

Violent Rhetoric as Response to Global Hegemonies in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Peter Onwudinjo

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Abstract

This paper on “Violent Rhetoric as Response to Global Hegemonies in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka and Peter Onwudinjo” gives an insight on the incessant oppression, victimization, exploitation and terrorism perpetuated in Africa and African-America. The appropriation of this heinous crime by the capitalists and the attendant revolution of the masses in different climes necessitated this paper. The paper adopts post-colonial theory as the basic theoretical framework. This theory aims at re-examining history from the perspective of the colonized by decolonizing the minds of the subalterns and blacks in Africa and in the Diaspora. The protest tone deployed by the poet astutely unmasks the vengeance of the people against the ruling class and white hegemony. Relevant aspects of style will be analyzed to strengthen the literary oeuvre of the writers and provoke the complacent masses to challenge the status quo. It has also been observed that Baraka and Onwudinjo are angry generation of poets who are not only in a hurry to touch the lives of the people but also to correct certain abnormalities in our debased society. The paper finds out that Onwudinjo and Baraka's poems make use of allusion, proverb, riddle and aphorism to interrogate this entrenched rottenness in the society. The study recommends that more research be carried out on poets from different continents of the world to consolidate scholarship on comparative study in African and African-American poetry.

Keywords: *Vengeance, Rhetoric, Post-colonial Theory, Global Hegemonies and Capitalists.*

Introduction

The struggle for an egalitarian society has been successfully tackled by scholars, critics and writers who clamor to be close ally to the conscience of humanity. These writers explode the myth of unrepentant dictatorship and strive to help the indigent masses. It is as a result of this perceived dehumanization, oppression, and maltreatment meted out to blacks in the United States and blacks in the Nigeria's post colony that Niyi Osundare interrogates in his article entitled “Thread in the Loom...” in this manner

As natives of the most dehumanized, most flagrantly exploited continents in the world, African writers have never nursed any doubt about the role of art in the struggle for the restoration of human dignity and justice, about the need to widen the space for our dreams and deeds (11).

This fervor and feelings find expression in the poetry of Amiri Baraka and Peter

Onwudinjo whose radical commitment, no nonsense disposition and language of weaponry are deployed to vehemently choke the ritual space of capitalists and allies in all facets of our society. These writers from different geographical background unravel the enabling posture that this paper is interrogating. Their vengeance and revolt is as a result of the maggots steering the wheel of progress in Nigeria and in the Diaspora. Osundare makes us to understand that “Africa is the most humiliated, most dehumanized continent in the world. Her history is a depressing tale of dispossession and impoverishment” (26). It is against this backdrop that Josephat Odey and Patrick Odey Ogar bring to the fore roles of poets and poetry thus: “In African literary tradition, poetry is and has always been a driving force of social change and an avenue of interrogating the life of the people in the war-torn region”(6).

The poets use the predicament in Africa and in African American as the nodal point around which they interrogate a touching story of the plights of blacks in Africa and in the United States. These precarious conditions of the masses and the cannibalistic disposition of the capitalists in the 21st century are very much recaptured in the poetry of Baraka and Onwudinjo. The poets show that the lives and destinies of the masses is a reflection of their sordid conditions and liken to the biblical parable of the seed that fell among the thorns and the rocks. This anomaly in Africa and America is rightly echoed in Bessie Heads question in this manner: “If a race with the same affinities cannot be at peace with itself, and if within such a race, a few brutally oppress and alienate the majority, then how can two or more different races living together ever expect to be at peace?” (89)

The circumstances of the oppression and brutality by the leaders and whites in the Diaspora are a major provocation of language of protest and vengeance appropriated by Baraka and Onwudinjo. Amidst these weary protest cry against oppression and the nefarious activities of the capitalists, they exist a defaced and routed cosmology. The poets illuminate a region whose citizens are subjected to dismal and subverting practices; especially the victimization of black by blacks around the world (Xenophobia). This echoes Bernth Lindfors critique of Armah's histories when he states that “The denigration of the past are responsible for the chaos one sees in Africa at present and (that) only by properly understanding that past and present will Africans collectively... be able to tackle the problems of the future” (4) In Linfords exposition, the cannibalism appropriated and perpetrated by the capitalists on the subalterns who are severally mangled by dehumanization and exploitation act as an elixir of protest and vengeance among the intelligentsias, scholars and activists in all works of life.

Although for Baraka and Onwudinjo as with black protest writers in Africa and in the United States of America, the crucial disparagement is leveled against the exploiters: xenophobic blacks, whites and the visionless leaders. This internal rust in the society is what Sophia Ogwude unmasks “...The black man has two enemies to contend with; namely the prejudiced white man as well as the African leaders who perpetuate retrogressive African traditions and customs since these violates the individual's will to resolve his destiny” (92). The position of these poets is that various aspects of the society and human endeavor must be respected and accorded veneration and any barrier, antagonism and impediment brought about by anybody, race or institution must be resisted through the deployment of language of vengeance and protest.

The aforementioned idea reverberates in the United States, where blacks are subjected to variant dehumanizing practices. It is in the same manner that Imoh Emenyi and Imo Okon state that

African-American literature is the aesthetic chronicle of a race struggling in the face of enslavement, oppression, deprivation and near total subjugation of a people's right to live.

The engendering impulse of this literature is resistance to inequality, injustice, exploitation;- all forms of human tyranny, the sustaining spirit of the literature is dedication to human right and dignity. It is a literature created by the oppressed to indict oppression (167-168).

Amiri Baraka and Peter Onwudinjo are poets whose backgrounds are bedeviled with this ingrained anomaly. Just like in Africa, blacks in the United States of America are severed from their African abode and not fully absorbed into the American cultural mainstream. Thus, they became a social outcast made to bear the odium of inferiority and repressed pride of their race. William Edward Du Bois states that “the dilemma of African American, in most culture sections and cities in the South, the Negroes are segregated service caste; with restricted rights and privileges, before courts, both in law and custom they stand on different peculiar basis” (26). Emenyi and Okon note that “slavery had established the status of African-Americans as sub human beings” (168). It is this prejudiced attitude of whites and their cohorts in Nigeria that most writers have debunked in their works by deploying violent rhetoric.

Baraka's poetry commits violence against those he feels are perpetrators of unwholesome practices and responsible for aspects of society he knows are unjust. Baraka is a renown African-American poet who “bridged the precarious territory between African American revisionary movement and other cultural and political movements” (qtd in *The Norton Anthology of African Literature*, 1937). As a result, Baraka uses poetry as a weapon of action and placement of real objects in his poetry as a way to make his African Americans and Africans to identify with his work. This militant activism in “Black Arts” has shown Baraka, formally known Leroi Jones as a poet who steered the hornet nest of the most racist white and the most complacent blacks in the society. The “Black Arts” asserts: “poems are bullshit, unless they are teeth or tree or lemon pile on a step” (1). The poem is a call to all blacks to be alert at all times until the fight for self-determination is won. The central focus of the poem is for Blacks to feel a sense of pride at all times: “Love what you are/breath like wrestler or shudder strangely after passing” (1). The poem then sends fear to all those who stand in the way of Black liberation or independence:

...we want poems
like fist beating niggers out of jocks
or daggers poems in slimy bellies
of the owner-Jews. Black poem to
smear on the girdle mamma mullato bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck (1)

Post-colonial theory reexamined this from the perspective of the colonized, and in most cases they are Marxist oriented. “Fists” would be used to make lazy blacks “jocks' wake up to the fight and daggers to terrorize Jews who are in the habit of exploiting blacks. The tempo of this violent rhetoric boil over where the poet states:

... We want “poem that kill”.
Assassin poems, poems that shoot guns
Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
Poem for dope selling wops or slick half white
Politicians. Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrr
rrrrrrrrrrrr, tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh
... setting fire and death to white ass (1)

The revisionist stand of Baraka is an indication of vengeance and revolt. He draws our attention to the brutality of the police who terrorize and oppress the blacks. The police are used by the white establishment and even black hegemony to subvert the will of the people. In Baraka's view, a fatal blow against the capitalists is bound to instill fear in the racist America and the exploitative blacks. As a result, Baraka holds that "Let there be no love poem written until love can exist freely and cleanly" (1). In post-colonial vantage point, the poet shows obscenity of capitalism and angry denunciation of anything whites. His employment of violent imagery like "kill", "dagger", "shoot" and "weapons" further strengthened this violent rhetoric.

In "A Poem for Black Heart", Baraka pays tribute to a renowned activist Malcolm X who staked his live for blacks in the new world. Malcolm X adroitly driven rhetoric and philosophy vehemently influenced the ideals and ethics of the Black Arts Movement. The poet personae elevate Malcolm X to the status of a god or a deity who is to be revered, emulated and venerated. Baraka's deployment of violent rhetoric is because the blacks are abused, tortured, and dehumanized in the face of the most revered and eulogized American dream. In the poem, Baraka overtly calls for a revolutionary action against the whites as follows:

...for Malcolm's
heart, raising us above our filthy cities,
for his stride, and his beat, and his address
to the grey monsters of the world...(1940-1941)

Words and phrases like "filthy critics" and "monsters of the world" show these irresistible hatred the blacks have for the whites. The racial conundrum they have plunged themselves into is a major elixir of violent rhetoric by blacks in American society. It is also as a result of this divisive and subversive American disposition that the poet is calling on the black man to be proactive in all ramifications. Baraka states that

...for all of him dead and
gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
clings to our speech black god of the time
for all of him, and all of yourself, look up
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up
black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,
until we avenge ourselves for his death...(1941)

This call on the blacks to "quit stuttering and suffering", "quit whining and stooping" is a violent rhetoric deployed to goad the blacks to wrestle with the whites. The poem shows how the will and quest of the people to surmount the prowling obstacles in America is intricately woven with the image of Malcolm X

For Great Malcolm a great prince of the earth, let not in us rest
Until we avenge ourselves for the death, stupid animals
That killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if
We fail, and white men call us faggot till the end of the earth (1943)

Characteristic of Black Arts poetry, the poem is reminiscent of the black man's vengeance and protest in America's stifled space. In post-colonial perspective, the poet is interrogating the position of the blacks from the perspective of the colonized and in a way agitating for the liberation of the masses from the tight fisted grip of the colonizer by deploying language of revolt. The poem is replete with contrastive diction. The poets' use of "stupid animal" is a

metaphor of the instituted hegemony in the new world. The style is used effectively to build up the attributes of Malcolm X so as to gain legitimacy in the call to revenge his death at the end of the poem.

Baraka explodes this myth of oppression in “Black People” as he succinctly describes as the American material wealth that is far cry of an average African American. In the poem, Baraka implores the whites to stop their capitalistic lust or hanker after and take their American pie by force: “No money down, no time to pay, just take” (224). The language is garbed with scathing and inciting remarks on the capitalists. Baraka goes on to justify the murder that took place during the Newark rebellion:

We must make our own world man,
our own world, and we cannot do this
unless the Whiteman is dead.
let's get together and kill him
my man...let's make a world
we want black children to grow
and learn in (224).

In the poem, Baraka captures the frustration of the masses and urges the masses into action and rebellion through his use of language. The conflict between the classes (Blacks and Whites) will lead to upheaval and revolution by the oppressed people (Blacks) and form the ground work for a new order of society and economy where capitalism is overthrown. Karl Marx makes us to understand that the revolution will be led by the working class under the guidance of the intelligentsias. Baraka is of the view that once the capitalists are overthrown, the elite class and the peasant would create an egalitarian society. The poem was a successful attempt by Baraka to rationalize and bring a sense of understanding and purpose to the chaos, destruction and death that took place on the street of Newark during the rebellion. Baraka in his poem constructed a unified consciousness of a people divided by poverty and despondency. From the post colonial perspective, Baraka clings tenaciously to the saying that the “emancipation of the working class is the work of the working class itself” In his deployment of language, Baraka is advocating for armed self defense as a legitimate means of liberation. The blacks are aware of themselves, fighting to survive in an unchangeable, hostile and harsh environment. They are conscious to overcome the insensitivity of white oppression. Post colonial criticism looks at the tone and language of the poets and writers in the society.

The experience of the people in Nigeria is far from being ideal because of the frustration and disillusionment caused by oppression. Onwudinjo exposes the suffering and oppression of the masses as a revolutionary appeal to educate the masses and instigate them to fight for their rights in order to remove the suffering place on people. The uncivilized manner of the government does not escape the satirist eye of the Onwudinjo in “Kingmakers of Krabadi”. The leaders aim to steal, plunder and destroy while the masses wallow in abject poverty. The poet's sarcasm boils over in the lines below:

If you have no money
you are as good as dead
you'll die of hunger
if you have no food to eat;
if you cannot pay the doctor
appendix will rupture
in your belly;

If you are poor
 your kids cannot go to school
 they will grow up just like brutes
 to push hand trucks
 in daily market,
 your daughters will zip down
 to every passer by
 and your wife will flee from you (*Song of Wazobia*, 29)

The agonies of the masses are suggested by emotion-laden expressions like “you will die of hunger”, “appendix will rupture in your belly”, “your kids cannot go to school”, “your daughters will zip down” and “your wife flee from you”. The poverty and suffering of the masses underscores the insensitivity of government.

From the moment of campaign, laced with deceit and calumny, the vulnerable members of the society are victims of oppression. The poet paints a vulgar but realistic picture of the political scenery of the country. Reacting, the poet persona mocks the political platforms used during electioneering in this scathing remark:

fee dee dee!
 fawa!!
 fee dee dee!
 fawa!!
 fee dee dee!
 bawa to the feeble!!! (*Song of Wazobia*, 30)

The expression “bawa to the feeble” is an allusion to one of Nigeria's biggest but corrupt party PDP (People Democratic Party) whose slogan is “Power to the People”. The poet persona's satire becomes apt and more telling when he realizes that he may be lampooning the Hausa expression with acronym as (“PDP”) and slogan (“Power to the People”). Mimicking the Hausa/Fulani is also deeply significant because the Hausa/Fulani oligarchy in Nigeria is assumed to be one of the most culpable for the degeneration of Nigeria.

The poet persona depicts the extremely exploitative nature of the Nigerian political class through cannibalistic imagery when he remarks:

after mocking
 all that is good
 in the system
 they dragged their
 ghana-must-go
 into the armored cars
 and shut their doors
 fukpum, fukpum, fukpum
 fukpum, fukpum, fukpum
 and drove off
 to the dens
 to feast
 on the blood
 of their countrymen (*Songs of Wazobia*, 30)

Through ridicule, irony and humour, the gamut of oppressive policies is seen in the display of “ghana-must-go/to their den/to feast/on the blood/of their countrymen”. Although the masses

have been paralyzed by oppression, they remain resolute in their determination to confront oppression. According to Ngugi “violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery, it purifies man” (28). The basic implication of Onwudinjo's poetry is the struggle between the forces of capitalism and labour; a situation that constantly suppresses and represses the hopes of the indigent masses through deceptive economic policies.

“Where is the Love?” is another poem that unequivocally arouses the impulse of the masses for the reformation of the society. The poem is a metaphor of the suffering and oppression of the people. In the second stanza, the poet recounts the dilemma and frustration of the masses. Eskor Toyo's assertion lends credence to the above mentioned problems in this insightful comment:

Why on earth should anyone expect a garden that springs on the soil of greed, selfishness and the traders daily lying to yield the fruit of honesty? Men will live according to the success criteria which society prescribes. Capitalist society respect money, not men, not good conduct, not honour, not honesty. The criterion of success is money, no matter how meanly and ruthlessly acquired... Capitalism demands a dead conscience to what it calls “success”, which is the money or money-making position which a man has. According to the debased mentality of bourgeoisie society, the question 'what is the man's worth?' means how much money does he have?(79-99).

Onwudinjo unmasks the fact that people who go into politics and affairs of governance do so for self-aggrandizement and other selfish reasons rather than love for their father land and not patriotism driven motives. The poet persona recalls:

three years have passed
since you were the crowned
...the night looks lugubrious
and people are asking
here and there:

where is the love?
where is the love?
you swore to give?(*Songs of Wazobia*, 31).

The above excerpt is suggestive of the deceptive and misleading lies which Nigerian politicians are known for. There are good at making promises which are never kept. The resultant effect is that all the people elected bear tell tale signs of lack of credibility, competence and accountability.

The derisive and derogatory remark of the poem arises from the attitude of the leaders and their failed economic policies. The reader is confronted by an angry and defiant cry for reformation of a debased society. The poet persona tells us that

people are wailing:
where are the roads?
where are the hospitals?
where are the taps?
you swore to build?
young men and women
are getting angry
that you took them
for a ride

hear the chants of anger... (*Songs of Wazobia*, 31-32)

Here the poet persona acts out his true role as the conscience of the masses; a mediator between the political class and the impoverished people. The poem shows that the anger of the oppressed has accumulated into a dehumanizing crescendo. The repetition of the expression “where is the love?” reemphasizes the poet's call for social change in the society. Onwudinjo writes on the condition of the masses that “having waited for long for a solution to the national contradictions and dilemmas, the younger generation of poet are now reacting with anger and threatening revolution” (160). The implication so far is that writers like Onwudinjo are social commentators on the socio-economic circumstances in the country.

The poet is more trenchant in his strident call on the masses in his poem entitled “Let us Give them Battle”. Having acknowledged the decadence in the society, he empowers the people to rise against the unjust policies of the government in the following lines:

we the people of the wetlands
we are the midget pot
we are the baby adder
we are the spark of fire
we must strike the foe today
to save our fair tomorrow (*Songs of Wazobia*, 66)

The “foe” as used in the poem symbolizes the leaders. The poet tersely shows the disparity between the haves and have-not, the oppressor and oppressed, and the ruler and the ruled. The poem illuminates the inner turbulence of a people who have vowed to take immediate action on the tragic situation in the country. The poet persona's anger on the society rises in his clarion call for reformation:

let us give them battle
let us give them shock attacks
surprise defeats the valiant
so it did to Goliath
surprise defeats the mighty
so it did to Agamemnon
surprise disarms the strong
so it did to Mberede nyiri Dike (*Songs of Wazobia*, 66)

Onwudinjo's revolutionary instinct is inherent in the impulse created in the poem. The poem is a clarion call to the sufferers of the malevolent forces to rise up and fight for their rights. In line with Marxist's commitments, his poetry aims at educating the masses on class struggle and reformation. The poet persona berates the leaders for the oppression of the masses which he sees as a major bane of reformation in the lines below:

they call us rats
and set up rigs
and take away our oil,
and we who own the land
loll our tongues like hungry dogs
and watch them take our wealth away; (*Songs of Wazobia*, 66)

The people remain dejected, hopeless and downcast because of the ruining of their livelihood by environmental degradation perpetuated by the government. The insensitive exploiters also loot the people's natural resources recklessly. The poet persona observes that

despoilers roll in splendour
 and we that own the swamps and ponds
 pine away with hunger,
 mired by misery
 we do nothing
 but poke the anus
 and smell the shit! (*Songs Wazobia*, 67)

To crown it all, the people are disillusioned and frustrated. The above excerpt x-rays the insensitivity of the government and the political class remains unperturbed as the people “mired in misery”.

The poet persona is playing the role of a revolutionary intellectual who is out to wrestle the oppressors to standstill in order to guarantee freedom for the masses as he exhorts:

tufia!
 we must rise
 like the sun
 and give them battle
 like the rising sun;
 rat's prick is small
 but it doesn't go a borrowing
 to spray the lawn for his wife (*Songs of Wazobia*, 67)

Onwudingo deploys the use of witty proverbs in articulating his grievances against the oppressive and vicious power wielders as he incites the masses to build up a spirit of resistance against a common foe. Addison Gayles avers that “anyone that is relegated to permanence in such a world cannot but scream, yell and shout” (viii). The tone of protest is vocal, overt, and parallels Claude Mckay's “If We Must Die” because it incarnates the spirit of resistance in a depraved society. Looking at the poem from the post-colonial perspective, the poem is a desperate shout of defiance against the leaders. It can be interpreted that the persona, one of the most subjugated persons is calling for a revolutionary action of ferociously fighting back against the agent of destruction. The poet persona reports:

we've been driven
 to the brink,
 if the head does not move about
 birds will perch on it

we are at the edge
 of the canton
 if we do not fight back,
 monkey's head will tumble down
 and smash up the down ravine (*Songs of Wazobia*, 69)

The poet makes us to understand that if there is no resistance; reformation will be a far cry. The combined effort of the oppressed to resist tyranny and its attendant horror becomes an articulate vision to survive through resistance. Still echoing the revolutionary verve of Mckay, the poet persona says:

if we must die
 let us not die

like yam farms that stand
idle
and watch the floods
overwhelm their tubers (*Songs of Wazobia*, 69)

Onwudinjo's disdain and hatred for the role capitalists play within the society is very palpable in his poetry. Marxism notes that all types of subjugation whether by race, religion, or gender is realized by stereotyping and reducing the people to objects. Onwudinjo's poems illuminate the poet persona's disappointment with the unfortunate privileging of the political class over the people as the poet persona in the poem would have it: "they squash our rights of ownership/and plunder us at will, /because we are small". He is not willing to take any nonsense from the leaders.

The poet shows a creative handling of human follies and absurdities in the power of art. Romanus Egudu observes that the poets of Onwudinjo's generation are inciting when he states that their poetry is "...a poetry of comprehensive human concern and mass mobilization. It exhorts the leaders and enlightens the followers; it warns the strong and empowers the weak"(79). The poetry of Onwudinjo as enunciated above will help the masses to throw off the burden of oppression in Nigeria.

In conclusion, the artistic vision of Baraka and Onwudinjo is iconoclastically driven. Their vision reignites the deferred dreams in Africa and in the diasporas; a vision of self-fulfillment and emancipation. Their vision is a reflection of the basic fundamental human rights. In their candid opinion, no segment of the society or mankind found guilty of negating and violating the rights of the people can be freed from the protest and vengeance of the masses. The subaltern disposition pervades the poetry of Baraka and Onwudinjo, especially in its use of contents and form.

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