

MAN AND THE GEOMETRICAL PROGRESSION OF THE ENCUMBRANCE OF LIFE: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON J.P. CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S *ONCE AGAIN A CHILD*, R.A. MASAGBOR'S *SOLEMN CHANTS* AND TONY AFEJUKU'S *A GARDEN OF MOODS*

Clement Chukwuka Idegwu

English and Literary Studies Unit, Department of Languages
University of Delta, Agbor
Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

Humans begin their journey on earth with a cry, an indication of anguish and the inevitability of pains that will bedevil the entire pilgrimage. Like its commencement, the moment of cessation of this life's excruciating task could be likened to the marcabale dance of a lizard's tail when it is slashed off its parent's body. The whole exercise could be best described as the timely visitation of Nigerian herdsmen at regular intervals on a community of harmless and defenseless humans. The thrust of this article, therefore, is to explore the geography of pains, articulating the conspiracy against man and its inevitability. This will be screened through J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Once Again a Child*. R.A. Masagbor's *Solemn Chants* and Tony Afejuku's *A Garden of Moods*.

Keywords: Anguish, inevitability, visitation of Nigeria herdsmen, conspiracy, harmless and defenceless.

Introduction

This is where you win the battle,
in the playhouse of the mind (74)
Maxwell Maltz.

Life is a series of steps. Things are done gradually. Once in a while there is a giant step, but most of time we are taking small seemingly insignificant steps on the stairway of life (105) Ralph Ransom

It is indeed a truism to state that life is a journey in crises, an exercise in critical moments meant to be assessed, which though inevitable, remains surmountable when undergone with wisdom. The proportion of humans who navigate the ineluctable storms of life with the desired perspicuity remains very insignificant that one is compelled to ponder on why most human beings never bothered to search their yesterdays in order to understand their today and project their tomorrow. Ignorance can

never be an attribute, hence there is need to begin each day by deliberately asking oneself the things worth learning today that one did not know the previous day.

If life's journey begins with an agonizing cry, and the cessation of same like the macabre dance of a lizard's tail slashed off its parents body, life's battle field, the human mind should be well guided in order that the battle of life would be won with ease. The imperativeness of this position lies on the beauty of Maxwell Maltz and Ralph Ransom's postulations above that the battle of the encumbrance of life is won "in the playhouse of the mind" (74), and that "life is a series of steps. Things are done gradually" (105) respectively.

Maltz and Ransom's explications above as cited by Brain Tracy (2007) form an excellent plank on which to negotiate the discourse on man and the geometrical progression of the encumbrance of life.

Most humans are deluded that they do not

see the reality around them and lack the luster to live a life of integrity. Hence, they do not act in a way that ensures that each of their tomorrows finds them further their today progressively. Rather than allow their dead pasts remain in the tombs of life, they consciously exhume and act such as if their live depend on them.

Clark, Masagbor, and Afejuku in their poetry topic, demonstrate that men do not learn from the errors of their past, the lives of their progenitors, and great men who were able to leave their footprints on the cemented walls of history, as well as those whose ignoble lives were very repulsive.

The question has been why is man unable to come to the knowledge of his real identity, of his sameness with all permeating prudence and authority thereby making it impossible for him to have access to laws higher than the ordinary mind which will enable him to overcome the seeming conspiracy against him, and achieve the right results? Man seems to have been incapacitated from the genesis of his life, hence each step he takes is a progression of pains which makes him worthless. He seems not to bother about this stage, hence he deliberately encourages it. Perhaps we must agree with Abraham Lincoln as cited by Donard J. Trump (2009) when he posits that “I don’t think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday” (47).

The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate that man not only expands the geography of his pains, but ensures its regular upward review. The navigation of this discourse will be done through Clarks *Once Again a Child*, Masagbor’s *Solemn Charts* and Afejuku’s *A Garden of Moods*

Textual Analysis.

In our analysing of Clark-Bekederemo’s poems, it is expedient to explain that he sees man’s earthly pilgrimage as a journey in pains. He seems to align with Salman Rushdie’s postulation that man at birth is “tumbled forth into the world” (3).

Rushdie’s major character in the perforated sheet of his book *Midnight Children* in agony states further:

There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his toe; but his accident was a mere trifle, when set besides what had befallen me in the benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3).

In Clark – Bekederemo’s “My Grandmother Konono”, one sees how man compounds his problems. The narrative persona tells the readers that konono was “twice widow to father and son,/Adomi and Amakashe” (2). Man’s greatest problem is choice. Why will a son get married to his father’s wife at his demise? What unimaginable pleasure does he expect to find in that which must have killed his father? And when the son died, the “twice widow” lived for decades. What a world?

The poet, earlier in the poem explains the pain at birth, a journey one begins in great mental anguish thus:

That was the day she rose full first
Into my view, pulling me as it were,
out of the darkness of my childhood
Against which I must have been
Struggling, I was told, right from
the moment
I was born, crying, as if protesting.
The event, which I now know I had
Good cause like everyman to be
afraid of. (2).

If the narrative persona, like everyman begins life on planet earth like this, and remains conscious of the enormity of the intrigues involved, one would have expected a journey loaded with caution. But rather than this, what one sees is one of multiple

errors where a son will joyfully marries his father's wife at his demise and soon die while the "twice widow" lived for decades.

Konono's grandchild who incidentally is the narrator of this poem tells us that more than fifty years after his mothers explanation, he could still not puzzle the grandmother's corpse out. He further explains how tired and worn out he is:

I told them to leave my grandmother
Alone, asking, Doesn't the body
Tire one? How self and body are
Separate, and one tires of the other
I then could not have known, nor am I
sure
I do today, now I, too, an tired and
worn

"In father in his tribute,:" the reader is confronted with man in agony right from birth and the monumental progression of pains as we see in "My Grandmother Konono". The persona narrates that

... with my mother now
Nursing my sister Tiro and
Owumieta, both dead before I was
six,
And being no longer with my
grandmother,
Taken from me at two in another
place,
I began to have, even when in the
middle
of a game in those crowded
compounds,
Full of laughter and fights,
A feeling of being lost in a fair. (15)

The narrator lost two of the siblings at the age of six and the grandmother at two, and that grief become a permanent appendage in life. The parents, most especially the mother who knows labour pains are grief ridden. It is a sad thing for ones childhood to be buffed with tragic incidents such as the lost of loved ones. Hence, "he began to have... a feeling of being lost," but not found, a feeling he has to live with all through life.

The same idea is Clark – Bekederemo's dominant feature in "When My Father Fell ill, "A

Certain Guest" and "Early Cases of Death". Humans in their senselessness and self-deceit fail to understand that in Nigeria, and "elsewhere, men would have to make their peace with the world which they knew existed beyond the faith" (429) as V.S. Naipaul (1982) puts it in *Among The Believers An Islamic Journey*. They fail to make those they come across in life happier than they meet them. Hence, as Clark-Bekederemo puts it "one person's pain is dead wood to others". (16).

... when My father, who could not take
A sick wife, fell ill himself
His wives felt it down to their children,
And the cry would go up to
His mother, miles away in
Another, land (16)

One is daily grieved when one realises that man who was tumbled forth into this world, and gets inundated in his infancy with pains that gracelessly adore his pilgrimage, compounds it by being polygamous, having not "less than five" (16) wives, deliberately fails to love them equally due to pretense of the politics of polygamy, is abandoned to his mother when ill. The question is, what on earth will make a man gather ant-infested wood in preparation for the winters of life. The narrator talks about thus:

The big strong man of the house,
Seated in his room, steaming
In his sweat, his polo shirt
Stucked to his skin, and every time
The fit of that feaver took
Him by his head to his feet,
From even where I sat, my head,
Swollen with fear, which had
Everyone there cold, the cement floor
Seemed to shake deep down under
me (17)

In *Early Cases of Death*", and "A Certain Guest," the poet gets his readers deluged with the agony of existence. In "Early Cases of Death" the narrator states:

... in my father's house
Of many wives, from time to time,
I heard my mother or a mate,

Crying aloud for help, not
Because of any beating from
My father, fierce before his forties
But for the life of a child,
Like me, lying still on the ground
who she would not let some men...
Crowding around her, bear off
To the bush, as a bundle in a mat (19)

The poet is very explicit about the causes of pains in the house. The poet talks about beatings of the many wives and children by the violent and aggressive father of the house which may have resulted from the quarrels between the many wives, and children, and the trauma of being a polygamist and deaths which may have been caused by any of the above factors among other things .

In “The Reasons Why” the clue to man’s affliction and the geometrical progression of the encumbrances of life seem graphically displayed more than the proceeding poems. He states that the problems are endemic because men have failed to learn from their mistakes and that of their progenators.

My father took tough line
With his first set of children, ...
So they would grow to become
The brothers he did not have.
In a big, divided house
To which he was heir, just as
His father fought him always .
In public, to save him from
The gates, belching fire around (29)

Here, the poet talks about a polygamous home where envy reigns and love does not exist. The poetic persona’s father and grandfather are symbols of polygamy. A critical examination of their lineage will show that the great grandfathers and their forebears were polygamists who had suffered the calamities involved, and would have wished their sons avoid their pitfalls. He explains that the grandfather fought his father always, even in public just to save him from “the gates, belching fire around” (29). The belching of fire, troubles, bewitching of any mate’s sons who may be heir

apparent at the demise of their husband, among other things, the poet likens to the eruption of a volcano and the attendant destruction.

The poet in “A Tale in the land” tries to explicate the degree of division, hatred, deaths and other forms of evil for which a father would have wished the son shuns polygamy and other very costly mistakes made by him and his forebears which he would not allow his sons to make. It reads.

I had a piece of yam hot in my hand,
And already wet, a mouth full of it...
Back to that of my father...
At once into one voice of horror,
Demanding to know where I got and
how I got
The piece of yam, and who gave it to
me,
While my poor mother grappled and
disgorged
It from my hand and month (20)

It will be beautiful to imagine how his mother perhaps with the dexterity of a Boko Haram, holding the throat of the son trying to make him forcefully expel whatever piece of yam that may be found in his mouth. Even the answer that came:

From a wife from the other place,
Then also eating her own piece of yam
As she pledged her act was one of love
(20).

This would be disregarded for only few of such acts are truly acts of love in every polygamy where no woman wants other males children to be better than hers. These doubts and insincerity become very glaring as one critically analyses “Time for prayers”.

My father had a wife when
Another wife lost a child,
That was the time she prayed
Aloud to God to fasten her own
Children, tighter still to her back (36).

Clark-Bederemo is well known for his concern for man’s peace on the earth hence his poems are journeys in pains. Roman N. Egudu (1977) speaks of Clark-Bederemo thus:

Grief, Chaos, insecurity, and irredeemable loss are the hallmarks of the deftly woven fabric that is Clark's poetry. A tragic vision of life pervades his poems. ...Clark remains negative throughout his poetry, but all the same he addresses the whole of humanity as did Dante ... The tragedy of Clark's African man can therefore be viewed as that of any man anywhere else in the world, and the ugliness of the world of his poetry spills through the frontiers of the African world to reflect and link with the universal horror of life (25 - 26).

The poet who begins his *Once Again a Child*, a beautiful explication of how men consciously complicate and endanger their lives and that of their loved ones within the family unit, never mince words in stating that men are impervious to correction. The first line of the first poem in the collection reads "Tell me, before the ferryman's return" (v), an indication of pains. The last poem of the Collection titled "A Second Coming" has the following lines

"Okemeje, Okemeje, hear me...
To you my brother! Awake, awake,
awake,
And come home to your own! All the land
Knew well you were like no other around,
And therefore by plot of men, fearful
Of you, they had to take you out, right at
The outset of the great journey before you.
Now that you have come back as this child
In my arms, let destiny, denied
You then, be at last fulfilled, as you chose
At first, when coming into this world"
(71-72)

The poet here talks about men terminating people's lives due to envy. Men kill whoever they see as a better person, instead of begging the perceived better being to help them improve themselves. Okemeji was killed at the outset of the great journey of life.

Having done an analyses of how Clark-Bekederemo expounds or explicable man and the

geometrical progression of the encumbrances of life, it is necessary to state that Masagbor in *Solemn Chants*, a second test for this analysis, aligns with this people's posit that man creates problems for himself because he is mischievous, impervious to correction, and unwilling to do the needful, hence his life remains an endless drama of pains from generation to generation.

The first line of the poem "The Baton" states: "you refused my batton" (38). The word, 'refused' in Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary means "to declare oneself unwilling to do what one has been asked to or told to do, etc to say 'no'" (1172). The unwillingness to do what one has been told to do is a resultant effect of being stubborn or the task not being in tune with ones posture on the issue at stake. The question is, why will the child refuse the baton? What is the nature of the batton? Is it ideal for the child to refuse? Is the call detrimental? What are the consequences of such refusal? As readers ponder on these questions, the poet further states:

And chose to run your race,
Ere we had got set for it
You turned the table, the order
changed
Leaving all startled and speech
bereft,
What happened son for we'd struck a
cord. (38)

The death of the son in the above poem leaves the reader with a lot of "unsearchable secrets" (38) which need to be fathomed out. Readers need to ponder on how the said cord was breached. Was it a forced agreement? The fact that an agreement was reached and broken, the plank on which it was, not withstanding, shows that there has been a progression of agonies and those involved must have been hurt. Hence, that status quo was not maintained, and never will, with the demise of one of the partners.

In "Many Partings," the poet further tells his readers that grief is man's greatest companion:
I have seen many partings

But none as this, when Kenny
Unannounced, was spirited to
the unknown
I have seen many partings but
None as gory, as when
innocence was mangled.
I have seen many partings
But none so hurting, calling the
eyes to tears
Of compassion, the cry of
injustice
The call of the able disabled
without a fight (37)

The readers finds it disturbing that each successive parting is dealier them the former as it leaves tremendous afflictions than the initial one. The partings become highly disturbing when they are frequent and spiced than their daily meals. Indeed, what a gory scene to see the innocence mangled and the able disabled every minute.

In “Morning Awareness,” and “The York of Pains”, the poet probes further in his attempt to comprehend the misery of life. He laments the death of a son, like he has done in some of the poems analysed already:

I take a peep at the room
It’s hollow and empty
Only the phantom I feel I see,
Son, if truly the dead lives...
I looked into the vista of years...
That proved so lethal, so fatal in later
times
Garry, I’m dazed with disbelief
At the reality that you are gone
Why? What went wrong? (35)

And what went wrong lies in ourselves. Paul S. Buck as cited by Donald J. Trump (2009) states that “if you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday”. (35). Sigmund Freud as cited by George Seldes (1985) Corroborates Buck when he opines that: Life as we find it is too hard for us, it entails too much pain, too many disappointments, impossible tasks. We cannot do without palliative remedies... (144)

This is why men ought to adhere to Buck’s argument and take a detailed study of the yester years, understand their today and put things right in order to maximize the knowledge to create an environment where life is meaningful and death comes when men have aged gracefully and very much willing to go to God. Freud’s argument for palliative measures at least is good for though “the goal of all life is death,” and, casting back,” (144) as Freud magnanimously adds, it is a thing of joy for fruits to be ripe before they fall.

In “The Yoke of pain,” the reader is confronted with:

Oh Lord...
You taught us to see the child
As heavenly gift to love
A gift of loyalty or
Was it a gift to taunt us? ...
Yet Lord you tore him off.
Mindless of the hearts pained with
grief (34)

Masagbor, the poet, who “is married with children, one of whose demise is responsible for the dept of emotion in some of the poems” in the collection, shares the pains of Joy Swift and her husband when her family experienced “The Very Depths of Despaire” (17) as she calls it in her book *When Death Isn’t Fair*, According to her:

Five days later we buried our children by order of age, Steven, 14, Gregory. 12, Tonya, 3, and Stacy 17 months. But the tragedy was not yet over.
Our eldest daughter Stephanie, 17, lay in a hospital bed the night Billy had gunned down her brothers and sisters. Twenty days later her six-week-long battle with cancer ended, and we laid her to rest besides the other four. Within a span of three weeks our family of seven had diminished to just George and me. Enormous grief engulfed the days and weeks that followed (14-15)

Imagine burying five children of the same parents

within a span of three weeks. Imagine the murderer of four of the five children, being “a 14 – year – old boy who had played with our son, Greg. His accomplice, 20 – year – old. Richard, Jr., didn’t even, know the children’s name” (14). Imagine the murderer “Billy Dyer had bragged about his plan to steal guns from our house and that he would kill anyone who got in his way.” (14) Imagine being told later that “the authorities revealed that Billy had a juvenile record in two states and had attempted murder before. He had planned to use the guns to go on a killing spree until he got caught” (14) He bragged and did carry out his ungodly act. And the powers or government that ought to have stopped him allowed the unwanton destruction of lives. Imagine being a victim of this horrendous storm or watching helplessly as it sweeps through a family. This kind of pain must have informed Masagbor’s accusation:

Yet Lord you tore him off
Mindless of the hearts pained
with grief. (34)

Masagbor, angered by the mindless tearing off, of loved ones, tries to probe the heartlessness of the divine “for the yearning for one gone before his time/ leaves a yearning for later fellowship beyond” (39) as posited in “The summon” one of Masagbor’s Songs of Pains. What joy lies in a situation where a life is terminated before mid-day in order to make those left behind to grieve and long for fellowship beyond, either to appease one who tears off heartlessly, or to live a happier life.

Having done with two of the three poets whose collections form the basis of this investigation of the vista of pains, and men’s inability to minimize it because man is impervious to correction, it becomes expedient to explore Afejuku’s position on the matter. Afejuku’s exploration of the theme of the encumbrances of life could be seen from his thematic construct on the death of loved ones, the effects on those left behind and his note of finality that not only does grief lingers, it progresses geometrically.

The first poem in his *Garden of Moods* – “Fear of unrealised Ambition” explicates this feeling. Infact the entire poems in the first section of the collection titled “these elegies’ espouse grief, its lingering effects and multiplications and how it affects the individuals. It is on record that the demise of loved ones, creates installmental deaths in the living. In “Fear the Unrealised Ambition” the poetic persona states:

Come, see him in this thought’s flight
In the river of creation which is life
He sees himself as drowned:
All his dreams and hopes are gone...
Himself not realising the thing of his
life!
To achieve a little thing is the labour of
ages
He takes his exit by licking the
hemlock-
O better not to live at all, if this is life
(3)

From this first poem, the poet articulates what poets form ancient time in all climes inundate their world with trying to figure how best to minimise the monumental increase of pains. A.E. Eruvbetine’s (2009) postulation that “literature captures the human-being-in-action simultaneously absorbs and fabricates reality through experiencing”. The fabricated realities serve as a lamp, illuminating the paths of the People. Brar B.S., and Sukhde Singh (2011) in their article talk about “the relationship between the dead and the living and act as being a communal and socially functional activity” (471) It is also worth mentioning that in Africa, ancestors are seen as the basis for morality. They are mentors and historians of the land. Infact the first mentor of the people. Afejuku ends the above mentioned poem, stating that it is better you do not live than:

To live and carry dreams that mock
You to your unwilling grave (3)

If men’s ancestors are mentors and historians, and the people, the mentee live and make the mistakes

made by the mentor and even more, it then means something is really wrong. Why will a people or community keeps living and dreaming dreams that indeed mock them to an unwilling grave if not their being impervious to corrections.

In “Timi”, the persona talks about the demise of a friend which makes him cry each dawn for fourteen days.

Baba, it is Timi, my friend, he is dead.
Poisoned
He died sixteen nights ago. Temi whose father and mother
Died on the road, not quite three months now leaving him a handsome legacy.

The impediments to the attainment of life ambitions, and aging gracefully are indeed numerous and within every being. Readers are inundated with how much pains, Timi’s death has caused his friend. Readers got involved in the trauma, sympathizing and empathizing when they know that

Timi’s life was shot by his wife whom he ‘for-better-for-worsed’
Barely one month before his father and mother died.
The hyena tricked his life with dainty porridge for the legacy (6)

There is a deliberate attempt by the poet to demonstrate how much pains people experience when evil befalls them or their loved ones. A man was shot or killed by his wife whom he wedded in a colourful ceremony in the church. What a very high degree of pretended love. It becomes very painful and disturbing when one realises that after killing him with “dainty porridge”, and ensuring the death of his parents, barely a month after, the hyena, she is laid claim to the legacy of the family “daring any of Timi’s siblings to come near” (6). It also agonises to realise that Timi has no faithful siblings” who could sue her for treachery and murder, and that Timi and this hyena wife had:

For a long time played and danced

and swam

In each other’s affection before
They went to the Roman Church
that glued them... (7)

The question is why will a man choose one who will kill him? Why will God even create such a being? There are so many whys’. No reader goes through this fabricated reality without taking a quick look at his back as if there was a security alert. The poem makes readers pale with pains as the burden of trust increases geometrically every day.

Idegwu (2011) talks about man’s hopelessness as his life is bedeviled by the encumbrances of life that multiplies astronomically every second. According to him, Afejuku tries to “depict man as being toast into the world incapacitated by its creator, and circumstances around him, even before the commencement of his earthly mission, and absolutely left without a choice for the choice he is claimed to make on earth are the choices made for him by forces he cannot comprehend which hold him hostage eternally” (79). Though this paper agrees with Idegwu’s explanation, there is need to state that man’s choice which grinds him to a halt is due to his not being prepared to study his yesterday. He deliberately ignores his yesterday, the lessons he should have learnt from the lives of his forebears hence he even makes worst mistakes than those before him. Idegwu’s assertion above helps the reader to appreciate Afejuku’s frame of mind in his A Garden of moods. In “Death”, the last poem in that collection, the readers find a call on death to come immediately without delay:

Death, come for me now.
Come and claim me –
I am yours
Now that I am yet to be known
You’ve taken too may
People dear to lose
Worse more, at the
Pinnacle of their fame
Why the world needs them

More than you (51)

The poet's argument here is that death should come when one is yet to be known or successful. He abhors death calling, refusing, and dragging one when one is thriving. He also frowns at death calling when one has committed so much evil that makes him a hell candidate. In his words, So come, come now, That I'm most prepared (51)

Conclusion

The legacy of our parents and ancestors influences each of us in different ways. Unlike many people my age, I am acutely aware of my family's past. It has for me proven both overwhelming and motivating, burdening and uplifting. I wonder how I would have reached if I had come up against the obstacles that so many of my relatives had struggled to overcome...

Our era as well as our legacies shape us... (x)

Jonah Martin Edelman's (1991) postulation above in his foreword to his mother's book: *The Measure of Our Success, A Letter to My Children and Yours* is very relevant as I sum up this discourse on men and the geometrical progression of pains. If man has allowed his

ancestors' legacies, and the era in which he lives to shape him positivity, he would have suffered lesser pains than his fore bearers.

The three poets, used for this analyses are explicit enough in their explications of man and his dilemma. Man needs to understand and appreciate the fact that in life the consequences of man's actions often come first and the lessons later on or afterwards if man is alive to learn it. This is very much unlike Colleges where students got their lessons from their teachers first before being examined on how well they had truly learned. This is why it is expedient for one to be careful on one choice. No man should repeat the errors of his forebears. This is what the poets in this discourse have tried to educate the readers.

In conclusion, it is necessary to stress that where one is at present is not very important. What matters now is in what direction one intends to move. Let the postulations of these augurs in this study shape mans actions from now in order to absolutely minimize pains. This is because it is only when man is able to make himself that he can make his world. Perhaps man can do himself some good if he takes Abraham Lincoln's postulation to heart. To him "I don't think much of a man who is not wiser than he was yesterday".

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