

## AUDIENCE-CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN POETRY

<sup>1</sup>Azan Baba James, <sup>2</sup>Philip, Daniel Mole, <sup>3</sup>Shehu Ibrahim Ahmad

Department of English

Faculty of Arts

Nasarawa State University, Keffi Nigeria

### Abstract

Since African poetry emanates from the socio-political schisms bedeviling the African cosmos, contemporary African poetry has seen a shift from exclusive euro-modernist tradition of obscurantism, ‘syntactic jugglery’ which obfuscates the assimilating capacity of the common man. The aesthetics of the shift is obviously evident in the simplistic language of its medium of instruction; the infiltration of oral traditions; the special place created for the peasants in the reading and relish of poetry. Ultimately, this essay reveals, through critical comments on the poetry of the euro-modernist poets and that of Niyi Osundare’s generation, who are audience-conscious, evident in the simplified language of their poetry for the apt understanding of the layman, that the masses enjoy the poetry written in workaday English, while a selected few relish the one produced with convoluted syntax and complex imagery. After creating these dialectics, the researcher concludes that, though minimalism appeals to a vast majority of audience, poetry should not be made to yield recklessly to craftlessness, or be reduced to poetry of ‘unaesthetic’ prose statement.

**Keywords:** Contemporary African Poetry, audience-consciousness, minimalism, pidgin, Euro-modernist.

### Introduction

The audience is a vital aspect to be taken into close consideration in communication. It is of utmost importance to consider many variables as they concern the audience, who are expected to be recipients of the message intended by any given writer. The level of education, experience, age, among other things, are often ever taken into critical consideration, or else the whole enterprise would be misconstrued, and communication plunged into a fiasco. Thus, any writer who desires to be widely read and understood, must painstakingly select his diction and style appropriately to suit prospective audience.

It must be acknowledged strictly, nonetheless, that no writer, however obfuscating, obscure, deliberately or otherwise, is stripped of the sense of an audience. In this vein, the first generation of Nigerian poets: Wole Soyinka, Okigbo, and Clark, whose esoteric and complex poetics is elusive of commonplace people, and even some elite, had their audiences in mind. However, it is clear-cut that they wrote not for the consumption of the common man, or for profit-making. Though considerably obscure they are,

they remain archetypes to those whose interest lies sea-deep in aesthetics, and same, who read for transport, and are particularly interested in the sublimity of art, especially poetry as it had been since the time of pope and early on.

To broach a discourse on this, it is imperative to reproduce the livid, no less sentimental outlook and censure of the maverick, eccentric critic, Chinweizu Ibikwe and his soul-mates, interred in the farthest plane of the dearth of ideology. Commenting on what they pigeonholed ‘incomprehensible’ Eurocentric poetic style of the first generation of Nigerian poets, they ridiculously assert that:

...the poetry of the Ibadan-Nsukka Poets tends to be craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificially difficult. Simple ideas are often deliberately clothed in esoteric idiom (IGB).

This they believe to be over-indulgent, elusive, privatist and alienating, because their audience is limited and the barely literate persons cannot read and consume the substance of their poetry. This is further accentuated by Thomas Inyabri when he

asserts that theirs is a “willful obscurity”, privatism, and abstractness (Cited in Alu, Nesther Nachafiya, 64).

This problem led to ardent demands and open agitations for authentic African imagery, laments, invocations and the re-rooting of modern poetry in oral traditions. The new breed poets principally sought to demystify African poetry through the simplification of its language and the shift to the prominent use of traditional imagery and oral tradition, which a vast majority of African construe maximally. Commenting on the new trend as seen in the poetry of Ojaide and his contemporaries, Abdu Saleh affirms that:

Osundare’s poetic style marks him as a representative voice of the group. Through a studied critique and reworking of language of their predecessors, Osundare leads the group in their tacit task of liberating and demystifying the business of poetry to many readers. As language and language use lie in the essence of poetry, African poetry can only gain, its distinctive voice quality by the degree to which its language-African or borrowed European- is shaped and reflected in local African experience” (49).

Obi Maduakor, another important voice in Nigerian poetry, however, believes that the new direction in the language of poetry has to do with the Nigerian civil war. The emergent style and the themes of their poetry tended to address the new socio-political and economic realities of the nation. He asserts that “a new attitude in language — the war revolutionized the attitude to language of Nigerian poetry imbued it with new energy, a new direction and a new urgency. (49).

#### **Audience Consciousness in Contemporary African Poetry**

The emergence of the second generation of Nigerian poets surfaced and provided an answer to the riddles supposedly posed by the Afro-Euro-modernist triad. Ojaide’s poem ‘Naked Words’ does not only acknowledge the place of the audience; he also pours out his mind on what should constitute authentic African verse and the need to decolonise it. He is of the conviction that words used in constructing African should be plain ‘naked’ and altogether accessible. He divulges that:

This is a family ceremony

to which the world has come,  
If outsiders understand us  
let them imbibe our wisdom and secrets  
but we will not change our songs  
because of their presence,  
we will not sing their songs here  
to show that we have heard them  
sing about themselves,  
Let us not learn from teachers  
who have no love for our land.  
We must speak the truth  
about ourselves to ourselves.  
Without interpreters, middlemen.  
(Cited in Nachafiya, 64)

This is echoed by Osundare when he queries vividly in his socially committed temper that “are we supposed to read it or toss it back to the shelves in endless desperation” (Cited in Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi, 249). For him, poetry should talk to and for the suffering masses, who need to be aware of their plight and challenge the institutions responsible: for their state. For instance, Osundare sets out in *Songs of the Marketplace* to redefine poetry as “a life spring/which gathers timbre/ the more throats it plucks/harbingers of action /the more minds it stirs”(1). The poet rejects the earlier preconceived exclusive and obscure nature of African poetry. The poet quickly reworks the equation that amounts to African poetry, restating its nature, its dimension and acceptable medium as he emphasizes accessibility to its target audience. Apparently more reassuring and comforting to an erstwhile estranged audience, the poem poetry illustrates this new posture:

Poetry is  
No oracles kernel  
For sole philosopher’s stone  
Poetry  
Is  
Man  
Meaning  
To  
Man (1-2).

Similarly, in a lucid language, Osundare’s “forest Echoes”, condemns the unholy realities of social decadence, moral atrophy, potential gambit and disappearing laughters in the face of humanity and

equates the contemporary imperfections and impermanence to the flora, the disappearing trees and the forests, arising from man's cruelty to his environment. The poet's concern for those trees takes him to the forest, where there is a picture of beheaded habitat, through the outright artificial destruction of these essences by man. Osundare shows his discomfort about how the flourishing forests of old times have now undergone some very unhealthy transformation. In simple language he laments that:

A forest of million trees, this  
a forest of milling trees,  
wounded, though by time's axe  
and the greedy edges of Agbegilodo's  
matchet. (5)

What supporters of this school find more thrilling and fascinating is the poets "...unapologetic and assertive use of African myths, folklore, proverbs and speech patterns derived from their oral literary traditions" (Terhomba Shija, 254) and familiar idioms and imagery, which fraternise them with especially local audiences.

Ojaide censures complex poetic style and lends fervent credence to syntactic minimalism, because of his conviction that only through such style will the vast majority of the masses be carried along as they will be able to decipher the semantic implications of symbols and images and the general idea being put forward by the poet. And since the so-called esoteric, elitist, obscurantist style of the threesome: Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark, supposedly alienates even a great number of the elite, poetry realised as a compromise between low and high art will yield itself quite easily to all literate members of a stratified and bedevilled society. In the poem "Labyrinths of the Delta" Ojaide leaves no reader in doubt about his minimalism:

We took off without thought of where we were going...  
And paths opened for our anxious feet  
It was not for fun men and women split from bed...  
We rushed into the vast night  
Living not in our homes  
But caravaned in hope. (23)

"Ojaide's language is narrative, simple and direct, telling the story of people under siege" (Tayo Olafioye, 10), and it appeals to both local and foreign audiences as the message does not need an

interpreter for proper understanding. But the case is sure to vary relatively and substantially when juxtaposed with Soyinka's "Ulysses" which says:

It turns on quest cycles, to track a skein  
Of self through eyeless veils, stumble on warps  
Endure the blinds of spidery distortions, till  
Swine-scented folds and caressing tunnels  
Come to crossroads at the straits, between  
Vaginal rocks.

Obviously, the above excerpt is almost incomprehensible to the average reader, and the only justification for such complexity, beyond the matter of ideology, is Donatus Nwoga's conviction that:

It would be naive, however, to think that because the poems (of the Euro-modernist poets) are written by fellow Africans, they should be understood, appreciated and enjoyed immediately and without any effort by the African readers. No writing of any value can yield its beauties so easily to any reader. We know, for example that the English have been writing books upon books to help themselves understand their own poets. We must be ready to work for our enjoyment and our mental and emotional development (iii).

But essentially, however, poets must pay critical attention to the vast majority of the barely literate populace in Africa, or else the ultimate essence of his communication to the audience, especially, that of this present generation, will be defeated with such elegant linguistic construction and almost unfamiliar imagery.

It is believed that the language of committed poetry must be disambiguated, categorically straightforward, commonplace- almost without any embellishment. In his substantiation of this proposition, Aderemi Bamikunle remarks that contemporary African poetry, especially that of the generation that preceded the troika:

...is socially committed on the side of the underprivileged. As such it is to avoid all forms of elitism in language use by being accessible. As a corollary, his subjects will be down-earth as he avoids such metaphysical flights of the imagination of the elitist poetry of his predecessors. (35)

He believes that accessibility should be the hallmark of any committed poetry, since it is designed to struggle for a better society for the

downtrodden in society. This evident in the poem “Advice” in *Village Voices*, where he say:

To yourself  
Friend, be true  
You farm a hundred yams  
And you tell us it is two hundred  
Alright  
After eating a hundred yams  
You will eat a hundred lies.(42)

The above poem does not require any interpreter; a ‘cypherpunk’ to decode its meaning to even the less than average reader, because he or she can tell without any difficulty whatsoever, that the poem is making a commentary on deceit; the deceptive nature of our politicians.

Osundare, in “The Villager Protest”, again makes his usual social commentary using workaday expressions. What is fundamentally fascinating about the poem, is the poet’s consciousness of his audience. Using familiar diction and imagery, he reveals in unequivocal term the deceptive nature of the politicians, who come during electioneering, telling the masses that:

We’ll build schools  
We’ll build hospitals...  
We’ll give the farmer  
The best for his sweat  
And make poverty  
A thing of the past. (47)

But upon winning their elections, they eccentrically transmogrify into tyrants and oppressors of the masses, who elected them into power and breaking every single promises made during campaigns. Hence, they engage in all sorts of immoral life-style: they become promiscuous and squander lavishly and prohibitively their constituency allowances on their personal and worthless needs. They become new men, whose faces can no longer be seen on the streets but only their cars are seen when they “they thunder through the streets/and/our dust -laden mats announce the departure of the man of power”. (48).

According to Agema, modern African poets, especially the generation after the first a high level of social commitment, averring that “their commitment is much that even their words and language used in writing bears the trademark of dedication” (Agerna 2008).

The need to reach out to wider and varied

audiences is significantly a driving force behind the introduction of Pidgin as a medium of communication in contemporary Africa. And also because Pidgin is a pejorative language and associated with the low social group, hence the language of commitment to the suffering masses. Since any literate, semi-literate African person understands Pidgin, poetry rendered in this medium will appeal to a vast majority of Africans and he will be able to pick up a book of verse and read to his relish. And beyond the African audience, the West can also read and get the messages of such pieces. As Peter Onwudinjo posits:

Pidgin is the language of West African urban cities where millions of Nigerians from various linguistic backgrounds dwell and eke out a marginal living. Pidgin is the highway to the Nigerian urban poor audiences most of whom do not read and write. Pidgin poetry yields its meaning without undue tasking of the intellectual resources of the reader. Just as the rendition of folktale captures the attention of an audience in the hands of an experienced raconteur, so does a creative performer of pidgin poetry capture the attention of the listening audience in the motor park, market place. Because pidgin is so powerful, and reaches a wider local audience... (vii).

In contemporary times, Pidgin has become one of the accepted mediums of writing poetry. It has been accepted as a viable language capable of sustaining works of literature. Ohaeto remarks that “it is clearly this capability of pidgin to sustain works of literature — since it is a language that bridges orality, a language that absorbs several cultural elements as it communicates- which has made it yield creative possibilities for the Nigeria poet (25).

For instance, Ezenwa Ohaeto, writes most of his poetry in pidgin, and he is able to capture a wider audience because of his consciousness. He tells us in the “I Wan Bi President” that:

I never see president hungry  
I never see president thirsty  
President no go worry for road  
Police no go stop am for checking  
President no go worry for house

Na government cook dey prepare food  
Na government dry cleaner dey wash cloth  
Na government driver dey drive motor  
Na him make I wan bi president (57).

Using simple pidgin, he exposes the tyrannical and selfish nature of our leaders. He exposes the weaknesses, carefree and insensitive nature of our presidents who are power drunk. He satirizes their inhuman treatment of their citizens:

President dey go where e like  
President dey do wetin e like  
If president wan travel  
Na siren dey clear road  
Dem cley param param piroo piroo  
Every car go run comot for road too  
Na president dey pass for road (58).

The poet has never seen a president walk ten miles, and they are fundamentally free from all social travails and sufferings. The presidents' servants are well to do; their wives are very happy and their children are accorded with preferential treatment. All these luxuries and high degree of comfort triggered his quest to be president. The interesting thing about the diction of this poem is its simplistic nature, and its ability to carry every literate African person along and even western users of English.

Asika Ikechukwu Emmanuel posits that, with the use of the Pidgin language, our poets create poetry very familiar to the woman in the market, a palm-wine tapper on a tree, a fisherman in a boat and a weary tout smoking under the mango tree on a hot dizzy day. The Pidgin language speaks to their people and speaks for them too, since poet write for the people and their conditions (96).

In tandem with the idea and call to decolonizing the Africa poetry from many and

Euro-modernist modes and conventions of poetry making; in the quest to address a wider audience other than the Nigerian environment yet retaining the local imageries, ideas and worldviews peculiar to the Nigerian people but alien to the Western world; and in the task of finding the equivalent of thoughts and replacement of native ideas in the African environment without losing their beauties and sense of originality, Pidgin poetry has come to serve as the bridge between these two great divides, creating poetry in the beauty of the native language and still appealing and making a sense to non-natives of the language (98).

### Conclusions

It is obvious that complex poetic style alienates a vast majority of audience, but that of a minimalist kind avails itself and yields it meaning considerably easily to a large number of the audience. Beyond this, is the supposition that simplified diction and commonplace imagery, as well as oral traditions betray more commitment relative to the obscure, hence virtually incomprehensible style, which seemingly, is meant for the consumption of a selected few in society. But then again, we must, in our quest to appeal to a wider audience, remember to reflect on the disjunction between poetry and other genres of literature and also ensure that we do not produce artless art; poetry of prose statement, all because we want to be widely read. Noteworthy is the fact that both form and content are fundamental to art, especially poetry. In all, we must endeavour to produce poetry that is a compromise between high and low to create equilibrium and be able to sustain the interest of both those on the upper and lower rungs of the ladder of social mobility.

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