

**Tripartite Reflection on Nigeria:
A Postcolonial Criticism of
Uche Peter Umez's *Aridity of Feelings*,
Isidore Diala's *The Lure of Ash* and Chris Ngozi
Nkoro's *Trails of a Distance***

by

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Abstract

The article is a post-colonialist criticism of Uche Peter Umez's *Aridity of Feelings*, Isidore Diala's *The Lure of Ash* and Chris Ngozi Nkoro's *Trails of a Distance*. Events in postcolonial Nigeria such as corruption, politics, violence and neocolonialism are examined. Although, these myriads of problems that have envisaged Africa's "sleeping giant" is as a result of bad leadership, Umez, Diala and Nkoro seem to be pessimistic about the future of Nigeria. The paper adopts post-colonialism as its theoretical framework and elements of cultural hybridity are reflected in the texts investigated. The literary works of the poets studied did not provide possible solutions to the problems in the post-colony. The paper concludes that credible leaders must be elected into public offices in order to eradicate various forms of illicit practices in Nigeria.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Nigeria, Uche Peter Umez, Isidore Diala, Chris Ngozi Nkoro

Introduction

One of the problems that have envisaged postcolonial Nigeria is colonialism, British colonial administration was structured to exploit the human and natural resources of their formal colonies. After Nigeria gained her independence in October 1st 1960, the dreams and aspirations of many of her citizens remain unfulfilled due to the nefarious activities of bad rulers. Unfortunately, many independent African countries including Nigeria have not been truly independent after they gained their independence as a result of neocolonialists' interests in their formal colonies. The trust of this paper is that it examines events in Nigeria decades after her independence; these negative events have continued to hinder her growth and development. It is indeed ironic that a country with about 200 million people and interestingly the most populous African country in the world do not have credible leaders. It is unfortunate that some Nigerian leaders protect the self-centered interests of their formal colonizers; it then became paramount for some educated literary artists to criticize the exploits of previous and current Nigerian rulers. In an earlier study by Nelson Fashina, he posits that "The discourse theory of the black man which has a long history of profound nurturing, influence and enslavement by the Western dominant tradition can decode and even recode the colonial discourse as a way of writing back in anger by using the colonizer's political, economic, linguistic, literary and cultural cudgel against the colonize" (66). Uche, Diala and Nkoro makes lucid attempt to using the colonizer's language (English) to write about various societal ills prevalent in postcolonial Nigeria. Colonial discourse theory reveals the copious plights of Nigerians. Chinyere Nwahunanya further states that postcolonial criticism "include all criticism about literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It also deals with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their people as its subject matter"(33). The poems of the poets investigated appear to include the colonizer and colonized as their target audience, these poets appear to take their craft serious and are definitely on the side of the oppressed in postcolonial Nigeria. Uche Peter Umez was born in Nigeria, and studied Government and Public Administration at Abia State University. He hails from Obiakpu, Ohaaji/Egbema in Imo State, Nigeria. He is an award winning poet and has published extensively. Isidore Diala belongs to the generation of Nigerian poet of Igbo extraction and a literary critic of repute. Diala hails from Okwu in Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. He obtained a B.A in English at Imo State University, Okigwu (now Abia State University, Uturu) before proceeding to the University of Ibadan for an M.A and a Ph.D. also in English. Chris Ngozi Nkoro studied English at the University of Jos and Nigeria, Nsukka. He has been a prolific contributor to several journals and poetry anthologies. Beside critical essays, Nkoro has also authored a play and novel. The major thematic preoccupations in this postcolonial discourse include corruption, politics, neocolonialism and violence. Using Postcolonial literary theory, I will examine Uche Peter Umez's *Aridity of Feelings*, Isidore Diala's *The Lure of Ash* and Chris Ngozi Nkoro's *Trails of a Distance* in postcolonial Nigeria.

Postcolonial Criticism of Uche Peter Umez's *Aridity of Feelings*

Uche Peter Umez's *Aridity of Feelings* is a reflection of events in postcolonial Nigeria; it is Umez's second poetry collection. The issues explored in the text are illuminating and vivid mental pictures are created in the minds of the readers. The plights of the downtrodden is unraveled, their condition seem to be hopeless as Nigerian rulers are not in any way sensitive to their numerous problems. We may not be wrong if we ascribe Umez as a "dark writer (poet)". William Wordsworth definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility" illuminates Umez's creative imaginations in *Aridity of Feelings*. The imagery in his poems appear to be intense, it captures the state of postcolonial Nigeria decades after she gained her independence. Elements of cultural hybridity are evidence in Umez poems. Ifediora Okiche had noted in an earlier study that "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"(51). Although, Umez writes his poems in English, it is embellished with figurative expressions that capture the Nigerian experience, he captures his reality using the colonizers language (English). Like I mentioned earlier that Umez could rightly be referred to as a "dark writer" this claim is revealed in the poem "For Her, For Me" the persona makes use of the first person pronoun "I" to include himself in the turnout of the negative events attributed to the high rate of poverty caused by bad rulers in the lines below:

is a melodious song of pain
my life

her tears are flowing hot lava
My land

nostalgia itches my eyes, woe yeasts in me
I am home to despair

hunger roost here, poverty breeds there
she is home to tyranny

I and my land are entwined
in one long poetry of agony! (2)

“Her” therefore refers to postcolonial Nigeria and the negative metaphor in line three of the poem above indicates that postcolonial Nigeria is on the brink of doom. In addition, it is the exploitative activities of corrupt rulers that have contributed to the plight of the downtrodden in the society. Corruption is a militating factor against Nigeria’s development. In Umez’s “I Sing My Thoughts” the persona laments “These thoughts I sing, though/ my voice lacks charm-/ the mellifluous appeal/ of a eulogist/ a sycophant/ a palace bard;” many African leaders are often surrounded my praise singers who eulogies them for doing the wrong things. It is indeed ironic that in the mist of plenty in a land blessed with human and natural resources many citizens remain poor as evident in “Grind” when the persona laments that he/she is “mired in poverty/ of a rich land” (5). Ugwanyi Dele Maxwell further states that “Africa has mineral wealth, which is exploited for the benefit of others, fertile land, which is under-cultivated, rich cultures that are been destroyed and brainpower, which is being “drained” to the other parts of the world” (220). Umez is pessimistic about the turn of events and the state of hopelessness even for the supposed leaders (children) of tomorrow. Many Nigerians had lots of expectations after she gained her independence; unfortunately these expectations appear to be unattainable even for the African child. In the “Little Hawker” the poet persona is nostalgic “crying out:/ oranges, buy fre-e-esh oranges/ even when they are dried up/ like his hopes/ by the sweltering African sun. .../the African child,/ the leader of tomorrow” (7). It is indeed satirical that the persona laments in “Cleansing” about post-independent Nigeria “We commemorate in flourish/ the 46th birthday of a black nation, /its historic split from white shackles;” Nigerian has not been totally free from “white shackles” as a result of neocolonialist interest the formal colonizer. Various forms of violence have been a reoccurring event in postcolonial Nigeria as there is a colossal destruction of properties and lives. Unfortunately, government security personnel are active participants’ in the destruction of human lives in “Aridity of Feelings”:

in the north, east, south, west
in monstrous numbers like mosquito larvae
people die of kerosene, pipeline, bomb explosions,
of uniformed men’s bullets, robbers’ bullets, militia’s bullets,
of accidents in streets, on roads, on highways
people die; (20)

The point then is that there is a breakdown of law and order in some regions of postcolonial Nigeria, the government seems to be doing nothing to salvage the ugly situation. The poet’s reoccurring use of “bullet” in line four of the poem above indicates that many lives have been lost as a result of deaths associated with guns in the post-colony. The “militia’s” bullets represent armed resistance in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria who are sometimes unemployed youths. Frantz Fanon further states that “Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them” (118).

Even though many of the events in the poem could be avoided if credible leaders govern the affairs of postcolonial Nigeria. Furthermore, western forms of leadership introduced in Nigeria during colonial administration do not seem to be working after about five decades of its practice. Colonial administration in Nigeria is exploitative and appeals to western cultural perspective. African leaders before colonialism adhere to communalism which worked in some communities. Lindfors, Bernth observation that African (Nigerians) should protect the cultural interest of her people is revealing when he asserts that “Bearers of a culture are better equipped to interpret that culture than aliens (colonizers) who have experienced its realities only vicariously. Those who share a writer’s background can more readily comprehend the full implications of his message” (2). Nigeria is indirectly ruled by “political puppets” who dance to the tune of the piper’s (colonizer). Umez further exposes the exploitation of the downtrodden by politicians protecting the (former) colonizers selfish interests in postcolonial Nigeria. This is fully captured in the poet’s poem “Neo-Puppets” when the persona laments that:

hungry cheetahs have crouched together
in the hallowed court
of lions,
and empowered a rabid black jackal
to hold sway over my groaning land! (27)

A major thematic preoccupation in Umez’s collection of poems *Aridity of Feelings* is violence; the forms of violence include physical and psychological violence, although our major concern is centered on the physical form of violence associated with youth restiveness in the country. The four regions of postcolonial Nigeria are affected. These young men in “Lawless” are compelled to embracing arm struggle all in an attempt to fight corruption and bad leadership in the country. The persona captures it by the constant use of the figurative expression simile in “noise like thunder/ fury like billows of fire/ blood like july floods” (35). Many parts of postcolonial Nigeria are revenged by violence perpetuated by the Nigerian youths whose energy should have been channeled towards productivity instead of destruction of lives and properties. Many of the problems inherent during colonial Nigeria are also the problems inherent in post-independent Nigeria. According to Maxell:

The colonial experiences of most African countries have refused to go after many decades since the colonial masters left. This is as a result of the myriad of social, political and economic problems still facing the continent. Independence promised a lot of good things for the masses and this brought about their active participation in the struggle for independence (218).

From the foregoing, the optimism, aspirations and dreams of many Nigerians after she gained her independence has been dashed by the negative turnout of events associated with corruption, neocolonialism and violence in postcolonial Nigeria. These problems are captured fully in Uche Peter Umez's collection of poems *Aridity of Feelings*. Furthermore, bad leadership is indeed a major problem militating against the growth and development of postcolonial Nigeria.

Postcolonial Criticism of Isidore Diala's *The Lure of Ash*

The expectations of many Nigerians after she gained her independence have not been met as a result of bad leadership that has drastically affected the development of the country. It is unfortunate that even the death and sacrifice of numerous Nigerians to making postcolonial Nigeria a great country seem to be futile. According to Rob Nixon, he noted that "First, postcolonialists have tended to foreground hybridity and cross-cultivation. ...Second, postcolonial writing and criticism largely concern themselves with displacement, ... and relatedly, postcolonial studies has tended to favor the cosmopolitan and the transnational. Postcolonialists are typically critical of nationalism" (235). In Diala's *The Lure of Ash*, the poem "On a Tombstone" depicts the spirit of nationalism epitomized by sacrifice of Christopher Okigbo who died during the Nigerian civil war.

Chris: poet, prophet, patriot
Martyred that the letting of his blood
May hasten the birth of the ideal nation

Bound as well are to mere dust
Laying down our lives,
A light and a signpost to the living,
We hope to make an ally of eternity. (10)

It is disheartening that Okigbo's death has not been able to hasten the birth of the ideal nation (Nigeria) years after her independence. The matrix of the problems in the postcolony illuminates that it is revolved around bad leadership characterized during colonialism and postcolonial Nigeria. Probably, the civil war could have been averted if the military rulers involved thought critically about the colossal amount of lives and properties that would be destroyed as a result of the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war that lasted for about thirty months. After Nigeria gained her independence, the political ruling class partook in series of corrupt practice which include bribery, electoral malpractices, embezzlement of public funds etc. Some soldiers in the Nigerian military overthrew the civilian administration through a coup.

It was then assumed by some military officers from the Northern part of Nigeria that the coup was an “Igbo coup” since most of the politicians’ killed came from the region. This eventually led to reprisal attacks that finally resulted to a civil war. It is indeed unfortunate that various forms of corruption that was perpetuated by the civilian administration were also propagated by the military. Diala’s reflection in *The Lure of Ash* is revolved around a state of hopelessness which is depicted in some of his poems in the collection. In “Nigeria at Thirty-eight” which is another political poem by Diala, the persona is nostalgic about the turn of events after about four decades of Nigeria’s independence from Britain. In the first stanza of the poem, the persona laments “My flute wails thirty-eight salutes,/ Mourning wilted hopes of beauty;/ My flute wails thirty-eight salutes,/ Lamenting smothered dreams of grandeur” (20). The major thematic preoccupation in the poem is hopelessness, the dreams and aspirations of citizens of the postcolony have not been materialized. The fluidity of Nigerian politicians tends to have dashed the aspirations of many of her citizens who could be classified as “political puppets” in the corridors of power. Many writers (poets) creative imaginations are deeply inspired by events in his/her environment. In an earlier study by Diala, he postulates that:

The voice that the contemporary (Nigerian) poet heeds is invariably the voice of the people, that is, the downtrodden and pauperized masses, a class that transcends ethnic boundaries and is held together by the condition of historical deprivations which are shared beyond regions. This makes the badge of the contemporary (Nigerian) poet’s truth not heaven’s revelation but the beneficence of the earth. At the risk of formulaic oversimplification, the contemporary Nigerian poet’s sober truth is that the masses are the light of the earth, the rulers its vermin. (6)

Furthermore, Diala’s political poems unravel events in postcolonial Nigeria. In “June 12” another political poem by Diala, he makes use of dialogue between “she/he” as a form of style to exposing negative events in postcolonial Nigeria.

She: Those who live in Aso rock
Must not lack a rock’s solidity
Let poets adore words
A soldier is his decrees.

He: Leading a people on an eternal pilgrimage
Is dwelling in everlasting anxiety,
The puddle in the broken pot is the dog’s.
The rite cries for consummation. (28)

The theme of corruption has been a reoccurring one in the poetry of many postcolonial Nigerian poets of Igbo extraction such as Chukwuma Ibezute, Ifediora Okiche, Solomon Awuzie, Ikeogu Oke, Christopher Okigbo, Esiaba Irobi, David Odinaka Nwamadi, Uche Nduka, Chiedu Ezeanah, Olu Oguibe, Afam Akeh, Hyginus Ekwuazi etc. I have noted earlier that corruption is a major militating factor that has hindered the growth and development of Nigeria. There is lack of social infrastructures in the country which is associated with the embezzlement of public funds that is meant to be used in the provision of basic amenities like good road, water, transportation and health care facilities in the country. Nigerian rulers do not seem to exhibit nationalism in their leadership, owing to the fact that many of them are corrupt. In the second stanza of "I'm Dying, Nigeria, Dying" the persona makes constant use of the repetition "Of" for emphasis "Of the mortal stench/ Oozing from corruption forged in the highest places./ Of the lethal glare/ Of transitional moments cast in the image of eternity;" (31). The lines above depict a high level of corruption that has militated against the development of the country. It is also worrisome that those perpetuating it are those in the "highest places" (politicians). Political corruption and other forms of corruption are some of the major problems affecting many countries in postcolonial African and Nigeria in particular. Diala makes lucid use of symbolism to depict neocolonialist activities in the postcolony. In the poem "The Vulture" the vulture in the poem is symbolic and it represents Nigeria's formal colonial masters who are interested (selfish) in the affairs of their formal colony. "Once again the Vultures/ Weave their iron circles in the furthest sky./ Unhurried, like dirty rags flung at the sun," (44). Fashina had noted in an earlier study that:

The neo-colonial African experience is becoming more and more enervating as the African political space is becoming more turbulent and unbearable for the people. The people are at the mercy of the tyrants who are forcing themselves on the people in the name of democracy, African style. The rulers become more corrupt and it seems nothing is working. With this, African literature is becoming more robust and more sensitive in its reactions to the complex neo-colonial problems in Africa. (131-132)

Elections in Nigeria have been characterized by various forms of violence and the rigging of politicians into various leadership positions. The persona's depiction of politicians in postcolonial Nigeria in "Election" is negative. Many Nigerian politicians are desperate to get into political offices even at the detriment of the lives of their countrymen. During elections conducted in the postcolony, lives and properties worth millions are destroyed. The persona laments in the last stanza of the poem "... In the wake of Thunder/The terror and mortal election" (52).

Diala's poems reveals that he is concerned with the problems of his society, it is some of these problems that he writes about in his maiden collection of poems *The Lure of Ash*. The simplicity of Diala's poems makes it easy for an average reader to comprehend irrespective of the topicality of the issues in the text.

But beyond the aesthetics of Diala's poems, neocolonialism, violence, corruption and politics are the major thematic preoccupations embedded in his collection of poems. A greater proportion of Isidore Diala's poems shows that amidst the problems revealed in his poems, he does not proffer solutions to any of them. His poems are not only informative, they are also very educative.

Postcolonial Criticism of Chris Ngozi Nkoro's *Trails of a Distance*

Nkoro is preoccupied with problems in the postcolony as the situation seems to be hopeless. Nigeria's leadership which includes both civilian and military are engulfed by corrupt rulers. Nkoro admits that the situation of the downtrodden in postcolonial Nigeria is indeed hopeless and is illuminated in his poem "Eyes on boom", and thus, the persona makes use of the pronoun "They" to refer to the masses "They sit at ailing promises/ and feed on odd reception at receptions/ they wait forlornly at doorposts/ to rest their dimming brains/ just for her service" (18). The persona's description in the poem is vivid, the dreams and aspirations of the majority of Nigerians have been dashed by the activities of selfish politicians who plunder the resources of the nation. Thus, Nkoro exposure of the problems inherent in postcolonial Nigeria that involve corruption perpetuated by the rulers in the corridors of power indicates the state of hopelessness which is illustrated in "Song of the lost"

October already history
adopts sister-months
to the story on stage
July divorced
February died
December cracked
The April sang
August stepped aside
June lost
then came May again. (53)

The persona makes use of personifications such as "February died" and "July divorced" to reinforce the hopelessness that is inherent in postcolonial Nigeria over five decades after she gained her independence. Nkoro's "Careless" is a clarion call to be wary of the activities of Nigerian politicians who are corrupt and "Who waste you (Nigerians) in empty debates/ And drag off you every shine" (65). In "A hag now (*For Naijira*)" the persona asks a rhetorical question "Are you only a giant hag now?/ You were the attraction of the decade/ ... And your mill well are running empty" (75). A writer (poet) is meant to be patriotic, his/her patriotism should be anchored on truth in his society.

Diala postulates that “The writer’s explorations are danger-fraught both for himself (herself) and for society. This is because he may discover things unknown or only partly known, or even exhume things deliberately ignored or concealed at his own peril, things about society or those in power whose positions such revelations may threaten”(3). Nkoro’s poems illuminate some of the problems inherent in postcolonial Nigeria especially the ones perpetuated by politicians. The poet (Nkoro) epitomizes resistance and strives to interrogate political rulers who have successfully plundered the resources of his nation through various forms of corruption.

Conclusion

Through the poetry of Umez, Diala and Nkoro, we observed that some negative events such as corruption; politics, violence and neocolonialism have contributed to the underdevelopment of Nigeria the “sleeping giant” of Africa. However, from our analyses of the poems, the poets did not suggest or provide possible solutions to the myriads of problems that have envisaged postcolonial Nigeria. Credible leaders should be elected into various political offices in order eradicate various forms of corruption in the society. Furthermore, it is important to note that making Nigeria a great country is the responsibility of her citizens and nationalism should be propagated. Corruption in virtually every sector has negatively portrayed the image of Nigeria to the international community and the rest of the world. Finally, Nigeria can be a good country.

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