

**NIGERIAN PIDGIN POETRY AS PROTEST LITERATURE AGAINST  
DICTATORSHIP, CORRUPTION AND EXPLOITATION: AN INTERPRETATION  
OF EZENWA-OHAETO'S IF TO SAY I BI SOJA**

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**Abstract**

The main objective of all poets is to communicate a message. The emergence of Pidgin poetry in the Nigeria literary sphere, especially in the early ninety-eighties, introduces a new poetic revolution against conventionally Western influenced poetry championed by the first generation of Nigerian poets better known as 'Euro-Modernist poets'. Their poetry is Western-oriented, whilst the second generation of Nigerian poetry, is geared towards a people oriented, because they want to effectively communicate Africa's poetic vision and African realities, to a wider audience so that the necessary message of poetry could be decipher even by the common man. This paper is set against this background to explicate particularly Ezenwa-Ohaeto's new kind of poetry written in Pidgin English, to protest against dictatorship, corruption, and exploitation, which has been militating against socio-political stability and economic posterity of Nigeria since independence. This paper further shows that Ohaeto Pidgin poems is to bridge orality so that the not-too-educated and downtrodden Nigerian masses can decipher and enjoy the art of poetry, thus awakening their consciousness on the socio-political realities, to enable them to identify and elect patriotic leaders who will bring the desired socio-political and economic change they have been yearning for since 1960 or so. This paper, therefore, concludes that the analysed Pidgin poems in *If To Say I Bi Soja*, identifies dictatorship, corruption, deceit, and exploitation as obstacle to good governance hence Ohaeto ultimate goal is to motivate mass revolt through his rhetoric and mob appeal for a better Nigeria.

**Keywords: orality, poet, pidgin English, Nigeria.**

**Introduction**

Since Nigeria gained political independence in the 1960, the national affairs of the country have been characterised by social injustices and socio-political pandemonium. These national upheavals are caused by most of its political leaders who have find pleasure in the peril corruption thus exhibited gross ineptitude in the management of the political affairs in the country. Both military and civilian leaders have records of distorting the electoral process via rigging of elections, thuggery, imposition of candidates and all forms of political manipulation in order to cling to power for as long as they are alive. It was this unfortunate and unbearable socio-political experience that gave rise to the

advocacy by the first and second generations of Nigeria writers, with the aim of salvaging the miserable situation in their respective society through the power of the pen. Julie Agbasiere briefly takes it over from here thus:

All writers from the pioneers to the younger generation share one objective which is to bring about a change for a better. They want a society where there will be social justice, equity and fair play, a society where the rulers and the ruled live in harmony and where peace and progress prevail. (80)

In 1962, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka (disciples of the Euro-modernist class of poets) showed obviously in separate

interviews by a South African writer and critic that they cared less about their literary audience. In fact Okigbo confesses that “Somehow I believe I am writing for other poets all over the world to read and see whether they can share in my experience... Nowadays everything is done for the study and of few occasions it steals out; I think it is to please, but not a large public” (Qtd in J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada, 21). Similarly, Soyinka is direct here thus “...I don’t think I need bother about the audience, whether Nigerian or European” (Qtd in J.O.J, 21). It is pertinent to state here that, Okigbo only writes for intellectuals as himself and perhaps few educated individuals, while Soyinka writes only for himself as he does not bother who reads his inspired lines at home or abroad. This may be the rationale the Euro-modernist poets wrote usually in obscure diction thereby making:

their poetry difficult to follow, at least for the average educated Nigerian. It was a repelling type of verse much as they were respected abroad for writing like Pound, Eliot, Mallarme or Tagore. At home their poetry could not be ‘touched’ by the local critic, let alone the ordinary lover of literature. (J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada, 21-22)

The aforementioned makes one to think whether the true essence of poetry, which is to communicate a message to the audience, has been achieved by the first generation poets. One may be eager to ask again if the Euro-modernist poets have been able to awaken the consciousness of the African masses, to collectively champion the cause for socio-political change in their respective societies. No wonder the African masses, especially those around the 1950-60 were suffering and smiling and falling victims of political gimmicks because the so-called writers and activists language of communication to elicit positive change in the Nigerian polity fell on deaf ears as the target audience (masses) could not decipher their poetic messages as a result of their obscure diction. This is perhaps the reason Gabriel Pearson decided to advice the Euro-modernist poets and their contemporary admirers that: “poetry undirected towards its audience must be sick” (Qtd in J.O.J, 22). This is true because the audience is a vital aspect to

be taken into consideration in either verbal or written communication. It is essential to consider many variables as they concern the audience, who are expected to be the recipients of the poetic message (s) intended by any given writer. The levels of education, age, among other things, are to be taken into consideration or else, the whole creative products would be misconstrued, and essence of communication plunged into a fiasco. Therefore creative writers, who desire to be widely read, understood and elicit positive change in his or her society, must painstakingly select his diction and style to suit prospective audience.

It is against this backdrop that calls for audience consciousness and communicative impulse in the poetry of the second generation of Nigerian poets in the 1970s and 1980s. These poets wouldn’t want to be termed ‘sick’ hence they are concerned with traditionalism and indigenisation of Nigerian poetry. In their poetry, they employ rhetorical devices obtained from African languages orators. This means that in this kind of poetry, one finds materials from African myths, idioms and riddles, proverbs, incorporated into it. This kind of poetry is also written in the simple clarity of the traditional African verse. In all these, the new poets, especially those from the eighties, attempt to demystify poetry; they are making poetry a communal product; they are taking it to the market place; they want everybody to enjoy the art of poetry so that poetry would no longer be the exclusive reserve of university students, professors, and intellectuals. These groups of poets are attempting to take poetry out of the bookshelf of rusting library into the heart of the masses for both academic and pleasure consumption towards achieving a positive change in the polity. This is why some of the poets of the 1980s, especially Ezenwa-Ohaeto who has published two volumes of poems in Pidgin, adopted the Pidgin English as a viable language to communicate the African experience (s), because it is capable of sustaining works of literature as the Standard English.

In Nigeria, the problem of corruption is as old as ‘society itself’ (Abdullahi Shehu, 13). It is not perhaps unique to any society, but the trends and patterns of corruption vary

from one society to another, depending on the variables that are considered as causes or correlates of corruption. In Nigeria however, corruption is the greatest obstacle to democratisation and development since the military era. The then military government and the so-called democracy regime has done nothing but form the root of ethnic and tribal xenophobia and religious chauvinism in Nigerian politics, where the few privileged and selfish elite exploit the masses for their own benefit. Abdullahi Shehu is apt when he notes that: "Corruption has affected all facets of human endeavor and is threatening the existence of the country (Nigeria): weakening control institutions, undermining the rule of law and good governance, and destroying the economy" (13-14).

Analysing the despotic leadership style and intense corruption during the military regime, which has been the aftermath militating against good governance in Nigeria today, once again, Shehu avers that the:

Nigeria's polity and governance had been characterised by incessant military interventions leading to political instability, disregard for the rule of law and lack of respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, as well as lack of accountability and transparency. All the seven successful military coups in Nigeria purported to stop corruption. Unfortunately, however, the military regimes that claimed to deal with corruption became even more corrupt. (2-3)

In his description of the various military dictatorships experienced in Nigeria, Arthur Agwuncha Nwankwo notes that "The military era, from 1966-1978, 1984-999, can be best described as a parchment of corruption and scroll of iniquities. The sordid effects of this era of madness, greed, thievery and looting transform into the grinding and grapping poverty which has decimated the populace" (29). No wonder this group of military leaders who stole public funds during military era and now want to be democratic president, are what Habib Yakooob metaphorically describes as *The Ugly Ones Refuse to Die*, and because they have refused to die, Ayi Kwei Armah prophetically says that that is the reason *The*

*Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born.*

## NIGERIAN PIDGIN ENGLISH IN LITERATURE

Pidgin English is a more linguistic tool, which aids communication between people of different cultural backgrounds in Nigeria. For example, Pidgin language is widely understood and spoken in Nigeria than the three major national languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, among people of different dialect and beliefs. Elugbe and Omamor see Pidgin English as "some kind of a marginal language that arises to fulfill specific communication needs in well-defined circumstances" (45). There is no doubt that Pidgin English is spoken between the elite and the common man, and those of different languages in order to achieve communicative benefits. Similarly, Ezenwa-Ohaeto describes Pidgin as "a communication system that develops among people who do not share a common language" (23). This is perhaps evident that the Pidgin English is the product of contact between peoples from different linguistic groups. The language not only appeals to the mass- literate and semi-literate, but also accommodates Nigerian oral traditions.

However, in literature, it is not only in poetry that the Pidgin English has been utilised. In novel and drama texts, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, T.M. Aluko, Ola Rotimi etc. gave Pidgin to some of their invented characters, particularly to achieve communicative effects. For instance, in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1986), the well-educated character, Ikem Osodi speaks Pidgin English in his dialogue with Elewa, his half-illiterate girlfriend in order to achieve communicative benefits. Correspondingly, Ezenwa-Ohaeto argues that: "It is in poetry that the language has been most effectively employed to create a bridge of orality, especially in the attempt to domesticate, develop and exploit its artistic resources..." (*Bridges of Orality*, 70). For Ohaeto, the use of Pidgin English brings literature nearer to the people just as it aids the domestication of the poetic tradition. Nigerian Pidgin is no longer the language of the market place, uneducated or the Motor Park touts, etc. as it has been variously described.

Corroborating this view, Okeke Ezeigbo elucidates thus:

Not only is Pidgin a much simpler language, syntactically, but it is also a practical, viable, flexible language distilled in the alembic of our native sensibility and human experience. This lusty language which transcends our geographical and political boundaries, grows daily before our very eyes. It is our national unifying weapon against the divisive forces of English. In West Africa, English splits, Pidgin unites. (34)

The Pidgin language is not only accessible but also enjoys popularity over the multitude of language and dialects spoken in Nigeria.

Before the 1980s, Dennis Osadebay wrote the first Pidgin poem, published in his *African Sings* (1952) volume. Frank Aig-Imoukhuede published "One Wife for One man" in 1963 in Gerald Moore's *Modern Poetry from Africa* (1963) edited poetry anthology. However, it is in the 1980s that poetry written in Pidgin was on the increase in journals and collections. For instance, Tanure Ojaide's "I Bi Somebody" appeared in his *The Eagle's Vision*. Tunde Fatunde has also published "Women Dey Suffer" and "Bad Belle Too Much" in *Okike*. Frank Aig-Imoukhuede in 1982 published *Pidgin Stew and Suffer Head*; Oyekunle Oyedeji's published Pidgin Play, *Kataka for Sufferhead* (1983); Mamman Vasta's *Tori Forgeti Bow Leg* (1985); Ken Saro-Wiwa also published "Water Weh Dey Boil", "Dis Nigeria Sef" and a novel in Pidgin entitled *Sojaboy* (1985); Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *I Wan Bi President* (1988), *If To Say I Bi Soja* (1998) and Peter Onwudinjo's *De Wahala for Wazobia* (2007) among many other contemporary Nigerian writers.

By and large, the Nigerian Pidgin is mostly used in informal conversations. However, Nigerian Pidgin for now has not been granted official status to be included among the three major recognised languages in the country. But it is interesting to know that even the policy makers do use the Pidgin English at their places of work, academic domains, in politics, advert, television and

radio programmes, news casting, comedy events, and Nollywood films among other national events towards reaching to a wider audience.

### **Nigerian Pidgin Poetry as Protest Literature**

The selected Pidgin poems that protest against dictatorship, corruption and exploitation in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *If To Sey I Bi Soja* include "As One General Pray", "If To Say I Bi Soja", and "How I Go Believe You".

To start with, the poem "As One General Pray", Ohaeto creates revolutionary awareness on the dictatorship and corrupt tendencies of the Nigerian military in all ramifications. They manifest their authoritarian nature by using force on the masses, diverting public funds into their personal accounts while victimising their antagonists. According to the poet, the General (who symbolizes the military), prays to his God asking for gun with which he will 'kill' his adversaries including those from any quarters who stand on his way. The General further asks for 'big gun' with which to find his way into office by hook or by crook. He would carry-out all his evil activities whether the masses like it or not. The General prays:

God a beg you/ Give  
me big power  
Make I take kill my  
enemy/ Whether e  
curse me or not  
...God I beg you/  
Give me big gun  
Make I shoot enter  
office  
Whether my people  
want me or not. (38)

The poet-persona lampoons both Christian and Muslim military leaders during the military era in Nigeria. He explains that those privileged leaders do not have love and statesmanship for their people and country at large. These leaders ironically call on God/Allah to aid their unconstitutional and ungodly plans to cling to power, by hook or by crook, thereby venturing on global tourism against their people's wish and oath of office. The poet notes that the military are myopic to national development and societal needs but wiser than the Tortoise to accrue the wealth of the nation into their personal pockets even the people go

hungry and remain in abject poverty. Once again, let's hear the General's prayer:

God A beg you/Give me big pocket  
Make I take carry money/Weda na my own or not,  
Allah A beg you/Give me big belle  
Make I take eat food/Wede na my own or not  
Give me better peace/Make I just dey travel Wede my kontri poor or not. (38)

Military leadership was perhaps a complete failure because of their despotism. The poem exposes military unscrupulousness and dictatorship as they hide under the cloak of their uniform to commit all sorts of crimes inimical to national integration and development. The military see their entrance into power as survival of the fittest even though they lack leadership characteristics. They also disagree with the adage that education is the key to any meaningful development in the society. That is why the General keeps praying that:

Allah a beg you/ Soja  
no bi suffer again  
War don die finish/  
Make I take uniform  
get De thing my brain  
no fit get. (38)

To the military, being in power is an express way to getting what one never had as a soldier; when they hold power, they want to enrich themselves by all means and accrue property by force, instead of discharging qualitative leadership to meet the yearnings and aspirations of the populace. The military called themselves 'messiahs' who have come to remedy the wrongs of their predecessors but turn out to be worse than those they succeeded or forced out of office. This ugly leadership experiences during the military regime is still what Nigerians are going through in the so-called democratically government of today.

In yet another poem entitled, "If To Say I Bi Soja" which bears the title of the Pidgin poems collection, protests and x-rays dictatorial tendencies and the misused of political power by the Nigeria military during military era. Ohaeto explains that the soldiers do not welcome criticism from any quarters; or they will unlawfully detain anyone who

criticises or protests against the military misrule. That is why an indiscriminate use of power occupies the poet's mind of becoming a soldier and a dictator, who would always clamp down on his opponents. Let's hear the soldier poet:

But if to say I bi Soja  
Kai! And I hear all de things  
Wey dem talk finish  
And see all of una wey dey read am  
I for put everybody for detention. (43)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto noted that military dictators came into power by coup aided by their colleagues. As such, their regime becomes a 'paddy paddy' government, where incompetent friends and family members are appointed to head sensitive positions at the detriment of the growth and unity of the country. The poet ironically regrets not being a soldier- a highly privileged fellow who uses his gun to get whatever he wants by force thus:

If to say I bi Soja/If my son no get  
University admission  
If my friend curse me plenty/I for don  
make my own coup  
Put my broder as Minister/Make my  
friend Board Chairman  
Even my Houseboy go  
become/Permanent Secretary for  
Ministry,  
I fit make dis country follow my  
religion. (42)

The poet persona wishes that he was a soldier, because soldiers do not lack and cannot be oppressed like the common man. Stressing the dictatorship and looting associated with the military style of leadership, the poet says if he was a soldier:

I go make decree/Say all better better  
house  
Go dey my Papa compound/I for don  
make edict  
Wey go make my Mama Farm/One  
better Palace so,  
Na Switzerland for be kitchen/For my  
own million million naira. (41)

It is obvious that the poet-soldier would build the best house in the country for his father and enact a law that would ensure that the wealth from the nation's natural resources should be allocated to his mother so that she could live a life higher than kings and queens.

It is glaring the military believes that retirement from office is national breaks to allow them enjoy to the fullest the money and properties they had looted while in office. Again, soldiers believe that at retirement, whether they are paid pension or not, they will never lack because, they always have a lot of money in their nationally and internationally 'Swiss' bank accounts. More so, the law enforcement agencies saddled with the responsibility of 'tax collection' as and when due, are afraid of the soldiers and dare not question their delay or refusal to pay tax, as well as be stopped on the road by either armed robbers for robbing or any security officer for checking. Once again, the poet-persona notes that if he was a Soja:

Retirement no for worry  
me/Retrenchment no for trouble me  
Irregular pay no for harass me/Police  
no go ask wetin I carry  
Thief no go ask wetin I get/Tax man  
no go ask wetin be my salary. (40)

It is obvious that Ezenwa-Ohaeto through his poems constantly fights against dictatorship, corruption, exploitation and corrupt leadership style of the military, and makes a strong case for the common man and downtrodden whom he has intense sympathy for.

The poet uses satire as a tool to lampoon the military, saying that if he were a 'soja', he would put his brother as Minister; make his friend Board of Chairman and even his houseboy as Permanent Secretary. This selfish and unpatriotic act has been one of the major factors encouraging socio-political corruption and exploitation of the masses in Nigeria, during and after the military era. As a societal observer, Ohaeto uses his Pidgin poems to disapprove and protest against the corrupt, exploitative and dictatorial military style of leadership, which traits are quite prevalent in the current civilian style of governance in Nigeria.

In the poem, "How I Go Believe You", Ohaeto criticizes both the military and civilian leadership style of exploiting the masses to enrich themselves. The poem is also a protest against the deceptive promises and exploitative tendencies by the civilian and then military leaders, to the detriment of the well-being of the Nigerian masses and downtrodden. These leaders compulsorily

collect ten percent from all the contracts they award as well divert more than half of the country's treasury into their own personal foreign accounts. The poet describes their leadership style as inhuman and full of cruel tendencies, and yet, they claim that they love those they are governing. These rapacious acts by the military and civilian government have placed the poor poet in an excruciating and pitiable condition. The poet therefore cries out loud to the civilian leaders, especially the military, to be aware of the corpus suffering and frustration of the innocent masses. According to the poet:

You go award plenty contract/With  
ten percent for your account  
You say you no bi bad man/How I go  
believe you?  
You say you like us plenty/For  
morning you flog us koboko  
For afternoon your dog bite us/ For  
evening you put us for detention  
Your boys dey harass us plenty/You  
say you like us plenty  
How I go believe you? (22-23)

It is glaring that the poem is an attack on both civilian and military dictatorship and corruption which are major hallmark militating against political stability in Nigeria. Nigerian leaders divert their country's oil monies to their foreign accounts while the masses are left to languish in abject poverty since the attainment of political independence in October 1st, 1960. Generally speaking, the poet-persona announces that Nigerian leaders of all quarters should not be trusted again because they are not for those they are governing but themselves, cohorts, families and perhaps house animals hence Nigerians should never believe everything they say. Hear the poet:

You say Kontri no  
rich/ Oil money you  
carry alone  
You say make I de  
manage/ De food your  
dog chop  
My family never sees  
for one year/ You say  
country no rich again  
How I go believe  
you? (22).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto further exposes the deceit associated with African leaders. In Nigeria, he makes it obvious that leaders do not go for Nigerian made product to boost the economy but rather for foreign products, where they use half of the nation's wealth to purchase material things in order to feel on top of the world, while their subjects are dying of hunger and lack of social amenities day and night. The poet insists that, these leaders will say there are no funds to run the affairs of the country and pay for civil servants salary and citizens' welfare, yet they buy foreign cars, houses and clothes among others in foreign currency, at expensive rate. With this demonstration, it is obvious that African leaders are not straightforward hence cannot be trusted with the wealth of their respective country or states. For instance:

You say you no get kobo/ But your  
dress dey expensive  
Your shoe na imported/ De car you get  
too cost  
De thing wey you bi/ Just talk loud  
pass your word  
You say you no get kobo/How I go  
believe you? (22)

The poet insists that, considering all the factitious political promises, how can any meaningful Nigerian or African believe any promise (s) made by politicians: military or civilian? Ezenwa-Ohaeto believes that greediness, insincerity and high handedness are indications of corruption, exploitation, and dictatorship which are responsible for leadership failure, unemployment and insecurity in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Although Ohaeto admits that some political leaders may have good plans towards providing the needs of their people, but their aides and friends who are agents of corruption and exploitation would frustrate such a leader towards achieving his positive goal and objectives. Again, if a leader appoints Ministers, Advisers, Commissioners and Director-Generals etc. who are corrupt and have pending corrupt records, to be part of his administration, the poet continues, there is no way that that leader who has good plans and intentions would achieve them to better the lives of the masses. If a leader is surrounded

by national treasury looters and law breakers, the populace can never trust in him no matter how sincere he appears to be among them. Once again, the poet-persona complains that:

You say you get better plan/ All bad  
people na your friend  
When you make small ceremony/ Na  
only thief people go full dere  
Dose wey you dey help na rogues/  
You say you get better plans  
How I go believe you? (23)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto believes that a good leader should be seen among people of like minds, else, all efforts to achieve a peaceful and developed nation would be thrown into oblivion.

### Conclusion

The studied Nigerian Pidgin poems of Ezenwa-Ohaeto have not only uncovered and protest against the high rate of dictatorship, corruption and exploitation in the polity during the military era, but also protests against the ugly and despotic style of leadership in the current civilian era. This study has so far identified dictatorship, corruption, deceit, and exploitation as a menace to good governance and national development and integration, which is why the poet employs satire with a view to correcting the anomalies of Nigerian civilian and military leaders since independence in the 1960. The study has also shown that the Pidgin English has been used by reputable Nigerian scholars in their creative writings as Ohaeto, to bridge orality so that the not-too-educated and oppressed Nigerian masses could decipher and enjoy the art of poetry, thus awakening their consciousness on the socio-political realities, to enable them to identify and elect patriotic leaders who will bring the desired change they have been yearning for since 1960. Through the Pidgin English, Ohaeto makes the masses to understand the status quo on the struggle between the rich and the poor: the dictatorial, materialistic, exploitative and corrupt style of leadership by the civilian and military leaders. He uses his poems, especially the ones written in the Pidgin English, to protest and condemn socio-political ills and other social vices inimical to nation building.

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