses the June 12 struggle to develop and groom Pro-Democracy "heroes."

Furthermore, it is noticed that the reference to biological, as well as geographical imagery in the poem, stresses the unyielding "resolve" of the deceased. The will to remain undaunted, despite fierce challenges from the powers that be dominate the speaker's ideas in the closing couplet of the poem. One can tell from the poem's atmosphere that the zeal for democratic freedom, through the restoration of the June 12 "mandate" is one of the legacies that set Kudirat on the high pedestal of national consciousness. Little wonder then that:

She stood, inured, but never kneeling
to an age of impunity and poisonous weed
baiting the peace-keepers in iron hood
whose trigger-threshing of alleyways
was a rite of mad dogs rooting for spoils

Never afraid, she walked her folklore
to highways made of songs division wrote
and so, face to face with the shooting sticks
of stolen power, she cried: "I'm ready...
to take the bullets meant for the children ... shoot!" (*Generals*, 36)

The brilliance of the speaker's revelation of Kudirat's character is quite telling. One would agree that even in death, we are arrested by the charm of her character. From all indications, the beauty of the late activist's disposition can be sensed through the unusual demonstration of an unperturbed spirit, even in the face of "poisonous weed."

Moreover, one must appreciate the speaker's use of folkloric imagery to emphasise the lasting greatness of the deceased. By implication, it is suggested in the poem that Kudirat has sealed the story of her greatness through "songs division wrote" in the heart of many by her struggle for democracy and human rights. It is noticed that it is in the course of her struggle that she came "face to face with the shooting sticks/ of stolen power." The speaker's imaginative use of language here captures the Abacha-led military junta and his army of assassins in a most interesting light. The closing statement of Kudirat in the last two lines of the extract confirms her sacrificial role for democratic rule in Nigeria and her eventful glorious transition to eternity.

V.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the poetic proficiency of Ofeimun as an elegist. In our analyses of his elegies, it is noticed that the poet's mourning is interwoven with consolation. This strategy is deliberate, as it registers the enduring legacies of his subjects of lamentation. It is interesting to note that the memorials are actually on political and democratic personalities. This is quite significant, as it leads us to understanding the dominant thoughts of Ofeimun's poetic character. Besides, it is noticed that the sombre and agonizing atmosphere generated in the poems are traceable to Ofeimun's linguistic choices

Looking at the elegy for Rewane for instance, though he has transited to glory, yet, the manner in which the mourner captures the picture of death is interesting. In a way, Ofeimun's poem is important for the reader to visualize how the Pro-Democracy activist was hunted down by dare-devil murderers. In a similar manner, the assassination of Ige underscores the elegist's mastery of literary language to illuminate plangent atmosphere of death. The sadness and agony in the heart of the speaker could be sensed through the manner in which the gap-tooth politician was lured into the den of killers. Closely related to the above thoughts is the elegy dedicated to Kudirat. The mourner, in this case, leads us into the struggles that led to the assassination of the Pro-Democracy campaigner. We can see through the cry of Ofeimun that Kudirat deliberately surrenders herself to be a sacrifice for democracy in Nigeria. Her disposition to the tenets of democracy and human rights is quite inspirational and consolatory.

Finally, it must be pointed out that apart from Ofeimun's astute use of figurative expression, one is also impressed with the consolatory effects that pervade his elegies. From poem to poem, and in the midst of his agonizing cries, one could sense that he takes solace that the subjects of his mourning lived exemplary lives. In the end, it is the beauty of Ofeimun's elegies that would cement his place as one of the finest modern African poets to experiment with the elegiac genre.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (9th edition). Wadsworth: Cengage, 2009. Print.
- Aiyejina, Funso. "Anger and After: The Civic Poetry of Odia Ofeimun." *Okike* 24.(1983): 34-45. Print.
- Asika, Ikechukwu Emmanuel. "Poetry and Militancy: Niger-Delta Crisis and

- Environmental Concerns in Odia Ofeimun's *Go Tell The Generals* and Peter Onwudinjo's *Camp Fire Songs*." *ANSU Journal of Language and Literary Studies* (AJLLS).1:1(2011):1-12,Print.
- Bello, Idaevbor. "Odia Ofeimun's *Nigeria the Beautiful* : A Diverse People's Tortuous Journey to Nationhood." *Journal of The Literary Society of Nigeria (JLSN)*. 11(2019): 103-119. Print.
- . "Representation of Leadership in Second Generation Nigerian Poetry." *Journal ofLiterarySocietyofNigeria (JLSN)*. 11(2019): 136-150.Print.
- . "Revolutionary Strategies: The Poetry of Odia Ofeimun." *New Nigerian Poetry*. (2005): 85-100. Print.
- Egudu, Romanus. "Power and Poverty in Nigerian New Poetry in English." *Okike* 38 (1998): 34-45. Print.
- Garuba, Harry. "Odia Ofeimun and Femi Fatuba." *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature:1700 to the Present*. 2 (ed.) Yemi Ogunbiyi. Lagos: Guardian Books (1988): 269-76. Print.
- Ofeimun, Odia. *Go Tell the Generals*. Lagos: Hornbill House, 2008. Print.
- Ojaide, Tanure. "An Insider Testimony: Odia Ofeimun and His Generation of Nigerian Poets." In: *Indigeneity, Globalization, and African Literature: Personally Speaking* by Tanure Ojaide. London: Palgrave Macmillan. (2015): 119-132.Print.
- Okunoye, Oyeniyi. "The Margins of the Metropole? The Location of Home in Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*." *Kunapipi* 27:1(2005): 93-107. Print.
- Okwechime, Okey and Kola Eke. "Societal Problems in The Poetry of Odia Ofeimun." *Emotan: A Journal ofTheArts*.3 (2005): 169-178. Print.
- Olaoluwa, Senayon S. "Another Tale of Two Cities: Contestation of Globalization in Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*. " *The Anachronist* 12(2006):251-268.Print.
- Orhero, Mathias Iroro. "History and Politics in 21st Century Nigerian Poetry: AStudy ofOdiaOfeimun'sABoiling *Caracas* andRomeAboh's *A Torrent a/Terror*." *A Conference Paper Presented at The 9th University of Uyo Conference on Language and Literature on Thursday 24th February, 2017*. Print.
- Osoba, Gabriel A. "The Poem as a Social and Linguistic Product: A Stylistic Investigation ofOdia Ofeimun's. *The Messiahs*." *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 17:3 (2013): 29-33. Print.
- TheHolyBible.KingJames Version*. New York, Thomas Nelson, 1990.Print.