

*Research*

## **SALIENT THEMES AS VOICES IN AFRICAN POETRY**

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**Abstract.** The paper examines the various voices in African poetry. African poets use their themes as echoes to salvage various inferences found in the decaying political, economic and social landscape. The paper argues textually the cultural ethos and the contemporary post-independence disillusionment on the African psyche as a result of colonilization. Using the meta-critical approach combined with realism, within sociological approach, the research calls for a concerted effort to stimulate originality and harness the benefits of globalization for the development of humanity in Africa.

*Keywords:* salient themes, African poetry, literary consciousness

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### **Introduction**

Poetry uses powerful words to x-ray deep thoughts about man and society. It is pertinent to state that this genre of literature is so important because it explores the use of imagery to delineate important perceptions about people

living in a continuum. Poets have explored these phenomena in their poetry. Accordingly, Maduka and Eyoh (2000) did the following names dropping when they mentioned “Tennyson, Blake, Wordsworth, Elliot, Pound, Okigbo, Soyinka, Clark, Okara, Osundare, Ojaide, Brutus, Kunene, Mitshali, Peters, Awonoor, p Bitek, Hughes, Baraka, Senghor and Walcott.” The illustration here is to show that these poets though existed during different literary periods; were using poetry to celebrate one voice or the other in their canon.

Literary consciousness is the cardinal focus of poetry. Though poems usually employ word economy and distinct message, the dissemination of its subject matter which I called “salient voices” are anchored in the use of rich imagery which the poets either make “personal” or “conventional” in order to break the till. The various voices that emanate from the poems are sociological in nature; however, sociological approach to literary criticism would be more appropriate to the analysis of these voices as they move in time and space in the poems under review. Luke Eyoh<sup>1)</sup> did a cursory study of the application of sociological approach in the analysis of poetry. According to him “The sociological approach to literary criticism provides a framework for this study” he goes further to observe that “Irele’s explication of the sociological approach clearly illuminates the character of the framework and its relevance to work. “According to him, a fruitful kind of sociological approach attempts to correlate the work to the social background to see how the authors intention and attitude issue out of the wider social context... and to get to an understanding of each writer... captures a moment of the historical consciousness of the society” (Eyoh, as quoted by Irele (1981)). I quite agree with him that such work is deeply “rooted in the historical dynamics of society, the sociological theory adopted here underscores the social elements of politics, economy, ethics, religion, etc. The theory has copious aspects of applicability but two of them, marxist and realism, require ample elucidation in view of their centrality to the study.” Four generations of African poetry have emerged: the

first generation imagined themes such as the black aesthetics following the concretization of black aesthetics in America. Leopold Senghor belongs to this tradition of poets, the next generation of poets in Africa cry for independence from the grip of colonisers and racial prejudice. Wole Soyinka and Denis Brutus have some poems in this direction. The third generation of poets use poetry to establish the post independence disillusionment and the sudden break down of law and order in Africa. When the military becomes interested in taking over politics, many harrowing experiences were experienced by the people. The fourth generation of African poets usually consolidate on the current and contemporary problems militating against Africa. My intention in this work is to apply the sociological approach to the study of selected poems in *Poems of Black Africa*, which was edited by Wole Soyinka (1999). I would make attempt to follow the classification of themes as Soyinka rightly put them. Within this sociological praxis, I will limit myself to social realism because it is most applicable to the understanding of the various voices which African poetry attempts to visualize.

### **Voices in African poetry**

African poetry has expressed many concerns which make them unique to the understanding of African ethos and traditions. Commenting on these various voices in African poetry, Soyinka (1999) asserts that these poems “embrace most of the experience of the African world- modern and historic- though naturally no claim is made here for an unattainable comprehensiveness of themes; or for their mutual exclusiveness. The overlapping is obvious and frequent. What gives, for instance, the love poems of Denis Brutus their raw, passionate desperation is the fact that they are just as much poems about love as they are poems of indictment -a word I prefer to protest-against the brutish environment from which such emotions are painfully wrenched, that they speak of integral refuge and outer defiance, hope and resolve, within one

breathe. Even when the poem emerges as essentially tender, its poignancy remains a yet more lacerating accusation.”

The voices in African poetry according to Soyinka (1999) encapsulate history and reality. While some poetry scrambles for self assertion, others struggle for identity. Some in the long run examines the powerlessness of man in the face of uncontrollable phenomenon. Leopold Senghor`s poems are typical examples of poems that strive for self assertion, identity, self consciousness, black aesthetics etc while J.P Clark`s poetry strive for the place of man in the face of natural and uncontrollable phenomenon. Some poems are psychological while some are grossly philosophical. Niyi Osunsare`s poems are mythical, cultural and philosophical. The same thing goes to Soyinka`s “idanre” personal feelings were also expressed in African poetry this makes the voices in African poetry very fundamental.

According to Christopher Drummond (2005) in his critical essay, published in African Postcolonial Literature in English series, Wole Soyinka in 1972's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* presents seven thematic groups of poems composed during Soyinka's imprisonment for political protests against the Nigerian government. One of these thematic groups, titled "Four archetypes," comprises four poems – "Joseph," "Hamlet," "Gulliver," and "Ulysses"--each of which draws an analogy between Soyinka and the corresponding character from literature. In particular, the poem "Ulysses" employs allusions to Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), referring to both works for the archetypal figure of a wandering man who has become separated from his home and his past. Thus, by forming parallels between his life and the stories of Odysseus and Leopold Bloom, Soyinka not only dramatizes his imprisonment by the Nigerian government, but also examines the isolation of all individuals. In "Ulysses," Soyinka employs a first-person monologue that serves as the personal voice of the poet. In this fashion, Soyinka steps away from the Modernist (and sometimes Victorian) use of dramatic monologue in

poetry, a technique which often produces a narrator who cannot be trusted to deliver the poet's meaning in his own words. Rather than using an intermediary such as Robert Browning's Duke of Ferrara or T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, Soyinka speaks for himself, and thus initially "Ulysses" appears to function much like the poetry of Romantic authors such as William Wordsworth and John Keats. However, whereas the Romantic poets tend to write in a relatively straightforward first-person style that extols the individuality of man, Soyinka uses a more convoluted first-person narrative that seems to emphasize the loneliness which stems from that individuality. Thus, Soyinka uses the first person in poetry much like Joyce uses it in prose, employing a stream-of-consciousness technique that emphasizes the necessarily unique and isolated nature of each individual.

In addition to the use of a first-person stream-of-consciousness monologue, Soyinka's "Ulysses" includes a profusion of impressions that flow together without any clear argumentative structure. By combining unorthodox syntax with images deeply rooted in personal experience, Soyinka presents the reader with a style of verse that is at once lyrical and ambiguous:

*It turns on quest cycles, to track a skein  
Of self through eyeless veils, stumble on warps  
Endure the blinds of spidery distortions, till  
Swine-scented folds and caressing tunnels  
Come to crossroads at the straits, between  
Vaginal rocks.*

This use of jumbled imagery parallels other such poems as Dylan Thomas's "After the Funeral" and (to a much lesser degree) Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Like Thomas and Coleridge, Soyinka juxtaposes images in such a manner that the reader cannot find immediate and rational

relationships between them. Thus, to a certain extent, the reader must derive his own meaning from the poem, allowing conscious thought to give way to the subconscious process of association. At the same time, however, Soyinka did not write "Ulysses" as an exercise in purely subjective interpretation. Rather, by referring to Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, Soyinka ensures that the reader (or at least the well-read reader) has a framework of symbolism in which to read. By means of these allusions to the archetype of Ulysses, Soyinka presents isolation as a major theme of the poem. This theme of isolation appears in two different ways, the first of which deals with the immediately obvious subject of Soyinka's imprisonment by the government of Nigeria. Like Odysseus, who became physically separated from his past life, wandering lost for ten years after the fall of Troy, Soyinka spent several years confined in prison, struggling in a metaphorical "swell of dancing seas and pygmy fountains" not to "lose the landmarks of my being". Beyond the comparison with Odysseus, however, the poem goes on to draw a connection with Joyce's Leopold Bloom, as hinted in the full title of the poem: "Ulysses--Notes from here to my Joyce class." Whereas the allusion to Odysseus seems to work more as a comparison to the specific isolation endured by Soyinka in prison, the allusion to Bloom expands the analogy to include the isolation experienced by all individuals within society. Like Bloom, whose wanderings through Dublin symbolize the ironic loneliness of man among his fellow men, Soyinka explains how he has become like "boulder solitude amidst wine-centered waves" (Soyinka, 1999, p. 29). Indeed, the intensely personal nature of Soyinka's imagery echoes this solitude with a stream-of-consciousness technique comparable to that used by Joyce in *Ulysses*. Thus, by alluding to Homer and Joyce, Soyinka parallels his specific experience of imprisonment with the more general experience of isolation entailed by the unique consciousness of each individual. This use of archetypes may derive from the works of Carl Jung." (Drummond, 2005).

Various voices which would be examined according to the *Poems of Black Africa* include Alien perspective, Ancestors and Gods, Animalistic Phases, Black thoughts, Captivity, Compatriots, Cosmopolis, Early passage, Ethics, Exile, Indictment, Land and liberty, Man in Nature, Mating cry, Mortality, Poets passage, Praise singers and Critics, Prayers and Invocation. These various classifications were made by Soyinka in the anthology.

### **Contextual analysis**

African poets use various voices as thematic preoccupations in their poetry. On alien perspective, some poets such as G. Adali Mortty, Mazisi Kunene David Diop and others reflect on the typology of foreign images in African poetry. The portrayal here is that no matter how an African learns to become a European, there is still a very magnificent landslide difference between them. G. Adali-Mortty uses his poem “belonging” to substantiate this voice in poetry. The poems remarks that:

You may excel  
In knowledge of their tongue,  
And universal ties may bind you close to them;  
But what they say, and how they feel-  
The subtler details of their meaning,  
Thinking, feeling, reaching-  
These are closed to you and me for evermore;  
Are, indeed, the interleaves of speech-  
our speech-which fall on them  
No more than were they dead leaves  
In dust-dry harmattan,  
Although, for years, they’ve lived  
And counted all there is tot count

## In our midst!

The poet recalls the coming of the European into Africa and how these Europeans attempt to make the Africans white men at all cost. The case of France is highly symbolic. The policy of assimilation which the French tries to operate in their colonies was an attempt to bastardise the hard earned African cultural heritage. The poet is using a very simple word to communicate to the young generation of Africans not to see themselves as Europeans. The Europeans are unique people this same thing goes to Africa who are also unique in their own way too. Any attempt to attempt to copy the foreigners would only lead to utmost rejection. That is why Mazisi Kunene quickly presents the poem entitled “Europe” to show the generation of young Africans to be self reliant, dedicated and strive toward excellence. The poem opens with a melancholic tone, sarcastic and didactic impression. Concerns for ancestors and gods have been noticed in African poetry. African poets believe in the protection of the people be their ancestors. That is the reason behind incantations, songs to the ancestors, rituals, sacrifices to the gods and some traditional activities which bring succour to Africa when the lands are appeased. Jared Angira’s” if” is a poem is with belief in ancestral traditions. The poem opens sharply:

a squirrel crosses my way  
while on my trip  
then luck is mine  
but when it’s a cheetah  
or wild cat that crosses there  
I turn and go back.

I knock my right foot on the stone

While on a trip  
i melt in joy  
Since I shall be overfed  
But when it's the left  
I turn back and go back

The poem is beyond the comprehension of non African. The poet is attributing his success to the goddess of luck. Signs of accompaniments enable him know how the outcome of his visits would be. The use of animal imagery is to show calmness and wildness. "Squirrel" is a calm animal that also typifies good luck, elevation in African cosmology. While the likes of lions, "cheetah" constitute violence. So these signals give an African a premonition of what may occur while on their trip to a strange place. The poet is calling attention that African should not loose sight into how these signs work. They have been laid down by our ancestors and proven to have a great significance on the people because it gives a pre- awareness of time to come.

J.P Clark demonstrates more ancestral phenomena with his poem "olokun" to show the Africans that the ancestors though dead are not asleep. They watch over their children and they protect them from the enemies. That is why in some areas in Nigeria, particularly, the Yoruba ethnic group focuses on the strong belief in ancestral worship. In Irun Akoko, Ondo State of Nigeria, around September thereabout some families in Esan sacrifice live animals to the ancestors. It is believed that these ancestors are not dead but asleep. By sacrificing these animals, they reawaken the ancestor's interest to care and protect against impending doom. During the first world war, the Irun people of Ondo State believed that they would have been swept by the war but for the intervention of the ancestors and gods who came in form of spirits to prevent the warriors from "seeing and locating" the town. Wole Soyinka's "Idanre" belongs to this class. The poem x-rays the significance of gods to the socio-

political and economic development of Africa in these modern times! The same situation goes to Bille Kingdom of Rivers State who views “teme” as the spirits handed down by the ancestors for their own use. “teme” is a maximum spiritual protection which cannot be broken by the enemies before and after Agbanijike, the great warrior.

Animistic voices are heard in Jared Angira`s “hitch hike” which brings back to memory the past of some Africans. The voice is also heard in “a look in the past”. This is a poem Angira`s attempts to establish the process of human development from a reptile to the present state. The poems asserts that

Once I was a lizard  
Cheeky and harmless  
And built clouds  
That the heat  
Never could melt

...then one day I died  
But knocked my head  
On the sharp gravestone  
That woke me up  
To find me winged  
Tough-clawed and a scavenger...  
I was an eagle...

The poem goes on and on to explain the exploitation of man from being a beast and the transformation he goes through. This situation in African poetry is metaphysical. An ordinary person may not know what the poet tries to explain. But of paramount significance is this theme because it portends the originality of man as he moves in time and space. These poets combine some

elements of metaphysics with nature, love for the land, originality. They borrow a leaf from some 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poets. The Columbia Encyclopaedia remarks that:

*Metaphysical concerns are the common subject of their poetry, which investigates the world by rational discussion of its phenomena rather than by intuition or mysticism. DRYDEN was the first to apply the term to 17th-century poetry when, in 1693, he criticized Donne: 'He affects the Metaphysics... in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts.' He disapproved of Donne's stylistic excesses, particularly his extravagant conceits (or witty comparisons) and his tendency towards hyperbolic abstractions. JOHNSON consolidated the argument in *THE LIVES OF THE POETS*, where he noted (with reference to Crowley) that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets'. He went on to describe the far-fetched nature of their comparisons as 'a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'. Examples of the practice Johnson condemned would include the extended comparison of love with astrology (by Donne) and of the soul with a drop of dew.<sup>2)</sup>*

The difference here is that African metaphysical poets are different in their approach to poetry. They prefer to address those aspects of life and customs which are beyond ordinary comprehension regardless of what the Eurocentric critics would say. Similarly, Black thoughts are visualised in Poems of Black Africa a typical instance is “Black Mother” by Viriato da Cruz. The poem goes the way:

Your presence, mother, is the living drama of a race  
Drama of flesh and blood  
Which life has written with the pen of centuries

Though your voice  
 Voices from the cane plantation  
 The paddy fields, the coffee farms,  
 The silk works, the  
 Cotton fields  
 Voices from plantations in Virginia  
 From farms in the Carolina  
 Alabama  
 Cuba  
 Brazil  
 Voices from Brazilian sugar plants,  
 From the tonga drums, from the  
 Pampas, from factories,  
 Voices from Harlem District South,  
 Voices from slum locations,  
 Voices wailing blues going up the  
 Mississippi, echoing from rail road wajor  
 Voices weeping with Carrother`s voice  
 “Lord God what will we have done”

The poet suddenly remembers his past, the slave era. The poem is melancholic about the travails of slavery and the agony of pain it brought on the entire black race in the world. The zig zag structure is to suggest that Africans were not happy with their previous and present experiences in the hands of imperialists. Although the poem is not written during the slave time, it reinvokes the African past and the sudden spread of black people all over the world. Slavery and colonisation spread the black people all over the world and gave them a new home. While mother Africa weeps for loosing her children to ungrateful people who still “enslave” the blacks with obnoxious policies and

world order, globalisation and racism, the “colonisers” smile to the bank with their exploits.

The poet wonders which sin the blacks might have committed to subject them to these kinds of agony, pain and undue treatment. All over the world, the blacks have one agonising tale to tell or the other. This is a feeling of black thought which some poets still carry in their canon in Africa. Bernard Dadie practically manifests his feelings in his poem entitled “I thank You God”. The poem goes on:

I thank you God for creating me black  
For making of me  
Porter of all sorrows,  
Setting on my head  
The world,  
I wear the Centaur’s hide  
And I have carried the World since the first morning  
White is a colour for special occasion  
Black the colour for everyday  
And I have carried the World since the first evening.  
I am glad  
Of the shape of my head  
Made to carry the world,  
Content  
With the shape of my nose  
That must snuff every wind of the World  
Pleased  
With the shape of my leg  
Ready to run all the heats of the World.  
I thank you God for creating me black

For making of me  
Porter of all sorrows

Bernard Dadie is returning to his past situation as a naturally created black person. He is influenced by the principle of black aesthetics of Baraka and the quest for black revolution. The poem may be viewed by a white person as a racist poem but Dadie is only trying to explore the African soul and the zeal to stand firm by the travails of the past. He journeyed through a long “meeting” from the “morning” to the “afternoon” and finally to the “evening”. This symbolises the movements of the historical evolution of the black persons from being a free moral agent in their respective kingdoms to the advent of the European. The coming of the Europeans to Africa subsequently brought slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism which grossly led to the exploitation of human and natural resources. An article on Scramble for partition of Africa best explains this evil, the article reports that:

*Established empires, notably Britain, Portugal and France, had already expropriated vast areas of Africa and Asia, and emerging imperial powers like Italy and Germany had done likewise on a smaller scale. With the dismissal of the aging Chancellor Bismarck by Kaiser Wilhelm II, the relatively orderly colonization became a frantic scramble. The 1885 Berlin Conference, initiated by Bismarck to establish international guidelines for the acquisition of African territory, formalized this "New Imperialism". Between the Franco-Prussian War and the Great War, Europe added almost 9 million square miles (23,000,000 km<sup>2</sup>) — one-fifth of the land area of the globe — to its overseas colonial possessions<sup>3)</sup>*

Dadie is just remembering his gory past. This leads to the issue of “captivity” in African poetry. The theme of captivity here refers to the collec-

tive and personal experience one gains from a contact with external forces. However, most South African poems express their captivity by the white minorities. The expressions of apartheid policy on the blacks and the subsequent limitations blacks suffer in their day to day activities. Denis Brutus uses his poems not only to denote his prison experiences but to capture the phenomenon of captivity the people suffer. Wole Soyinka's "purgatory" is a poem that extrapolates this issue in a succinct chunk. Reflecting on "cold" of Denis Brutus, one sees the dehumanizing and harrowing expressions in the poem when the poet shows how he was brutally mishandled by the prison conditions, the poem asserts:

The clammy cement  
Sucks our naked feet  
A rheumy yellow bulb  
Lights a damp grey wall  
The stubbled grass  
Wet with three o'clock dew  
Is black with our fingers  
The sugarless pap  
Into our mouths  
Then labour erect;  
From lines;  
Steel ourselves into fortitude  
Or accept an image of ourselves  
Numb with resigned acceptance

The poet has resigned to faith. He was arrested and incarcerated by the authority he has been criticising. In the prison, the bulb is the type that can even make one go blind. The wall is dirty and the floor is not well kept. This

is the case with African prisons. These places are placed extremely dirty and unkept. Inmates fall sick and were taken out at will. The image of sugarless pap is to denote “waste”, “nothingness” that people suffer in the hands of bad governments in Africa. The worst is military government in Nigeria. Military governments have continually arrested Wole Soyinka and this constitutes his theme of captivity in” purgatory”, the poem reports that:

Wall of flagellation to the south  
Strokes of justice slice a festive air-  
It is the day of reckoning

.....the circus comes to circus town  
A freak show comes to freaks  
And ancient pageant to divert  
Archetypes of Purgatorio

Soyinka’s poem is addressing the state of captivity which envelops the land. This is a nation that nothing happens.” Strokes of justice” is a metaphor for kangaroo courts the Nigerian military carry out to “nail” political critics and send them to jail. “Jungle justice” becomes the order of the day. Soyinka is a victim of this situation. This kind of jungle justice sent Nelson Mandela to twenty seven years jail without proper trial.

African poetry is critical of these various voices in order to inform, correct, criticise and deconstruct. That is the basis of the society and reality. No wonder Matthew Arnold once said” we need a poem that has teeth to bite”. Poetry uses elevated language to denote the recklessness of public office holder in Nigeria and in Africa at large. Another vibrant voice in African poetry is the theme of compatriot. Poets use their poetry to celebrate falling heroes in African cosmology. These heroes fought to keep the spirit and soul of Afri-

ca together. They sometimes use their poetry to delineate trust for the fallen ones and immortality. This is essential because the only recognition and respect these fallen ones who died for their father land could get is appreciation. J.P. Clark Bekederemo's "Casualties" is a typical example, the poem states that:

The casualties are not only those who are dead;  
They are well out of it.  
The casualties are not only those who are wounded,  
Though they await burial by installment.  
The casualties are not only those who have lost  
Persons or property, hard as it is  
To grope for a touch that some  
May not know is not there  
.the casualties are not only those led away by night;  
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven,  
Nowhere as absolute as the grave,  
The casualites are not only those who started  
A fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands  
Are burning that had no say in the matter.  
The shattered shell become prisoners in  
A fortress of falling walls.

Clark is trying to observe the state of the down trodden in our society. Some people are dead and gone, they are casualty, some are forgotten, some are imprisoned, some are poor and dejected. A lot of problems hover round man as he moves in time and space. Clark is of the opinion that nobody should be left out in the framework of society. Those who expect death by installment are those who have no means of livelihood. The government does not give any

form of assistance to her citizens in form of social security which countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark etc give to sustain those teeming populations of both lazy and unemployed. That is why the rate of crime and security breakdown is alarming. To Richard Nturu, compatriots should be vividly directed to the down trodden in our society, his poem, “The Pauper” exclaims:

Pauper, pauper, craning your eyes  
In all direction, in no direction!  
What brutal force, malignant element,  
Dared to force your piteous gate?  
Was it worth the effort, the time?

You simply lean on a leafless tree  
Nursing the jiggers that shrivel your bottom  
Like a baby newly born to an old woman.  
What crime, what treason did you commit  
That you are thus condemned to human indifference

Showing compatriot to the living ones gives a sense of place. That is the main preoccupation in the poem. Richard Nturu presents a gory image of poor and rejected African person. Poverty becomes the order of the day because the pauperism is no longer a hidden agenda! Some are born into it, some inherit it, and some come to it by chance. Nturu tries to find a place for them in literature of consolation. This is because in Africa, we live a communal life as opposed to the individual life of a European! The rate of divorce, mental disorder and imbecility are not as high in Africa because the Africans work together to eradicate problems. One man downfall is perceived as a downfall for all! Nturu has used his poem to show concern for the abandoned people.

African poetry moves to the cities and demonstrate the city situations with the use of imagery, metaphors and ironies. The city recklessness, prostitution, drunkenness, creativity constitute some of the cosmopolis voices we hear in poetry. In Okot p` Bitek “Song of Malaya” he ridicules with scorn prostitution and indolency. The poem which is just in five lines attempt a capsule presentation of life in totality; what it should be and not what it ought to be. The poem reports:

Sister prostitutes  
Wherever you are  
I salute you  
Wealth and Health  
To us all.

In Africa, it is common to hear “my brother” or “my sister” while there is no degree of consanguinity between the addresser and the addressee. P Bitek is only showing love and attention for those girls that out of poverty “sell their bodies for money”. He admonishes them that while they look for “wealth”, they should consider that they put their “health” in jeopardy. Well he ends up that everybody including him needs good health. Unbridled quest for materialism, lustfulness, greediness make one to dabble into prostitution. He similarly uses another poem to advise women who find themselves in this dastardly act. In “ Karibu” part VII, he advises that:

Sister Harlots  
Wherever you are  
Wakeup  
Wash up  
Brighten up

Go gay and clean;  
Lay  
Your tables  
Bring in fresh flowers....  
Load your trays  
With fresh fruits  
Fresh vegetables  
And plenty of fresh meat....  
The hungry lions  
Of the world  
Are prowling around....  
Hunting!

The imagery of “lion” is to suggest the masculinity in African men! What the poet is trying to assume is that instead of the woman to take to prostitution, they could as well get themselves set for any “hungry lion” meaning any serious minded suitor who is very desperate for marriage at all cost. This reason underscores the motive behind bride price system in Africa. Men pay good bride price to recognise and appreciate virginity. A girl who keeps virginity before marriage is accorded much respect and honour not only to her parents, but to her husband. Modernization has changed many things in Africa. Most of these poets use their poetry as voices to change any form of sociological inherence which may limit the growth and the development of Africa as unique black people. B S uses “The Bastard” to ridicule and admonish girls who allow city lives to degenerate into having bastard children. This is against African culture and tradition. The poem remarks:

An unlucky creation  
His mother, a street walker;

His lying father,  
A champion at producing bastards  
Its not his fault,  
Poor innocent bastard,  
That in slums he's brought up  
By a mother that has no husband  
Though many husbands he sees  
Caressing his mother  
On a stool or lumpy bed.  
Poor bastard,  
Dumped on the ground to make room  
For his nocturnal fathers,  
Or on the mat to spend his horrid nights  
Among the steaming pots of food  
And walking rats.  
An unlucky creation,  
These bastards,  
Before birth heavily and mercilessly tormented  
With a rope tied tight round the mothers waist  
To strange the foetus  
Or his unformed head  
Squeezed with hands rough and murderous.

Other themes which African poetry discusses include ethics, indictment mortality, prayer and mortality. African poets are of the opinion that literature mirrors life and it portends the historical evolution of the African people. These poets have experienced the socio economical situation cum political problems in their various countries. They have used their poetry either as protest or as warning, caution on the need to solve the militating prob-

lems ravaging the human society. That is why African literature has been perceived by critics as “weeping literature” The literature of “lachrymal” as Charles Nnolim would rightly say. This situation gives African poetry a unique significance to the development of arts and culture. The principle of black aesthetics lends an axiomatic credence to the continuous survival of the black soul.

### **Diction as instrument of poetic communication**

Diction is the choice of word the poets use in communicating their various feelings and voices. Although most of them use melancholic tone, the purpose of this is to show how sorrowful black poets have been. Right from the discourse of slavery, colonialism and neo colonialism, these poets have shown their grievances because this is the only medium they could easily communicate their feelings. Maduka & Eyoh (2000) shed more light about the concept of diction as an instrument of poetic communication, they opine that:

*[P]oets pay close attention to words to grind the smallest particle of meaning out of each of them. Accordingly, choice of words which is generally referred to as diction is central to their activity. Diction embraces various operations: the poet chooses his words in the context of the emotional associations they generate in him and possibly in the reader (connotation; imagery/figurative language; symbol; myths archetypes); on the context of accentuation- rising and falling of the stresses in words as well as their patterns of occurrence in poems (rhythm and metre); or in the context of kingship of sounds (musical devices); or even in the context of his attitude of his subject (persona and tone). The other aspect of diction is related to formal/ colloquial; simple and complex, familiar and esoteric.*

African poets have chosen a particular reason to use language in technical colour because they want to embody the African myths and experience in the body of their work.

### **Observation**

It is observed that most of the African poets have a way with their poetry. Some attempt to coin new words and metaphor while some narrate using a few words. J.P. Cark belongs to this class of poet. Wole Soyinka belongs to the class of poet that invokes some foreign images in the body of their works.

Wole Soyinka has been accused by the maverick critic, Chinweizu of using difficult words beyond the comprehension of an ordinary reader. Similarly, Niyi Osundare, a poet and critic, accused Soyinka of using words that could not be easily comprehended by all. He observes “are we supposed to read it or toss it back to the shelves in endless desperation”. Osundare is of the opinion that poetry should be written in the simplest form. Brutus writes his autobiography and uses poetic vision to model them together. Most poems that are expressing the African voices are coming from West Africa, East Africa and South Africa. Although North African poets are very symbolic to the African literary canon, they have not created much impact in the definition of black aesthetics and African perceptions in arts. The various voices I have been examining are part and parcel of African daily experiences. They cannot be divorced from African socio-political and economic relevance. Some pose some questions on the African religious importance in the scheme of things. That is why Soyinka (1999) at the opening of the book observes that:

*[A] distinct quality in all great poets does exercise a ghostly influence in other writer, but this need not be cause of for self-flagellation. The resulting work is judged by its capacity to move ahead or sideways, by the thoroughness of ingestion within a new organic mould, by the original strength of the new entity.*

*Modern African poems which betray traces of internal dialogue are often accused of alien affection, but an examination of traditional poetry reveals that it too is built on a densely packed matrix of references.*

### **Conclusion**

The work concentrates on the various voices in African poetry. Selected works of black Africans were used for the purpose of this study. The work focuses on the textual analysis of various poems across Africa. Major themes were examined as the voices of the people which the poets attempt to exemplify poetically. The introduction of unique language gives the poems a different projection from the English poets of the Victorian era, Elizabethan era or different from the romantic era in English literature.

It is expedient to state here that these poets use distinct imagery which set them out from their contemporaries in Europe. It is also of paramount significance to state that new metaphors were created to illuminate the voices based on the poets' divergence of cultures. The work was situated based on a sociological approach to literary criticism with recourse to realism because the poems under analysis were realistically expressing African worldviews and idiosyncratic norms.

### NOTES

1. Eyoh, L. (2003). Socio-political protest and poetic imagination in Clark-Bekederemo's Poetry. *J. English Studies University Port Harcourt, April*
2. [www.columbiaencyclopaedia.org](http://www.columbiaencyclopaedia.org)
3. Wikipedia: Scramble for partition

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