

History, Politics and Poetry in J.P Clark's A Decade of Tongue

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ABSTRACT

John Pepper Clark's *A Decade of Tongue* approached the Nigerian civil war as haunting and ever turbulent from the mediation of fact and fiction rendered in poetry. The selected poems for this paper fictionalised history and politics with a façade of nationhood in the early atrophy of a nation-state caused by political upheaval and conflicts of the civil war. The selected poems were discussed within the theoretical framework of Cultural Poetics. A close reading of some selected poems in the paper revealed that Nigeria's history and politics is tinged with bigotry, violence and injustice right from its inception. It was discovered that though historically, the Nigerian civil war has come and gone but the state of anomie has been a familiar feature in the history and politics of Nigeria. The paper concluded that the civil war in the history of Nigeria is a remarkable reflection of the wanton destruction of life and property via the selected poems under discussion.

Keywords: History, Politics, Poetry, and the Nigeria's civil war

INTRODUCTION

The unique feature of poetry lies in the manipulation of words in a witty way through the use of numerous figures of speech that abounds. Poetry like all other genres of literature has continued to mirror and respond to issues that bother on life and human experiences in a given society such as the Nigerian civil war. Hence, in Nigerian literary history, the crisis and the scar of the war (of different magnitudes) have been veritable tools of creative impulse for Nigerian poets. In this sense, poetry in this study has been identified as one of the most veritable literary means through which powerful and strong emotions are expressed in condensed words. Ramsay (2009) observes with palpable interest that;

A poem is like a butterfly or a memory. An experience when we saw, we felt, perhaps even, we knew. It touches deep in us. Deeper than word and something begins, in that inner space. Something that is uniquely ours to speak of [...] There is a poet in all of us. However unknown or neglected that part of us may be, it is there often just waiting for the right conditions to present themselves.

Thus, the contribution of the Nigeria's civil war literature to poetry in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised. To this end, McLuckie (1987) avers that the Civil War is the most important theme in the Nigerian Literature. It is against this backdrop that this paper therefore explores John Pepper Clark's *A Decade of Tongue* as an indication of the history of a nation-state plagued with politics; ethnicity, racial segregation and prejudice which has led to the first Nigerian Civil War with holocaust. Other war poets who have written about the Nigerian Civil War other than John Pepper Clark are Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Ken Saro-Wiwa and so on. These poets lived the reality of the war; their accounts are undeniably authentic and often heartbreaking in their poignancy with brutal and horror effect of war on civilians and survivors. Along this line, Joy M. Etiowo (2014) argues:

It was a war of looting, plundering, betrayal, deceit, lies and lies and lies. In most cases, these ills were not propagated against the 'enemy' but by brothers against brothers; by 'patriots' against the same people for whom

they claim to be fighting. Personal protection, protection of one's ego (not integrity) becomes a major driving force for senseless manipulation of people's psyche unto death on both sides of the war divide.

More specifically, this study explores the state of anomies during the Nigerian Civil War by a way of interrogating the interdependent relationship between history, politics and poetry. Thus, the research employs the creative work of J.P Clark's *A Decade of Tongue* with poems that dwell on the inherent falsehood in Nigeria's journey to nationhood as grounded in the selected text. The study will also evaluate the misleading characters of the Nigeria's federal state which reflects in the narrative of ethnic discrimination, nepotism and tribalism mediated by the 1966 political crisis, which led to the destruction of economics, social and political stability in the country that metamorphosed into the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

HISTORY, POLITICS AND POETRY

Poetry happens to be the highest form of any spoken language in the world (Clark, 2013). Yet, history provides the "raw material" needed for poetry to flourish. Poetry is not life itself but a reflection of life and in part mimetic (Richard, 1965). This confirms the contention that poetry mirrors life and responds to issues that bother on life and human experiences in the society. Hence, poetry does not operate in a vacuum; it must have a reference point from where it draws its "raw materials". This according to Olanipekun (2013) is an indication of the relationship between art (poetry) and society. In essence, poetry is a creative expression of the diverse moods, experiences and tempers of the society which it mirrors. History also does this but while history hardly brooks authorial embellishment, literature spices up the raw data of history and social events with creative imagination of the author. This point is expressly indicated by Ajah (2010) when he observes that authorial intention defines the difference between an historian and a writer. In a sense, emotion, creativity and imagination are the basic elements in poetry which distinguishes both history and poetry.

Still on the overlapping inter-relationship between poetry and history and their distinctiveness, Hart (2002) succinctly unfolds that the possible world of poetry meets the actual world of history. Poetry, like the epic, can be historical, and history, especially narrative history, can be poetic, but the two, despite their overlaps, in practical terms are not identical. The point being stressed here reveals that

history merely provides the literary artist with the raw materials. What the writer does is what Ajah (2010) refers to as "fictionalisation of history". However, Ali (1986) opines that the forces of poetry and politics are joined. This supports the assertion by Hodgkin, and Schachter (1960) that there are times in the history of Africa that it was not clear whether Africa was witnessing poets with an interest in politics or politicians with an interest in poetry. Leopold Senghor of Senegal was a poet, Barnard Dadie of Cote d' Ivoire a novelist, Cofi Gadeau a playwright who had one time or the other held political offices in their various countries. This posits that in those early years, it was difficult to draw a line between the artist and activist, between the poet and politician.

Adeoti (2015) who recently hinted politics in African literature puts it more poignantly:

On the whole, politics is a common theme in the avalanche of creative works by African writers from colonial era to date. African writers of different ideological, religious, generational and gender affiliations have always put in the front burner of their aesthetics, the issue of politics. But what separates them is the kind of politics that the writers subscribe to as well as artistic genre and style employed to put across their different perspectives on politics.

Yet, Asein (1978) on Literature as history: crisis, violence, and strategies of commitment in Nigerian writing maintains that the events of the civil war and the scars of wounds inflicted on those who survived the crises cannot but fascinate the student and scholars of Nigerian literary history. To him, establishing the relationship between the crises as a historical continuum and literature demonstrate the emergence of the differing public attitudes among Nigerian writers, and the subtlety with which they deal with public themes which derived directly from or were suggested by the crises. It is from these perspectives that the interdependent relationship between history, politics and poetry will be explored with regards to Nigeria's socio-political history of the Civil War.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

A significant body of research in Nigerian literature has usefully engaged the discourse of Nigeria's civil war in fiction owing to the notion that the civil war has the most important themes in Nigerian literatures. However, scant critical

attention has been paid to the historical Nigeria's civil war in poetry with respect to the politics of bigotry that characterizes the civil war. Paying attention to how poetry employs history and politics in the depiction of the Nigeria's civil war will expand the discourse of war literature. This is the gap this study intends to fill.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Identify and discuss the interdependent relationship between history, politics and poetry in J.P Clark's *A Decade of Tongue*; and
- Elucidate how poetry has usefully employed history and politics to indicate the state of anomie in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will employ both primary and secondary data. The primary data source will comprise of John Pepper Clark's *A Decade of Tongue*. This collection of poems is selected because they portray a peculiar haunting experience of the historical Nigerian civil war and politics. A close reading of the texts will be done to reveal how the selected poems in the entire collection indicate the inter-relationship between history, politics and poetry. The secondary source will comprise books, journal articles, inaugural lectures and the Internet. Cultural Poetics will form the theoretical framework for the study, with insight drawn from Stephen Greenblatt's 'Towards a Poetics of Culture'.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural Poetics challenged "practical criticism" or what is known as "New criticism" as practiced by I.A Richard, F.R Leavis and others by a way of interrogating the textual analysis outside the social, political and historical context that gave rise to it. In other words, Cultural Poetics as a theory resituates and restructures the analysis of literary materials within the parameters of historical and socio-political necessity.

Accordingly, Cultural Poetics expresses that literature has a historical base. Thus, literary works are not the products of a single consciousness but many social, political and cultural forces. In "Towards a Poetics of Culture", Stephen Greenblatt (1986) maintains that the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error; namely, a symptom and a

reinforcement of the reification and privatisation of contemporary life. To use the word of Greenblatt, "worse than an error" because Cultural Poetics provides literary critics with a practice of literary analysis that highlight the interrelatedness of all human activities, admit its own prejudices and give a more complete understanding of a text than does the New criticism and other interpretative approaches.

This theory is relevant to this research as seen in the work of J.P Clark's *A Decade of Tongue*, because it offers a broader theoretical framework for the subjectivity discussion and examination of history and sociopolitical issues within the literary parameter of poetry.

POEMS AS HISTORY AND POLITICS IN J.P CLARK'S *A DECADE OF TONGUE*

John Pepper Clark, pseudonym J.P Clark Bekederemo was born 6th April, 1935 in Kiagbodo, Nigeria. He is the most lyrical of the Nigerian poets, whose poetry celebrates the physical landscape of Africa. He was a journalist, playwright, and scholar-critic who conducted research into traditional Ijo myths and legends and wrote essays on African poetry. While at the University of Ibadan, J.P Clark founded *The Horn*, a magazine of students' poetry. Upon his graduation with a degree in English in 1960, he worked for a year with a research institute; the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan. He later became a lecturer at the University of Lagos and coeditor of the literary journal *Black Orpheus*.

J.P Clark's verse collections poems (1962) and *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) do not display the degree of craftsmanship apparent in the work of his fellow Nigerian Christopher Okigbo; but in his best poems, his sensual imagination makes successful use of the patterns of traditional African life. His *Causalities: Poems* (1966-1970) is concerned primarily with the Nigerian civil war and this also is the primary focus of this study. Other poetry collections include *A Decade of Tongues* (1981), *State of the Union* (1985) and *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988). He has many plays to his credit. And these are; *Three Plays* (1964), *The Masquerade* (1965), *The Raft* (1978), *Ozidi* (1966) and so on. In all his plays, his characterisation is highly convincing and his symbolic setting richly allusive.

Thus, this study focuses on the interplay between poems, history and politics in J.P Clark's *A Decade of Tongue* which illustrates the horrendous events of the Nigerian Biafra war. This is because the intermingling of reality

with creative imagination which is quite apparent in the text helped the poet to relive his experiences of the war through poems. In short, the relationship between poems, history and politics all collude to reveal distorted humanistic values during war time, ethnicity and racial clashes, wanton destruction of life and properties, corruption, selfish ambition, the meaninglessness of war and so on as seen in J.P Clark's *A Decade of Tongue*.

The poem *The Burden in Boxes* historically reshapes the causes of the Nigerian civil war poetically. The boxes there in the poem, are an allusion to the Greek mythology where the first woman on earth was given a box by the gods and was told not to open it. She disobeys the instruction out of curiosity, releasing all manner of evils into the world. The costly disobedience of this woman is related to the wanton habit of the early military leaders who out of curiosity to seize power opened the "boxes"; the deadly boxes of coup de' tat and civil war which brought about the distortion of humanity. In other words, the "boxes" are burdens for the peoples as seen below:

Boxes were brought by night
Boxes were left at crossroad
As gifts for the people
Without distinction
With no key to the locks...
But in cold storage he left the lot,
The high priest of crocodiles who skipped
over hedge in the dark, then leapt back,
into sharp sunlight, hearing the cheer...

The poet then hints at politics (ethnicity) in these two poems, *The Burdens in the Boxes* and in *Season of Omen* which according to Oripeloye (1991) is the singular factor that sows the seed that finally sprouted into the Nigerian civil war. The images in the former, "Cows in the plains mowed over grass" is an indication of economics polity between those from the South and North in the country. Those from the South would always refer to people in the North as "Cows", but the North has always sees the South as their "Grasses" upon which they can feed. Yet, in the later poem, "Cattle counted for the heads of men" expresses how the North has inflated its population by factual counting of animals during census.

The poet while responding to an ever turbulent historical Nigerian civil war announces the perversion of human values, harvest of death, blind rage and holocaust on the basis of

ethnicity and racial clashes. In *Skulls and Cups*, which is highly dramatic, the poet laments over the death of his fellow artist, Christopher Okigbo and this is because the loss of such people is the tragedy of the whole nation. J.P Clark therefore uses this metaphor, "And the goblets are legion, broken upon the field after Nsukka" to articulate massive loss of lives during the war as seen below:

'... How do you tell a skull
from another?' asked Obi...
How does one tell a cup on the floor
from another, when the spirit is emptied?
And the goblets are legion,
Broken upon the field after Nsukka

In the case of the Nigerian Civil War, the country on one hand, became a theatre of death, the landscape became a tortured scene of drama with blind rage and carnage, a drama which prevented the Nigerian people from seeing or hearing each other as brothers. Mutual trust was replaced by mutual hatred and reciprocal vendetta. This duality of Clarks' sorrow for his personal friends who perished during the war and for Nigeria is summed up by Olafioye (1974) when he revealed that J.P. Clark bemoans the condition of a Nigeria at war with itself and expresses personal sorrow for his close friends as much as for his country as a whole.

Indeed, friends became foes, hatred replaced love and the once peaceful space is now deafened by strident wailing of predicament. It is therefore not surprising that the poems under consideration here see consistent state of anomie as issues-based in art and poetry. This J.P Clark expresses in 'Friends' where to him, the haunting image of those that are lost in the civil war may be carried and counted but their deaths will ever remain green in the memories of their loved ones who are still alive:

The friends
That we have lost
May be carried
Deep in our heart,
But shallow is the burden
When placed besides

Nevertheless, in the poem, "Casualties" J.P Clark cautions objectively, the readers and future generation against seeing only the dead as the victims of the war; "the casualties are not only those who have lost person or property,

hard as it is." This line provides the refrain for the first segment of the three parts poem with the listing of an array of victims of the war, i.e, "the dead", "the wounded", "the dispossessed", "wandering minstrels", "the imprisoned", "falling walls" etc. To him, the dead are not even the casualties because "they are well out of it", it is the living who survive only to count the losses. In the poem "Song" Clark mourns those friends he used to share "everything"; "bed", "wine", "tea", etc with. Since they have all been wiped off by the war, he knows he can look at the sun in the face, but the friends he had lost he can never see any one of them again:

I can look at the sun in the face
but the friends that I have lost
I dare not look at any.

CONCLUSION

The poet sensitively registered through poetry his encounter with the history of his people, tinged with violence and politics and this is not too far fetch from Ngugi (1975)' s argument who opined that the writer is always haunted by a sense of his past. In this light, the poet addressed the sociopolitical crises of his time with respect to the Nigerian civil war and the long awaited Nigeria's independence that did not bring about the desired expectations of political stability, economics development, peace .However, the poet subtly emphasised on the need for harmonious co-existence among all the ethnic groups in the country in a poem titled "Conversation in Accra".

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