

# African Poetry as an Expression of Agony

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## Abstract

This study focuses on sociological study of selected African poems as an expression of agony which seeks to address the issues of oppression, psychological torture, injustice, apartheid, racism oppression and man's inhumanity to man in the society. Since series of poems of culture, love, nature and animalistic voices are mostly presented by the critics, this study has as focus poetry as an expression of agony and pain in Africa.

The study therefore adopted an analytic approach in its examination of the poems. The natures of agony as well as suggested resolution to this agony in the poems are pointed out with close reference to the selected poems. Poetic devices of the two (2) poems (Nightfall in Soweto and Peasant) are also analysed in attempt to discuss the themes of the poems. In conclusion, it was discovered that the poems exposed the terrible state of affairs in Africa through the poet's effective use of symbols and images.

**Keywords:** negritude, agony, symbolism, imagery, literature

## 1. Background to the Study

Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality in their poems but they write from experience which they have had earlier in life, they visualize societal ills using symbols through their poems they profound solutions to the ills poets therefore do not write their poems to express their personality. African poetry has expressed many concerns which make them unique to the understanding of African ethos and traditions. Commenting on these various voices in African poetry, Soyinka (1999: 29.) asserts that these poems "embrace most of the experience of the African world- modern and historic- though naturally, no claim is made here for an unattainable comprehensiveness of themes; or for their mutual exclusiveness. The overlapping is obvious and frequent. What gives, for instance, the love poems of Denis Brutus "*their raw*", passionate desperation is the fact that they are just as much poems about love as they are poems of indictment-a word I prefer to protest-against the brutish environment from which such emotions are painfully wrenched, that they speak of integral refuge and outer defiance, hope and resolve, within one breathe. Even when the poem emerges as essentially tender, its poignancy remains a yet more lacerating accusation" (*Poems of Black Africa*, 13).

Poetry and agony are inseparable because poems of agony tend to have it share in the market because people are eager to know what their ancestors have passed through in the past, poem is clearly seen as a counter-attacking instrument against the bad people to curtail the power of whoever has such bad behaviour in mind. This kind of poetry comes in different themes, some come having, suffering theme, some, theme of neglect, some theme of failed promises, theme of forgotten promises, theme of bad leadership, theme of racial abuse and many more.

Writers of poetry always write with cryptic expressions to coach their themes. Poetry is one of the most difficult genres of literature because of its use of symbols and other literary devices. The voices in African poetry according to Soyinka encapsulate history and reality. While some poetry scrambles for self assertion, others struggle for identity. Some in the long run examines the powerlessness of man in the face of uncontrollable phenomenon. Leopold Senghor's poems are typical examples of poems that strive for self assertion, identity, self consciousness, black aesthetics etc. while J P Clark's poetry strive for the place of man in the face of natural and uncontrollable phenomenon. Some poems are psychological while some are grossly philosophical. Niyi Osunsare's poems are mythical, cultural and philosophical.

The same thing goes to Soyinka's "*idanre*" personal feelings were also expressed in African poetry, this makes the voices in African poetry very fundamental. According to Drummond (2005) in his critical essay published in African Postcolonial Literature in English series, he observes that in "*A Shuttle in the Crypt*" (1967), Wole Soyinka presents seven thematic groups of poems composed during Soyinka's imprisonment for political protests against the Nigerian government. One of these thematic groups, titled "*Four archetypes*," comprises four poems—"Joseph," "Hamlet," "Gulliver;" and "Ulysses" each of which draws an analogy between Soyinka and the corresponding character from literature.

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

Akingbe, (2014:47) stated that contemporary Nigerian poets have had to contend with the social and political problems besetting Nigeria's landscape by using satire as a suitable medium, to distil the presentation and portrayal of these social malaises in their linguistic disposition. Arguably, contemporary Nigerian poets, in an attempt to criticize social ills, have unobtrusively evinced a mastery of language patterns that have made their poetry not only inviting but easy to read. The epochal approach in the crafting of poetry has significantly evoked an inimitable sense of humour which endears poems to the readers. The over-arching argument of various studies is that satire is grounded in the poetics of contemporary Nigerian poetry in order to criticize certain aspects of the social ills plaguing Nigerian society. As representatively exemplified in some poems,

Venugopala (2014:1) stated that '*Warpoetry*' is commonly read, discussed and taught as a very specific genre. The term is used to refer almost exclusively to poetry from the First World War (1914-18), and within that to a very limited group of poets, among whom Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are the most prominent. But poetry about war has been in existence for a very long time. Homer's *Iliad* has strong claims to be called a war poem, and literature in English frequently discusses the theme of war. Sir Philip Sidney's "*love sonnets*" often use images of war to describe the strife of love;" Wordsworth's '*Salisbury Plain*' poems discuss the after-effects of war in terms of injury and widowhood; Tennyson's '*Charge of the Light Brigade*' either celebrates or condemns the loss of life in one moment of the Crimean war; and several writers during the South African wars of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries address a complex of issues of patriotism, heroism and suffering. Why, then, has the poetry of the First World War come to assume its place in the academic tradition?

The answer to the question has a great deal to do with the larger processes in which the literary canon is created, and history written. Both involve a dialogue between the present and the past, in which each generation tries to explain and understand the decisions of its predecessors. If we return to the years of the war themselves and explore the kinds of poetry being published.

This study would focus on Poetry as an expression of agony, examining some selected poems in Africa. The strong tendency to understand poems from the standpoint of poets' biography seems to limit the possibilities for interpreting these poems. As long as we read poems, we will do no more than understand the historical facts of their lives. Poems therefore remain unknown to large number of people in the society. Agony and the poems are inseparable, but the cause or expression of agony in these poems still remains unclear to the substantial number of readers of these poems and this is because, readers of any poem are always from the diverse world of academics who are not skilled in poetic analysis.

It is as a result of this observation that this study focuses on the sociological study of selected African poems as an expression of agony with particular reference to O. Mitshali's *Nightfall in Soneto* and Cheney-Coker's *peasant*.

## 2. Poetry in Africa

Poetry in Africa encompasses the wide variety of traditions arising from Africa's 55 countries and from evolving trends within different literary genres. It is a large and complex subject, partly because of Africa's original linguistic diversity but primarily because of the devastating effect of slavery and colonization, which resulted in English, Portuguese and French, as well as Creole or pidgin versions of these European languages, being spoken and written by Africans across the continent. As pointed out by Anouk Ziljlma (2008)

"because there are literally thousands of indigenous languages spoken in Africa and many more dialects, every African country has an official language (or 11 in the case of South Africa). This official language acts as the '*lingua franca*' for (at least) a reasonably sized region"

Ushie (2016), also submitted that "*Modern written African poetry has a double heritage - pre-colonial and Western. As in most post-colonial situations, the tilt of our writing should be more towards the pre-colonial African literary heritage as manifested in the song, dirge, folktale, elegy, panegyric or riddle. Essentially, such art was meant for the whole community rather than for a few initiates.* There is need to talk about the developmental processes of African poets from pre colonial to post colonial era.

### 2.1 Historical Perspective of Poetry in Africa

This perspective contextualises the historical, political and indigenous cultural dynamics that shaped both the written and oral forms of literature (orature) of Africa past and present. If African orature depends on community and social setting, it can be said that orature "grows out of tradition and keeps tradition alive". According to Encyclopaedia of African Literature, Present-day spoken word and performance poetry, with its multidimensional forms of expression incorporating song, story-telling narratives, rhythm, rhyme, verse, movement/dance and the modern media forms of digital recording, composition and video projection, can be viewed as logical evolutions of the ancient indigenous oral traditions. Since 2000 the Internet has also emerged as a publishing channel for the promotion of both written and performed African poetry.

#### 2.1.1 Poetry During the Pre-colonial Era in Africa

Numerous examples of pre-colonial African literature span the continent, from scripts documenting the kings of Ethiopian and Ghanaian empires, as well as popular folklore in a host of native languages, through to Mali's famous Timbuktu Manuscripts, dating from the 16th to 18 centuries, with a wide array of subject matter, including astronomy, poetry, law, history, faith, politics and philosophy. In medieval times the universities of North Africa amassed Arabic and Swahili literature. African Pre-colonial Literature (2016) claimed that Poetry as an art form has undergone several phases of evolution from pre-colonial to colonial and then to post-colonial eras in most African countries. As an example, in the pre-colonial era in Nigeria — the most populated country in Africa and a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation — poetry was unwritten. "There existed a thin line between poets and musicians, who composed and rendered poetry in musical form. Poets then published their works in form of renditions at funerals and marriage ceremonies, with themes focused on praising virtues and condemning vices in society." (Adetuyi & Adeniran, 2017)

#### 2.1.2 Poetry During the Colonial Era in Africa

While the West bears record of African literature from the period of colonisation and the slave trade, particularly of works by Africans using acquired Western languages as their medium of expression, the thriving oral traditions of the time - particularly if in a mother tongue, were not recognised for their artistic value or the richness and significance of their content. Generated by the Atlantic slave trade and its opposition, from the 1780s onward, an astonishing and unprecedented array of texts appeared, both pro- and anti-slavery: poems, novels, plays, histories, sermons, speeches, newspaper columns and letters, travelogues, medical treatises, handbills, broadsides, songs, children's books. African authors writing in this period, along with the abolitionists and apologists, raise questions about the relation of British Romanticism to colonialism and slavery. Home.southernct.edu (2016) Themes of liberation, independence and negritude among Africans in French-controlled territories, began to permeate. African literature in the late colonial period between the end of World War I and independence. Leopold Sedar Senghor published the first anthology of French-language poetry written by Africans in 1948.

He was one of the propounders of the negritude movement and eventual President of Senegal Liberation Struggle and Independence Era. It is the political, economic, social and cultural events of a society that shape its literature. In his essay "Homecoming" -1972, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o makes this stance very clear when he says: Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background.

Many African poets suffered greatly and were compelled to cast aside their artistic vocations in order to be involved in the liberation struggles of their peoples. Christopher Okigbo was killed in the 1960s' civil war in Nigeria; Mongane Wally Serote was detained under South Africa's Terrorism Act No 83 of 1967; his countryman Arthur Norje committed suicide in London in 1970; Malawi's Jack Mapanje was incarcerated with neither charge nor trial; and in 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa died by the gallows of the Nigerian junta. According to Adetuyi (2017) submitted that:

*“African literature is protest in nature. It comes as a reaction to various forms of injustices meted out on Africans by the colonial masters and later, post-colonial masters Postcolonial African literature”.*

To have any sense of evolving African poetics, one must be aware of the socio-political significance of literary expression and the ideological character of literary theory (Adetuyi & Adeniran, 2017)

Most African nations gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s and with liberation and increased literacy, African literature written in English, French and Portuguese and traditional African languages, has grown dramatically in quantity and in global recognition of this work. Ali A. Mazrui and others mention seven conflicts as themes: the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modernity, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between Africanity and humanity. Other themes in this period include social problems such as corruption, the economic disparities in newly independent countries, and the rights and roles of women. Female writers are today far better represented in published African literature than they were prior to independence.

In 1986 Nigerian writer, poet and playwright, Wole Soyinka became the first post independence African writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. African poetry today since the 1960s, political, economic, and cultural events have begun to shape African poetry. Gone are the days when the shades of colonialism were an unending preoccupation of African poets. In modern African poetry, works that focus on the healing and purging of the country and families have dominated African poetry. Poets in Africa have faced issues in ways that not only explain how indigenous cultures are absorbed by western standards but also how limiting in vision their leaders have been.

In January 2000, Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, (Against All Odds, 2016) the first conference on African languages and literatures ever to be held on African soil took place, with participants from east, west, north, southern Africa and from the diaspora and by writers and scholars from around the world. Delegates examined the state of African languages in literature, scholarship, publishing, education and administration in Africa and throughout the world, celebrating the vitality of African languages and literatures and affirming their potential. Publication Over the last two decades, aside from individual collections of poetry by African writers, established literary reviews and journals featuring these poets, a significant number of anthologies of African poetry have been published, predominantly by university presses around the world and increasingly by African scholars based or associated with these institutions. In his article "The Critical Reception of Modern African Poetry" (Okunoye, 1982)

Oyenyi Okunoye of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, criticizes publications such as Modern Poetry from Africa, co-edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier in 1963, and A Book of African Verse by John Reed and Clive Wake in 1969, "for operating within a tradition that is pretentious in claiming the African identity for works that do not truly project diverse African experiences". In contrast recent anthologies not only document the evolution of African poetry in more recent times with greater objectivity and insight, but they are bringing to light and ever expanding range of African voices. They reflect greater cultural, gender, generational diversity and a widening scope of themes, styles, and ideologies, as well as alternative framing of these works by virtue of their editorial approaches. A few notable recently published anthologies of this kind are The New African Poetry.

This poem Cheney Coker's 'Peasant' and Mitshal's 'Nightfall in Soweto' as a poem of Agony is a protest poem which identifies with the down-trodden African peasant who does most of the work that drives his country yet paying him insignificant rewards. This is seen as the cause of the pain in this study. In the lines of the poem, Cheney-Coker identifies many points of "agony" of the peasant and illustrates singular experiences of these men left poor by their politicians that make for pondering. In the lines of the poem, he has disregarded the correct use of grammar in first-letter capitalization except in the first and last lines...and even the last line have a second sentence that disregards the rule too. This is a statement of his anger; when people are angry; their respect for the rules is usually close to nothing. Cheney-Coker seems to bundle this long list of complaints for the politicians of Africa. He enumerates how they marshal these peasants at election time (line 8) and forget them at banquet nights; how they are treated like slaves, left in roach-infested shacks and being used as labour for the many luxuries that the politicians enjoy. They are scornfully given party cards but never part support. They have little to take care of their children who develop projectile bellies (line 12) and for whom intolerable school fees (line 19) are paid to study meaningless languages and 'isms ready for non-existent jobs.

This looks like a tall pile of complaints which are building up anger one after another. To be able to appease the peasant, you must appease him layer by layer and agony by agony. A tall order, this. But Cheney-Coker says the

height of it all - the supposed icing - is being asked to being asked to be patient about it all. And he calls it "*the damn agony*" (line 21).

Who can bottle up such intense frustration with a slick of patience? It won't be long before the patience is broken. I chose this poem as a tribute to the revolutions that started in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and the Middle East, albeit being suppressed this very minute in Libya. This poem is a prophecy of all those happenings in a way, pre-informing African leaders that their people want them to know that "*their patience is running out*" (line 22). If only African leaders read African poetry!! I wrote this poem on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks on the US World Trade Centres in 2007.

The theme is slightly unrelated but I was wondering if we may have been too disobedient to the natural order. A lot of scientific reasons have been given for the supposed logic that there is no God. Could we have challenged an obvious truth and by some ensuing chaos, been probably jolted back to the realisation? I don't know. The terrorist destruction of the Twin Towers alludes to the biblical linguistic chaos that characterised the building of the Tower of Babel. Yes, I already said unrelated, but somehow, these two events make me shudder when I think about towers. But poetry has meaning whether the poet intentionally puts it there or not. So this poem will make meaning to the issue to which it relates and the person who identifies with its story line will find it someday. It was written for a slow, religious, questioning chant. Shall man dare play God?

The same poem "*Peasants*" by Syl Cheney exemplifies the cause of pain. The nature of the pain in this poem comes with a kind of deceit by the deceitful politicians and also neglect of these peasants when they assumed post. This brought anger to the poet. In the lines of the poem, he has disregarded the correct use of grammar in first-letter capitalisation except in the first and last lines...and even the last line has a second sentence that disregards the rule too. This is a statement of his anger; when people are angry; their respect for the rules is usually close to nothing. Cheney-Coker seems to bundle this long list of complaints for the politicians of Africa. He enumerates how they marshal these peasants at election time (line 8) and forget them at banquet nights; how they are treated like slaves, left in roach-infested shacks and being used as labour for the many luxuries that the politicians enjoy.

Oswald Mtshali's "*Nightfall in Soweto*", lines 35 -36 have given the possible way towards solving or stopping the pain which is by wishing for night not to come again and for day to always remain forever. It is believed that this killing always happened at nights and no one in that situation could have wished for night to come because an approaching night is a pain waiting to be inflicted.

*Why can't it be daytime?*

*Daytime forever more?*

The same thing goes with the poem about the peasants by **Syl Cheney-Coker** called "*peasants*", pain could be stopped in two ways, either people run out of patience and attack the politicians or the politicians start recognising them.

### 3. Poetic Devices in the Selected Poems

#### 3.1 *Nightfall in Soweto*

Poetic devices include simile, personification, metaphor, synecdoche, visual imagery, paradox, repetition and alliteration particularly with the word "nightfall" to give a dim, bleak connotation of life. This intensifies the message as the poem progresses.

The evil of "nightfall" is exemplified in the use of poetic devices such as the simile of "nightfall" being 'like a dreaded disease'. It is ironical that night which is supposed to bring peace is feared by people in Soweto. The natural role of night to bring rest to man after daily activities is rather replaced as the poet compares nightfall to a dreaded disease. Nightfall is here personified, giving to it the role of human capable of destroying and ravaging the town. Nightfall becomes a mask for criminals, when different inhumane crimes are committed. The image of a murderer with a dagger on his hands is created on Stanza 2.

The poet personae say he is the victim of this barbaric act. When night comes, the fear of his helplessness makes him hide. The poet personae are representations of all South Africans, who are the preys, while the white colonialists are the beasts. At the end of Apartheid, South Africa was rated having the highest violent crimes in the whole world. It was a society characterized by inhumanity to man, just as exemplified by the beast's attack of the prey. This is a metaphor that expresses the inhuman nature of man. Images of violence, destruction, fear,

insecurity are all created with a metaphoric framework. It has a lot of imagery and has a story behind it about a black man living in a shanty town fearing dark. Nightfall is like a representation of all the evil bad things that come out at night. This is one of the few poems that have remained fresh in my memory over the past seventeen years. The poem, to me, is a true mental picture of the inhumane apartheid system of administration. It is well written. The choice of words, the imagery and the metaphor gives the poem a clearer mental picture than a television screen.

The imagery experienced is one of terror and fear towards what the night can do to a person and how nowhere is safe regardless of how the victims of the night feel. This leads into the mood of the poem; as a poem aimed at displaying the racial inequality the mood replicates how the South Africans feel about the situation and causes the reader to be frozen with terror at the atrocities that are committed. "A murderer's hand" is a synecdoche a part that represents the whole the hand represents the whole dark, dangerous, murderous night; essentially, the night is a murderer.

### 3.2 Peasants

Svl Cheirev-Coke in "Peasant" identifies many points of "the agony" of the peasant which is Alliteration and illustrates singular experiences of these men left poor by their politicians, that makes for pondering. Line 2 "the agony of imagining their squalor but never knowing it" gives a picture of imagery Line 4 "the agony of treating them like chattel slaves" represents one of the metaphoric parts of the poem which is the simile.

### 3.3 Awareness and Words Clarification

Oswald Mtshali "Nightfall in Soweto", the choice of words in the poem is relatively simple; it is a very easy poem to comprehend. It is of eight unequal stanzas with dictions revealing fear and rages (tremble in line 28, ravaging in line 5, victim in line 9, marauding beasts in line 21; are prove of fear). Aside the personification in line 22-23, "let loose by cruel nightfall/ from his cage of death". The poem has an interesting figurative end (apostrophe in line 32 and rhetorical questions from line 34-36). He stated that other poetic devices in the poem are simile in line 1, alliteration in line 2, synecdoche in line 6-7, anaphora from line 16-18, litotes in line 26.

Symbolism where "cruel nightfall" is the symbol of the white oppressing the black, and prominent imageries in the poem such as (deafening knock, rabid dog, mortal enemy) Looking at the plot of the poem, the poem shows what the victims (the black) face whenever high appears at such time of discrimination and apartheid". This means that the nature of agony in this poem is racism, and the cause of agony is the racial killings that took place especially in the Night. He claimed that the oppressors use such dark period to launch attack on targeted victims; they even knock at victims' doors compelling them to open up. The poem creates a picture of Nightfall in South Africa during colonialism that Night became a period characterized by insecurity, fear and violence. It is ironical that night which is supposed to bring peace is feared by people in Soweto. The natural role of night to bring rest to man after daily activities is rather replaced as the poet compares nightfall to a dreaded disease. This disease, the poet says seep through the pores of a healthy body and ravaged it beyond repair.

Lines 24, 25, 35 and 36 Where is my refuge? Where am I safe? Why can't it be daytime? Daytime forever more? All gave solutions to the agony, such as options of leaving that troubled area, seeking refuge elsewhere to be saved from these racial killings, and even wishing for a never ending day light since night time was always a horrific night for them.

This poem has socio-ethic effects on the society which is interracial in nature.

The choice of words in 'peasant' by Mtshali is relatively simple, the poem is straight forward and easy to understand. At least the repetition of the word agony helps to give a picture of what the poem is all about. This poem is a protest poem which identifies with the downtrodden African peasant who does most of the work that drives his country yet paying him insignificant rewards, the nature of agony is neglect, deceit and many more. In the lines of the poem, Cheney-Coker identifies many points of "the agony" of the peasant which is an **Alliteration** and illustrates singular experiences of these men left poor by their politicians, that makes for pondering. In the lines of the poem, he has disregarded the correct use of grammar in first-letter capitalisation except in the first and last lines...and even the last line has a second sentence that disregards the rule too. This is a statement of his anger; when people are angry; their respect for the rules is usually close to nothing. Cheney-Coker seems to bundle this long list of complaints for the politicians of Africa.

#### 4. Conclusion

These selected poems in this study convey the feelings and sorrows of African society. The poets used symbols and imagery to pass their message but the analyses have helped reveal the underlying meanings of these poems. This study showed that these poems are a message about the ordeal that had happened to people of Africa in the past as it explains how the messages in these poems exposed the nature, cause of agony of African people with different themes and solution to the agony. The poems have the theme of brutality and injustice, theme of social unrest, theme of apartheid, theme of panic associated with night time attacks, theme of oppression and discrimination, theme of helplessness and lamentation, theme of racism, theme of bad politics, theme of neglect, theme of failed promises and so on.

In conclusion, this study has created awareness on the power of poetry in exposing or expressing the agony confronting Africans even on their land. There are reflected in the themes of the selected African poems in this study.

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