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إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين**

**DRAFT VERSION  
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**Power, Artistic Agency, and Poetic Discourse: Poetry as Cultural  
Critique in Twenty-first Century Africa**

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**5 - 9 / 12 / 2011**

**Rabat Maroc / Morocco**

## **Introduction**

Poetry prides itself as the prime example of linguistic unorthodoxy. It has the tendency to enshroud familiar things with an unfamiliar expression. In what one might see as its aporetic inclination, poetry seeks not to be a medium for expressing views on issues but a performance of words, a staging of artistic craft, often for sheer aesthetics values. At least, this seems to be the conception of poetry handed down to African literati and intellectuals, a conception formulated by the high modernism of Euro-America. But as with the colonial languages, especially the English language, poetry has come to acquire a feature rather distinct in the hands of African poets. While it continues to retain its attribute as an art form that, among other art forms, most heavily leans towards aesthetics, it finds in Africa an engagement peculiar to the African socio-political condition. In spite of its claim to high culture, poetry in Africa has not shied away from issues that concern the growth and development of the continent. Rather, poetry has been, since the colonial time, preoccupied with the question of humanity, of nationhood, of political regeneration, and of the civil society. With the cultural turn towards the end of the last century (see Fredric Jameson's *The Cultural Turn*), poetry world over has sought to unhinge itself from high culture in order to, as it were, thematise issues which were in the modernist moment seen as only fit for the sphere of popular or mass culture. It therefore increasingly resists any confinement to the domain of mythology, individualism, or elevated aestheticism; it rather seeks to critique the spheres of human life, to interrogate humanity. One way poetry interrogates humanity is its capacity to speak to power through social tenors. While there are views that contest the stance of poetry as a critique of socio-political condition of society, African poetry in European languages, in diverse forms, to different degrees, continues to stage issues and realities that impact directly on the life of the peoples of Africa. My concern in this paper is to demonstrate the engagement of the emerging poetic voices in Africa with mainly political issues that have become rather perennial to the continent. Like most past and present thinkers in Africa, these poets seem to see Africa's condition of underdevelopment as mainly a result of political failure. Their poetry thus becomes heavily inflected with political tone. I am also interested in the dimension of exile in their poetry, which, as I will argue, is linked to the question of leadership failure on the continent. My analytic method is mainly sociological, contextual, although emphasis will also be placed on artistic peculiarity. It conceives poetry as a cultural critique, one of the many cultural critiques such as artwork, music, performance, and all

other aspects of culture that continue to challenge the powers of the establishment and question the complacency of the civil society. With a close reading of some selected poems, I intend to illustrate the fears and hopes of new African poets (poets whose works are relatively unknown) for their continent. While the concerns raised in their poetry are not new – because their precursors have effectively thematised the same fears and hopes, it will be seen that a peculiar tenor of lamentation collectivizes their diverse tones. In their tones, they appear more frustrated than their precursors. Like other thinkers, they wonder aloud through their poetry why certain problems persist on the continent. Among many others, the poets include Remi Raji, Uche Nduka, Mildred Barya, Abigail George, Dzekashu MacViban, Fungisayi Sasa, and Chiedu Ezeanah.

### **Literary Trajectory**

There is a need to contextualise what I have referred to as “the emerging poetic voices in Africa” or “new African poets”. I am concerned with poets that have appeared on the literary scene since the 1990s. This period is decades away from the beginning of African poetry in European languages. It began during the colonial period, with poets such as Gabriel Okara, Dennis Osadebey, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Crispin George, Gladys Casely Hayford, and a number of others, whom Donatus I. Nwoga (32-56) refers to as “pioneer poets”. Okara whose poems first appeared in *Black Orpheus* in 1957 (the other aforementioned poets had appeared in various forums before him), is often credited with starting what has come to be regarded as modern African poetry in English. For instance, Nwoga contends that “Okara suddenly made public a new direction, a new intensity, a new vigour which did not exist in any poetry in English that preceded it” (33). In the following years, more poets in European languages emerged, as colonial education conquered Africa. The poets under study here are therefore descendants of poets who are either dead or alive but no longer write, or are still writing. Okara, for instance, is still writing, his latest being the 2004 collection *The Dreamer, His Vision*. Given the poetic or literary production in Africa since the colonial time, the new poets emerged into a literary tradition that some see as dynamic – a tradition that by the mid-eighties had produced the first black African Nobel Laureate for literature, Wole Soyinka.

While the issue of periodisation – that is, the splitting of literary production into generations in Africa – is debatable, and has in fact engendered a debate, it is useful for us to

conceive these younger poets as a generation, in the loose sense of the word.<sup>1</sup> One of the conceptual problems to tackle in this regard is to clearly differentiate the poetry of those we call new African poets from the poetry of those who have been on the scene since the beginning and are still writing, such as Okara. To do this requires, on the one hand, recourse to historicity, the epochs in the life of Africa that have profoundly inhaled themselves on poetic discourse; on the other hand, it demands an analytic focus on both individual and collective aesthetic choices the poets have had to make with regards to the idioms that best serve their moments of poetic growth and maturity. Guided, as it were, by historicity and aesthetic choices, we may safely talk – as other critics have previously done – of the pre-independence nationalist era, the post-independence disillusionment era, and the era of despondency (beginning roughly since the 1990s), marked by an extreme form of angst, near total pessimism, and the urgency to emigrate from Africa.

The pre-independence nationalist era, what we would regard as the first generation of African poetry in European languages, concerns itself, as the term implies, with a high degree of nationalist imagination. Schooled in, and deeply influenced by, Euro-American modernism (what has constituted the subject of attack in Chinweizu et al's *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*), the poets evolved, in their time, what should be better seen as a pastiche of idioms (both local and foreign) to articulate individual aspirations in the context of nations yearning for independence from colonial empires. Remarkable poets of this era such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Kofi Awoonor, Okot p'Bitek, Dennis Brutus, and others raise a poetic discourse that is a fusion of private (artistic) yearnings and public cries for decolonisation.

The roaring 1960s brought flag independence to Africa. But it was not one to be celebrated, as Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* rudely alerts Africans. Instead of the happiness that should come with freedom, Africa was thrown into disillusionment. And poetic voices emerged, most loudly in Nigeria after the Civil War (1967-1970), to confront power and its permutations in high places. With Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (notice the tone of insolence in the title), Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Marketplace*, Kofi Anyidoho's *Elegy for the Revolution* (echoing Armah's title above), and Jack Mapanje's *Of Chameleon and Gods*, a new regime of protest poetry took the stage, arrogantly speaking to power, and insisting on the agency of poetry for social change, the performative dimension of the poetic discourse. The emergence of this generation coincided with the heyday of Marxism in

Africa, with some of the poets, such as Osundare, regarding themselves as Marxists. Osundare, perhaps the most prolific of his generation, would insist on what he sees as the demystification and de-mythologising of African poetry; that is to say, poetry – following the argument of Chinweizu et al – should emanate, as a matter of aesthetic expediency, from African traditional poetics, and should become not only *meaningful* to the ordinary people but should also, in a Marxist spirit, champion their cause. From his much-quoted metapoem, “Poetry Is”, to his polemical essays such as “The Writer as Righter”, Osundare has sought to map out a direction for the poetic discourse of his generation. In contesting the established notion of poetry as an arm of high culture, a mytho-individualistic aesthetic that uncompromisingly excludes the *ordinary*, less educated people in the society, Osundare contends that:

Poetry is  
the hawker’s ditty  
the eloquence of the gong  
the lyric of the marketplace  
the luminous ray  
on the grass’s morning dew. (*Songs of the Marketplace*, )

Ordinary people, such as the hawker, in Osundare’s estimation, partake – and participate – in the aesthetic process of poetry. The “gong” is a metaphorical reference to the bucolic community in Africa where the (so-called) *unlettered* make and enjoy eloquent poetry. The marketplace, considered too commonplace for the kind of poetry received from the West, is – if we listen carefully – filled with local lyricism which, according to Osundare, is poetry itself. This conception of poetry seems to appeal to most of the poets of the post-independence era. Beyond the revaluation of the poetics handed down to them, the poets also argue that poetry should be ideologically *potent* enough to speak on behalf of the oppressed masses.

The thesis put forward by the Osundare generation would, it does seem, impact greatly on the evolution of the new poets we are concerned with in this work. The reason for this is not far-fetched. The Osundare generation, in clearing the space for itself, embarked on a theorisation of what it considered the right kind of poetry for Africa, a continent despoiled by its political leaders. In theory and praxis, they have presented a poetry bold and courageous in demanding for social equality. The new poets would find this appealing because they were born into the socio-political condition that the poetry has historicised. The new poets also find appealing the

(collective) aesthetic choice of the Osundare generation, which rests on the fetching notion that poetry be rooted in indigenous orature. It is however pertinent to point out that, unlike the Osundare generation, the new poets are pessimistic in their vision – perhaps a result of the frustration that comes with a continent seemingly growing worse despite artistic intervention from earlier poets and writers. It is this frustration that has caused the exodus of writers and intellectuals out of Africa. But in spite of their rhizomic tendency or the dispersal trope conspicuous in their poetry, the poets are concerned about the fate of their nations, about the plight of people in Africa, and continue to write poems that confront power with the awareness that Africa's problems remain largely political.

### **Nation, Power, and Dissidence**

While it may sound like an undue totalisation to say that African poetry of whatever generation, of whatever aesthetic temperament, is essentially political, rooted in a social vision that confronts establishment, it is indeed valid to assert that African poets – really, writers of all genres – have seen themselves as operating in a social condition that they do not like. Even without intending to, their works often end up historicising this condition. But many of them have expressed their disenchantment with their nation's political situation, and have intended their works to not only relate their philosophical stands on such situation, but to also stir consciences, or spur actions, against what they see as the ineptitude of the establishment. Perhaps more than in other continents in the last century, writers in Africa have suffered (in some cases, extreme) molestation from the rulers. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who suffered a long incarceration because of his writing, notes in *Writers in Politics* that "whether actively involved in political struggle or not, many African writers have often found that the very subject matter of their poems has placed them on the wrong side of the ruling cliques" (69). Ngugi's kin in the writing profession, Micere Githae Mugo, puts it in a blunt way: "most writers under neo-colonial dictatorships find their creativity censored, stifled, and targeted for vicious attack by the system. Through the use of terror, the offending systems go all out to impose silence in yet another effort to close another channel for raising the consciousness of the people" (84). Mugo is here talking from experience, having been condemned to imprisonment on account of her writing and theatre work.

The social vision of the African writer has therefore been located at the juncture where, most often, her desire, even urgency, of “raising consciousness” or narrating nation clashes with the self-glorifying discourse of power in Africa; a discourse that presents even the worse despot in the garb of messianism. Michel Foucault in one of his deliberations on power states that “[the] most intense point of lives, the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely there where they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavour to utilise its forces or to escape its traps” (80). For African writers, the decades of post-independence despotism in Africa and the current condition of pseudo-democracies, have been the “intense point of lives” as they continue to clash with power in the discursal form of protest poetry. In the past decades, it was even imperative for African poets and writers to go on the streets in demonstration, or engage in other daredevil activities (Okigbo, Soyinka, Brutus), in addition to writing subversive poetry because the despotic regimes themselves had the double strategy of physically assaulting the people, as reported in the media, and of using cultural or discourse means such as the mass media (radio, television, newspaper) to perpetrate anti-human activities and to perpetuate themselves. But it is the cultural form of counter-discourse that the poets have most effectively deployed. Sara Mills points out that “[p]articularly through their verbal dexterity and use of language, those who are not in economically powerful positions may nevertheless manage to negotiate for themselves fairly powerful positions in the hierarchy” (40). Through their powerful threnodic tones, or insistent tenor of counter-discourse, African poets dramatise quite vividly a capacity to engage power in ideological combat.

Across the generations, we see this ideological combat, in disparate idioms, in diverse tones. For instance, in the subdued, almost unrealised love between the personas in Arthur Nortje’s poetry, there is the angst invested in lines such as “we have long survived the stigma of being” (“Continuation” 28-29); there is a powerful orchestration of “aches” underneath what one might see as Nortje’s visceral optimism in historicising apartheid. When Jared Angira, in the intense, insistent voice he raises on behalf of “silent voices”, declares that “the torch / shall burn / your mutilated conscience / and wake up / from the powdered chamber” (“Epilogue” 19), it is clear that he is here in his usual combat with power. Following their precursors, emerging African poets whose voices are growing sturdier in the twenty-first century choose to combat power, realising their aesthetics of resistance by versifying social issues in their immediate societies. Social issues here, of course, encapsulate individual experiences which the

poet perceives in the larger context of the society. For instance, the Nigerian poet Nnimmo Bassey, imprisoned during the dictatorship of the late General Sani Abacha, gives us this poem which foregrounds the inevitability of hoping in the face of tyranny:

Don't tell me now how it  
Feels  
To see your liberty bowed by boots  
Don't tell me now how it  
Tastes  
To have vinegar down your throat  
Don't tell me what you'll do  
For when we are out then we'll growl  
Don't ask me when we'll be  
Out  
For if we knew then we won't hope  
Don't ask me why we  
Hope  
Is the only sure thing they cannot jail. ("Intercepted", 11)

The condition of prison, thus, does not baulk the invention or re-invention of hope. The "boots", with the capacity to suppress people's "liberty", is a synecdochic reference to the military junta – indeed the prolonged military despotism in Africa – which took people's freedom away from them in recent decades. The image we have here of military power is one that cannot be surpassed; the caged personas (notice the "we" in the poem) cannot by any action extricate themselves. But one thing they can continue to do, in the view of this poet, is to hope. The poem itself is symbolic of the age in which this generation of poets live: an age in which, given all the past political failures (and the failure of counter-discourse to arrest the failures), the new poets see their societies as huge prisons where the very act of writing is to hope.

Apart from speaking to power through personal experiences, as Bassey does above, there is also the strategy of dramatising, through vivid description, the state of struggle, the level of hardship, the nadir of despair, in the society – and through such a dramatisation indict the establishment and interrogate the complacency of the elite. The poet, in this case, shows us the

realities of existence and implicitly reviles the political leaders for causing the harsh realities. The young South African poet Abigail George in her poem "Orange Farm on the 7 O'clock News" gives us a picture of a collapsed system where mayhem holds sway. The first stanza of the poem ushers us into a clash between people's will and power:

Machine guns go da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da  
Drowning out the swaying, barefoot crowds in the streets  
Shooting rubber bullets through the air although they aren't aimed to kill  
Beating down half-defeated men and women, civilians on foot.  
Absent parents: children out of sight, out of mind. (1-5)

The staccato machine guns are, in our reading, symbolic of the existing power and, as the following lines show, are stalling the force of the people's will. Whether it is rubber or live bullets (the poem is ironic here in the light of the so-called "rubber bullets" drowning out the people from the streets), the picture we have here is that of a group of demonstrators being overcome by the superior power of the gun, even though they are resilient as indicated in the metaphor "barefoot". Their resilience is seen all through. At Orange Farm, where the crisis is set, the people have resolved to confront the establishment: "everyone is up in arms about this" (13). This is in spite of the hunger, of living in "dirty slums". The poet places this in the larger context of a continent in retrogression:

The beautiful dream: the rainbow, the African renaissance  
Counting every two steps forward we take three back  
We move forward and backward like a river seemingly with ease  
What about the orphans who seek shelter from the rules of the wild  
Children who play in time with toy handguns and grenades, toy soldiers. (21-25)

The poet hits the theme of child soldier, a ubiquitous phenomenon across Africa in the last decades. It is symptomatic of a degenerate existence. What the poet actually implies here is that Africa, by abandoning its orphans to "the rules of the wild", has killed its future; without children there is no prospect for the continent.

The description can also be that of a lack of technological necessity that is peculiar to the poet's immediate society, as we see in Chiedu Ezeanah's "The Blackout". The images in the poem are explicit enough for anyone living in Nigeria:

Swooped by a blackout  
another day outages  
into the stone-age  
seeking a spark.

The noxious relief of plants  
in the hub of darkness  
tinders homes and breaths.

The sky's solar eye dimmed  
by infernal flares yields  
the monochrome of night.

Knees still bleed, suppliant,  
unsung in the extinguishing light.

Our only Republic beams darkness -  
where does the light live, and bless?

For years, Nigeria has been facing the problem of electricity. The problem is seen here from a poet's eye. In the poet's view, the constant power outages give the society the aura of the Stone Age. That is to say, the nation is moving backward instead of moving forward. But also the dominant image of darkness directs our attention to the inability of this "Republic" to have any positive or developmental vision. The metaphor "Republic" is better unpacked as the power that controls the political decisions of the society; and it is, as the poem implies, indicted for the condition of darkness in which the people live. As the poem intimates, it is not only humans who are adversely affected by the erratic power supply in the society but also non-humans such as plants, houses, and the sky.

The critique also comes in the form of the poet-persona addressing her nation, as we see in Fungisayi Sasa’s ironically titled poem “Anthem”. The poet invents her own song of allegiance for her nation but it is laden with her deep frustration with her nation’s stagnancy. She knows why the nation is in that state, and that is why she feels sadder; the nation is being brutalized by those who claim to be its leaders:

You are beautiful, my Zimbabwe,  
 though the sharp words of corrupt men  
 are the heavy, hard instruments  
 raping you again; again and again,  
 though the stench of a government's  
 betrayal  
 is raw sewage fermenting in your streets  
 and even though your children lick the pus  
 from their wounds so that hunger may be appeased.  
 You are still beautiful. (1-10)

The poet’s nationalism is embedded in the line “You are beautiful”. It is not mere compliments, but an expression of an abiding bond between the poet and her nation – a bond that spurs her to embark on a discourse that challenges power. The poet does not mince words in naming those she thinks have messed up the otherwise beautiful country. They are the “corrupt men” who are part of the “government’s betrayal” that cause the raping of the nation. Notice the repetition of the word “again” to emphasise the unending act of raping Zimbabwe has suffered from. And when the Mother Country is thus repeatedly raped, it is the citizenry, especially those who are economically weak, politically voiceless, that suffer most. The poet refers to those as “children” who “lick the pus / from their wounds”. This is a strong image. It evokes helplessness, that a people in order to feed would resort to licking the pus of their own wounds; that is, eating the wastes that come out of their own bodies. This conveys the intensity of the hardship the people are thrown into because of the raping of the nation by the political elite. But the poet is hopeful that the nation and its citizenry may be free some day:

Tsvarakadenga, stop your weeping  
 and wash your face.

Discard your rags and oil your flesh.  
Dance to summon the rains,  
chant to your ancestors who look at you now  
through hollow eyes.  
Abase yourself before the altar  
of a stone god with a clenched fist  
where your supplications cannot be heard. (22-30)

The hope resonates, although the poem seems to have projected hope in a rather simplistic way. For a nation perpetually raped, for a citizenry condemned to licking the pus of their wounds (to maintain the poet's metaphor), what is required for emancipation ought to be a strong revolutionary move, instead of merely hoping or soothing oneself with any rhetoric of a better tomorrow or, as the last lines of the poem shows, surrendering oneself to the "altar" of a god/goddess. But it is understandable, as the poem seems to imply, that a people must be courageous enough to withstand any kind of condition in which they find themselves. The ultimate goal of this poem, viewed from the context of our reading, is the foregrounding of a nation despoiled by its political elite, as we have seen in the previous poems. Power in such a society is in the hand of a few wicked, corrupt, and mindless persons who, contrary to what people see of them, pose as great leaders and thinkers – even as messiahs – in a society that, as one of the poets has pointed out, grows backward.

### **Exile and Dispersal: a Post-Nation Anxiety**

Perhaps I should begin this section by drawing attention to a certain thought which is critical of the kind of poetics deployed by these younger poets – a poetics that, as I have tried to explain earlier, is handed down to them. There is the cynicism that the new poets, like their precursors, might have, by writing their *kind* of poetry, undertaken an exercise in futility. This cynicism manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, there are those who think the poets have invested so much utility in their art, regarding it as a means of struggle against a repressive authority; an authority mainly constituted by the political elite who, we may conjecture, rarely read poetry, or if they did would hardly be disturbed by the force of the poem. This view is vigorously expressed by the Nigerian scholar Wole Ogundele in an essay entitled "An Appraisal of the Critical Legacies

of the 1980s Revolution in Nigerian Poetry in English". Juxtaposing the poetics of the Okigbo-Soyinka generation (what I have so far called the pre-independence nationalist period) and that of the Osundare generation (what I have called the period of post-independence disillusionment), Ogundele wonders what the overtly instrumentalist ideology of the post-independence period has achieved. If the poets, in their Marxist aesthetics, have set out to confront the cruel leadership of their nations, then to what extent has that aim been achieved? In Ogundele's view, "if the politicians learnt no lessons from the poetry of the [pre-independence nationalist] period because it was 'too obscure', they learnt none either from the prose and drama of the [post-independence disillusionment] era which, surely, were both 'more accessible' and more 'political and socially relevant'" (144). It is Ogundele's contention (as it is the contention of many other scholars) that the Alter-Native ideology (trumpeted by the post-independence poets) – the ideology inherent in the present generation – is counter-productive. Secondly, there are those (including Ogundele) who think that the poets, by focusing too much on what they perceive as their social engagement, mortgage the craft of poetry for its purported interventionist role. The British scholar Stewart Brown is one of such thinkers. Brown opines that "[while] there can be no doubting these [new] poets' sincerity or the depth of their anguish, the unending self-righteousness of the narrative voice, the artless predictability of the sentiments and the clichéd language of 'protest' undermine...the force of so many of these poems, *as poems*" ("Still Daring the Beast", 101). Such critical (indeed cynical) positions have been met with counter-arguments. Although this should not detain us here, it might be useful just to mention one of such. In the preface to his volume *A Song from Exile*, Olu Oguibe, one of the earliest voices of new generation, writes,

It is arguable to what extent the artist can influence or turn the course of history, and we in Nigeria have had so long a history of battles between the artist and the state that we have even greater reason to be doubtful.... [But] we are simply saying what we see, for it is seeing and not saying, our people say, that kills the elder. It is hearing and not heeding that will kill the child. That, for us, is the fate of the emperor and the poet. (7)

This of course is just one strand of the defence, with other poets such as Remi Raji (see his preface to *A Harvest of Laughters*) claiming that they are moved to soothe the pain of the suffering masses.

The foregoing scenario is remarkable in the sense that it is, on the one hand, symptomatic of the debate surrounding the entire foundation of African literature in European languages, often manifested as charges of being heavily anthropological and sociological, of being too theme-concentrated, and of being self-limiting, among others. For instance, the scholar Charles E. Nnolim in an essay entitled "African Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges for Writers and Critics" argues that African writers, instead of perpetually binding themselves to Africa's unending socio-political problems, should concentrate on "forward-looking" literature that imagines a "utopia for Africa" (6). He wonders why Africans do not write science fiction or do not write much about peoples of other nations and continents.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand – and this is what is more important to us here, the scenario arguably informs the phenomenon of exile or the central trope of dispersal dominant in the new generation of African poetry in English. In the late '80s and the first half of the '90s, or thereabouts, almost all of the poets I consider new were in Africa, some of them having just earned their first or second degrees. But now most of them, especially from Nigeria, have moved to the western world. In the words of Toyin Adewale, herself a poet of this generation, the new Nigerian poets "chose to go into voluntary exile" (iii) during the dictatorship of the late General Sani Abacha.

But the new Nigerian poets – and their counterparts in other nations of Africa – would conveniently be said to be already prisoners and exiles in their own country. Indeed their exodus out of Nigeria is merely a second level of exile. Exile here is conceived broadly as what David Bevan calls "a constant of our common predicament" in which case it is "a form of estrangement [...and] otherness" (3). Exile, in its intensity, is thus synonymous with prison condition. The notion of exile as prison condition is the main focus of the book *The Word behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile* (1997) edited by the Ghanaian poet and scholar Kofi Anyidoho. In his introduction with the moving title "Prison as Exile/Exile as Prison: Circumstances, Metaphor, and a Paradox of Modern African Literatures", Anyidoho harps on the perennial leadership crisis in Africa which has, through various indices, reduced the continent to a huge prison in which its writers see themselves as exiles. "The focus on exile and prison," Anyidoho writes, "as two sides of the experience of oppression was almost inevitable, considering that intellectuals and creative artists who insist on fighting oppression often end up in prison, that those who manage to survive prison often end up in exile" (3). Most new African poets (including the older ones) who emigrated to the west during dictatorships in Africa would claim

that if they had not left the continent, they would have been killed. Such claims could not be far from the truth given the fact that the Nigerian ruler Sani Abacha at a point declared Wole Soyinka wanted for treasonable offence; but worse is the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Abacha regime.

Exile, whether in the form of estrangement within one's society or emigration to another country, would come to affect the poetry of the new African poets thematically and stylistically. The trope of dispersal comes to dominate the poems they write in exile. This trope exhibits a vivid awareness of *being* (thematically, stylistically) among other peoples, literatures, cultures, styles, voices, etc. The form is ultimately characterised by pastiche; and the content by a social text that explores, in diverse ways, the triumphs and travails of multiculturalism. Obviously this is tending towards postmodernism. The postmodern practice among these new African poets is particularly obvious in the way some of the poets, having settled outside the continent, now tend to distance themselves from the literary tradition out of which they emerged. In the larger context of some African scholars' hostility to postmodernism and post-structuralism, their poetry expectedly encounters criticisms such as that of Niyi Osundare where he refers to the poets as the CNN generation.<sup>2</sup> For some scholars and observers, these poets are straying away from what is considered as their original literary tradition or the *authentic* tradition of African writing. They are lured by the competing cultures of what Fredric Jameson insists is late capitalism or what has come to be strangely regarded by others as *glocalisation*. But the other side of the argument is what Abiola Irele expressed. There is no period of Nigerian or African writing, in Irele's view, that does not have a "historical and thematic correspondence" to that of European, American, or World Literatures. In this premise, the postmodern practice of the new African poets (dispersal, pastiche, multiculturalism) is one such correspondence whereby the poets who exile themselves in Europe and America succumb to the pressures and influences of *glocalisation*.

This entire phenomenon is what I have termed a post-nation anxiety. Unlike the poems we have discussed before, the poems written in exile or subjected to the trope of exile and dispersal critique cultural issues beyond the anxiety of nationhood, although the issues they raise are indirectly connected with the question of power on the continent. Consider the poem simply titled "Exodus" by the Cameroonian Dzekashu MacViban. Here is another form of angst;

a deep sense of frustration, not with the power of the political elite of an African nation, but with the instability and the unsettled life of exile.

Out went we, with flocks and herds  
Out of Pharaoh's custody, seeking  
The Promised Land. Songs of deliverance  
Rose from griots and gongs – tore  
Tore the air with liberation-lyrics.  
Our marriage – now a vague dream –  
Was some distant lore of how  
WE LIVED IN DEATH. (1-8)

“Pharaoh” in this poem is a figurative representation of the kind of power the poets confront in Africa. The persona has moved out of the Pharaoh’s nation (“Pharaoh’s custody”), and assumes that the “Promised Land” – an obvious reference to the developed world – will turn out to be a place that she can dream and achieve her dream. If the home country were good, governed not by Pharaoh but *Moses*, there would be no need to go into exile. But exile turns out to be what the poet calls “the wilderness of Sinai” – the full import of this metaphor can better be accessed through the biblical story of the children of Israel spending an incredible amount of time to reach the Promised Land which is otherwise not far from Egypt. The poet here is of course drawing our attention to the disturbing gap between the dream of achieving success in the Promised Land, the land of exile, and the lack of achieving such success due to the vagaries of living in exile. That is, most young Africans, including the self-exiled writers, think once they are out of Africa they can fully realise their dreams, but it usually does not turn out to be so. The life of the exile comes to be characterized by distress and disenchantment, as the lines here show: “We moved under the watchful eyes of the sun / As mirages danced at a distance / Could it be our promised land? Our hearts beat” (16-18). The heartbeat here is that of confusion. Between living in exile and returning to dysfunctional society in Africa, the persona keeps asking: could the west be his promised land?

The Nigerian poet Uche Nduka would be considered by many as one of the emerging poets in Africa who has, more than his contemporaries, versified the condition of exile. He moved to Germany in the 1990s, having published *Flower Child* and *The Second Act* in Nigeria.

The first poetry volume he published outside Nigeria is suggestively titled *The Bremen Poems*. It exhibits an obvious shift in Nduka's thematic concern and stylistic inclination (see Oha 1-19).

The poems become shorter, the lines shorter; and the metaphors, growing purer, organise themselves with sparks of intensity. Since *The Bremen Poems*, Nduka's poems have assumed a riddling level of brevity, weighty with paradoxes, and oxymoronic witticisms. They grow farther away from referential exigencies, foregrounding their images and sonic essences rather than directing our attention to any semantic mapping. Although latent in *Flower Child*, and *Second Act*, it is in *The Bremen Poems*, and subsequent volumes, that Nduka turns his attention to erotic themes, very individualistic, which are capable of revealing the personal odyssey of an artist. The first poem in *The Bremen Poems* betrays this shift in thematic focus:

Even in so divine a time  
she screams and dreams

She walks on the freeway  
where everyone walks

Everywhere in the ballroom  
of the mind you find her

But where nights void  
her legtraps, no man comes.

This, even for the persona, sounds strange and it reveals the freedom and its concomitant loneliness in a society so different from hers. This is a sharp contrast from the society where a woman cannot dream, cannot even scream, and is not free to walk where "everyone walks"; and for a woman to be found in "ballroom" of the mind amounts to immorality. The case is different here, and in this collection Nduka crafts poems to dramatise this primal disparity. For instance, in the poem "To Your Cigarette", Nduka demonstrates that the European woman with her cigarette seems to wall herself against the worries of the world; he says of her "no pain bloodies your lips" (3), a phenomenon that is common in his own society. While I agree with readings such as Oha's that poets' attachments to places are often expressed through erotic images; and

that for Nduka, “imagining the space as female becomes particularly a revelation of the desire to possess and be possessed by the exile space” (8), I find it more useful to see the referent of Nduka’s body of amorous images not as the physical place or space of exile (so that the love is imagined as existing between the poet and the city), but as a collective of experiences which the poet has had with different individuals. For Nduka experience has no boundary. His erotic images, such as we encounter in the volume *Heart’s Field* (with a photo of a naked Nduka as front cover), undermine the claim that his love trope stops at the level of his attachment to a city or exile space.

Beyond the open surprise at the different life that the poet now has to live, there is a deep sense of nostalgia articulated in such poems as “I Speak of River”, “Note to a Season”, “Far from this Sadness”, and others in *The Bremen Poems*. In “Like the Dark Sky”, we encounter this nostalgia:

Like the dark sky  
hungering for stars,  
my lips long for  
the flute of wine’s fire;

for a sun  
to disrobe desire on the wire.

This nostalgic longing has become a strong theme running through Nduka’s poetry volumes written in exile. It shows the poet-persona misses his homeland, and would have gladly stayed back in his nation, if it had not been messed up by its political elite. This would be said of most of the poems written in exile by emerging African voices. They have left home, vacated the nationalist theme, and now have the theme of survival in exile with which to contend. Their frustration about life in exile is also a frustration about life on the continent, which up till now has failed to improve.

## Conclusion

The concept of poetry as cultural critique rests on the notion that poetry as an aesthetic domain does not limit itself to mere artistic orchestrations; it seeks to find as its substance socio-political issues that concern humanity. That is to say, it offers itself as a performative instrument for critiquing life. In this regards, the poet feels compelled, as it were, to use the poetic medium to participate in any kind of discourse that has an impact on the life of her society. It has been my concern to point out in this work that the emerging voices in African poetry have, like their precursors, used poetry to critique the pressing socio-political issues on the continent. Because the poets – indeed many thinkers in Africa – predicate the issues on the question of leadership, the near absence of good governance, their poetic discourse is largely antithetical to the establishment of political power in Africa. In their estimation, Africa has failed to develop because of the kind of leadership it has had. By writing poetry, these poets hope that they are not only exposing the realities that negate the self-glorifying rhetoric of the political elite in Africa, but are also helping to dethrone the power of such political elite. But it does seem that the power is not easily dethroned. This informs the exodus of these poets, writers and other intellectuals out of Africa. Life in exile presents other existential problems. The object of critique, for the new poetry, thus shifts from the concern with the nation to a post-nation anxiety which entails the historicising of survival struggles in exile. Any critique of the condition of exile points indirectly to the power behind the retrogression in Africa. This is under the assumption that if the continent were well-governed, developed, there would be no need for the exilic condition dramatised in the poetry.

## Notes

1. For the opposing views of the debate, see Garuba (51-72), and Obiwu (37-43).
2. See for instance Part XI of the seminal book *African Literature: an Anthology of Criticism and Theory* edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson for the debate on post-structuralism and postmodernism from the perspective of African literature. Also see the chapter entitled "African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorising" in Niyi Osundare's *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture*.

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