

Socio-Political Activism and Nationhood in the Poetry of Odi Ofeimun

Peter E. Omoko

...that poetry works! above the ruse of power
hate decrees and hundred and twenty eight
ways to homicide fashioned by mongrels
who tie pythons round the waist of the Delta
to defeat hope and suffocate dreams...

(Go Tell the Generals, 101)

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to examine the salient metaphors of activism in Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* and *Go tell the Generals* and interrogate the social and political issues in the poems that are aimed at redirecting the Nigerian tide towards the path of progress. It attempts the analysis of the diverse sites of poetic truths spoken to powers, as

well as the decapitations of the indices of nationhood in the two collections. The examination of Ofeimun's poetry in this essay covers the basic ideas, thematic goals, as well as the formal elements of his poetry that endear them to the masses. What is discernible in the two collections is a nation stripped naked of all its dregs of humanity by her political leaders.

Poetry is one of the major literary channels through which the writer communicates with his audience. This is because poetry communicates ideas through the medium of metaphors and images that imbue in the human psyche, the social reality of the time. Poetry, often times, is influenced by various factors; social, economic, historical, cultural and political. The writer, being a member of the society, weaves these experiences into his poetry so that his audience can have a feel of his inner thoughts concerning such social and public affairs. This is why Ngara believes that the "impact poets make depends on the significance of what they say about social reality and on how effectively they communicate their vision to their readers" (1990, xi). The Nigerian writers, like those elsewhere, have in their creative works, reacted to the social and political dysfunctions that constitute the lots of the people in the society. They serve as the mouth piece of the people by reflecting and refracting events that have bearing in the life of the people. Mao expresses this idea when he avers that, "works of literature and art are products of reflection in the human brain of the life

of a given society” (1975, 81). According to him, “the life of the people is always a mine of the raw materials in their natural form, they provide literature and art an inexhaustible source” (Mao 1975, 81). Awhefeada corroborates the above statement when he explains that the “writer should be seen as actively involved in the unfolding experience of his society not only as a recorder, but also as a participant trying to shape events” (2006, 374).

Thus, the committed writer stands as the mediating force in the society on whose shoulder other aspects of the superstructure of the social-divide (the authorities standing at the apex and the populace at the summit) are well equilibrated. Since he does not possess the material power to change his society to the exotic utopia that he wants, nevertheless, he reflects such necessary residues in the society that makes for constant positive progress. With this consciousness, we can boldly say that the poet, through his works is a potential catalyst for positive change in a society that is ‘alive’ to its responsibility. I use the word ‘alive’ to mean such a society that is not altogether lost in the greed of self-destruction as Nigeria. Onoge reminds us that, “literary ideas like other ideas ‘do not fall from heaven, nor do we receive them as a gift of God while we sleep’. On the contrary, ideas are the products of social practice, usually reflecting the struggles to resolve the internal contradictions of a society” (1978, 94).

Odia Ofeimun and the Post-Civil War Nigerian Writers

The post-civil war Nigerian writers are more radical in their quest for socio-political change than their predecessors. They are rooted among the masses who have been dispossessed by the political class and have used their works to redirect the masses to confront their oppressors headlong. Obafemi foregrounds the dichotomy between the post-civil war Nigerian writers and their predecessors when he notes that the thematic aesthetics of the post-civil war writers are “materialist in description and perception and dialectical in approach,” unlike the older writers whose works tend to follow “quite uncritically classical specifications” as well as being “existentialist in their search for formal excellence, sometimes even to the detriment of content” (1988, 57). According to him, these writers believe that man's “problems originate from man and not from the metaphysical realm or from the gods” (Obafemi 1988, 57). He further foregrounds this point when he tells us that,

while their predecessors deal with universal verities and metaphysical profundities such as the part psychic search for the meaning of life and death in Soyinka's *The Road*, the young playwrights deal with urgent contemporary social problems in Nigeria... (quoted in Umukoro,12).

Similar view is also expressed by Ojaide he tells us that Odia Ofeimun “belongs to 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" (1996, 13). According to him, 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" (Ojaide 1996, 13). In other words, the writer deploys his artistic skills to the services of the society from whatever perspective he deems appropriate to his purpose. Thus, in the deployment of images and metaphors in many of his poetry, Ofeimun, like other African committed writers confront issues that have bearing on the people. This is because he imbues in his works, images and metaphor that deny the enemy of the masses sleep. Ofeimun's poetry is one that pitted the state against the downtrodden who looked to them for direction. Ojaide, a contemporary of Ofeimun gives us insights into the social-political environment of their time that necessitated the revolutionary nature of the poetry of his generation. He tells us that:

I believe in the artist's activist role. Action counts to remedy a bad situation. Being passive or apolitical will not change things. Patience may be a virtue in good times, but not in the desperate era in which Africans are living. Conditions unique to the Africa of my day have made me believe strongly that bad conditions do not change unless there is persistent effort to reverse the current of evil. To accept the

corruption as endemic and so insurmountable is to accept defeat. To accept the military's trampling of justice and freedom without protest or resistance is to accept a cursed life and to shirk one's responsibility. Not to act means hopelessness. I have hope. We are hopeful. However indirect we may have to be in our struggle, we are contributing to a dismantling of oppression and corruption. I have used the image of the struggle which collectively will destroy the oppressors. (2012, 125)

Odia Ofeimun has over the years distinguished himself as one of the most significant post-civil war Nigerian writers, who have used his art profusely to engage the sundry socio-political misfortune of his people. He imbues in his works poetic vignettes that send shivers through the spines of all those who have held the nation on her toes and at the same time, mourns the docility of the Nigerian populace whose silence captures the vagaries of the nation's historical trajectory. Ofeimun thus stands as a social crusader who sides with the debased Nigerian masses. His poetry is replete with images of exploitation, oppression, poverty, and subjugation of the Nigerian downtrodden. As a poet, Ofeimun foregrounds issues that have to do with the dichotomy between the 'haves' and 'haves not', the oppressed and oppressors; as well as poor leadership, corruption, political insensitivity, military dictatorship, war, and the despoiled environment. The aggregation of the above socio-polit-

ical malaise in the Nigerian state is poeticized in the two collections: *The Poet Lied* and *Go tell the Generals*.

The Dialectics of Socio-Political Activism and Nationhood in the Poetry of Odia Ofeimun

The dialectics of nationhood is such that it can be interpreted from virtually the field of social sciences and humanities without running away from its forest of meanings. Nationhood can simply be described as a state of being a nation, or a large group of people united by common language, culture or economic life. Margaret Apine and Rogers Brubakar are two scholars who have separately interrogated the tenets of nationhood with regards to literature. According to Brubakar, nationhood is “an institutionalised form comprised of a pervasive system of social classification, an organising ‘principle of vision and division’ of the social world, a standardised scheme of social accounting, a legitimate form for public and private identities” (1994, 7). Apine, on the other hand, sees nationhood as a state where “citizens have surrendered their individual sovereignty to the state through a social contract that guarantees the provision of public goods” (2014, 5). What is inherent in the above definitions is that nationhood involves a social contract between the rulers and the ruled; that in any case, should a party renege from the contract, there would be consequences. As shall be shown later in this essay, the Nigerian elites have constantly reneged from

the contract that make for a true nationhood. Thus we shall in the course of this essay interrogate the indices of nationhood using Ofeimun's poetry as our artistic compass.

The two collections, *The Poet Lied* and *Go tell the Generals* resonate with the vituperations of anger against the corrupt and visionless leaders who have held the people down and dispossessed them of all that are due them as a people. In the poem "Their Excellencies" for instance, Ofeimun laments the distortion that has been done to the land by corrupt politicians whose only aim of coming to power is to defraud the state for their selfish aggrandisement. They are insensitive to the plight of the people they are 'elected' to govern. They also lack the capacity to reflect and dream of ways to develop and improve the country's economy that the common man may live a better life. The poet thus tells us that instead of improving the lots of the populace, the politicians,

... move in their merry-go-rounds!
Satiated, they have little stomach for reflections;
though cups of misery over-brim
in the eyes of every man woman and child
sprawled out across their rounds....

They have little stomach for reflections
Though the faces of those they love may swim
in the cry that is bleated out
by the million lives numbed by want
overawed by hunger... (*The Poet Lied*, 16)

What is inherent in the above lines is a nation deprived of all sense of humanity by those the people look up to, for social and political guidance. Ofeimun, like his contemporaries, are aware that the challenge that troubles the Nigerian state is one that needs urgent and practical solutions. Unfortunately, the populace are not ready to confront their oppressors. The poet tells us that the oppressors,

...move in their merry-go-rounds
oblivious of the grunts and groans
deflowering the fabled laughter of our afternoons
They do not see the shrunken bellies
the harrowing faces out-lining their rounds
(*The Poet Lied*, 16)

In the poem “A Footnote (1)” for instance, the poet decried the politicians who renege on their promises as soon as they get hold of power,

in our model democracy
the magic promises of yesterday
lie cold like mounds of dead cattle
along caravans that lead nowhere

.....
in our model democracy
nothing is left of the old humour
the sacked parliament of our collective desires
appraise horizons burnt to dancing grey
by tall threats, tall decrees, tall abominations
(*The Poet Lied*, 6)

The poet exposes the politicians who, having attained political powers, put on the gab of ignorance – an ignorance of insensitivity to the plight of the people they had once promised to redeem. In their traumatised state, the helpless masses develop a severe attitude of apathy and docility even to their own state and continue in such predicaments until another group of oppressors come to catch up with their docility to exploit the remnant of their hopes. Thus, it can be argued that the contest of the political parties in Nigeria, since the attainment of independence in 1960, has often not been about serving the people, but about who should have the “ultimate right” to exploit them. To Ofeimun, therefore, the politicians cannot be trusted. In the poem, “The Messiahs” the poet tells us that the politicians whom he called messiahs:

...are not doing a bad job
the messiahs
are still riding high
on the fervid winged horses
of their triumphal entry (The Poet Lied, 10)

The new messiahs are boastful and their *modus operandi* is the use of propaganda against perceived enemies. They claim improvements in different sectors of the economy that are only visible to them and their cronies, and not the impoverished masses. In order to make the people believe that they are working, they will tell lies and falsify statistics to show that things are going on well in the country.

Their harvest reports say
the barns explode
with tubers of plenty
all trees are watered
with scented alcohol
now they grow faster than they ever did
in the other dynasty

Their harvest reports
manure the earth
with hawking question marks
as if they were answers
as if they born
to feed on only harvest reports
on horseback
they issue the word: we dance
when our Sunday bests become rags
we spread palm-fronds on the roads
for their motorcades
(blessed are they that come!) (*The Poet Lied*, 10-11)

These are recurrent indices in the political landscape of Nigeria that a committed poet like Ofeimun cannot ignore. For in the craze to falsify developmental facts, praise-singers are recruited from all walks of life to adumbrate their lies. Professors, pastors, imams including civil society organisations connived with the government to hoodwink the already pauperised masses. These are strategies adopted by the oppressors to soften the oppressed masses. In this regard, the poet adorns the

garb of such politicians to lampoon their pettiness.

And we must hire praise-singers
talking drummers. Be happy
and why must we be sad
when the Messiah are with us
to hound us and butt-gun us
into greater tomorrows. (*The Poet Lied*, 11)

The oppressors thus reign supreme through propaganda. And because there have always been a wide divide between the ruling elite and the masses, such propaganda easily find fertile earth in the heart of the people to germinate. This is the level of propaganda that brought in the All Progressive Congress (APC) into power in Nigeria in 2015. The party came with the symbol of broom to sweep away all the evils of the past government and the people fell for it. They rode into power in 2015 on sheer propaganda; making bogus promises that even the poor masses who supported them knew they won't fulfil. Yet, with the strong weapon of propaganda and the obvious desire to cause chaos in the land, they were allowed to rig themselves into power. But not too long, the people were shocked when they turn out to be a sheep of the old block. In the first stanza of the poem "The New Broom", the poet recreates the politicians' use of propaganda to the amusement of the reader:

The streets were clogged with garbage
the rank smell of swollen gutters
claimed the peace of our lives (*The Poet Lied*, 6)

However, the poet does not want the people to sit back and wail as though their lives have ended. He wants them to resist all forms of oppression and reconsider their place in the socio-political dysfunction of the nation. He wants them to remember that of all nations that attained independence with Nigeria, it is only Nigeria that still remains stagnant in terms of social, economic and political development. On this level, the poet becomes not only the people's advocate, but an intellectual who uses his intellect to guide his people out of every social and political quagmire that they have been subjected to, by their oppressors. Okome informs us that Ofeimun is a public intellectual whose "publicness is the abiding string that links his poetry and social activism to the real lives that people live in contemporary Nigeria" (2012, 8). Uka adumbrates this role of the writer when he avers that the African writer should recognise his place as one who "is an intellectual and a writer, and strictly speaking not ingratiating the established corridors of power merely, but is committed to truth as he sees it, he must so shape his action that his own integrity is preserved at the same time that he influences policy" (1978, 22). This idea resonates poignantly in the poem, "Let's Consider".

Remembering that in our muddled voyaging
we always arrived at last
at the point where we set out
where we acquired un-healing wounds
and the angry scars that still prefer us
(*Go tell the Generals*, 74)

In this “remembering”, the masses must know that their votes decide who should rule over them. They should jettison immediate aggrandisement in the form of ‘stomach infrastructure’ that the politicians always put forward whenever it is the time for elections. If they have failed before, they should not fail again by “remembering that we come back in season/to the shame that we cuddled on wanton habit” (*Go tell the Generals*, 74). What the poet has done with his lines here is to stir the people to reality - to rekindle their senses to the untoward hardship that is brought on them mainly from their negligence and docility. It is against the background that Okome tells us that a good poet uses his poetry to rekindle

...interest that extends the boundaries of the reader’s sense of poetry as politics and culture, that deep-seated belief that words can actually translate into social actions; that words are indeed social relationships, and that words are divine tools with which the poet can change his/her environment (Okome 2002, 16).

Ofeimun, in the poem, accuses the people of being accomplices to their predicaments “remembering that we are never innocent/that our weakness makes us part of every crime/committed against us” (*Go tell the Generals*, 74). He therefore seeks the people’s cooperation to change the tide of wretchedness in the land. To achieve this, the people must show signs of readiness. They must not be swayed by religious or ethnic leanings. They must be united against all forces of oppression as their op-

pressors are united against them irrespective of religion or ethnic affiliation. He charges the people thus,

Let us not wonder, let's consider
why those who supply the prophets
also supply events in rituals
that prove the prophets right.
Let's consider the ways we consider
the failure of sight
that decrees the language
of every street song (*Go tell the Generals*, 75)

In the above lines, the poet sought a progressive social ethos which could, at least, serve as the basis for an ordered, equitable and just society devoid of religious bickering, ethnicity, corruption and other vices that have kept the country on its toes. Ofeimun's idea of a just and egalitarian society is typified in the last four lines of the above poem. This is the vision Apronti wants the modern African writer to espouse in their works, a vision that calls for a progressive change in the society. According to him,

...modern African writer must be in the forefront of those who are causing progressive change in Africa and that this is one way in which he can demonstrate immediately his relevance to his people in the one hand, and on the other his right to take the place of his traditional counterparts in our modern society (Apronti 1978, 78).

The foregoing is a reminder to the corrupt leaders that the people are prepared to take their destinies into their own hands. They are ready to confront oppression in all its spheres until victory is achieved. In order to displace the selfish rulers who trade the collective fortunes of the people for selfish gains, all hands must be on deck.

For instance, Ofeimun goes on in the poem “Rap Anti-Text” to foreground how the people’s collective power can put the oppressors in great discomfort. He uses military images and revolutionary motifs fashioned in the style of Yeats’ “Second Coming” to strengthen his social vision and call on the collective will of the people to match in protest against their political overlords. He says:

In the shaman’s brew
that the General made
thighs fell apart
for the centre to hold
in brawling carnivals
 tattooing the streets
with rented mobs
 and circuses
the falcon flew
 with the falconer in tow
turning and turning
 in constricting gyres
till reason’s somersault
 darkness unloosened

thighs fell apart
the General appeared
thighs fell apart
and the General fled (*Go tell the Generals*, 78)

To Ofeimun, the people must be prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice of revolution in order to redeem the land from the hands of their corrupt leaders. As Ojaide affirms, Ofeimun's activism "ranges in the side of the common people and is at the vanguard of forces struggling against tyranny, dictatorship, oppression, injustice, and other socio-political vices so as to establish humane and democratic values" (2012,11).

Ofeimun's social vision rests in the belief that whenever the oppressed people of the land come together, as one to confront their exploiters, victory will be sure. Ngugi wa Thiong'o agrees with this ideology when he tells us that: "A people united can never be defeated and the writer must be part and parcel of that revolutionary unity for democracy, socialism and the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human" (2007, 164). The lines below foreground the above vision:

The General fled
to a bush of ghost
as blood-dimmed tides
set the nine dogs growling
(*Go tell the Generals*, 79)

Thus, in his poetry, especially those that foreground the indices of dispossession of his people of the Niger Delta, Ofeimun conveys the true state of affairs in Nigeria where a people whose region produces the crude oil wealth that sustains the entire country live in abject poverty. Ofeimun's commitment to the literature that points to this fact; that is, the social imbalance in the Nigerian political structure is well documented in the section "Children of the Creeks" in *Go tell the Generals*. The unbridled capitalist onslaught on the Niger Delta and the aftermath of this uncanny state-sanctioned assault are given prominence in the poem, "Children of the Creeks".

The children of the creeks
cried for hands to raise
the sky that loomed
too close to the earth
they prayed for the old days
of timber and palm oil
to return to the mangroves
...

What forbearance
the earth demands of those
whose crops are pulped
to mud and black kaolin
by ill-will, ill-done
and by prayers that turn
every fish belly-up

The children of the creeks
yelled in searing electrodes;
as evergreen trees roasted
in the haggle of loot-sharers
who staled the Delta
for the very last overcoming
of the Lower Niger. (*Go tell the Generals*, 89)

The poem above is quoted at length to expose the footprints and horrors of multinationals' presence and activities in the Niger Delta. The activities not only crush the biodiversity of the delta, but also impoverished the inhabitants. The poet's message is captured in bold relief by the use of imagery, contrast, irony, hyperbole and other devices to depict – the unprecedented suffering to which the people of the Niger Delta are subjected.

Similar dislocation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is also examined in the poem "Memory II". In this poem, the poet tells us that as soon as oil was discovered in large quantity in the Niger Delta, the people's fate was sealed. This is because the oil multinationals and the Nigerian government that benefit from the crude oil resources of the people care less about their environment and their wellbeing. The poet laments thus:

We knew only after
the explosion in our creeks
we'd forgotten the wisdom of the ancients

who saw our faces smeared in unbidden foil
bloating human cattle in the sun
grown beyond recognition
as the rain of fire from the rigs
took over the night sky,
swept mangroves and mushed the rivers
soiling earth-wombs, our haven of ages

....

We knew only after the explosion in our creeks
of the new deities arriving
with the grimace of giant caterpillars
monsters bigger than ships and houses
who felled pythons and crocodiles
wounded siblings driven
from rare waters
to be buried with our dead
in mass graves (*Go tell the Generals*, 87-8)

Inherent in the above poem are the images of destruction, devastation and exploitation that reverberates the tyranny of the Nigerian state against the people of the Niger Delta region of the country. The people are daily roasted by the "...the rain of fire from the rigs" which "took over the mighty sky". This "rain of fire" comes from the various gas flares in the Niger Delta that pollute the environment. The pollution of these flares have "swept mangroves and mushed the rivers/soiling earth-wombs, our haven of ages". In other words, the people's sources of livelihood that have sustained them over the years are destroyed by the activities of the oil compa-

nies without any mitigating measures to ameliorate the suffering of the people. Thus, the deaths of python and crocodiles through the activities of the oil multinationals only foreground the death of all that the people held sacred in their environment. The poet's lamentation is a protest against the outright ecological devastation of the Niger Delta by the oil companies in collaboration with the Nigerian state. The poet, in this poem, speaks truth to the conscience of the oppressors of his people by artistically recreating the evils of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. This is why Ojaide believes that, "in the narrative of the gradual and persistent march towards true democracy in Nigeria, Ofeimun's poetic output and practice together with his activism outside the book have facilitated the process that will make Nigeria a nation of humane and democratic values" (2012, 25).

As part of Ofeimun's commitment to the Niger Delta struggles, he identifies with the masses and front runners of the liberation struggles. In particular, he offers outright condemnation of the state murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other martyrs of the Ogonis by Abacha military junta on November 10, 1996. Though the murder of the nine activists acted as a major setback to the struggle of the Niger Delta emancipation, Ofeimun, through his poetry, gives a voice to the struggle for the meaningful survival of his people. This idea finds expression in his poem, "Ken" written in three cantos in the collection *Go tell the Generals*.

I

Now, when they talk about the Niger Delta
they will know neither sleep nor cover
no longer indifferent to creeks and rivers
the green earth defoliated by gas flares
fishing havens blacked out by murky oil
crops withering in the mush of toxic foil
they will remember the ghost they invited
an angry first son who'd re-invented
patriarchates, roping death to his side
in favour of truth that'll outlast every tide
(Go tell the Generals, 99)

Ordinarily, the gruesome murder of his colleagues would have instilled a terrible fear in him to shut his mouth. Instead, he opts to eulogize them. This bravery finds resonance in the statement of G.G Darah when he affirms that:

The struggles of the oppressed and exploited nations of the Niger Delta have also added a new dialectics to the methodology of popular uprising in post-colonial Africa. The images of a mass movement, martyrdom and guerrilla fighters which were hitherto strange in Nigeria have become familiar as a result of these experiences (Darah 2010, 3).

Apronti supports this view when he asserts that “our writers being an important segment of our intelligentsia are duty-bound to take on this assignment” (1978, 88).

Thus Ofeimun gives a sense of optimism in the poem when he assures the people that the enemy of the Niger Delta,

...will know neither sleep nor cover
While the beaten of the creeks bend double
bearing the weight of elephant and rhino
who claim right by size and touted presence
from wrong to ever lucrative wrong
hearing no voice of conscience but the chink
of coins, slush of paper money, and harems
throbbing with license while gas flares
warn the beleaguered of the Delta to stand up:
“we cant abandon fights that wont abandon us”
(*Go tell the Generals*, 100)

Like the Russian writer, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn once stated, “the great writer goes on ‘constituting a kind of second government’, thereby making those in office, those who wield authority, uneasy in their saddle, as long as they do not ride perfectly on honesty, till they heed the warning, message, and ideas which the writer envisions, even predicts” (quoted in Uka 23).

In “Memory II”, Ofeimun celebrates the bold voices of the oppressed who defy death to confront their oppressors. The oppressors think by killing their leaders, the people of the Niger Delta would succumb to their powers. As a poet, he is part of the struggle to liberate his people from the shackles of oppression. This is why

Ogungbesan explains that the act of artistic creation in the most profound sense “is a moral and political act”. According to him, “the writer’s individualism is not only the highest form of protest and insurance against tyranny – from any political system – but also the deepest affirmation of the most everlasting truth” (Ogungbesan 1978, 18). Ofeimun therefore makes his poetry send sleepless ditties to the oppressors:

that poetry works! Above the ruse of power,
hate decrees and the hundred and twenty eight
ways to homicide fashioned by mongrels
who tie pythons round the waist of the Delta
to defeat hope and suffocate dreams (*Go tell the Generals*, 101)

Furthermore, he warns the oppressors that it is not yet time for them to celebrate because their evils against the people will surely catch up with them. He says:

... and when they ask why
the age-grade still meet
at the public square, tell them
it is for those who will not
abandon a fight
because they’ve lost a pathfinder
(*Go tell the Generals*, 103)

The struggle to redeem the land must continue because victory against all forces of oppression and dispossession is sure. It is a collective struggle in which every-

one, including the poet, must be ready to take up arms against the oppressors even when their lives are at risk. Ogungbesan confirms this view when he notes that “if it is necessary to throw bombs in order to change society, then the writer must recognise his obligations to his society and throw as many bombs as possible. After all his own safety may depend on it” (Ogungbesan 1978, 4). Here, the poet does not absolve himself from the struggle that affects the people; he must walk hand-in-hand with them in order to reclaim the land. He exhorts the people thus:

...If they hang your dog
Kill their cow

If they steal your purse
Burn their house

If they bring down your plane
Sink their ship

If they bring plagues to your door
Don't cry

till their councils
teem with arson and broken totems

...

So that none would believe it ever again
That your palms alone

Are made for slave potions (*Go tell the Generals*, 90)

The above lines are in consonance with the position of Ngugi wa Thiong'o when he says that the committed writer should not only use his works to comment on the ills of the society, s/he must march in front of the oppressed in order to reclaim the society from the hands of the oppressors. Hence he says:

As the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier [...]. The African writer ... the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival [...]. He must be part of the song the people sing as once again they take up arms to smash the neo-colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started in the fifties, and even earlier. (wa Thiong'o 2007, 164)

In the poem entitled "I feel the need to Scream" Ofeimun assumes the voice of the voiceless in exposing the series of monumental failures that obfuscate the Nigerian political landscape. His sense of history in the poem is enlivened with the vivid presentation of the anomalies that have held the country down over the years. He therefore put on the garb of a rebel to quest for an ideal society because the corruption and oppression in the country nauseate him. And because his words can be misinterpreted by the oppressors, he must scream on papers for all to see and read.

I feel the need to scream
on paper.
The decadence in the air
grates on the iron petal
my will to survival

Trickles of irremediable days
Unawakened suns

I feel the need to scream
my lungs dry
till sands burn in my veins
till the rebel in me tastes
the pollens of another sage-hood (*The Poet Lied*, 10)

Further in the poem, Ofeimun decries the flamboyant lifestyle of these politicians who govern the people in impunity. The recklessness with which they gamble with the nation's fortune heightens the uncertainty and frustration that have become the lots of the poor masses. The lines below give credence to this point:

Scream! I want to scream
my refusal to let the acid infamy
of these days trample under
my faith in the coming footfalls of dawn
(*The Poet Lied*, 10)

The lines above not only evoke the poet's desire to change as well as rid the society of all that offend the

cultural ethos of the land, but resonate with metaphors of revolution which is the foreseeable way of redeeming the land from the clutches of political dispossession. His patience has turned to anger, and his anger, to reaction. He therefore seeks to act, believing, like Rotimi says: “to sit down and do nothing is to be crippled quickly” (Rotimi 1971, 6). Thus, in order to re-right the sundry wrongs perpetuated on the people of the Nigerian state and at the same time redeem the oppressed masses, he must refuse “to let the acid infamy/of these days trample under/my faith in the coming footfalls of dawn”. This is what Freire calls “the greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (1982, 21).

Conclusion

To sum up, Ofeimun is the people’s poet. He not only feels but shares in the pains, fear and aspiration of the dispossessed masses of Africa, especially his Nigerian people. His poetry protests against the debasing status that have become the lots of the Nigerian populace and at the same time, he charges the people to rise above petty sentiment, even at a price, to confront their oppressors headlong in order to enthrone social justice and fair play in the Nigerian state. On matters dealing with oil exploration and the consequent degradation of life, property, and the environment of the Niger Delta, Ofeimun refuses to compromise his faith of a better society.

Thus, in his stockpile of weapon, to use the words of Uka, he “boasts oratory which can move a populace to action, as if it can move a mountain, because the oratory is faith, not camouflage. This faith can project into the future, beyond the present power holders and the writer himself” (1978, 24). Ojaide, a fellow compatriot of Ofeimun therefore asserts that,

Ofeimun has deployed a large measure of his talent and resources to cope with the postcolonial society of the post-independence Nigerian nation and done so with singular dedication that is unparalleled in his generation of writers. He has used his poetic works and socio-political activism to sustain attention and struggle to build true democratic governance with justice, fairness, propriety and other virtues to his credit.(2012, 24-25)

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