

Contemporary African Poetry: A Postcolonial Reading of Iquo Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants*

by

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature has revealed that some events in post-colonial Nigeria are as a result of culture contact between Europeans and Africans. This paper investigates the poetry of two contemporary Nigerian poets and how they have been able to reveal postcolonial realities in their societies. The paper adopts Postcolonial criticism in the analysis of the primary texts. Through the poetry of Iquo Eke and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh the problems in the post-colonies are lucidly publicized. The focus of this paper is to reveal how Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* and Nwaeboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* have been able to celebrate the numerous cultural aesthetics in Nigeria through elements of cultural hybridity inherent in their poetry and how they attempt to portray positive image of Africa and post-colonial Nigeria in particular.

Keywords: Contemporary African Poetry, Iquo Eke, Ifeanyi Nwaeboh, Postcolonial

Introduction

Several contemporary African poets have examined various problems inherent in postcolonial African countries including Nigeria, they have also been able to correct some of the negative comments attributed to postcolonial Nigeria through their depiction of positive traditional and cultural aesthetics. Iquo Diana Abasi Eke was born in Uyo, Nigeria. She has performed her poetry on various platforms across Nigeria, usually to the accompaniment of folklore, embellished with traditional drums, flute and strings while Ifeanyi Nwaeboh is a multi-talented Nigerian prodigy, poet, academic and playwright. Modern African poets are faced with the challenge of exposing societal ills and injustices through their poetry. Eke and Nwaeboh's thematic concerns are topical and adhere to the ideological vision of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubiike. In their critical essay entitled *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, Chinweizu et al asserts that:

A writer does have a minimum professional responsibility to make his work relevant ... to his society and its concerns. He may do this by treating the burning issues of the day ... or ... by treating themes germane to his community's fundamental and long range interest (152).

In their poetry, we observe that their fears, hopes, aspirations and frustrations in the post-colony are elaborately illuminated. They make use of elements that characterize typical African poetry which include oral tradition, myth and symbols. Nwaeboh advocates the right of the downtrodden in his society. His works therefore can be categorized as African literature written in English. Although an emerging poet from Igbo extraction, he believes that a writer should champion the fight against various forms of exploitation, Nwaeboh critic societal ills prevalent in his country. Nwaeboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* unravels the socio-political realities in postcolonial Nigeria. Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* brings to light negative events in her society which she tries to correct through her poetry. Both Nwaeboh and Eke recount their numerous experiences in postcolonial Nigeria and are among the new voices that have emerged in the 21st century. The thematic preoccupations in Nwaeboh and Eke's poetry share similar distinctive features, the former is from the South-South while the latter from the South-East of Nigeria, through their poems, we are able to observe the ills that has befallen postcolonial Nigeria. Their poems are embellished with lucid figurative expressions that are rich in aesthetic beauty and elucidate topical thematic concerns. Their works seem not to have received serious critical attention especially by critics, hence the need for this paper.

According to Chinyere Nwahunanya,

The issues raised in postcolonial criticism includes the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wakes of colonial rule, the ways in which writers (poets) from colonized countries attempt to articulate and celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from colonizers, how knowledge of subordinate people is produced and used (33).

From the forgoing, it is pertinent to note that some of the major thematic preoccupations in postcolonial literary works are national identity, culture related issues, struggle for independence/ the aftermath of independence and emigration. Postcolonial theory therefore seeks to actualize the concept of various forms of resistance towards reclaiming a people's glorious past. In the analysis of Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* and Nweaboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ant* one comes to terms with the hybridized nature of their works and how these poets have been able to blend Western and African cultural elements in their poetry. Using the tenets of post-colonialist literary criticism, this paper will critically analyze Iquo Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* and Ifeanyi Nweaboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ant*.

Postcolonial Criticism of Iquo Eke's *Symphony of Becoming*

Symphony of Becoming is Iquo Eke's first published collection of poems. Her performance poetry is richly embedded in African oral tradition and culture. One finds verse collections embellished with aesthetic and utilitarian beauty, which is also educative and entertaining. Iquo Eke might have been influenced by African oral traditional of her people; oral poetry predates written form of poetry. Nkem Okoh rightly remarks that "virtually every occasion necessitates singing (poetry) and, for the composer, provides suitable material for the composition of new songs. Because songs permeate every aspect of African life and culture" (159-160). In *Symphony of Becoming* Eke's thematic concerns in the post-colony encompass different ethnic and racial boundaries. As a result of the hybridity of African literature in postcolonial Africa, one cannot but come to terms with the reality of culture contact between Europeans and Africans. Modern African literature (poetry) can be referred to as contact literature. By this, I mean the cross-fertilization of diverse cultures as a result of the colossal impact of colonialism in Nigeria and the African continent. This has significantly affected the nature of literary production across Africa and contemporary Nigerian poets of the fourth generation. Nelson . O. Fashina asserts that:

African literature displays the linguistic, gnomic and cultural symbols as well as oral verbalization aesthetics and convolution both of cosmic, ethereal and terrestrial space, which make it to maintain a unique identity even in its relative hybrid status (64).

Eke's collection of poems showcases her as an emerging voice who has mastered her craft. In her poem, "I Set Sail", the persona celebrates her womanhood and her distinctive features which portray her as a true African woman. In doing so, the persona makes a creative attempt to inculcate hybridized features of both Western and African elements especially in her choice of words in the lines of the fourth and fifth stanza in the poem below:

On this voyage of self discovery
I drown in waves of renewal
For I am woman

I speak of love and comfort
Of birth and of rebirth
Of beauty and warmth
I drop anchor
I drink deep
Life is sweet! (2).

The persona creates a mental picture of an African woman on a journey towards self-discovery and the actualization of her innate potentials. Thus, Eke's penchant for the preservation of her rich African cultural heritage in *Symphony of Becoming* is revealing. It reveals the persona's childhood experience. Through the use of rich cultural elements Eke is able to bring realism in her work. In "Home Call" the persona is nostalgic and reminiscent about her childhood experience. The persona celebrates her beautiful cultural identity/heritage especially her childhood experience in the village with her parents. She says: "For mama's delicacies/ And papa's proverbs/ My heart will rejoice in ancient nke/ At your inviting banks/ We will commune in graceful Ekombi/ And dance Uta to grandfather's palm" (3). Pivotal is that Eke's rich cultural heritage has helped her in the repositioning and unveiling the aesthetic beauty enshrined in Africa through her published poetry. In an earlier study by Abdou Ngom, he observes that:

As a result, the devastating impacts of Western knowledge politics on African indigenous cultures poses, for postcolonial societies, the significant challenge of recapturing national or ethnic histories either revealed or systematically concealed in the margins of both published and unpublished texts (275).

Consequently, Eke does not fail in mirroring the vicissitudes of life which is encapsulated with joy and sorrow. The human life is in constant flux and as such, one should be strong enough to withstand the storms of life courageously. In “Seeking” the persona recounts the uncertainty of human life. “Yesterday is but foggy memory/ As today strolls past me again/ In dignified candour / Morphing into tomorrow/ While I regrettable/ Grope in the dark” (17). The persona is pessimistic about the future which according to her is unpredictable. Eke therefore performs the role of a social critic in her society using her poetry as a tool of social transformation. In “Independence Day Blues” the persona examines the plight of citizens in post-independence Nigeria. The poet makes lucid use of historical allusion in uncovering the themes of oppression and injustice. The hopes and aspirations of Nigerians who envisaged a better country after independence from Great Britain become despondent as a result of the nefarious activities of the visionless rulers. The senseless destruction of human lives (as exemplified in what happened to Saro Wiwa and co) is publicized in the lines below:

Then came another general
Wielding an unforgettable baton
More pain to our already bleeding hearts
Till we exhaled
The paradox of a forbidden apple

Martyrs become you, on the ride
To a destination never to be reached
Hail Saro Wiwa and his eight
Your struggles remain a faint echo
In this land of empty cymbals (24).

In stanza two of the poem, “The Place Called Home” the persona laments about the plights of citizens in Nigeria. “I turn the pages of our History/ And watch with horror as/ Each succeeding pages erases one by one/ The dreams our heroes past” (27). The aforementioned lines indicate that post-colonial Nigeria is on the brink of doom and will die if nothing is done to rescue her. In this sense, Eke seems to be saying that there is need to rebrand Nigeria’s image and that of Africa in general. Sunday Agboola Olatunji comments that the relevance of promoting positive African image cannot be put aside when he opines that “postcolonial writers have made it a major issue to re-inscribe the history of Africa by a subversion of Euro-American concept of history and by celebrating the past of the African peoples” (128).

Although Eke’s poetry is written in English, one can easily observe that she makes use of Nigerian English and her indigenous language for stylistic effects. Eke’s thematic concerns in *Symphony of Becoming* are vital as the ills inherent in her society are brought to light.

The aftermath of Nigeria independence over the past five decades remains despondent as a result of the nefarious activities of selfish politicians who plunder the resources of the nation. These and more, serve as militating factors that have hindered the growth and development of Nigeria. The persona in “The Place Called Home” laments that “These streets of dirt and disease/ These homes of hunger and lack/ These faces of suffering and depression/ This dance of shame/ Surely/ These were not the dreams of Azikiwe” (27). It is indeed unfortunate that some of the aspirations of our national heroes who fought for the liberation/independence of Nigeria are yet to be satisfied. The persona in the last stanza is optimistic that things will get better in the future: “Time will restore our lost glory/ And nurture new fruits/ Someday/ This place shall be home again” (27).

In examining the theme of national identity, the poet asks several questions that need urgent answers. The persona seems to be interested in the emancipation and rebirth of her country. The persona takes pride in her Motherland. For instance, “Rites of Rebirth” lucidly captures the plight of hopeless citizens asking questions: “When shall you Motherland/ Purged of grunge/ Deliver us anew in a rebirth?/ Rebirth of honour and pride/ When?” (29). Eke’s work highlights Yoruba traditional myth of the cosmic cycle which is woven around birth, death and rebirth in order to illuminate the theme of national identity. Eke’s “Earth Wind and Fire” is symbolic. While “fire” symbolizes motivation, “wind” epitomizes success. In this poem the persona does not perceive “fire” and “wind” as destructive elements, because of their destructive nature. This is seen in the following lines:

You are the fire
Raging within me
Your caress
A fiery upsurge
Within you, in you
I catch, I burn

You are the wind
That fans my passion
To a raging inferno
For you, with you
I float, I soar
Take flight to inconceivable heights. (40)

Eke’s poetry contributes to the expanding of the frontiers of postcolonial discourse as many social themes are found in it. Thus, the poet makes use of figurative expressions in *Symphony of Becoming* in order to heighten the rich cultural aesthetics of Nigeria and of Africa in general.

This echoes Chinua Achebe's words- that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans... they (Africans) had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty and dignity" ("The role", 158). In this regard, beauty and value are realized in Eke's *Symphony of Becoming*.

Postcolonial Criticism of Ifeanyi Nweaboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants*

Stampede of Voiceless Ants is Ifeanyi Nweaboh's first published collection of poems. African writers from Anglophone nations ensured that they made use of English language in a manner that differed from Western writers. In the words of Achebe: "I feel that English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experiences. But it will be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (*Hopes and impediments*, 62). In this section, Ifeanyi Nweaboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* will be analyzed, revealing the themes of oppression, national identity and emigration in the poetry.

In the poem "Murmurs of Thunder" the persona highlights events in post-independence African countries. One observes in the fourth stanza of the poem that many African countries are faced with many problems. These problems include senseless destruction of human lives, natural disasters, starvation and war which has brought about a state of hopelessness in these post-colonies. The struggle for independence have been fought and won in many African countries but underdevelopment, unemployment and hunger contribute negatively to the underdevelopment of African nations. The persona laments that:

In Mozambique flood reigns supreme
In Ethiopia famine loves to prime
Sudan is swollen from senseless slaughter
Somalia is restive, scattered and stateless
Zimbabwe is soaked in civil strife
Across Africa good things are on strike. (1)

The persona seems to be pessimistic about the turn of events in post-colonial African countries and the plight of the downtrodden. The image of many African countries the persona creates in the poem is undesirable. In addition, the negative portrayal of Africa situation is illustrated in "I Hear Voices". In the poem, the persona laments on the evil that has befallen on the African people thus: "Voice of the restive dead, killed by arrogant/ oppressors ... courtesy of little quarrels/ Voices of innocent citizens ... life made vegetative and/ hopeless by deliberative mistakes of foolish rulers" (2). The dreams and aspirations of citizens of Mozambique, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe and other independent African countries are unfulfilled because their leaders plunder the wealth of their nations.

Nwaebob presents events that took place in some postcolonial African countries after the West have relinquished power to their former colonies and what these colonies have been able to do with the power/authority they wield. It is sad to note that it has been a vicious cycle of senseless killings and brutality. In Nwaebob's "Dele Giwa" a journalist is killed, the persona recounts, vividly images of Giwa whose life was cut short. "In wooden caskets/ Evil Genius forced your hastened journey/ To early grave/ Off you sped to heaven/ Clutching a disemboweled stomach/ Your scattered fingers/ Blood and bones exposed together/ Held with firm grip of death" (12). Furthermore, before the end of 1969, many African countries had gained independence from their colonial masters but it turned out that African rulers were only after their selfish interest. Some African writers became disillusioned and aggravated; their literary works were used to criticize the oppressive government policies.

Some post-colonial African literary texts tried to restore the national identity of post-independence African nations and discredit Joseph Conrad's negative portrayal of Africa in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. Africa had contributed tremendously in the building of various empires across the continents through voluntary and slave labour. Nwaebob makes a bold attempt to restore the pride and dignity of the African people in his poem, "Dear Africa". In this poem the persona says:

You built towers with human faces
Monuments miles away in the sky
African Pyramids ... Black Babel
Other nations groped in primitivism
While you taught men hieroglyphics
On papyrus (4).

Nwaebob's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* is used to restore the dignity of Africans in the post-colony. In "Black or White" the persona fully captures the beauty and splendor inherent in the people of Africa. The image of Africans is created in the positive in order to "restore the dignity" of the African people. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker says: "I am person/ We are a people/ From glorious Africa/ The African race/ But not Black race/ Let's make a change/ Away from colours" (6). The persona makes the use of the pronoun "I" and "We". Here "I" suggests that the persona is part of the African race and "We" represents African unity which the persona hammers on. The cultural aesthetics of Africans in the post-colony is once again revealed in "Fence the Night" as night is being likened to a pregnant woman who will give birth to light in the morning. This suggests that the future of Africa is bright. Nwaebob enlightens us about the culture and cosmology of his Igbo race, how night "loses her black identity/ To glorious rays of morning light" (51).

Linda Hutcheon opines that “postcolonialism has distinct political agenda and often a theory of agency that allows it to go beyond postmodern limits of deconstructing existing orthodoxies into the realms of social and political action” (130). In the face of the numerous criticism of post-colonial Africa by her citizens as a result of her underdevelopment in spite of her rich human and natural resources, Nwaeboh attempts to show how Africans who emigrated abroad assisted towards to development of other nations. Africans especially in the diaspora have contributed immensely to the economic growth of the West. The persona is enthusiastic about Africa and says that the continent is a “Land of million black heroes/ Your sons and daughters/ Built other lands/ Europe, America and Arabia/ Through centuries of forced labour/ And in modern times/ Your talented sons and daughters/ Wizards of learning/Choose to be in diaspora” (49). From the foregoing, events that have been entrenched in post-colonial African poetry are revealed through the various thematic concerns identified in Ifeanyi Nwaeboh’s *Stampede of Voiceless Ants*.

Comparative Analysis of Iquo Eke’s *Symphony of Becoming* and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh’s *Stampede of Voiceless Ants*

Iquo Eke’s *Symphony of Becoming* and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh’s *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* share various distinctive features which are inherent in contemporary African poetry. These poets’ thematic concerns are revolved around events in post-colonial Nigeria and Africa. In some of the poems of Eke and Nwaeboh studied, the issue of leadership has been a militating factor that have hindered the economic growth and development of Nigeria irrespective of her rich human and natural resources. It is as a result of the exploitation of Nigerians by those in leadership positions that have contributed massively to her underdevelopment and colossal infrastructural decay. J. O. J Nwachukwu-Agbada had noted in an earlier study that “we are yet to have a leader that is prepared to take on Nigeria’s problems with honest and integrity of effort” (102). Interestingly, both Iquo Eke and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh’s poetry represents their personal experiences of events in post-colonial Nigeria which can be noticed in their use of the pronoun “I” in some of their poetry. They seem to have been inspired by the turn of events in post-colonial Nigeria before and after she gained her independence. In Nwaeboh’s “I Hear Voices” for instance, the persona says “I hear voices/ In the morning, at noon and dusk/ Across the heavens and the earth/ In spaces were humans live and beyond” (2).

Of significance is Eke’s poem “I Set Sail” which depicts the rustic life and riverine community which might be the persona’s village. The persona vividly recounts her experience on the river paddling her canoe when she sings “I set sail/ Borne on waves of/ Small beginnings and endless possibilities/ Alone with my paddle/ I wade through the water/ I hear birdsongs” (2). Eke reveals her vast knowledge of African oral tradition, cultural, and rural life in poems such as “Home Call” and “Memories” and in latter the persona affirms that her memories is “A story/ Itching to be told” (4). The persona seems to be nostalgic about her reminiscence about her past experiences in her rural community. Eke and Nwaeboh, like many other African writers are troubled by the burden of their people.

Their fears, hopes, aspirations and dreams are revealed in their poetry. Each generation of writers produce writers who through their creative works are able to reveal the events in the society. It is through the poetry of Eke and Nwaeboh that they have been able to show that the problems in the post-colonies are similar and they include corruption and bad leadership which has contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa. Some African leaders in the post-colony seem to be intoxicated with power; they tend to ignore the plights of the downtrodden in their societies. Government of certain African countries misappropriate funds that ought to be utilized to provide basic infrastructural facilities like good roads, water, electricity, hospitals and other various social amenities that could ameliorate the sufferings of Nigerians. It is indeed very unfortunate that several African rulers might be obsessed by the quest to retain leadership positions for their selfish interest alone. Eke and Nwaeboh once again are troubled by bad leaders in many African countries. In Eke's "Independence Day Blues" the persona narrates the activities of visionless rulers when she says "Gunshots were rife/ When the general held sway/ A tight ship he ran/ Desecrating our mandate/ On the platter of intoxicating power" (24) while in Nwaeboh's poem entitled "Dictatorship" the persona calls dictators "Ambitious oppressors" (7). Through the poetry of Iquo Eke and Ifeanyi Nwaeboh they have been able to expose the negative activities of African rulers in the post-colony who have contributed to the underdevelopment of Nigeria after she gained her independence.

Aside from the various problems in post-colonial Africa, Eke and Nwaeboh have in *Symphony of Becoming* and *Stampede of Voiceless Ants* tried to elevate Africa's cultural heritage, oral elements/tradition and promotion of positive national identity for African and Nigeria in particular. It is in line with Eke and Nwaeboh's select poems, Stephen T. Ogundipe opined in a previous study that:

What we know about the existing research on the transfer of oral elements to the written form in African poetry largely interpret it as a response to the perceived hegemony of Africans by Europeans. But this is not always the case, reading African writing as a literature of reaction does not necessarily give considerable attention to either the aesthetic element of the oral forms or their functions (100).

In Eke's "I Unravel Your Mystery" the persona is a praise singer; she sings Mother Nature's praise with hearts full of joy. In the fourth stanza, the persona says "Joy river!/ Your beauty unfolds before me/ I dip in the joy that you bring/ Your lips are fine combs/ Your lips drip honey/ I drink lavishly" (38). The image of Africa is not entirely negative as portrayed in some of Eke's poems; however, she succeeds in celebrating the aesthetic beauty of Africa in some of her poems in *Symphony of Becoming*. Eke seems to eulogize various positive attributes that characterizes and project positive representations of Nigeria through her poetry.

The positive image of an African is once again represented in Nwaeboh's "Africa's Miss World (2001)", the persona eulogies the achievement of a Nigeria who won Miss World beauty contest in 2001. In the first line in the first stanza, the persona tells us that "At last a black sister became Miss World" (41). Therefore, it is imperative to note that contemporary African poetry is a revelation and reflection of events in the post-colonies.

Conclusion

Through Eke's *Symphony of Becoming* and Nwaeboh's *Stampede of Voiceless Ants*, they have been able to project both positive and negative events inherent in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa. Eke seem to have highlighted significant aspects of Nigerian traditional and cultural aesthetics in her poetry. She draws significant attention to the fact that postcolonial Nigeria has myriads of problems exemplified in some of her poems analyzed but also indicates the beauty and splendor inherent in the post-colonies. From the forgoing, we can observe how Nwaeboh have been able to reveal the plights of Nigerians and Africans in the post-colony which have been characterized by bad leadership, corruption, exploitation, extrajudicial killings and dictatorship. Nwaeboh also makes lucid attempt to show that Africans have also been able to become successful in their various fields of human endeavor irrespective of innumerable limitations.

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