WRITING DISENCHANTMENT: HARNESSING SOCIAL CONCERNS IN THE POETRY OF JARED ANGIRA

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Abstract

Socio-political consciousness of literature in African society is an inevitable phenomenon which has remained an enduring, even necessary motif in African poetry. Murky politics of post-independent African countries has constantly provoked contemporary African poets to outrage and to near-fatalistic vision of history of their respective countries usually rendered in acerbic tone in their poetry. As may therefore be imagined, the discussion of social issues in African poetry is often graphic and accusatory.

Jared Angira is a politically-committed poet whose radical ideological position is explicit in his poetry collections: *Juices (1970), Silent voices (1972), Soft Corals (1973), Cascades (1979)* and *The Years Go By (1980). F*or Angira, social concern is not optional: it is the very basis of his work, and he has brought a marxist-oriented class analysis of society to bear upon his writing. In doing this, Angira conformed to Louis Althusser's notion of art as being '"to make us see', and what it allows us to see, what it forces us to see, is 'the ideology from which it is born'" (Bennet and Royle, 132).

Consequently, in Angira's poetry social issues are not perceived as being the result of chance and circumstance, rather, they are seen as emerging from clearly discernible socio-political and economic factors whose workings could be subjected to detailed scrutiny and rigorous analysis.

This paper examines how Jared Angira has entrenched social concerns in his poetry for the purpose of proffering solutions to the perceived social and political problems in Kenya.

Keywords: Disenchantment, Harnessing, Social concerns, Writing

Introduction

That African writers from South Africa to the North Africa and from West Africa, East Africa to the Central Africa, have struggled with the issues of social concerns since independence is incontrovertible, while the major social concerns have focused on political and economic imperatives, wars, religious differences and Aids pandemics have often poised significant challenges to daily existence in Africa.

The language of African poetry over the last decades has thrown up fierceness, passion, originality and vitality which is lacking from much of recent Western poetry (Moore, 1998). Indeed, it is rare to encounter a commentary on African poetry that ignores social concern in its thematic preoccupation, this underscores T.S Eliot's submission, that poetry has the ability to communicate "some new experiences or some fresh understanding of the familiar or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility (1957).

Jared Angira typifies a vibrant voice in the literary corpus of East Africa. In his five collections of poetry: *Juices* (1970) *Silent Voices* (1972) *Soft Corals* (1973) *Cascades* (1979)

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and *the Years Go By* (1980), Angira's voice has been fiercely established as one of the most critical voices imbued with artistic vision in Kenya 'It is in the conscious use of irony that Angira is distinct from other East African Poets. While Okot P' Bitek uses a single personal in each of his poetry collections, Angira uses varied ironic characters in his poems. Richard Ntiru also uses irony in some of his poems but not as pervasively or effectively as Angira. Compared with Okello Oculi, Angira's scope is wider and deeper' (Ezenwa – Ohaeto, 87).

For Angira who represents generation of African post – independent poets in the moulds of Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare who are disillusioned with political failure, economic cesspool and corruption among government functionaries in post-independent Africa. Angira's poetry takes from the historical processes of the past and the present to construct the future. He criticizes corruption, oppression and social inequality in Kenyan society with its attendant impoverishment of the masses .The increasing ambivalence and decline in corporate social responsibility by Kenyan government to its citizenry as identified in the poetry of Angira, relentlessly calls to mind the intersection of poetry and politics as grounded in the interrogation of "when the internal subjectivized ambivalence is confronted by the sociopolitical, seemingly 'objectivized' ambivalence" (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, 13-32), as abundantly demonstrated in Wole Soyinka's *A Shuttle in the Crypt* , which sufficiently interrogates dimensions of human experiences when poetry intersects politics. This intersection is further explained in the words of Reed Way Dasenbrock, in his essay: *Poetry and Politics:*

> *Today most critics and theorists hold that the connection*
> *Between poetry and politics is not limited just to situations in*
> *Which poets become politically involved in an explicit way, but*
> *Instead all cultural expression is related to the social and political context*
> *- whether implicitly or explicitly- in which it is produced….All poetry is*
> *Political in one way or another, since even the choice to eschew explicit*
> *Political involvement or reference constitutes a form of political action*
> *(or perhaps more precisely inaction)(51).*

In Angira's poetry, this intersection is discernible, and constitutes a vibrant motif and convenient locale for articulating the suffering of the masses, towards mobilizing them to confront their oppresssors. The intersection typifies a paradigm for search of a form of expression that will significantly articulate the aspirations of the downtrodden Kenyans in their quest for liberation.

This essay is preoccupied with the evaluation of the depth of social concerns in the poetry of Jared Angira, and an examination of how Angira in the selected poems have used poetry as a mode of discourse with which he delineates the socio-political malaise of corruption, abuse of power, poverty, hunger and oppression in Kenya, while remaining committed to his calling as a literary artist.

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Jared Angira in *"obligato to from public gallery"* expresses a deep seated disillusionment with democratic posturing of the government. The distilled Anger of the masses at the corrupt members of the political parties who are termed Zombies are brought to the open. The main thrust of the poem is that it captures so compellingly the unquenchable desire of the masses for a better welfare condition, which demands unequivocally, that the government should rise up to its primary responsibilities of providing basic human needs, foods to the public, so as to maintain continuity of life:

The public now wants bread
At least to breed tomorrow
The public now wants rice
At least to rise tomorrow
(Cascades, 88)

Angira's exposure of the deceit and manipulation of the masses by the politicians in *'Obligato from public gallery',* resonates Chinua Achebe's seminal article "The Novelist as teacher" where he articulates African writers artistic obligation to his society, which is primarily to enlighten the society and bring it to self – awareness and knowledge regarding what needs to be done as to move such society forward.

In *"Out patience, the Diagnosis"* Angira clinically evaluates the social disparity between the poor and the rich. Images of pain and suffering is juxtaposed against the image of affluence and opulence .Two patients in the hospital are complaining, the poor yawns for lack of food the rich one yawns for over-feeding. Images such as constipation, out patience, diagnosis, lying in bed, disagreeable stench of the mouth, and nursing a heavy hangover, provide the signifiers of social disparity between the rich and the poor. This disparity is further pursued in the poem, with the comparison of he types of laughter produced by both the rich and poor patients.

One laughter is madness
The other for suffering
(Cascades 100)

The issues of artistic commitment to the uplifting of their societies constitute a recurrent phenomenon in the works of African poets. Social and artistic commitment is discernible and constitutes a common strand in Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths.* Wole Soyinka's *A shuttle in the crypt;* Odia Ofeimun's *The poet lied*, Niyi Osundare's *A nib in the pond* and *village voices*, Okot P' Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, Taban Lo Liyong's *Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs* and Tanure Ojaide's *labyrinths of the Delta.* In these poems, the recurrent thematic preoccupation is grounded in how the artist can transform their societies. In the poems there is always a future orientation in the social vision, even though, as in Soyinka's *A shuttle in the crypt* and Okigbo's *labyrinths,* that vision may not always be an optimistic one. (Aderemi Bamikunle, 75). Angira's artistic commitment in his poetry is reverberated by his dissatisfaction with the social inequality, crass materialism engaged in, by the Kenyan politicians and the despoliation of the masses by the ruling elite in Kenya.

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The nature of poetry as an art form which earn its effect largely by indirect means, affords Angira the needed platform to speak with passionate angry tones which defy conventions of restrained art, to significantly address social issues in Kenya in its immediacy.

This is characteristic of the entrenched thematic- preoccupations of poverty; corruption; ethnic crisis; unemployment and political oppression in post- independent poetry in Africa as sufficiently grounded in the poetry of Jared Angira, Syl Cheney Coker, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide , and Femi Osofisan ' who ranged on the side of the underprivileged and tended to concern themselves more with socio-economic issues rather than culture, which formed the major preoccupation of the earlier generation of Soyinka, J.P Clark, Kofi Awoonor, and Lenrie Peters. These " new " poets also expressed more of class conflict as they relied more on African oral traditional techniques rather than the modernists in their expression of the current African reality. Thus Africa's history and politics are connected' (Tanure, Ojaide, 13). These poets in their works constantly strive to expose injustice and social inequality as perpetrated by African leaders.

"On market day at Ugunja" Angira deplores verbal irony significantly to juxtapose a peaceful market scene and disturbing dangerous weapons under the fig tree;

It may be peacetime we know
But under the fig tree
Are clubs and shields
Ropes for our bulls
Axes and jembes for our farms
and all for
nation building. (Juices, p.21)

Dangerous weapons and nation building are two irreconcilable divides in the poem and one does not think of a nation building, while amassing weapons of destruction like: clubs, shields, ropes, axes and jembes (cutlasses) at the same time. The poem makes mockery of the peace effort by some countries in Africa who are having internal strife, but still busy acquiring arsenals of war. It is sad to note that while the leaders of such African countries are busy moving from one country to the other in search of an elusive peace and reconciliation, they are also busy amassing instruments of warfare, squandering the scarce resources that could be used to take adequate care of their citizens in the area of health care, education and provision of the much needed agricultural produce. Angira's robust use of verbal irony in this poem and his other poems has significantly corrected the hasty misreading of his poetry by Adrian Roscoe, Angus Calder and Abdul Yesufu who earlier on unanimously believed that, although Angira has successfully enlarged the readers consciousness through his thematic concerns, but have not examined his artistic use of irony. Adrian Roscoe though, acknowledges that 'good clear imagery, a gift for compression, lyrical delicacy' (Roscoe, 94) are among Angira's achievements. Angira has been described by Angus Calder, as an

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alert, witty writer (Calder, 37). While Abdul Yesufu also regards Angira's poetry as, 'an acutely ideologized' body of works (Yesufu,327). This essay however agrees with Ezenwa – Ohaeto's remarkable observation that, Angira is one of the most exciting poets in Africa and his achievement lies in his utilization of irony to explore the social realities of his country, Kenya (Ezenwa- Ohaeto, 87).

Jared Angira's poetry represents an interstice between history and artistic creation which mutually constitute the modes of perception and portrayal of human experience in Kenya. His poetry is focally concerned with the representation of human experiences through phenomenistic weaving together of these experiences in symbol, irony, myth, legend, imagery, anecdotes, metaphor and other figures of poetry. In this way, Angira takes his exploration of the Kenyan socio-political and economic landscape beyond the limits of factuality in to the limitless realm of the imagination. His focus dwells between emotions and imagination. Through his poetry, Angira has been able to portray the tortured landscape of the frustrated, disillusioned and despairing Kenyans in need of a succor.

In *Your Homecoming,* Angira condemns an education and knowledge that is not constructively useful to the needs of the society. Angira's condemnation is hidden in the persona's voice: 'every time you come /I see you less of us /and more of a guest' the persona further interrogates the alienation which more acquisition of education further manifests, "this homecoming was odd/you still dream of reading more books." The persona is not primarily against the acquisition of knowledge , but such education must conform to the culture and embrace the intrinsic values inherent in the communal development. This anti-cultural norm has its signification in the poem:

Then read all the books of the world
One day you'll find
The length of the night
The fur of the sheep
One day you'll find
Thunder's dwellings (Juices. 49)

The poem cast an aspersion on the negative aspect of western education, which does not recognize the application of western education to the cultural ethos of African community, and which tends to subvert the traditional essence of African cultural practices as inferior to the Western culture. However, the persona also predicts that such knowledge will soon find its destruction "one day you'll find thunder's dwelling". This implies that the searcher is bound to get in to a cultural conflict when a cultural norm is transgressed which will in turn attracts a severe penalty. Whatever could have informed the reason for the persona's comment on western education, we were not told in the poem but there is a striking difference between the primarily individualistic, parochial and often exploitative quality of western education and traditional African perception of the narrow use of such education by the individual involved, to achieve exploitative and manipulative tendencies as exhibited by the government political functionaries in some

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African nations. Some of these who are highly educated but turned out to be oppressors of their people in their respective countries.

In *the years go by,* there is a presentation of a typical African society, where the appropriation of the resources of the people by the rulers is done effortlessly, when it does not attract a compelling risk. Here, Angira condemns the exploitation of people and resources of their countries. The wealth of the people is stolen at will by the "Caesars" of the land while the people are overlooked, neglected and left in their abject poverty.

But when Caesar begets vices
Vices unto the poor are given
When Caesar's of the land
Bring forth poverty and decay
Unto man are these passed. (The Years Go By. 3)

In this poem, Angira emphasize that 'Caesars' should not only be demanding endlessly the harvest of wealth of their lands, but they should also be ready to bear the full wrath of the consequences of their actions, when it triggers pestilences:

What is good
Is everyone's desire
What is bad
Belongs to nobody
When misery sings
Who dances the tango?
(The years Go By, 4)

Angira believes that wrong formulation of policies, breeds misery which has no impact in the lives of the rulers, but which adversely affect the general well-being of the masses. Angira's anger is directed at the political leaders whose self-serving policies orchestrate economic degradation of their respective countries.

In *The years Go By,* Angira illustrates the burden borne by the poor as a result of social stratification. The poem is garnished with various devices of capital market. Angira's thematic concern here is on the misfortune of the oppressed, who "must buy existence "which underscores the injustice of inequitable distribution of national resources which are typified by the melange of imageries scattered in the poem:

Today,
We must buy existence
At the going price
Of the stock exchange
Today,
We must hide
In the drawers
Skeletons of Stone Age
For to stays in daylight
The price so high

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Keeping to the lane
From the iron Heel. (The Years Go By, 89)

The poem proceeds with a number of interlocking woes for the poor. The need for the poor to 'buy existence before the going price for them to' hide in the drawer'. One of the distinctive features of this poem is the art, with which dreadful events are portrayed so that the full depth of oppression of the poor by the rich is conveyed without the goriness of detail,

The poor have to constantly, live in fear of been trampled upon by the rich, keeping to the lane from the iron heel. The poor and the rich are perpetually locked within this background of mutual suspicion, which makes its impossible for the poor to breathe any air of freedom both during the day and even at night. Angira indeed heightens his condemnation and inveighs against this oppressive subjugation of the poor by the rich which has sufficiently traumatized the general psyche of the poor and rendered them worthless. The poem is not simply about the portrayal of the misfortune of the poor. It is also a social and political testimony on the deplorable condition of the masses in post-independent Kenya.

Out of this comatose situation of the masses, suspended between fear of expressing their marginality and the need to confront this debilitating pressure of grim experience, has necessitated the reaction of Angira, to poignantly condemn this despicable attitude of the rich in the poem, as to reiterate the utilitarian aesthetic of poetry.

This theme of social stratification recalls Taban Lo Liyong's *student's Lament* in which liyong reassesses the social-climber image of African politicians, past and present:

Politicians rule us all
Henpecking man and wife,
Usurping stool and wand
Before the hair is grey,
To intellect is theirs too
With only primary four
They rule, we carry stone.
(Frantz Fanon's uneven ribs, 117-118)

The poem laments the plight of a country trapped in mis-governance by dubious politicians, who have foistered dictatorships on African political landscape. These dictatorships no matter their guises, have in their throes, depression which manifests in harassment, detention, torture and killing of dissent voices.

In *Decay,* an evaluation of a metaphorical death of a man, who fails to exercise with his brains. The poem establishes a paradox: Death of a plant from its head rather than from the root, the poem commences with "trees die from their heads" which tends to examine when a trees leaves wither, it apparently indicates a death process. The poem foregrounds instalmental death of a man from his head, if he fails to continuously engage in mental exercise. This obviously satirizes old and irrelevant politician who have

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constituted a sit- tight ring in African political landscape. The poet wonders aloud what meaningful administrative skills could a leader who have ruled his country for more than thirty years contribute again, to the development of his country:

When we resign from thinking
And resort to collective laziness
When we can not remember the present
Nor conceive of the future
Since the past is no more.

And that past which is gone forever
Is all we can see
When reason takes leave
Of our little heads
What else can it be
If not withering from the head?
(Soft corals, P.94)

Angira in this poem stridently deplores his sarcastic and satiric jabs at Africa leadership sit-tight syndrome. The poem is significant in the sense that it has in its repertoire, a plant imagery which is employed to dramatize human degeneration. One would have assumed that it is only plant which vegetates, but with the robust employment of plant imagery, Angira has graphically demonstrated that most of the poor policies emanating from sit-tight African leaders, are significations of their vegetations and one should not expect sound policies from decaying heads. The irony in the poem is predicated on the fact that one would have taught that when a plant is dying, it would have started from the roots. On the contrary the plant dies from its head. On a more general note it can be said that the success of this poem is due not only to the fact that it symbolizes, but perhaps more importantly the fact that, the plant in the poem is a metaphor of a man who has ceased thinking, because he is bereft of ideas, and this inability to think is the beginning of a biological death.

In conclusion, this essay has emphasized the interplay of society, literature and social reform in the poetry of Jared Angira. It has also evaluated the identifiable interconnections between art, ideology and social commitment in the selected poems. By focusing on the notion of social and artistic commitment, the essay has significantly articulated how contending social forces arise as a result of socio-economic and political difficulties experienced in post-independent Kenya, and sought to discover the precise nature of the literary depiction of social problems within the context of Kenya's political milieu. The essay has also assessed the significance of literary insight in delineating social issues and the efficacy of the manner in which it proposes solutions to them.

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