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The Later Poetry of Odia Ofeimun: A Continuation of His Tradition of Resistance Writing

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Abstract

Poetry remains a medium to interrogate the relationship between state actors and the governed within the Nigerian political landscape. This paper examines the poetry of Odia Ofeimun, published in the opening decades of the twenty-first century and observes that as a poet of the second generation of writers in Nigeria and Africa, the poet has remained consistent with the tradition of the generation of writing for the deprived segment of society. In these later collections, Ofeimun has continued to deepen his mission of feeling "for ears and hearts and hands/to rise with [him]" in the mission to steer society in a positive direction that will benefit all citizens. Drawing on Marxist theory, it is argued that Ofeimun has not wavered in his objective of holding the leaders in his society accountable to the people; and also, that the poet remains consistent in his belief that the power to change society for the better lies with the people. Ofeimun vigorously writes of the travails and plight of the ordinary toiling people in order to "nudge and awaken them" to the reality that surrounds them.

Keywords: Continuation, Ofeimun, Poetry, Resistance, Writing

Introduction

This paper investigates the poetry of Odia Ofeimun written at the opening of the twenty-first century with the objective to show that his poetry has remained consistent with his aim of holding political leaders accountable for the state of affairs in their society and to mobilise the people towards standing up for themselves at all times. To do this effectively, the paper adopts the Marxist theoretical approach in its discussion of the relevant poems selected for the study.

Ofeimun, a Nigerian poet, was born on March 16, 1950, in Iruekpen, in the present-day Edo State. He had his early education in his home town having been born in the then Western Region, which under the leadership Chief Obafemi Awolowo, had started a free education policy that came into effect in 1955 when the young Ofeimun was barely five years old. This early education, even though it was initially threatened due to lack of funds, was to prepare him for a writing career.

As a poet, Ofeimun has published a number of poetry collections, amongst which are *The Poet Lied* (1980, 2008), *A Handle for the Flutist and other Poems* (1986,

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2010), *London Letter and other Poems* (2010), *I will ask questions with stones if they take my voice* (2010), *Go Tell the Generals* (2008), *Dreams at Work and other Poems* (2010), *A Boiling Caracas And Other Poems* (2008), *A Feast of Return: Poems for Dance Drama* (2010), *Under African Skies* (2010), and *Nigeria the Beautiful: Poems for Dance Drama* (2011). The last three collections are designed for the stage as performance poetry.

Ofeimun, like most of the members of his generation of poets, is a child of two worlds. His poetry spans more than two generations. *The Poet Lied and other Poems*, his inaugural poetry collection, was first published in 1980. Its entry into the African body of literature is significant because, as Amuta (1989) observes,

> [it] inaugurates a fresh departure in Nigerian/African poetry, namely, the use of poetry as criticism of poetry. The freshness and desirability of this departure derives from the fact that it holds out the vital promise of banishing the redundant and artificial dichotomy which bourgeois scholarship had maintained between literature and politics. (p. 191)

According to this quote, Ofeimun took poetry away from private entertainment and used it to draw the attention of the people to their plight in society and how they should respond to conditions that dehumanise them; and, more importantly, for the poet to serve as a watchdog of some sort to the poetic engagement of others.

His second collection, *A Handle for the Flutist,* which was first published in 1986, did not depart much from this preoccupation. If anything, it reinforces this vision of deploying poetry for the advancement of societal good and, as Aiyejina (1988) points out, it brings sharply into focus the "urge in poets to challenge political opportunism and embrace kindred spirits" in the struggle to raise the people's consciousness (p. 121). From his emergence as a poet, therefore, Ofeimun clearly carved a path for himself on which to tread. He seems to have established that any meaningful art must engage with the people's condition without any pretence whatsoever.

This study, however, engages the poetry of the period from 2008 to the present, that is, after about a twenty-year period of hiatus. This is the period that has seen him issue more than eight collections to the reading public. This is done to show that as a poet whose writing career has spanned over forty years, Ofeimun has remained consistent with being a voice to warn the leaders and to inspire the people to rise up in self-defence.

The Ofeimun generation of poets sees poetry as a medium of interaction between the writer and his audience. Ojaide (2012), a member of the generation, says it is:

> ...the generation of Nigerian/African poets/writers who believe in the transformative role of the literary art and deploying it as a weapon towards regaining the lost ideals of nationhood; in Nigeria's case, the vision of a model independent African state. The art this Generation advocates is utilitarian and meant to advance the goals of humanity, especially in the areas of good governance, equality, justice, and human development. (p. 13)

For them, poetry serves as a means for the apprehension of the human condition and galvanises the people to seek solutions to the problems that are prevalent in their society. To achieve this objective, they believe firmly that they should strive to communicate with the people for whom the poetry is written. A leading voice in the

poetry of this period, Osundare (1983), seems to have written the manifesto of the poets of that era, an era that has now come to be referred to as that of the second-generation writers in Nigerian letters, when he says that for them poetry is not "an esoteric whisper ... [but] man meaning to man" (p. 3).

The question of poetry as a medium to communicate with the ordinary man and to thereby mobilise him for the political action that would birth his total freedom is integral in the understanding of the earlier poetry of Ofeimun as encapsulated in *The Poet Lied* and *A Handle for the Flutist*. In these two collections, the poet tackles the difficult challenges that post-independent Nigeria has had to contend with; and this is largely the problem of poor, or even, failed leadership, which Achebe (1983), in his political treatise, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, says is at the root of the country's enduring problems. In engaging his objective of being the mouthpiece of the working people in his poetry, the poet navigates nearly all aspects of the lives of the people and captures for his readers a political and social clime where state actors have acted in ways that impede the full realisation of the people's collective potential.

Methodology and Scope

Ofeimun's first two collections have received quite some scholarly attention as can be glimpsed in Aiyejina (1983, 1988), Amuta (1989), Ebeogu (1983), and Garuba (1988). This contribution is, therefore, an exploration of the later collections with a view to show that the poet has remained consistent in his poetic *ouvre* in a career that has spanned more than forty years. He has used his poetry to enlighten the people to their parlous situation at the hands of their leaders and to thereby nudge them into standing up in resistance to their oppressors. This is against the backdrop of the poet's stated mission in the Prologue to *The Poet Lied*:

> ... I must tell my story
> to nudge and awaken them
> that sleep
> among my people (p. 1).

For the poet, poetry is the story of the people told to them to raise their awareness to the precarious position they occupy in their society. It is not for him private musings meant to amuse and entertain a placid audience. In other words, Ofeimun is of the conviction that poetry must be a weapon to inspire the people to erect walls of defence for themselves if they truly aspire to be free of kleptomania leaders. Another aspect of his preoccupation that is essential to point out is the communal ethos of the poetry. Like the bard in traditional African societies, Ofeimun's objective is to tell the people's story to them:

> I have come down
> to tell my story
> by the same fireside
> around which
> my people are gathered. (*The Poet Lied*, p. 1)

In essence, the persona in his poetry is the inheritor of an age-long tradition of the bards wherein stories are told to inspire the people and prepare them for communal action. The point made here is that the persona in Ofeimun's poetry is a mobiliser who raises the consciousness of the people to see their true place in society and nudges them into raising questions about their leaders. Chukwueloka (2012) affirms this bard image of Ofeimun when he posits that the poet:

> ...sees himself as some kind of griot who has a message for his people and he perceives his audience as the same kind of audience in the African story-telling tradition, where folk gather around the fireside to listen to older ones telling adventurous stories of the past. (pp. 28-29)

This study engages with selected poems from a few collections, given the limitations of space. The focus is on *I Will Ask Questions with Stones if They Take My Voice*, *Dreams at Work and Other Poems*, and *Go Tell the General and Other Poems*, hereafter referred to as *I Will Ask*, *Dreams*, and *General*.

Theory and Literature

The Marxist theory is adopted for this study as it apprehends literature from the perspective of its relevance in enhancing the quality of life for the working people in society. Marxist critics, as Austin (1994) puts it,

> ... [r]eject the characterization of literary texts as complete units that contain within themselves all the information necessary for critical interpretation. Instead, they see literature as something shaped by historical and economic forces – something that, when carefully scrutinized, will yield valuable information about the context in which it was produced. (p. 199)

In other words, to understand the contents of a literary text, the critic must investigate the social milieu from which it ensued. As Plekhanov (1973) puts it, "... the mentality of an age is ... always conditioned by that age's social relations;" and he goes on to posit that "[t]his is nowhere quite as evident as in the history of art and literature" (quoted in Jameson (1973), p. x). In essence, art and literature have remained the turf where relations between the ruling and working classes are interrogated.

Darah (1986), in his investigation of the economic factor in Urhobo panegyrics, says that "Marxist criticism recognizes the primacy of the sociality of every artistic endeavour and insists that the evaluation of any artistic work be guided by a knowledge of the human world that conditions the production and reception of that work" (p. 178). This view further situates for these writers the fact that the Marxist theory has as its central focus the social relations that birth a literary work.

Eagleton (2008) argues that any theory addressing human meaning, values, language, emotions, and experience inevitably engages with fundamental beliefs about individuals and societies, including issues of power, sexuality, interpretations of history, understandings of the present, and visions for the future.

In the poetry of Ofeimun contained in the publications for this study, the reader is confronted with a landscape wherein true human development is abandoned by the leaders in pursuit of primordial interests.

The condition that prompted Ofeimun to write the way he does, according to Aiyejina (1988), is largely the betrayal of the expectations and hopes of independence. He believes the poet, being of the generation that witnessed the attainment of self-rule and the promise that came with it, could not, "like any sensitive member of that generation," come to terms with the betrayal of that promise of greatness by the ruling class (p. 33). If the political class had derailed that initial promise, the monumental failure that the intervention of the military turned out to be became even more debilitating for all Nigerians who genuinely believed in the human and material potentials of the country.

Like the committed artist that he is, Ofeimun has drawn quite substantial attention to his art. Okome (2012), for instance, tells the readers of Ofeimun's poetry that the poet "... demonstrates clearly and unequivocally what he considers good literature. It is the literature that answers to the wishes and will of the people on whose behest it was written in the first place" (p. 2). And he goes on to define 'the people' "as those who live at the bottom of the street that is the people who live in the debility that is crushingly postcolonial (sic)" (p. 2). This shows clearly that the poet writes of the pains and the agony that the ordinary people experience in their daily lives; a life that is crushingly excruciating in all its aspects.

With particular reference to his poetry for dance drama, Uwatt (2012) posits that the collections "are united by their pan-Africanist resistant struggle of not only against ethnic fractions in competitive interactions, but also against external European forces that delayed the evolution of African democracies" (p. 97). In essence, Ofeimun, as a poet, does not only deal with current issues as they affect his country and the African continent, he goes further to show the roots of those problems. In the collections that Uwatt refers to, the poet tells of the journey of Africa and its peoples from pre-colonial times to the present, the heroic engagements of the people with the external forces that for centuries denied the people their humanity; they, more importantly, serve as reminders to all Africans the need to avoid the pitfalls of the past.

Ebeogu (1983) says Ofeimun believes that the committed writer and their art are geared towards interrogating the social and political conditions of their society. He puts it thus:

> The poet is a member of a particular society whose fortunes and misfortunes he cannot remain indifferent to. And the major praxis for determining the fortunes or misfortunes of such a society is the social condition of its citizens, a situation which, to a large extent, is determined by the political climate of the nation. Odia Ofeimun's peotry (sic) is a porter of an unevible (sic) burden: the burden of a sickening political situation and debilitating social order. (p. 83)

The scholar aptly captures the concerns of the poet in his creative engagement. Ofeimun's poetry inevitably forays into the social and political landscapes of his society to make manifest the conditions of the people; and what comes forcefully across is a gory image of a people held hostage by a leadership that lacks any sense of humanity. The political landscape, to borrow from Omobowale (2005), is manned by "very corrupt, oppressive and dictatorial leaders" (p. 115) who have failed to provide a meaningful direction for the people.

Afaha (2012) points out that as a writer, "Ofeimun is concerned with the palpable disjunctions and anomy in the Nigerian system and his firm belief that if

genuine social transformation policies and mindset are pursued, there is hope for long-range optimism" (p. 73). He adds that the writer "... transcends mere criticism by offering solutions" (p. 73) to the problems that bedevil his society. Afaha's position, to a large extent, echoes Garuba's (1988) which is anchored on the fact that Ofeimun's career is dictated by an innate quest to contribute to mobilising the people to rise up to wrest their country from the path of doom that its rulers have set it. For the poet, as the scholar shows, it is not just enough to draw attention to the debilitating effects of poor leadership and the attendant consequences, he goes further to advance ways in which the people can overcome their lot. Hence he says: "[t]he entire corpus of Ofeimun's poetry never moves far away from this intense awareness of decadence [in his society] and a seething animal passion defines his commitment to eradicating it" (Garuba, 1988, p. 271).

Ofeimun's Thematic Focus in His Later Poetry

Following from the assessment of an appreciable volume of the scholarship on his poetry, Ofeimun is a fervent student of his society. In other words, his poetry is informed by the developments around him; amongst these are oppression, kleptomania, leadership devoid of empathy, and lack of attention to public infrastructure. This has been the direction of his creativity as a poet from the beginning. An examination of some of the poems contained in his later collections will confirm that this position has not changed. In the opening poem of *Generals* entitled "A Welcome", for instance, the reader is confronted with the betrayal of a people's trust that defined the incursion of the military into governance in Nigeria. The persona in the poem shows the frustration of a people who came in enthusiasm to welcome a self-imposed leadership with hope and a high level of expectation; but not long after, the welcome is turned to ashes in the mouth of the people as not much changes in their lives.

The people's initial welcome is informed by the experience they had at the hands of the leaders that the newcomers have come to replace, but soon they find that nothing has changed. The persona laments their situation; he cannot help but recall the initial expectations that drove the people to celebrate in welcoming the generals. He recalls:

> 'We welcome you, General', we marched.
> Through the chatter of weaverbirds
> converging where hope, in imperfect supply,
> put an auctioneer's label
>
> upon truths we all swore by[.]

\- Ofeimun, *Generals, (p. 2)*

As the persona says, the hope, upon which their welcome was initially derived, is "in imperfect supply" because the people apparently had doubts as to how things would turn out. A prominent poetic device deployed in this extract is the epithet – "an adjective or adjectival phrase used to describe a distinctive quality of a person or thing" (Abram & Harpham 2012, p. 113), and this is common with Ofeimun. In this regard, the reader finds 'imperfect supply,' 'happy crowds,' 'scrambled decade,' and 'retrenched

workers.' These situate for the readers the various moods and situation of things that the persona wishes to convey; and these include pain, deprivation, false hope, among others.

The message that the reader gets from the excerpt is that even at the point of the entrance of the generals who came in the flurry of the people's disenchantment with the old order, there was already a palpable sense of the cavalier in the carriage of the self-acclaimed reformers. Theirs was more of showmanship and the razzmatazz than any real sense of purpose and commitment to true change. There had been a lot of negative developments that left the people disenchanted with the system, and they had hoped these would be put right by the newcomers. It is the betrayal of that hope that leaves the persona deflated. Nothing has apparently changed.

The people "...line the routes of passing tanks/with flag-waving kindergarten on forced holidays" to welcome "...Generals with garrulous vowels" (Ofeimun, *Generals* p. 2). This underscores the fact that the clime painted by the persona in the poem is one in which nothing gets done and where the people are driven to a point of desperation. In spite of their deprivation and denial of their right to a decent education, the infants of kindergarten age, who apparently are forced out of school, are made to line the streets in welcome of these self-imposed generals who are high on rhetoric but short on action. The list of the empty promises of the generals is:

> longer than queues baiting essential commodities
> in a graffiti of anger and anguish
> stretching from food stalls to bus stops
> from sea-swelling Delta to Sahel-stricken Yobe.
>
> \- Ofeimun, *Generals*, (p. 2)

The reader is presented with the pervasive nature of the deprivation under which the people live. The persona captures the sordidness of the history of the Nigerian peoples; a history that is characterised by periodic non-availability of the essentials of life. This has often led to the people being made to queue for those basic needs when they are made scantily available; and no corner of the Nigerian nation is spared from the effects of these parlous conditions and this is effectively shown by the deployment of the epithet, essential commodity.

In "Children of the Creeks" (Ofeimun, *Generals*, p. 25), the persona shows the oppression of the people that appears to be the policy of state for those in power. The position expressed by the persona in the poem can be surmised to be that the leadership in the Nigerian political landscape is more interested in the resources that lie beneath the land of the people than in the good and survival of the people. The persona, appalled by the inhumanity that drives man's greed for profit, presents the dilemma that the prospecting of oil has become for the Nigerian people in the Niger Delta region of the country. That dilemma is borne out of the fact that whereas the profits from oil have made men and women of power and their acolytes become stupendously rich, it has become more of a curse to the proletariats in the region as its prospecting has nearly irretrievably destroyed their environment. That is why now "they prayed for the old days / of timber and palm oil / to return to the mangroves" (Ofeimun, *Generals*, p. 25). It can be inferred that those were days when the people could source their means of livelihood with their environment preserved.

As a result of the devastation that the location and prospection of crude oil has brought to their communities, the people cannot but wonder about their plight, especially as it has led to a mindless pillage by a vampire state. Now:

> The children of the creeks
> sought distance
>
> from an age of braziers
> What deity, they asked,
> weighs down the shoulders
> of devotees so irremediably
> with blessings that crush!

\- Ofeimun, *Generals*, (p. 25)

This "age of braziers" has left nothing but agony and blight, bordering on annihilation, in its wake and a sour taste in the mouth for the people. They cannot understand how it has come to be that what was meant to be a blessing has become a curse that is threatening to consume them all. What the deity chose to bless the people with has been turned by 'human deities' into something that "weighs down the shoulders/of devotees so irremediably." In essence, the burden that the people are forced to bear is man-made. The devotees of a deity are normally expected to enjoy the benefits of their devotedness and belief in the deity, but in this case, the devotees are blessed with a burden they cannot bear anymore.

Apparently, this was not originally meant to be the case. The persona is left baffled by the unfeeling nature of the human deities, the political leadership, that forcefully extract devotion from the people without a corresponding or reciprocal protection of their interests. These human deities wish to keep the people silent and compliant. While in the drive for profit and the good life, they destroy the people's life and heritage in a mindless fashion. The rhetorical questions the poet-persona poses, therefore, are meant to draw attention to the absurdities of the situation and to underscore the fact that the expectation to have the other-cheek-turning people amongst a deprived lot, despite their precarious situation, is a forlorn one. The working people must, under such absurd situation, raise their voices in defiance of the extant order with the expectation to exact their humanity. It is because of this that Bello (2024) suggests that Ofeimun is "a poet who promotes revolutionary action or a poet of combat who seeks fundamental and radical transformation of his society through the people's collective action" (p. 1).

The persona in the poem draws attention to the devastation in the environment that the people live in. The devastation and the degradation are such that famine stares the people in the face as their "... crops are pulped/to mud and black kaolin/by ill-will, ill-done" (Ofeimun, *Generals*, p. 25). The reader is now made manifestly aware that the plight the people face is man-made. What is not of immediate profit to the predators in their drive for pecuniary gains, no matter its usefulness to the people, is destroyed. Thus their crops are "pulped to mud" and to "black kaolin;" these are indicative of human action as they come about "by ill-will, ill-done." In this kind of coordinated plundering, the reader of the poem can imagine "[w]hat forbearance/the earth demands of those" (Ofeimun, *Generals*, p. 25) who have been so mindlessly denied of their right to a decent existence.

In the poem's last stanza, the poet-persona captures, in a chilling tone, the pain and deprivation of the people. The profiteers from the resources in the delta region of the country do not have any stop gap measures to safeguard the people and their environment. It is no wonder then that because of the bone-chilling methods deployed by the oil prospectors and their collaborators who wield state powers:

> The children of the creeks
> yelled in searing electrodes;
> as evergreen trees roasted
> in the haggle of loot-sharers
> who stalked the Delta
> for the very last overcoming
> of the Lower Niger.
>
> - Ofeimun, *Generals*, (p. 25)

This shows that life in the Niger Delta is precarious as the people suffer from the effects of prospecting oil with no one caring about the agony they bear. Worse still, the agents of the state in the area wield their guns in torment of the people rather than in their defence. It is because of this noxious and atrocious state that one can understand Maier's (2008) position that the people of the Niger Delta have over the years:

> ...received much of the harm but few of the benefits ... oil had to offer. Poverty is endemic in ... the Niger delta as a whole. Education and health facilities are primitive at best, and a few ... homes enjoy the most basic services, such as electricity and running water. (p. 80)

The tragedy in the region that is the setting of the poem is all encompassing. Nothing is spared and the people are faced with a mindless plunder of the environment and the destruction of human life. As a result of this searing situation, the people are left groaning "as evergreen trees roasted/in the haggle of loot-sharers/who stalked the Delta" are what welcome one to the region. The roasting evergreen trees are a reference to both the destruction of the physical environment and a metaphorical reference to the frequent killings of the youths of the region in their prime, ostensibly to serve as a deterrent to the people never to question the activities of the "loot-sharers" that transverse the region in arms purchased from the proceeds of the people's resources. There is also the historical allusion to the persecution of the oil protectorates in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In the view of the poet-persona, that high-handedness of the colonial years to control the palm oil trade is what has continued to play out in the Niger Delta, but this time, to make oil proceeds available at whatever cost in human lives.

In *Dreams*, the poet engages variegated issues confronting the people, thereby serving as a voice to raise the consciousness of the downtrodden to their situation. The title poem, "Dreams at Work," is dedicated to the Nigerian literary icon, Wole Soyinka, and the poem which runs through 13 pages is divided into 10 sections with each dealing with a different aspect of the people's life. For instance, in the last section of the poem entitled "let them BE MAD" (sic) (Ofeimun, *Dreams*, p. 14), the poet-persona pours vituperation on "... the councils harried by love of booty" (p. 14) who are the architects

of the problems that the people are confronted with in their daily lives. In this specific instance, the persona is bitter at the misery that is the lot of the deprived segment of the populace.

The poem which comes in the form of an apostrophe, that is, "a direct and explicit address either to an absent person or to an abstract or nonhuman entity" (Abrams & Harpham 2012, p. 345), is arguably addressed to Soyinka at the time he headed the Federal Road Safety Commission. The persona of the poem is embittered by the needless deaths on the roads. These deaths from road accidents happen more as a result of the deplorable state of the roads rather than from human errors on the part of the motorists. The poet-persona's anger arises from the fact that the poor state of the roads is consequent of their being poorly executed and maintained because those saddled with building and maintaining them have pilfered the funds that could have run them. The poem opens with a prayer which ironically is a curse:

> to pray for you now in this hour!
> as victims of the road are ferried to your door,
> let there be an ambulance too for our country
> and for the councils harried by love of booty
> let roads to damnation unwind
> against the negritude of the vultures
> ever ready to converge on the dungheap.
>
> - Ofeimun, *Dreams*, (p. 14)

The poet-persona speaks in a metaphoric sense in the first line of the extract. The addressee of the poem is obviously helpless as his mandate does not include building and maintaining roads. As a road marshal, he must necessarily deal with the victims of the road. The persona of the poem realising his predicament, therefore, has taken on the position of his advocate. The poet obviously wants to see a situation where the people's consciousness is raised to a level where they can stand up to confront the aridity that the actions of these "vultures" portend for them. That is the only way they can enjoy true freedom.

He prays that a harsher fate than the victims' shall be the lot of these mindless lot responsible for the ugly situation. They have an uncommon "love of booty," hence that is what their councils are about – loot sharing. It is no wonder then that they are a "negritude of the vultures" who are constantly circling around carcass, their loot. The metaphor of the "negritude of ... vultures" is especially striking as it conveys the fact that like the proponents of the negritude movement whose major driving force was the celebration of the beauty of Africa and its people, so these "vultures" are driven by the greed to amass wealth even at the expense of their fellow Africans. Whereas the former were driven by positive ideals, the latter are driven by negative predatory objectives, hence the predatory terms by which they are clothed.

Furthermore, the poet-persona makes an appeal: "let someone raise the cry of buffalos / on rampage against the burning of forests" (*Dreams*, p. 14). This call is meant to mobilise the people to, like buffalos would in a band charge at anything that threatens their natural habitation and their existence, rise in unison against the predatory agents whose aim is to scorch them to death "when the mangled body of the next victim/drapes

the earth in the turnkey rites / of the last contract to end contracts" (*Dreams*, p. 14). For the persona, the needless deaths of hapless commuters on the roads that are badly built and poorly maintained by the ruling class should serve as a spur to bind the people together in resistance to this greedy lot. These state actors are so brazenly corrupt and do not see themselves accountable to anyone. They believe they have "the freedom that beggars all responsibility/to citizen, market and the state" (*Dreams*, p. 14).

The reader is informed in the last two stanzas of the poem of the real reason the roads, and by extension, the entire country, are in the deplorable state. This is where the curse that had begun in the ironic guise of a prayer and which runs through the entire poem becomes loudest. The poet-persona deploys parable in "O to pray for you in this hour! / as roads are turned back on themselves / - snakes in search of their own tails;" so will the activities of those responsible for the plight of the people turn back to haunt them. The reason for the mess is because "... tithes to warlord and mandarin/save the consciences of roadbuilders/who have modelled potholes in the dark" (*Dreams*, p. 14) to derail the people's progress. In other words, payments to powerful state officials and warlords who fought no real war but have merely seized apparatuses of state, have given contractors the confidence to design and build wobbly infrastructure that give way at the slightest test. In essence, the funds that would ordinarily have been deployed to build enduring public structures have found their way into private pockets that those who are saddled with erecting these structures have no other option but to deliver infrastructure, if they deliver at all, that will be a threat to the people.

The poet-persona concludes with a prayer that is meant to uplift the people and give them hope:

> O let there always be those
> who call the guilty by their names
> when goodwill hides the loaded finger
> when the whispered accusation absolves plagues.
>
> \- *Dreams*, (p. 14)

This is the final resolution in the poem; the objective is a celebration of those who have the courage to call to order the invaders of truth and purveyors of pain. They are the ones who have the capacity to "... call the guilty by their names" because they live above the common fear that the people have of wielders of transient power; and it is because of their presence in the society that it is true "... that even where the sky is dark victory can still be snatched from the jaws of cannibal polluters" who are out to wreck society aground (Bassey n.d, p. xxi). Besides, they have the courage of "... being able to speak the words of truth to their oppressors" (Fanon 1964, p. 102) that the poet-persona refers to them as "hordes of abiku." This is both an intertextual and metaphorical reference. Intertextuality:

> ...is used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts ... (Abrams & Harpham 2012, p. 401).

Simply put, intertextuality links writers, with a later author drawing on an earlier writer's work to support or strengthen an argument.

In the context of the preceding exposition, therefore, the poet-persona's reference to "hordes of abiku" relates to Soyinka's poem entitled "Abiku." This opinion is anchored on the fact that the Soyinka persona in the poem is that who celebrates the stubborn resistance of the *abiku* to being denied his right to exist, even if it is at the pain of the parents. *Abiku,* in Yoruba mythology, is the child that enjoys the repeated circle of birth and death. So, like the *abiku* in Soyinka's (1963) poem who boasts that "In vain your bangles cast/Charmed circles at my feet" and defiantly announces: "I am Abiku, calling for the first/And the repeated time" (p. 118), the persona in the Ofeimun poem celebrates "the hordes of abiku" that defy and question those who clog society's wheel of progress when the rest of the people, out of fear, "... turn lizards nodding yes to escape terror." In the poet-persona's invocation:

> let there always be hordes of abiku, ready
> to break the circle of fetish towards uproar
> and please let them be mad
> if we, we are too sane to be counted.
>
> - *Dreams*, (p. 14)

In many of the poems in these collections that are the focus of this study, the reader is confronted with the pains and the squalor that are the daily experiences of the people. What is also manifestly shown is the infrastructural decay that abounds in the nation's cities that are suffused "in nameless waters and cement jungles/and pot-holed streets weighted with garbage/and the sinuous haggle of daily marketeers" (Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 8) whose interest is in self-preservation. Those who wield power profit from and deploy it as a tool for the deprivation of the downtrodden. In this situation, the ordinary people are "stretched pleadingly towards the law-mighty" who wear "epaulettes glinting with a merry stamp" (*London Letter*, p. 5) and they spare no thought for the people in their plight. Members of the ruling class in the Nigerian political terrain are presented as a band of humans whose sole objective is to forcefully acquire the people's land so they can build for themselves edifices "where cattle may be ranched / and limousines brace / the lustre of flashy skyscrapers" (*London Letters*, p. 5). In essence, state policies are designed to assuage the ego of those who have access to power.

Ofeimun believes the people must not abandon themselves in helpless submission to those in power and lament their situation. He lets the people know that their freedom can only come if they unite to challenge those who clog their march to a decent life. According to the poet-persona, the people should stand up to rescue themselves and change their pitiable lot for the better. He tells the people in "Scandal" (Ofeimun, *I will ask*, p. 16):

> Forget the days
> and forget the nights
> forget the pains in the eyes of those you love
> if you have no will to train your anger
> to a skill that re-invents tomorrow.
>
> - Ofeimun, *I will ask*, (p. 16)

What the poet-persona preaches here is that if they truly wish to have a future they can be proud of, they must re-invent themselves and let their anger at the system that deny them their humanity be the spur that would birth the action that would lead to their freedom. The point is that the people's destiny lies in their own hands. Elsewhere, the Ofeimun persona encourages the people to take decisive and violent action against their oppressors for therein lies their healing and freedom. After all, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972) argues, "[v]iolence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man" (p. 28). To this end, the poet-persona in "Sink Their Ship" (*Generals*, p. 26) admonishes the people to respond in kind to the violence that the oppressor class unleashes on them. He says, "If they hang your dog/ kill their cow," and further, "If they bring down your plane/sink their ship." For the poet-persona, this reciprocal action of the people is "...the way to teach the strong / to climb from beast to person-hood" as it will humanise them to think more rationally. It is apparent then that for the people to experience true liberation, they must not shy away from responding in kind to the brutality that is visited on them by the ruling class.

Conclusion

Odia Ofeimun's poetry interrogates and seeks to right the parlous social and political conditions of his society. His poetry is consistent with the tradition of resistance writing, the kind of writing that positions the writer as a social critic and which also captures the relation between the writer and his society, between the writer and his commitment to social improvements since he regards his art as a social responsibility. Thus, the writer positions himself as the voice of the people in the light of traditional African artistes whose materials are no one's privileged possession but a shared experience and bound in a communal knowledge. The difference, however, is that despite this awareness, people, out of fear, refuse to act – what Odili, the narrator in *A Man of the People*, terms "primitive loyalty" (Achebe 1966, p. 7). So, the poet sees his function as one who awakens, who inspires, and as a compelling force to propel the people to action, to neutralise the primitive or tribal allegiance because it is only when the people are able to rise above these limitations that they can 're-invent tomorrow' (*I will ask*, p. 16). In other words, the people have the power to determine their destiny and the writer is there to nudge them in the right direction. Even then, the poet is not blind to art in his poetry as it has been shown; he deploys such art forms as metaphor, epithets, irony, and intertextuality in realising his objective.

The study has also pointed out that although Ofeimun's poetry cuts across two periods in Nigerian poetry, he has maintained his commitment to poetry of resistance to bad leadership. It has thus been shown in the study that Ofeimun's poetry has remained consistent in riling against the betrayal of hope by the elites. He has demonstrated that the people have been unable to reach their expectations after independence. Rather, they are faced with disappointment, disillusionment, frustration, hopelessness, poverty, and oppression. It was also shown that the people's condition did not change under military dictatorship because, again, there is deprivation and denial of their rights, even though the military had anchored their entrance into political leadership under the mantra of change. Therefore, Ofeimun's poetry does not merely chart history; he interrogates, challenges, and proffers solution to the myriad of problems facing the people. For the

poet, the people must be united in confronting the architects of the parlous situation that they find themselves in.

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