ABSTRACT

Whispers out of the Night, a collection of poems written by Africa's first Professor of Neurosurgery, Latunde Odeku, is predicated on the poet's belief that every individual should be given the opportunity to assert his rights to self-determination. In each of the poems, Odeku emphasizes the need for each person to be an embodiment of goodness at all times as he tries to define his existence in a very hostile environment. He also identifies some of the factors that have retarded the development of mankind as a whole. These include man's inhumanity to man and the continued existence of political, social and economic exploitation, which have jointly led to societal degradation in all facets of human activity. In many of the poems, Odeku is very philosophical as he examines life in its entirety and comes to the conclusion that for man to live a fulfilled life he must be exposed to different shades of experiences, both negative and positive in orientation, which help to facilitate his global understanding of the world around him. Thus, through this anthology of poetry, Odeku, functioning as an artist and psychoanalyst, tries to show that life is a struggle and man must not expect that everything happening in his life will always be smooth or favorable.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the former United States ambassador to the United Nations, Mr Andrew Young, came to Nigeria on a business visit. During the visit, he granted an interview to a Nigerian newspaper, The Guardian, where he talked about the reasons why he loved to associate with Nigeria and Nigerians. He traced his first contact with a Nigerian to Howard University, where as an undergraduate student in the 1950s, he had a Nigerian mentor, whose name was Emmanuel Latunde Odeku. Young asserted that Odeku was a genius who had distinguished himself by being one of Howard's best students in several years of its existence. Apart from this, Young maintained that Odeku's lifestyle had a positive impact on moulding his own personality as an African-American in what was then a highly racially stratified society. Through Odeku, Young became proud of his unique heritage as an American of African descent. According to him, Odeku was an enigma and every student in Howard wanted to be his friend. “It was a privilege to be seen with Latunde Odeku”, Young explained further with nostalgia.

Odeku, apart from being the first African Professor of Neurosurgery, was also an accomplished poet and in the next section of this study we shall critically examine Whispers from the Night (1969), his second volume of poetry.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF WHISPERS FROM THE NIGHT

Latunde Odeku's humanism comes to the fore right from the preliminary pages of Whispers from the Night (1969). It confirms more vividly, the fact that the poet identifies with the common man, not only in Nigeria but throughout the world. The poems are dedicated to an unnamed acquaintance, who is simply referred to as « M. R. », and the oppressed masses of the Nigerian society who he describes in his dedication as;

Those in the Backyards of life
_ whom some other men have kept
to life. In it, Odeku argues that a genius is a very hardworking, versatile, resourceful individual who is an enigma, a genius and scholar of repute.

By 1969, it had become obvious to the poet that Nigeria to which he had returned in 1962 with high optimism, even at the expense of his first marriage to an American medical doctor, Mary Gilda Miles, had not become the Utopia that he had hoped and worked for. Instead, the country was undergoing a monumental physical and spiritual morbidity in the political sphere, a development, which culminated in the death of more than a million Nigerians. From the perspective of Odeku, the Nigerian civil war could have been averted if the major political actors, General Yakubu Gowon and Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, had been tolerant of each other’s views. In fact, it is in this context that the third line of the excerpt above, « in the scorching sun », is an indirect reference to Biafra, which was also known as the « land of the rising sun ». In fact, it had the rising sun as its national emblem. Odeku sympathizes with the plight of the Biafran people. Thus, he contends that Biafra, instead of being a land of the rising (soothing) sun, was a land of the « scorching sun ». According to the historian, Robin Halett:

The Nigerian civil war lasted from July 1967, to January, 1970. Measured by the number of troops deployed by the two sides, the war represented by far the most substantial conflict ever recorded in the history of West Africa. No accurate figures for casualties exist, but deaths, particularly among the famine-stricken civilian population of Biafra, may well have been numbered in the hundreds of thousands … the Federal army had the advantage not only of larger numbers but also (as supplies of British and Russians arms steadily mounted) of infinitely greater firepower. (388)

Odeku makes it quite clear from the beginning of the collection that he does not mind whose ox is gored as a result of his presentation of these very lucid and highly illuminating poems. In a vein similar to John Keats in « Ode to a Grecian Urn », Odeku sees poetry as « truth and beauty ». In a short treatise, « The Crime of Poetry », which precedes the content page, he posits as follows:

POETRY, or rather the poet, singularly shares Life with its readers for what it is … stripping out Man in the open day, exposing him to the shameful infinity of his buried deeds … refusing him to shut his eyes, no escapes, no hired barristers; only a mirror and the blinding glare to show him « thyself » … stretches out the poet's crime beyond forgiveness. Only great poets can commit this « CRIME » of Truth; and only true Poetry can commit it well. And these faint whispers here from the night would content themselves, full and well, if in their own verdict they could achieve a mere « Misdemeanour » or perhaps some occasional « felony of Truth. (7)

Odeku restates his acceptance of the idea that poetry is a reflection of life, which possesses didactic qualities and which facilitates one's knowledge about the society and also about himself. In the same treatise, Odeku points to the fact that artists such as Oscar Wilde and Pasternak were at different times vilified by people who saw them as social misfits as a result of their unique attitudes to life. However, his message to artists all over the world is that they should not allow intimidation, oppression and victimization to cow them down into suppressing the truth. However, he posits that despite their attempts to make the society around them better, artists have never claimed that they are perfect human beings. They are certainly not flawless, although they collectively subscribe to the idea that the will of the people to make societies function positively can contribute greatly to a positivist oriented development of every individual.

The first poem in the collection « Synthesis », is divided into four parts through which the poet attempts to answer the question; who is a Genius? In presenting the personality profile of a genius, he opines that a genius is simply any individual who does ordinary things in an extra-ordinary manner. It is possible to say that in writing this poem the poet wanted to demystify and demystify the different speculations, which surrounded his own personality as a gifted scholar at the University of Ibadan in the 1960s. For example, barely three years after he joined the University College, Ibadan, he became the first African Professor of Neurosurgery. To many students and members of staff, Odeku, because of his exceptional brilliance, was an enigma, a genius and scholar of repute. However, « Synthesis » is a testimony to his self-effacing disposition to life. In it, Odeku argues that a genius is a very hardworking, versatile, resourceful individual who is...
forthright when presenting his or her views and opinions on any issue. Apart from these, he is a great thinker, who is always dispassionate when taking decisions. It is also possible to say that Odeku is of the opinion that geniuses are not born but made as a result of their own distinct attitude to life which makes it possible for them to synthesize together diverse ideas in a unique, peculiar way.

The Genius:

Scans the true and false
in every loosened word,
And from aged broken truths all else revere
Brings up from a vortex
New pearls from these old shells.(14)

Odeku’s position is that geniuses manifest in every field of human endeavour and that anyone can be a genius or exhibit traits or flashes of exceptional brilliance if he or she resolves to be different in thought, deed and action from other people who might even condemn him because of his beliefs. He contends that:

Great Thinker strays from the crowds
And dissension shoves him aside;
With depth so deep, a chainless rove,
Paces his Earth for a scratch pad;
And with a rainbow chalk
Writes his formula against the skies.(14)

In part IV, the poet stresses the idea that by standing alone in the crowd as a result of his positivist exploits, the Genius aspires towards immortality, despite the inevitability of death:

_Like a statue in the square
Sums up the story end of Man
And renders all the rest a nullity,
Tarnished backsides of a past;
But GENIUS dusts off the plaque
And, polished, shows its base of gold(16)

The poet’s words in the last part of « Synthesis » have proved prophetic. Today, his exploits as a scientist and as a creative artist have conferred on him, immortality. The underlying message, which runs through the poem is that every man possesses the innate ability to succeed in his chosen field of endeavour. Individuals such as Mozart, Handel, Picasso, Shakespeare, Einstein, Nobel, Bill Gates, etc., are regarded as geniuses because they strove hard to excel in their chosen professions by being uniquely different. Although « Synthesis » was written in 1966, Odeku’s postulations about who a genius is have been corroborated by a research reported in the Newsweek magazine on this same subject: « The Puzzle of Genius: New Insights Into Great Minds ». The author, Sharon Begley, writes;

In his 1988 book, « Scientific Genius » Simounot suggests that geniuses are geniuses because they form more novel combinations than the merely talented … those rare souls who manage to arrange these thought elements into a masterpiece of physics or poetry share certain personality traits. Iconoclasm disposes geniuses to entertain permutation of images and memories that more mundane thinkers toss out as too loopy. Similarly, creative geniuses are willing to take intellectual risks by merging disparate ideas… . Introversion … may attune them better to the inchoate musings of their neurons; they can hear themselves think. Scientific genius is often marked by an interest in unrelated fields… . If one style of thought stands out as the most potent explanation of genius; it is the ability to make juxtapositions that elude mere mortals … the ability to correct the unconnected, to see relationships to which others are blind.(36-38)

A close examination of Odeku’s poem and Begley’s submissions show that they both agree that geniuses
are those individuals who display their unique brilliance by being able to merge or synthesize into a cohesive, comprehensible entity « disparate ideas ». Begley’s postulates also enable us to establish Odeku’s brilliance, as a neurosurgeon or scientist, who wrote poetry, which is an humanities based discipline. In « Exitus », Odeku contends that it is the trials, which confront man in life, which mould him into a well-rounded personality, strong enough to withstand the otherwise overwhelming odds threatening his existence. In the fourth and fifth verse-paragraphs of the poem, he queries rather rhetorically:

Of what use is it to succeed if there can be no failures;

Or of the drive of spirit to dare that which is above Man,

If all men were gods !

Of what use is the life of man

Without the expectation of decay

(to limit its being and to mark its use),

Without the calmness of death

(to get it a measure of stillness and an end) …

A reprieve from failures,

And a humility for the powerful and for Kings !

Of what use is a beginning

Without an end ! ! !(17)

In this poem, Odeku performs the function of a psychoanalyst, emphasising that struggles, trials, obstacles and impediments, assist man to appreciate whatever he is able to achieve in life. The advice from the poet to his audience is that no one should ever consider himself a failure because he is undergoing some difficulties which are surmountable if the afflicted person develops a sense of purpose and direction. In the fifth stanza of the poem, which contains the kernel of Odeku’s message in « Exitus », a Latin word for « Exit », the poet refers to the transiency of life and the mortality of man. Whatever problem a man encounters is bound to cease when the person dies, and death is no respecter of persons. Both the powerful and the powerless will one day succumb to the all pervading power of Death. Odeku argues in this poem that life can only be meaningful when man experiences « painful let-downs and the crushing impotence of poverty » which can act as stimulants capable of propelling him to commanding heights of success. In different poems throughout this collection, Odeku criticizes man’s innate selfishness, which is often responsible for the myriad of problems which envelope the world today and turn the underprivileged members of the society into preys, at the hands of an unrelenting and ferocious enemy. The poet locates the enemy in man. Man poses the greatest danger to himself as evident in « The Sapient Beast ». The poem, alludes to the bible, particularly, Genesis 3 where Satan or the serpent is cursed by God for deceiving and luring Eve into eating the forbidden apple. In the poem’s first stanza, Odeku foregrounds two words, « destruction » and « beast ». For the purpose of focus and thematic emphasis, « Destruction », which is again repeated in the third stanza is meant to highlight the moral, physical and spiritual degeneration that have characterized the human world. The poem is a song of lamentation expressing shock at the extent of man’s inhumanity to man. The word « sapient » means wise or wisdom and it is often used ironically. However, in the context of this poem it is a pun on the word « serpent » and the poet’s position seems to be that man, through the ages has applied his divinely bestowed intelligence wrongly and in the process has transformed himself into a serpent, or a beast. He continues the exploration of this theme in the poem « The House of Hell » where he examines critically the Nigerian political arena of the early 1960s. The poetic voice is laced with irony as he ruminates on man’s self-centredness. The early part of the 1960s, it would be recalled, was a very turbulent period in the Western Region of Nigeria where supporters of the premier, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his erstwhile deputy, Chief Ladoke Akintola were involved in violent political clashes that led to an escalation of the political turmoil, which culminated in the Army takeover in 1966. When the poem was written, in 1964, the Western Region was in political pandemonium. The poet condemns the « holier-than-thou » attitude of Yoruba politicians who sacrificed communal interests at the altar of personal ambitions, directing their supporters to kill and maim political opponents:

_ « We » the gods, can do no wrong;

But crucify « THEM »
« THEM » ... The needed word,
Scapegoats of Politics

« THEM », a garbage can ...
« THEM », every-ba-one but ME and US;
« THEM », the Devils, be hung...

Streets paved with rugs in red...

Each man carried his daggers (under his cloak),
See them practicing their THRUST(26)

The political atmosphere in the Western Region of Nigeria in 1964 was so tense, to the extent that the Yoruba nation, the tribe from which Awolowo and Akintola hailed was divided into two opposing political camps with the majority of the Yorubas supporting Awolowo's Action Group Party (AG), against Akintola's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). It was a period of unbridled mayhem across the length and breadth of Yorubaland as siblings belonging to the opposing factions fought one another for political supremacy. The consequent violence led to the burning of houses, cars and murder, and the poem, refers to this orgy of violent destruction in, « streets paved with rugs in red ». In the poem through the statement `Each man carried his daggers (under his cloak), Odeku also makes an indirect reference to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, where Brutus and his co-conspirators hid daggers under their senatorial robes which they later used to assassinate Ceasar. As an objective chronicler, the poet indicts the two warring sides, the AG and the NNDP, for the wanton destruction of lives and property. The poem serves as a warning to Nigerians and the opposing groups, that the continuation of the violence could precipitate a much bigger crisis, referred to as « hell » in the poem, if care was not taken. The poet's prophetic pronouncements came to pass on the 15th of January 1966. The army staged a military coup against the civilians and set in motion a chain of actions which culminated in the Nigerian civil war that lasted three years: between May 30, 1967 and January 15, 1970. Another striking prophetic statement is the emphasis on numbers one, two, three;

Three steps to Hell ...

ONE,
TWO,
THREE !(26)

The numbers one, two, and three at the opening of the poem are also repeated at its concluding end. « The House of Hell », was hatched in 1964. The civil war ensued THREE years after, on 30th of May 1967, and ended on 15th January, 1970, lasting roughly THREE years after. In the poem, « Only the Village », Odeku reveals that tribalism largely contributed to the anarchy that led to the Nigerian civil war.

In several poems, the poet speaks of Africa’s transition from innocence and simplicity into experience and complexity. He explains how the advent of the western civilization has led to a reassessment of norms, values and cultural practices which had hitherto imposed a semblance of order on the African society. « Cocktails », describes and explains what western civilization entails, and how it has ruptured traditional values in particular, as well as dislocate and alter in general, the worldview of the African. The setting of the poem is a cocktail party in which the invited guests highlight the decadent nature of western civilization, which from the poet perspective is sterile and artificial in nature. That the poet detests the behaviour of the guests referred to as « socialites » is not in doubt. They symbolize those Africans who unwittingly and uncritically imitate the values of the western world end up as caricatures. The physician-poet is aware that too much alcohol causes liver cirrhosis, hence he graphically describes the side effect of alcoholic intake on the socialites; « tired livers burn and slowly fail » (31) resulting in untimely death. Thus, « whisky by soda », « brandy », « gin », « beer » and « bloody Mary » belong to « the Devil's list ». Unfortunately, the gathered crowd is quite oblivious of this danger, as « jokes bounce from ear to ear » (31). Ironically, one of the guests at the cocktail is a priest. The poetic persona describes the priest in a sarcastic manner as a hypocrite who parades himself as a « man of God »: The Parson comes:

And spreads some sacred eyes
upon this breaking of bread;

Once in a while …
A drunken voice so rough obscures his grace
And treads foul upon a holy ground.

The kind of moral degeneration highlighted in poems like « Cocktails », and « No Exit » is so graphic that the poetic persona urges his unnamed listener, a stranger, to steer clear of it. His audience must avoid the corrupting influences of those agents of the devil who indulge in different kinds of nefarious activities. The young, western educated Nigerian elites of the 1960s were avid party-goers and the poet frowns at this unhealthy habit and warns on the tragic consequences of excessive alcoholism. Therefore, in poems like « Nevermore », « Perishable Gods », « The Last Call » and « In Memoriam », the poet again, comments on the issue of death and man. Both « Nevermore » and « In Memoriam » are set in a cemetery and the poet uses gravestones to discuss the mortality of man. Like in many of his poems, which discuss the theme of death, the poet is very philosophical about the brevity and fragility of man's life and existence. In « Nevermore » are gravestones which:

_ … like little pillars hewn stumble about,

some broad or discordant tall;

Each arranged in haste, a corpse …

A lonely spot on Earth that makes a grave;

So much certainty that Man must die

Yet occurring, each death seems sudden and odd.

« Only a Fool », expresses the poet's concern about the fact that man hankers after ephemeral and very mundane things like riches, power and position despite the awareness of his own mortality. This poem is predicated on a passage from the bible: Luke 12:16-20. In this passage, Jesus uses the parable of the rich fool to emphasize that only God is omnipotent and that man cannot do anything outside the approval of God. The moral lesson here is the need for man to adopt a self-effacing attitude to life. The poet examines critically the lifestyle of the rich and concludes that:

_ Only a fool fails to see

These pieces we own (big and small)

Belong only to Time (Not to us)

And beyond our skin and some warm heart

(The bit of good they shield),

We chase only shadows everywhere…

At the end of life, whatever your own,…

What pitiable token you may keep

Moves slowly along in just one hearse:

And that's all the « baggage » …

… « Six » measured feet of sand.

Since even the wealthy must ultimately succumb to death and as such must die one day, the poet condemns man's obsession for wealth, which makes him to commit all sorts of atrocities to satisfy his selfish whims and caprices. Man elevates avarice and the love of money to the level of a god, to whom he has sold his soul at the expense of truth, trust, mercy and fairness. In the midst of so much opulence as characterized by the life of the few rich, there is still a lot of poverty tearing away the lives of the masses of Nigerians. In « Courage », the poet acknowledges the steadfastness, resourcefulness and contentment of the poorer members of the Nigerian society, who toll everyday for their survival as they eke out a living on the fringes of society. The depiction of the pathetic lifestyle of the poor masses evinces pity, but more importantly, they deserve our admiration for their resolute determination to overcome whatever odds confront them. In discussing the issue of class stratification of the Nigerian society, the poet celebrates the achievements of the so-called « under-
privileged member of the society, the rural dwellers in the poem, « Abanla ». He extols the wisdom of the sages who live in rural homesteads, erroneously regarded as « illiterate », but who have « bags of Proverbs filled with age/In frank unfettered edgeful strokes » (120). The tone of the poem is celebratory in mode. The poet presents the inhabitants of African rural environments as custodians of the cultural values of the people which western civilization has desecrated. In « Democracy », written in 1964, the poet examines the issue of whether a democratic system of governance is capable of lifting the Nigerian populace of the quagmire of economic distress, social inequality and political mismanagement. His conclusion about the Nigerian brand of democracy is on a very pessimistic note. It establishes his disenchantment with post-independent Nigeria where assumption of power by Nigerian political leaders had become a means of self-aggrandizement. Odeku believes that democracy is an essential aspect of civil society, indispensable because it guarantees equality and stability in the society. However, through the use of sardonic humour, he avers that democracy in Nigeria is oligarchic in nature, a government by a few people for a few people, the privileged members of the society. His pessimism on the possibility of the emergence of a people-oriented democratic process in Nigeria becomes more glaring as he compares the more chaste and responsible government of mere ants with that of Nigerians. He does not seem to believe that the salvation of the Nigerian people, especially the underprivileged members of the people lies in the hands of politicians who coat their lies in « sweet words » and invariably end up doing nothing worthwhile.

A study of the collection reveals the poet’s disenchantment with Nigerian political leaders for their insensitivity to the plight of the common man. He boldly speaks out against neocolonialism in several of the poems contained in Whispers from the Night. Poems like, « Equity », « Oil » and « Bondaged » discuss inequality, and corruption in the Nigerian society which are both fallouts of the neocolonialist tendencies of Nigerian political class. In « Equity », he highlights the injustice prevailing in the Nigerian judicial system, whereby the rich and the mighty enjoy a very privileged status at the expense of the poor, who are relegated to the status of second class citizens in their own country. According to Odeku, « Justice has scales (and its pigeonholes) » . (43)

The poem, « Oil » is a commentary on corruption in the Nigerian society. It is another round of lamentation, as the poem expresses concern over the desecration of the ideal Utopian state which the poet had envisaged in 1962, on his return to Nigeria from the USA. To get anything done in Nigeria it was necessary to offer or give bribes. As a chronicler of events, who has used the Nigerian society of the 1960s to project into the future, his conclusions about Nigeria, where corruption is depicted as being endemic, was very bleak. « Oil » directs the reader’s attention to the Nigerian political class made up of leaders who were supposed to be shining examples of transparency, honesty, accountability and probity but who were embodiments of moral degeneration and corruption. Another aspect of the neocolonialist inclinations of the Nigerian leadership is evident in « Bondaged », which expresses the innate tendencies of Nigeria leaders to use political power for purposes of self-aggrandizement as masses of the people wallow in abject poverty and neglect. The leaders flaunt their riches recklessly to the chagrin of the citizenry whom Odeku indicts for their passivity, an attitude which has turned them into slaves in Nigeria where they exist simply to satisfy the needs of the privileged few. Closely associated with the poems on neocolonialism are some other poems which highlight racism or racial stratification of society as a means of oppression and injustice. In « Beyond My Skin », he condemns the West for forcibly imposing on Africans, its own worldview, and in the process turning the blackman into a cultural hybrid. The poetic persona who also sees himself as a hybrid, explains:

They called me in,

said I could stay;

They gave me goggles

I had to wear:

Through them I saw…

All white, white, white

I wrapped my skin

up and withdrew

And tucked it neatly

beneath a tie;

Hid these bare feet, stuffed

in socks and tightened shoes…
They called me in
said I could stay;
But now I’ll take my goggles off
And LOOK at ME, adopted
discoloured
… and out of place.(53-54)

In this poem, the African is culturally lost, forced to exist on the fringes of the whiteman’s world. The poet comments extensively about different forms of oppression and man’s innate bestial nature. However, there are also some other poems like « Great Horns » and « Amnesty » in which he stresses the need for the oppressed to resist oppression and assert their rights to self-definition. In « Great Horns » the oppressed is an animal, a cow, who symbolizes the resilient spirit of the masses, the marginalized members of the community. The cow is about to be slaughtered and he decides to fight for its life. It becomes aggressive, determined to stand up and fight back. The poet seems to have suggested civil disobedience, a well-organized rebellion against the various kinds of injustice perpetrated against man by man. The poem is an invocation to battle, which attempts to stir up courage in the heart of the lily-livered about the virtue of fighting oppression. One perceives the echo of Claude McKay’s call in his famous poem, « If we must die » as Odeku accepts the fact that even if at the end of the day, the oppressed are vanquished and their heroic stand is unheralded and uncelebrated by the oppressors, they would, at least, have won some measure of respect for themselves for standing up for their rights and not giving the oppressors cheap victory. Most of the poems in this collection celebrate African culture and old age. Odeku employs his poetry to eulogize African culture as evident in such poems as, « Edge of Civilization » where he compares and contrasts African culture and western civilization, while « Ebony », « Judgement » and « Labels » essentially celebrate African culture. « Ebony » which also means black, praises African artforms for their uniqueness.

There is a suggestion that African culture and civilization connotes a very distinct vitality and spirituality that is peculiar to the continent. The poet uses « Judgement » to emphasize the idea that the African » past, in the words of Achebe, regardless of « all its imperfections ( was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered the African »(24) The position of the whiteman at the point of contact with Africans and even afterwards was that African are barbarians with neither a virile culture nor civilization. « Judgement » affirms that before the advent of the whitemen, a very good legal system run by African elders to ensure that peace and harmony reigned throughout the community, was already in place. This is a very long poem with 32 uneven verse-paragraphs that are broadly divided into two parts, « the setting » and « the case », respectively. Right from the beginning of the poem, the poet makes it quite clear that one of his aims in creating the poem is to show that the traditional African judicial system is not inferior to the western judicial system, which the whiteman introduced to colonial Africa. The judges who sit in judgement are highly revered members of the community. As repository of knowledge they are respected for their wisdom and experience in the ways of the people. Predictably, a specter of awe is conferred on these judges and the setting becomes an hallowed ground, unbefitting for the feet of the uninitiated. The entrance of the judges is preceded by ululations and praise chants in acknowledgement of their enviable positions as temporal guardians of the people’s culture:

\_ Not a book was opened in this court
so firm in its sway

Their lawbook scattered into their words,
aged proverbs …

Each in their memory made its clinch:

Canons welded into their ways

inseparable, final, honoured.(75)

The integrity of these judges is beyond reproach or condemnation as they sift through seemingly complicated issues to establish incontrovertible truths. The third case, involving altercations amongst women in a polygamous household, precipitates a novel act of judgement on the part of the judges who in a bid to ensure that there is peace in this polygamous family does not apportion blame to any of the wives but to the court itself. Of course, this is a signal to the plaintiff (Wife number three) and the defendants (the other four wives) to bury the hatchet in the interest of peace. It is obvious that the Yoruba court approximates, in the opinion of the poet, the African judicial system. In passing judgements on all the three cases, the judges employ traditional philosophical hermeneutics in proverbs, anecdotes and witty sayings couched in powerful symbols and symbolism for the purpose of comprehension and intelligibility, in the pursuit of peace and tranquility to ensure that communal cohesion reigned supreme in the land. Of utmost importance to the judges in passing judgement in the case involving the members of the polygamous family, is the need to ensure cohesion within the family, which is the most basic component of the society. The poet's deliberate use of humor is intended to enhance the dramatic quality of the poem and make it more appealing in a typical performance mode of a traditional bard.

Closely associated with the celebration of African culture is his celebration of old age in « Agbalagba ». The poet opines the idea that old age is synonymous with wisdom, knowledge and experience. Agbalagba is a Yoruba word for an elder. Through the poem, a graphic picture of an old man whose grey hairs symbolize his wealth of ideas is presented. The underlying mood, which runs through the poem is that of elation and celebration. Despite his tottering steps, the old man is enveloped with a cloak of dignity, respect and grandeur. The old man is the link with the past and, in a way, he is also a symbol of the resourcefulness of African culture as a bastion of support for the members of the younger generation who have to cope with the vagaries of modernity. « Resume », is largely a lamentation; the poetic persona submits that modernity has permanently changed man’s worldview. There is a bit of regret about the individualistic attitude to life and the tendency for the youth to disregard the counsel of the older members of the society who are more experienced and who have a more broadened physical and spiritual outlook of what life entails.

In poems like « And the Almost Silent Trees », « Rustles », « Apology to a Bee », « Before the Snow » and « Chosen » one suspects a definite influence of the romantic poetic tradition. This is evident in the poet’s appreciation and celebration of nature’s unique beauty of the disorderliness which has characterized the world. The poems also stress the indispensability of nature to the existence of man. For example, « And the Almost Silent Trees » epitomizes life and all its vitality:

_ The quiet forest could be heard

Making its Tree-talk ciphers in the woods;

Strange language rustling everywhere

Among the almost ever-silent Trees.

The leaves are rustling in their muted way,

The leaves are rustling on the Trees;

Perhaps they’re praying (begging for rains),

Perhaps they’re happy topping the Trees

That stand so idle in their eternal posts(35)

The poet expresses his appreciation of nature on behalf of man, for its dependability and reliability as a symbol of hope. The third part of the poem compares and contrasts the idyllic world of nature symbolizing peace, bliss and happiness with the chaotic, turbulent and often very violent world of human beings, which disturb the peace and tranquility, which nature, in spite of its diversity, represents. Thus, in « Apology to a Bee », the poetic-persona apologises to a dead bee, (a symbol of nature), for his « irresponsible » and wanton destruction of this symbol of nature. The mood of the poem is very somber. While the Bee is productive as a honey-maker, man on the other hand is destructive. A significant moral lesson that is
embedded in this poem is the necessity for man to allow temperance to be an abiding quality of his 
personality. Just like we have in Twilight: Out of the Night, Odeku’s first collection of poetry, some of the 
poems in Whispers from the Night have their themes around the subject of illness and disease. « Helpless » 
and « Lethargy » vividly portray the chequered nature of doctor-patient relationship. For example, in 
« Helpless », the physician empathizes with a patient suffering as a result of the painful effects of a 
debilitating disease. The doctor is shown to be human afterall as he laments the fact that even when the best 
of treatment has been given to a patient, death might still be inevitable. Man in this poem, is a pawn in the 
hands of Nature, the « Great mending Art never asleep/Doing the best with the possible worst ». The 
mortality of man suggests that the poet acknowledges the Nature’s invincible power. The picture of the 
patient presented in this poem is very pathetic:

_ The sick brain, a tired heart

Threatening with coma or with death:

These many years we strain and watch

The breathlessness of Man.

These damages so irreparable!

These many years ... a damaged spine,
Broken skulls, lungs molten with disease:...

We hold the hands of the Sick Man,...

But he suffers alone!

and that’s the Worst of all,

Not able to help ...

And still we have to stay;

And still we have to watch ...

the AGONY.(63-64)

« Helpless », expresses the helplessness of both the patient and the physician for their inability to find a 
solution to the medical problems confronting the patient. The physician, the poetic persona, agonizes on his 
own helplessness despite his expertise as a medical practitioner. This idea about the limitations of the 
physician’s knowledge in the fight against disease is also presented in « Lethargy » in which the poetic 
persona describes the work of the physician, who most often operates like an investigator in a bid to 
discover problems and proffer solutions:

_ And like a smooth detective you’d circulate

Your wits, your moves, your clues

With magic awe;

Taking precautions (here and there)

To mask a Patient’s started glare,

Great caution at your finger-tips...

And at the end of it all ... still a BLANK:

Diagnosis ... « Unknown »,

Treatment ... « Deferred ». (91).

The obvious gloom which pervades largely, the two collections of Odeku’s poetry are reflections of his 
pessimistic attitude to events occurring around him, while his romantic or love poems are manifestations of 
his livelier side. In these love poems, Odeku emphasizes the importance of compatibility and tolerance if any
romantic relationship is to succeed. Evident in the love poems is that when there is love, no obstacle is insurmountable. Some of the love poems in the collection, include « Heartbeat », Only You « and « Only with You ». In « Only You », the subject matter is predicated on the virtue of true love. The poet’s ideas seem to have been drawn largely from the bible 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, which presents the characteristics of true love or charity. Our position that this part of the bible has served as a literary pretext for Odeku is further strengthened when we consider the fact that Odeku was a deeply religious man, for whom the bible was an icon. Central to the extract from 1 Corinthians are the issues of trust, temperance, a forgiving spirit, and a self-effacing posture to events and situations. The underlying message, which runs through « Only You », is not different from all of the above. The poetic persona addresses his beloved:

_ It doesn’t matter what they say,

It doesn’t matter who;

Ten thousand whispers in the night,

Or the crowded murmurs of day;

Neither the torture of words,…

Nor the breath-ful alliance of men

Nor the canopy of their feeble acts:

They cannot now deflect

One molecule of You…

From what you are,

Or you are not.

It doesn’t matter … ONLY YOU(61)

The poetic persona speaks emphatically, proclaiming his love, which is predicated on trust and genuine readiness to forgive and forget, even if his beloved had erred in any way. The message of the poet to couples involved in romantic relationships is a very important one: no relationship can succeed if the partners do not sincerely love and trust each other by being ready to « bear, believe, hope, and endure all things ».

The poet’s call for unity among couples does not stop him from advising men to be very cautious in their dealings with women in the poem « Trouble ». From the perspective of the poetic persona, a woman is an enigma, whose unpredictability can precipitate trouble for the unwary man, especially anyone who conducts his affairs with women without the application of the requisite tact and wisdom. The poetic persona warns:

_ I saw a mass of TROUBLE stalking off,

Precocious … (the treacherous curves),

Horizontally swaying from side-to-side,

And shedding some perfume;

There goes « ENIGMA », the whistle-call,

Tagged with CAUTIONS you wouldn’t reads:

Soft « POISON » … « Take it slow » …

That’s a WOMAN

Mildest, to a willing touch;

Ferocious in her schemes.(93)

The poet’s message is predicated on the idea that every woman has, at least, two different personalities, one positive, the other negative, which she can manifest anytime it pleases her. Thus, while a woman can be a symbol of love, she can also be an embodiment of hatred, who can use her physical endowments to
achieve her selfish aims and objectives:

_Soft wink of shifting eyes,

And naughtier men crumble their swords

And heaves and heaves of little sobs,

Tear-drops from laughing eyes

Just wash aside their armours and their shields,

With discrete woven helplessness. (94)

While this poem can be interpreted as a vilification of womanhood, it also reflects in a very subtle and very ironical manner the poet’s admiration of the peculiar nature of women, whose uniqueness as a human specie makes them valuable and indispensable (« that which no man can ignore and safely live » 94).

The last group of poems that we shall be analyzing in our study of Whispers from the Night, are several miscellaneous poems which discuss sundry themes. Worthy of note in this regard are the « Whispering Lines » poems through which the poet muses on different aspects of life. They are nine in number. « Whispering Lines I » stresses the dependence of man on Divine Grace for his sustenance and the concomitant benevolence of the Divine. « Whispering Lines II » highlights the mortality of man. « Whispering Lines III », with its philosophical leanings, emphasizes the supremacy of excellence and truth over mediocrity and falsehood. « Whispering Lines IV » discusses the fallibility of man, while « Whispering Lines V » eulogizes an unnamed soldier, presumably Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi26. « Whispering Lines VI » presents a graphic picture of the « darkness » that pervaded the Nigerian state following the political upheavals of January 1966. « Whispering of Lines VII » laments the destructive nature of rumour-mongering which has become a Nigerian pastime. « Whispering Lines VIII » reaffirms the poet’s position that Nature epitomizes perfection while « Whispering Lines IX », is a strictly political poem which supports the defiant, aggressive nature of the emancipated African states of the early 1960s whose leaders including, Julius Nyerere, Abdul Gamel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, Patrice Lumumba, among others, attempted in a myriad of ways, to assert their nations’ rights to self-definition and rule.

Some other poems belonging to this omnibus group are « Invitation » which is a poem about a children’s party, « Jug of Red », a celebration of ink, the fluid through which life flows from the pen, « MBHS » and « Ibadan », the poet’s reminiscences reflecting on two citadels of learning, namely, the Methodist Boys High School Lagos and the University of Ibadan. « Light of Faith », proclaims the Divinity of Christ, « The Cabinet » highlights some components of the human body like the hands, eyes, legs, ears, the heart and their functions, while « Names » examines the etymology of names and « Sanctissime » contains a plea for individual spiritual regeneration and rejuvenation. Through « The Greatest Prize » and « Letter to Mankind » the poet presents some very important « eternal truths » about the world we live in. Out of all these « miscellaneous » poems, « The Greatest Prize » and « Letter to Mankind » stand out distinctly. They are the longest and the most matured poems in the collection. They encapsulate almost all the ideas, especially the morals, which Odeku has put across in Twilight: Out of the Night and Whispers from the Night in his bid to effect a positive change among the members of a depraved, perverse and reprobate generation. « The Greatest Prize » has philosophical connotations and the poet presents the poem with a supplicatory, entreating tone. There are two individuals who feature in this poem, the poetic persona and the addressee, his son. Essentially, the poem is the poetic persona’s attempts to introduce his son to some of the myriads of experiences, which man encounters in life and which shape his worldview. The poetic persona seems to be of the opinion that the lessons of life cannot be learned within the comfortable confines of a school compound alone:

_Righteous and wisdom, my Boy,

Contentment and happiness …

Responsibilities of Grace:

_Education only guarantees you knowledge

(some privileges)

… NONE of these. (122)

He urges his son to be resilient in the struggle for survival and be determined to succeed even when confronted by odds which threaten to consume him. He advises:
Even when you fail
It’s no disaster.

It’s in the not-giving up that you win.

You’re never conquered, my Boy,

When you stand and you’re fighting on. (123)

The poetic persona explains that the world is divided into class social lines but he also points out that it is not wealth or riches which determine who is the best of men:

“The King can do no wrong”
and commoners are seldom right

It’s an uneven world, my Boy.

But a good name sums up the man. (124)

Old age often confers respectability, on the individual with “grey hairs”. Thus, the poetic persona admonishes his son to always be mindful of advice given by the old. Discountenancing such advice may lead to the ruin of the young and foolish. He explains further:

You may harass the sun,
walk on the moon
… mere technical achievement, my Boy,
and it’s no wisdom;
Wisdom creeps and hides in age
in little boxes made of bone
… grey hairy precious skulls,
in the shadow.
The old men in front of you
All look archaic, my Boy;…
It’s behind them that you walk.

And wisdom walks ahead of you. (125)

At the end of the anthology, the poetic persona identifies the qualities, which every man must aspire to possess in order to succeed in life:

What then is the Greatest Prize …

It is Perseverance, it is HOPE;
Courage when you fail,
A sense of Equity;
That which no gold can simply buy
Nor the greatest power threaten
To deluge or take. (127)

The poem is divided into four parts, which symbolize the four broad stages of human evolution, namely, infancy, adolescence, adulthood and old age. The poem has 21 verse-paragraphs and they are also
symbolic. The age of 21 is usually regarded in different parts of Africa as being a very important stage in the evolution of man as it marks the point of transition from adolescence into adulthood. It can be assumed that the poetic persona’s son is at this crucial stage in his development as a man and his father feels compelled to intimate him with some of the facts of life.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that the debilitating socio-political issues, which Odeku passionately discusses in these poems and which have stifled the growth of Nigeria in particular and the development of the different nations of the world in general, still continue to exist, thirty-six years after the publication of Odeku’s anthology of poetry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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[Verse 2] Humanity, humanity Goodbye, goodbye Be on your way, adios amigo There's a price to pay For all the egotistic games you played The world you made is gone. [Chorus] You're a drop in the rain Just a number, not a name And you don't see it You don't believe it At the end of the day You're a needle in the hay You signed and sealed it And now you got to deal with it. [Verse 3] Humanity, humanity Goodbye, goodbye Run and hide there's fire in the sky (Stay inside) The water's going to rise and pull you under In your eyes I'm staring at the end of time ... [Outro] Humanity, humanity, humanity, humanity Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye It's time. More on Genius. The humanity or humanity? Discussion in ‘English Only’ started by Lorenzogreen, Mar 2, 2016. Previous Thread Next Thread. Loading... Hi guys! I need help for this sentence: The scientist was working on an ultimate weapon, which could possibly destroy the humanity or humanity? I'm a bit confused. Thanks in advance. Lorenzogreen, Mar 2, 2016. #1.