

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE AFRICAN VOICE: A CRITIQUE OF AFRICAN PROTEST POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The development of African poetry is based on the fact that it is protest in nature. African poets' continuous reactions to the social ills that ravaged the continent have shaped up the literature over the years. Most of the issues address by these poets ranges from poverty, environmental pollution, apartheid, corruption etc. This paper looks at how African poets such as Mitshali Oswarld, Ken Saro Wiwa, Jan Weeratunga and Sam Chrenyan condemn and protest against the social problems that plagued different parts of African countries. This study reveals that African poets are very conscious of their duty in identifying the continent's social problems and playing a crucial role in psychological and physical liberation of the subaltern.

Key words: Africa, Protest, Poetry**@ Copyright KY Publications**

INTRODUCTION

What is Protest Literature?

Protest literature conveys different definitions and meanings. According to Stauffer, "there is no common understanding of protest literature; the term has been used to mean almost all literature or no literature". Therefore, every genre can be described as "protest literature" because literature is a way and art of showing emotions, values and concerns. Because of the uncertainty of the definition, Stauffer provides a wide range of norms that can help classify the literature according to his views.

Stauffer enumerates a set of norms that helps classify by what he means by protest literature. Firstly, he defined protest literature as language that changes the society and self. In addition, Stauffer went deeper by describing the literature as a

"catalyst or mirror of social change". Furthermore, some of the necessary requirements for protest literature stated by Stauffer are three in number. They are empathy and symbolic action, in which empathy promotes shock value, inspires emotions and desires, and symbolic action supports interpretation.

Even though almost all literature can be called protest literature in a sense that they all portray a point of theme or view, protest literature has to be specifically written for change. In other words, the writer needs to have specific goals for change in society or individuals from the very start. Therefore, the effects of protest literature cannot simply be spontaneous or by accident. Furthermore, protest literature cannot be judged by how effective it is. This shows that protest literature fails to persuade or "convert" even one individual, the

literature is still consider a success because a point has been made which results in acknowledgement. It is this acknowledgement at the beginning that starts change.

The existence of Protest Literature is in different forms throughout literary history. Some of the greatest literary scholars in history have employed their talents toward awakening the public to injustices locally and world-wide

African protest poetry

African protest poets have always been their nation's conscience voice. They have through history use their poetic skills to criticize and create a positive change in the political system of their respective countries. They also reveal and berate the social ills and corrupt practices of power brokers in their country. Also, the common thread that binds all African protest poets together is the tacit understanding of the suffering of the subaltern and the ability to raise their voice for their cause.

Some of these protest poets have been punished by imprison them illegally. Their poems are also banned. All these persecutions do not stop them from continue to battle against evil political system that increases the suffering of downtrodden

In the study of evolution of African protest poetry, the poetry can be classified into colonial and post colonial era. Prior to the independent of most African countries from the western nations, poets raise a collective voice against imperialism, colonialism and exploitation of African resources. But their agitation change during post-colonial period, African protest poets begin to speak against vices of colonialism that are being sustained by greedy African leaders. Some of the social ills are unemployment, poverty, environmental pollution, racial discrimination, etc. that has crept into the body politic through bad leadership and governance.

Even today in the post colonial period when democracy has been restored, protest poetry continues to be on the rise. For instance, the number of protest poems that has been written in the past decade is more than those written in the colonial period. Poets express their sense of

frustration, anger, betrayal; disappointment and hope in all these poems. This kind of poetry inspires the oppressed to fight for their freedom and the sanity of the society.

Poem Analysis

The selected poems are analyzed base on the social ills the poets condemn in different part of Africa. For example, Ken Saro Wiwa was a Nigerian poet and activist protest. He protests against the marginalization and the environmental pollution of the Ogoni tribe in the Niger-Delta of Nigeria. The environmental pollution is due to oil spillage caused by Shell (oil Exploration Company). This spillage leads to the destruction of aquatic life, vegetation and agricultural land in Niger-Delta. The poet was later arrested and executed in 1995 after publishing the poem "Dance the Gun to Silence". The poem is written to invoke the jubilant mood for the celebration of Ogoni day. He uses the motif of Dance to describe the oppression and injustice that is meted on his people. The motif is also an expression of celebration. It is a tool employed by the speaker to transcend his people beyond their oppressed life. The speaker paints a picture of violence and domination by using words like anger, dump laws, oppression and injustice. However, the speaker inspires his people by giving them a sense of hope for a better tomorrow.

Dance your anger and your joys
Dance the military guns to silence
Dance their dumb laws to the dump
Dance oppression and injustice to death
Dance the end of Shell's ecological war of 30 years
Dance my people for we have seen tomorrow
And there is an Ogoni Star in the sky

Furthermore, many poems have been written about the rampant corruption in Africa. Some of these poems inspired masses to fight against such a menace. This is necessary at a time when every three out of five Africans have paid bribe to government official. Sam Chrenyan is a Kenyan writer, in his poem "Laments". He criticizes the hypocritical attitude of Kenyans in fighting corruption. He also berates Kenyans for celebrating

politicians who siphoned public funds for their own personal use. He questions the moral right of the Masses for accusing politicians of corruption because every citizen supports corrupt practices. He warns that the vice is capable of collapsing the socio-economic structure of the country. The following lines put more light on the level corruption in Kenya.

For a long time I thought
That no one had bought
The lies and untruths of corruption
But now I can see
That the lure of things free
Has led to a widespread deception:
That it's wrong when it's he
But right when it's me
Or someone of kindred extraction;
"My people and I"
May now justify
All manner of cruel exploitation.
Wrong is now right!
Black's the new white!
(So long as my tribesmate has done it)
Darkness is light!
The unrighteous upright -
An appointment? My clansmen can run it!
But – some feeling stirs
When it's not one of ours
And with a colossal log in each eye
We point the long finger
Let our mutterings linger
Then we open our mouths and let fly:
"Politicians!" we shout
"The larcenous louts -
They're the cause of our nation's downfall!"
I bring us a mirror
Let's see ourselves clearer:
There's politician inside of us all.
The truth should be plain:
That nobody gains!
When our nation is chock full of theft
Tis but a matter of time
'Til fraud, vice and crime
Cause collapse, and there's nothing left
It's time someone said
Enough blood's been bled
Enough of this cannibalization!

Let a nation stillborn
Become a people reborn
It's time: for revitalization.

In the poem "Field of Gold, Children of Poverty" by Jan Weeratunga". The speaker describes how most South Africans especially the gold miners' lives in abject poverty. They are described in a dehumanized condition such as homelessness. He explains how the country's miners are not benefiting economically from the natural resources. He enumerates the huge gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa. This compels most of them to resort to crime in order to earn a living. The horrible pictures of their extreme poverty are further outlined in the poem

Fields of Gold- Children of Poverty -

Fields of gold beneath their feet,
Yet at night the homeless sleep on the street.
No-one cares about their health,
The Governments concern – only its' wealth!

So much gold under their daily footsteps,
Yet crime is rife – part of this cities debt
For past opulent lifestyles, lived by the 'haves',
The 'have-nots' now silently buried in gold
surrounded graves.

Gold, gold mined below ground,
Yet here on the surface poverty's found,
Beggars at 'robots', car doors locked tight,
Fear they will rob us in the day or the night.

The wealth of a country – gold – hidden deep in its
soil,
Yet to reclaim it, the price, the life of miners who toil
Daily in darkness and sweat stench heat
To put gold on fingers – this cities heart beat.

Josi the city, carved out from its gold,
Yet on every street the poor to behold.
No rings on their fingers or gold on their wrists,
When they are gone, they'll hardly be missed.

They walk on gold every day of their lives,
Yet where're the politicians to hear the cries
Of infants and babes, long dead their HIV mothers,
Leaving in charge young sisters and brothers.

Every day they pass over gold reams
 Yet a roof over their head remains just a dream,
 And food in their stomachs, shoes on their feet,
 The child headed families, struggle to meet.

Yes beneath their feet lie fields of gold,
 Yet on winter's nights, they sleep out in the cold.
 No fire to warm them, or food that is hot,
 For the poor in Johannesburg, this is their lot.

Prior to 1994, black South African poets voiced out their anger and frustration against apartheid. It is a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced by the government from 1948 to 1994. Poet like Mbu Viseni Oswald Mishali in his poem "Boy on a Swing" describes the high level of racial discrimination caused by the apartheid system. The description of a boy on a swing is a metaphor for an average black South African. The blue shirt is compared with tattered kite. This represents the low economic status of the black community. The statement "whirl by the four cardinal point meet in the boy's head" is a symbolic representation of the de-motivation and disorientation faced by them in a society in which they knew where exactly they were or what direction to take.

Slowly he moves
 to and fro, to and fro,
 then faster and faster
 he switches up and down.
 His blue shirt
 billows in the breeze
 like a tattered kite.
 The world whirls by:
 east becomes west,
 north turns to south;
 the four cardinal points
 meet in his head.
 Mother!

Where did I come from?
 When will I wear long trousers?
 Why was my father jailed?

Conclusion

All the poems discussed above are few out of many of such that are written almost everyday by a new breed of poets emerging from Africa. They write

with the sole aim of being the voice of the subalterns who have been at the receiving end of corruption, unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, racial discrimination, etc. These writers can be view as a freedom fighter that has the consciousness of the continent's problem and they are playing crucial role in psychological and physical liberation of the masses in the continent

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