

Poetics of Protest: Examining the Fusion of Poetry and Social Commentary in Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

This work examines the convoluted chemistry between poetry, socio-political commentary and voice of protest in the Nigerian literary landscape, using the poetry of J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka as primary resources for its analysis. The study adopts a qualitative approach by examining the thematic foundations, stylistic devices, and rhetorical strategies employed by Clark and Soyinka in their poetry, in the bid to buttress how the two writers deftly weave complex webs of imagery, symbolism, and metaphors that encapsulate the socio-political realities of Nigeria, offering incisive commentary on issues ranging from governance and corruption to human rights and social justice. The study further explores the dynamics of the relationship between aesthetic innovativeness and socio-political engagement, elucidating how poetic form serves as an instrument of dissent and as an avenue for bolstering the collective consciousness of society. The study concludes that Nigerian poetry has remained a powerful utility for extrapolating the socio-political dynamics of governance deficits and the protest voice that seeks to correct the ills that inhibit sustainable development in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigerian history is woven with threads of misrule, protests and resistance. From the fight against colonial rule to the ongoing struggle for a more equitable society, Nigerians have consistently employed diverse forms of protest to achieve change (Agbu 2016). Street demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts have marked periods of political upheaval, but artistic expression, particularly through music, poetry, and protest concerts also plays a crucial role in mobilizing the masses and amplifying their

voices (Akinsola 2017). This rich tradition of artistic dissent finds its roots in Nigeria's colonial past and remains relevant in Nigerian contemporary history. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 serves as a powerful illustration. Young Nigerians harnessed social media platforms to share poems and music that condemned police brutality with raw emotion and biting social commentary (Adedoyin & Omojuwa 2020). This exemplifies the enduring power of artistic expression in igniting social movements and fostering collective action.

Nigeria's complex colonial legacy, coupled with its tumultuous post-independence history, has provided fertile ground for literary expression that grapples with themes of identity, power, and social justice (Irele 1999). Clark and Soyinka have emerged as voices of dissent, utilizing their craft to challenge oppressive systems and advocating for change. J.P. Clark's poetry occupies a prominent space in Nigerian literature, distinguished by its unwavering commitment to social justice and its mastery of vivid imagery (Echeruo 1991). Clark's verses become a platform for critiquing societal issues like poverty, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of Nigerian communities (Adeola 2008). On the other hand, Soyinka is a Nobel laureate and renowned playwright who utilizes his poetic talents to critique political oppression and champion human rights through his powerful use of satire and symbolism (Seetharam & Cudjoe 2006). Hence, this study embarks on an exploration of the convoluted chemistry between poetry and protest within the context of Nigerian literature, focusing specifically on the contributions of Clark and Soyinka.

The primary objective of this research is to unravel how Clark and Soyinka harness the poetic medium as a vehicle for protest and social change. This entails a nuanced examination of their works, which span decades and encompass a diverse array of themes and styles. Through close analysis of selected poems, this study seeks to illuminate the complex fusion of form and function in poetry, elucidating how aesthetic innovation becomes intertwined with socio-political engagement. The study also explores the thematic underpinnings, stylistic techniques, and rhetorical strategies employed by Clark and Soyinka in their poetic oeuvres. By delving into the imagery, symbolism, and metaphor present in their works, this study aims to decipher the layers of meaning embedded within their verses and uncover the underlying messages of dissent and social commentary. Furthermore, this research endeavours to situate their poetry within the broader tradition of protest literature, drawing connections to global movements for social justice and human rights. In undertaking this endeavour, the study engages with a theoretical framework – postcolonial theory. This theoretical perspective provides a lens through which to analyze the socio-political significance of poetry within the Nigerian context and elucidate its role as a catalyst for societal transformation.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory offers a powerful framework for dissecting the poetics of protest in Nigerian literature. It illuminates how the enduring effects of colonialism continue to shape the thematic concerns, stylistic choices, and the very act of protest embedded within the poetry. By foregrounding the historical and political realities of

colonialism, we can dig into the elaborate relationship between poetry, social commentary, and the articulation of dissent within the postcolonial nation. A cornerstone of postcolonial theory is its critique of colonial knowledge production. Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, exposes how colonial powers constructed knowledge systems that legitimized their domination over colonized territories. These systems portrayed colonized cultures as inferior, stagnant, and in need of "civilization" by the West (Said 1978). This resulted in the marginalization of indigenous voices and perspectives, creating a cultural and intellectual imbalance.

In the context of Nigerian literature, postcolonial theory sheds light on how the colonial project attempted to erase or diminish pre-colonial cultural forms. The imposition of the English language and literary traditions served as tools for cultural control. Nigerian writers, in turn, have grappled with this legacy by reclaiming their own narratives and reinterpreting their history. Clark and Soyinka, for example, both engage with pre-colonial myths and legends in their poetry, drawing strength and inspiration from these indigenous traditions. Their works challenge the dominance of Western narratives and contribute to the project of decolonizing knowledge production.

The complex chemistry between language and power is another central tenet of postcolonial theory. Homi Bhabha argues that colonized subjects occupy a liminal space, caught between the colonizer's language and their own cultural heritage (1994). This "hybridity" of experience is often reflected in the language of postcolonial writing. Nigerian poets, for instance, may utilize English while simultaneously incorporating elements of indigenous languages, dialects, and proverbs. This linguistic play disrupts the colonial project of imposing a singular language and highlights the multiplicity of voices within Nigerian society. Furthermore, postcolonial theory emphasizes the subversive potential of language. Writers may employ irony, satire, and double entendre to critique colonialism and its enduring effects. By manipulating the colonizer's language, they can expose its limitations and challenge its claims to authority. Clark and Soyinka, for example, both utilize sharp wit and acerbic language to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of postcolonial governments. Their poetry serves as a form of "counter-discourse," offering alternative narratives that challenge the dominant power structures.

Beyond critiquing the legacies of colonialism, postcolonial theory sheds light on the power dynamics and resistance movements within the postcolonial nation. The concept of the "subaltern," developed by Gayatri Spivak, refers to those who are marginalized and silenced by dominant ideologies (1988). In the context of Nigeria, the subaltern might include ethnic minorities, the working class, or women. Postcolonial scholars are concerned with recovering and amplifying the voices of the subaltern, who have often been excluded from historical narratives and official discourse. Nigerian protest poetry serves as a powerful tool for giving voice to the subaltern. Poets like Clark and Soyinka speak out against social injustices, human rights abuses, and the failures of postcolonial leadership. Their poetry reflects the lived experiences of the marginalized and gives voice to those who are often denied a

platform. By foregrounding the concerns of the subaltern, protest poetry challenges the status quo and demands social change.

However, postcolonial theory goes beyond simply critiquing the colonizer and colonized binary. The postcolonial world is a complex and dynamic space characterized by ongoing processes of negotiation, adaptation, and innovation. Nigerian protest poetry, while offering pointed critiques, also holds the potential for imagining alternative futures. The poets' engagement with pre-colonial traditions, their innovative use of language, and their commitment to social justice all contribute to the ongoing project of forging a truly decolonized Nigerian identity. This demonstrates that a postcolonial lens allows us to appreciate the richness and complexity of Nigerian protest poetry. By examining how these poems grapple with the legacies of colonialism, challenge dominant narratives, and give voice to the marginalized, we gain a deeper understanding of the role that poetry plays in shaping Nigerian society and its ongoing pursuit of self-determination.

J. P. Clark's the Blockade

Clark's "The Blockade" delves into the ecological and socio-political upheavals plaguing the Niger Delta, employing rich imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to underscore its themes of environmental degradation, government negligence, and societal upheaval. The water-hyacinths, initially depicted as a natural phenomenon, gradually evolve into a potent symbol of disruption, reflecting the systemic issues faced by the region. The proliferation of water-hyacinths serves as a metaphor for the pervasive environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The imagery of the creek "covered... from side to side" and "stretching... thirty-five kilometres" vividly conveys the extent of the infestation, symbolizing the suffocation of the natural ecosystem by human-induced pollution and neglect (lines 2, 27-28). This imagery aligns with postcolonial theory, which examines the enduring impacts of colonial exploitation on the environment and indigenous communities (Hall 1996).

Furthermore, the poem critiques the failures of governance and the political elite to address the plight of the affected communities. Postcolonial scholars argue that former colonies often grapple with neocolonial structures that perpetuate inequalities and hinder development (Agbu 2016). The lines "government of parties / By politicians to share assets / Of the people failed to come / To the rescue" highlight the rampant corruption and apathy that exacerbate the region's woes (lines 11-14). This critique aligns with cultural studies' examination of power dynamics and the unequal distribution of resources within society (Williams 1977). However, postcolonial theory adds another layer of analysis by foregrounding the historical and political context of colonialism and its lasting impact on contemporary power structures.

The sudden movement of the water-hyacinths, described as being "towed by a fleet / Of tugs, all invisible like / Submarines in action," serves as a metaphorical turning point in the poem (lines 8-9). This imagery evokes a sense of mystery and foreboding, suggesting hidden forces at play beyond the comprehension of the local inhabitants. It can be interpreted as a metaphor for the unseen influences shaping the region's fate, such as corporate interests or clandestine political machinations (Bakhtin, 1984). The

conclusion of the blockade, marked by the retreat of the water-hyacinths, further underscores the poem's themes of societal upheaval and uncertainty. The event is perceived differently by those who witnessed it, with some attributing it to "an act of nature" while others see it as a manifestation of divine intervention or rebel activity (lines 29-32). This ambiguity reflects the complex and contested narratives surrounding environmental crises and social change, echoing the principles of literary criticism in exploring multiple interpretations of a text (Barthes 1977).

Clark's Triage

In JP Clark's "Triage," a multifaceted analysis unveils a scathing critique of the social and political landscape of Nigeria, intertwined with potent imagery, symbolism, and metaphor, all serving as instruments for protest and social commentary. The poem's title, "Triage," draws from the medical lexicon, suggesting a sorting process based on the severity of conditions, but here, it extends metaphorically to societal stratification and neglect. The opening lines present a stark image of the marginalized, symbolized by "the blind and others in the street" (lines 1-2), who are led by children instead of attending school. This imagery not only evokes sympathy but also serves as a powerful indictment of the societal failure to prioritize education and uplift the disenfranchised. Postcolonial theory, which scrutinizes power dynamics and the legacy of colonialism, resonates here, highlighting the enduring disparities exacerbated by historical injustices (Hall 2012).

Clark's reference to being reduced "...to a state / Of stone" (lines 3-4) conjures imagery of petrification, suggesting a sense of helplessness and resignation in the face of pervasive inequality. However, the subsequent desire "...to throw it at this body / Of varied parts" (Triage n.d) hints at a latent urge for rebellion against the oppressive system. This metaphorical act of resistance aligns with the principles of postcolonial theory, which emphasize the critique of enduring colonial legacies and the struggle for self-determination. The act of throwing the stone can be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant power structures established at post-colonialism and a demand for a more equitable distribution of resources. Also, this emphasizes grassroots movements and subaltern voices challenging dominant narratives (Williams 1958). The notion of wealth held "in common" but exploited by a privileged caste wielding "the ballot box and gun" (lines 6-7) symbolizes the systemic corruption and abuse of power prevalent in Nigerian society. This symbolism not only critiques the ruling elite but also underscores the inherent violence perpetuated by entrenched power structures.

Postcolonial theory emphasizes the enduring effects of colonialism on the distribution of wealth and power, highlighting how these inequalities continue to shape postcolonial societies. In Clark's poem, the wealthy elite represent a continuation of colonial hierarchies, where a privileged few exploit the resources of the nation for their own benefit. (Barthes 1977). The concluding line, "These, indeed, are the ones too sick to treat" (line 8), serves as a chilling verdict on the state's neglect of its most vulnerable citizens. Here, the metaphorical sickness represents not physical ailments but the moral decay and callousness of the ruling class. This line encapsulates the poem's central theme of societal abandonment and underscores the urgent need for social reform. It echoes the principles of postcolonial theory, which advocate for

decolonization and equitable distribution of resources (Fanon 1963).

Soyinka's Elegy for the Nation

Wole Soyinka's "Elegy for the Nation" transcends mere lamentation, emerging as a complex meditation on Nigeria's socio-political landscape, steeped in vivid imagery, symbolism, and metaphor. The poem, underpinned by a scholarly exploration of postcolonial theory, navigates through Nigeria's tumultuous history, offering incisive critiques of colonial legacies, governance, and societal norms. Through poignant imagery and metaphor, Soyinka paints a stark portrait of Nigeria's societal decay and political disillusionment. References to "severed wrists" and "butchery" (lines 11-12) evoke a sense of profound disillusionment and societal fracturing, symbolizing the nation's descent into chaos and violence. Moreover, the imagery of a "wheelchair-bound" nation (line 18) underscores Nigeria's incapacitation and inability to progress, symbolizing the stagnation and paralysis of the state under corrupt leadership.

Soyinka's critique extends to the erosion of cultural heritage and identity, depicted through references to "broken mbari statues" and "empty hands" (lines 10, 25). These symbols represent the loss of cultural pride and the commodification of Nigeria's rich heritage, reflecting broader critiques of cultural imperialism and erasure within postcolonial discourse (Ashcroft et al. 1989). The poem's engagement with Nigerian mythology, such as references to Sango's axe (line 8), serves as a call for a collective examination of the past and a reclaiming of indigenous narratives in the face of colonial domination (Hall 2012). Furthermore, "Elegy for a Nation" serves as a powerful vehicle for protest and social commentary, challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for societal transformation. Through scathing indictments of corruption and self-serving leadership, Soyinka highlights the systemic flaws within Nigeria's political landscape, echoing the calls for resistance and revolution within postcolonial literature (Fanon 1963). The poem's interrogation of religious extremism and cultural fundamentalism aligns with postcolonial concerns about the enduring impact of colonialism on cultural and religious practices within the postcolonial nation (Spivak 1988).

Soyinka's Ah, Demosthenes!

Wole Soyinka's *Ah, Demosthenes!* transcends mere celebration of oratory; it emerges as a clarion call for resistance against tyranny, aligning with key tenets of postcolonial theory. The poem invokes Demosthenes, the legendary Athenian orator who tirelessly opposed Macedonian rule, as a potent symbol of defiance against oppressive power structures. Soyinka employs rich imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to convey themes of defiance, resistance, and protest against tyranny, echoing the principles of postcolonial theory which emphasize the ongoing struggle against colonial legacies and power structures (Hall 1996). The imagery of "ram[ming] pebbles in my mouth" (lines 2-3) evokes a visceral sense of physical resistance against oppression, resonating with the idea of resistance and protest often explored in cultural studies (Hall 2012). This act symbolizes the poet's determination to confront and challenge oppressive forces, even at great personal risk. It aligns with the emphasis in

postcolonial studies on the act of "talking back" to dominant narratives and power structures (Spivak 1988). Furthermore, the poem's focus on Demosthenes, a figure who resisted external domination, resonates with the postcolonial critique of colonialism and its enduring effects (Said 1978).

Soyinka employs the symbolism of placing "nettles on my tongue" (lines 8-9) to represent the willingness to endure discomfort and pain in the pursuit of justice. This act resonates with postcolonial theory's emphasis on resistance to oppression and the reclaiming of silenced voices (Spivak 1988). The nettles burning at the root and roof of the poet's mouth symbolize the scathing critique and condemnation of tyranny, aiming to sear the tyrant's power with the intensity of truth. The mention of "werepe" (lines 10-12), a potent and painful plant, serves as a metaphor for the discomfort caused by speaking truth to power, reverberating with the cultural studies' exploration of power dynamics and collective identity (Williams 1958). The fiery hairs of the werepe symbolize the discomfort and consequences faced by those who dare to challenge oppressive regimes, yet the poet resolves to place werepe on every tongue, indicating a collective commitment to truth-telling and resistance.

The poet's intention to "drop some ratsbane on my tongue" (lines 14) symbolizes the willingness to confront and bait the oppressive forces, sealing their fate in tunnels dark and dank. This act echoes the themes of resistance and protest prevalent in postcolonial theory. The use of poison, a weapon often associated with the marginalized and powerless, signifies a deliberate challenge to the established order (Ahmad 1992). The "tunnels dark and dank" evoke a sense of hidden power structures and the potential for subversion from within. This aligns with postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," where the colonized adopt the colonizer's language and forms but twist them to disrupt and ultimately undermine their authority (1994).

Furthermore, the imagery of thrusting "all fingers down the throat" (lines 18-19) to raise a spout of bile symbolizes the rejection of the status quo and the desire to purge the world of its "petrified forms" and "fugitive truths." This act of violent expulsion resonates with the postcolonial critique of knowledge production. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, argues that colonial powers constructed knowledge systems that legitimized their domination and marginalized indigenous voices (Said 1978). The "bile" in the poem can be interpreted as the accumulated injustices and lies perpetuated by these dominant narratives. By forcing it out, the speaker seeks to create space for alternative truths and challenge the established order. This aligns with the postcolonial project of decolonizing knowledge and reclaiming the right to self-representation. The poet's refusal to let the hemlock pass "between my lips" (line 23) signifies a rejection of passive acceptance and a commitment to actively resist oppression, echoing the defiant spirit of Demosthenes and resonating with the principles of postcolonial theory.

The role of poetry as a vehicle for social critique and political commentary carries profound implications within the Nigerian context, encapsulating the intricate socio-

political terrain and historical adversities of the nation. Within this framework, Nigerian poets and writers have wielded their craft to express dissent, interrogate oppressive systems of authority, and illuminate prevailing societal injustices, thereby providing a vital platform for the voices of the marginalized and championing transformative change.

Poetry as Resistance

The enduring impact of colonialism casts a formidable shadow over Nigeria, exerting a profound influence on its social, political, and economic milieu. Amid persistent inequalities and injustices, Nigerian poetry emerges as a potent instrument of defiance. Renowned poets such as Soyinka harness the power of their craft to interrogate the entrenched power dynamics inherited from the colonial era, aligning themselves with the principles of postcolonial theory. Colonial discourse, with its intent to marginalize and silence the colonized, is vehemently contested by Nigerian poetry, which actively reclaims the narrative and amplifies the voices of the oppressed. Soyinka's seminal work, "Ah, Demosthenes!", epitomizes this spirit of resistance. By invoking the persona of Demosthenes, the venerable Athenian orator renowned for his staunch opposition to Macedonian dominance, Soyinka draws a compelling parallel between the struggles of ancient Greece and the contemporary battle against neocolonial forces in Nigeria (Soyinka, *Selected Poems*, n.d). This act of invocation, as expounded by Ato Sekyi-Otu in *The Problem of Silence: Gender and Postcolonial Theory in Africa*, serves as a strategic form of "talk-back" (42) against colonial narratives that sought to efface or disparage African history and autonomy.

Dismantling Power Structures

While the imperative of reclaiming the silenced voices of the marginalized remains paramount, Nigerian poetry ventures beyond mere reclamation. It actively engages in the dismantling of the very symbols of power wielded by colonial regimes. Ania Loomba, in "Colonialism/Postcolonialism," contends that these symbols were not solely about territorial and resource control but also encompassed dominion over "knowledge, culture, and identity" (2). Through the metaphorical deconstruction of these symbols, poets empower their audience to critically scrutinize the legitimacy of associated power structures and envisage alternative paradigms. Soyinka's "Ah, Demosthenes!" epitomizes this strategic approach. The poem critiques contemporary oppressive regimes through potent metaphors that evoke the corrupting influence of colonialism. Lines such as "tainted towers" vividly portray institutions once emblematic of authority now tainted by corruption and injustice (line 8). Similarly, the imagery of "rodents" conveys a sense of infestation and decay, underscoring the destructive nature of these regimes (line 9). These metaphors serve as manifestations of "negative representation," a concept elucidated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in "The Empire Writes Back."

Rather than merely inverting colonial discourse's power dynamics, negative representation actively exposes flaws and vulnerabilities inherent within symbols of colonial power (Ashcroft et al. 1989). By stripping away the grandeur associated with

these symbols, Soyinka enables his audience to perceive them as instruments of oppression. The metaphorical deconstruction of power transcends mere symbolic critique; it disrupts dominant narratives perpetuated by colonial discourse. Soyinka's poem not only portrays the "tainted towers" and "rodents" but also positions the poet as one willing to infiltrate their domain and confront them directly (lines 8-10). This act of defiance, akin to Said's concept of "speaking truth to power" in *Orientalism*, challenges the legitimacy of the established order and ignites inspiration for others to follow suit (xiii).

Exposing Inequalities

Nigerian poetry emerges as a robust platform, not merely for social critique, but also for laying bare the harsh realities of social and economic disparities entrenched within the nation. Nigerian poets adeptly employ vivid imagery to encapsulate the struggles endured by the marginalized. These poetic expressions often portray individuals and communities marginalized from mainstream society, thereby underscoring their vulnerability and reliance on a system that frequently fails to cater to their needs. For instance, the opening lines of Christopher Okigbo's poem evoke a profound sense of displacement and yearning: "I walk the path of sorrow / And because I have no crown / Though they say I am a king" (*Collected Poems*, 49-50). The portrayal of a king bereft of a crown implies a deprivation of power and a denial of rightful status. Similarly, Osundare's poem starkly employs imagery to vividly depict the harsh realities of poverty: "Here, children eat fire / and cough out black smoke" (*The Eye of the Earth*, 32). These poignant descriptions not only captivate the reader's imagination but also compel them to confront the grim realities endured by these marginalized communities.

Moreover, Nigerian poetry transcends mere depiction of the marginalized; it digs into the convoluted web of factors contributing to their marginalization. This resonates with the core tenets of postcolonial theory, which highlights the enduring effects of colonialism on social and economic inequalities within postcolonial nations. Colonial systems often exacerbated existing social hierarchies and created new forms of marginalization. Nigerian protest poetry delves into these complexities, exploring how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the lives of the most vulnerable in society (Crenshaw 1989). Poems like "Market Woman" by Ifeanyi Okonkwo explore the hurdles faced by women navigating a patriarchal society and an unforgiving marketplace. Similarly, works such as "Isale Eko" by Soyinka shed light on the marginalization of specific ethnic groups within the broader Nigerian societal fabric.

Furthermore, the language employed by Nigerian poets amplifies the palpable sense of neglect experienced by the marginalized. Poems often utilize repetition and stark contrasts to lay bare the apathy of those in positions of power. In John Pepper Clark's poem, the recurring line "We shall inherit the earth" (*Collected Poems*, 47) starkly contrasts with the preceding portrayal of the dispossessed and forsaken. This reiterated refrain underscores the yearning for a more equitable future while simultaneously accentuating the chasm between the present reality and that aspiration. Similarly, Ojaide Tanure's "The Danced Poem" employs contrasting imagery to juxtapose the

opulent lifestyles of the elite against the struggles of the impoverished: "Champagne corks erupt / in air-conditioned rooms / while in the shantytowns/bellies rumble" (In *Songs of Myself: Quartet*, 56-57). Through language evocative of apathy and disregard, Nigerian poets challenge readers to confront their complicity within structures perpetuating inequality.

Conclusion

Clark's and Soyinka's poems analysed above clearly underscore the utility of Nigerian poetry as a vital tool at the disposal of creative writers in their patriotic pursuits of social change and national regeneration. Through their ingenuity in the deployment of vivid imagery, literary devices, and other resources as notable trailblazers in Nigerian poetry tradition, to expose the legacies of colonialism, challenge oppressive regimes, and amplify marginalized voices. As Nigeria grapples with its present socio-political realities, poetry offers a clarion call for fundamental reforms in the polity and conscientious leadership. The enduring power of Nigerian poetry lies in its ability to speak truth to power, foster critical reflection, and inspire collective action towards a more just and equitable society.

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