

FROM ORALITY TO PRINTED WORDS: THE MINSTREL PERSONAE IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S HEART SONGS

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ABSTRACT

The minstrels in traditional Nigerian (Igbo) society are itinerant singers, poets, chanters or storytellers who create their art from the events in their society. They serve as social critics and gadfly of their different societies. The traditional societies mainly privileged orality and these minstrels usually performed their arts orally whenever the occasion calls. The transition from orality to writing midwifed a paradigm shift in the oral performance of these minstrels to a written one. African (Nigerian) poets having discovered the immense wealth of artistic creativity inherent in African (Nigerian) oral literature, borrow extensively from it and equally incorporate the art of minstrelsy into their collections of poetry. This paper seeks to analyze the minstrel personae in selected poems of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Heart Songs. The analysis of some selected poems show that they dwell more on women issues and as such, one hears more of the voice of the female minstrels. The research adopts the qualitative methodology in the examination of the poems under study. A critical analysis of this collection of poetry shows that the poet creatively recreates the minstrels of old in some of her poems. By giving her poet personae (female minstrel) voices that resonate with social issues prevalent in her society, the poet successfully weaves contemporary issues in her poems in the tradition of the traditional African (Nigerian) minstrels. This research concluded on the note that minstrelsy in traditional African society has not declined but has mutated to new forms in different mediums. Also, in distancing herself in some of the poems and giving peculiar voices to the poet (minstrel) personae, the poet, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo succinctly explores the social realities in her society.

Keywords: Minstrel, Traditional, Society, Nigeria, Minstrel Personae, Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Oral poetry is a series of compositions in songs, tongue twisters and other forms of verbal arts generally referred to as oratures. Finnegan, (4) posits that "...much of what is normally classed as poetry in African oral literature is designed to be performed in a musical setting, and the musical and verbal elements are thus interdependent". Thus, we see African minstrels perform their songs in accompaniment of musical instruments. The minstrel figure in traditional African society is basically an entertainer. This itinerant performer also plays the roles of moral reformer, critic and counselor in the society. In traditional Igbo society, the minstrel is usually associated with either the masquerade (mmanwu) or itinerant musician, named according to the musical instrument used (egwu Ekpili, Egwu Une or egwu Okpubo) (Orajiaka, S. & Unegbu, J, 2015). These minstrels often entertain during religious festivals, transition occasions (Iba mmanwu, Ito Ogbo (age grade), marriage rites, burial, chieftaincy/title taking, and

so on. They sing/perform along central themes of morality, praise singing, sorrow and pain, essentially reflecting the society's heartfelt thought/mood. The creativity these minstrels exhibit in their performances and their ability to sing of human problems and concerns accord them the popularity and acceptance which they enjoy today in the modern-day Igbo society. This explains the popularity of such brands like *Egwu Ekpili*, *Egwu Ogene*, *Oja*, among others.

This shows that the roles of these minstrels in traditional African (Igbo) societies are multifaceted. It is in recognition of these functions that contemporary Nigerian poets explore the minstrel figure in their written works. Again, the transition of the traditional African society from orality to a written one takes its toll on these minstrels and their performances since what gives life to their art is its oral manifestation. Culture is known to be dynamic and the minstrel performance being an aspect of culture has to be dynamic too. Thus, the movement from the village square to the written text/ the printed word becomes a testament of the dynamism

often associated with culture. Also, the change ensures that the functions of minstrels do not diminish but takes on a new platform; a new context in written African poetry.

With the hue and cry for Nigerian poets to reflect African imagery and environment in their poetry, some Nigerian poets like Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Fatoba, and so on incorporate minstrelsy, an element of oral poetry in their works. They take on the personae of a minstrel in their poetry as they permeate every nook and cranny of their society (even the diaspora) through the printed words and sing songs that reflect their social vision as it relates to their respective society.

MINSTREL

The term minstrel is gotten from the French word 'Menestrel' which is derived from the Italian word 'minstrello' (later menestrello) from Latin word 'ministralis'. Hornby (1943) defines it as "a musician or singer in the middle ages". A minstrel could also be described as a medieval European entertainer. Originally, it describes any of these types of entertainers: musician, juggler, acrobat, singer or a jester. They tell stories of distant places or of existing or imaginary historical events. Although minstrels create their own tales, they would often memorize and embellish the works of others.

Due to the increasing sophistication of the court, minstrels were gradually replaced by troubadours, and many of the former court minstrels went on to perform as itinerant street and market musicians. The tradition of minstrels, which was moderately strong into the early 20th century (known as Minstrel Shows or Black Face Shows in the United States of America), has some continuity in the form of today's 'Buskers' or street musicians.

Minstrels, or itinerant musicians, are common in traditional African culture. The following lines from Finnegan reveal their true nature: "...that of the free-lance specialist, a poet who moves from place to place according to where he can find a wealthy patron or audience prepared to reward him in return for his poems." (Finnegan 92). This description fits into Achebe's description of one of his characters, Unoka in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*:

His favourite times of year were the two or three months following the harvest, when the musicians of the village brought down their instruments from the loft above the hearth. Unoka's happy, at-peace

expression would show as he played with them. There were times when a different village would invite Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to stay with them so that they could share their music and dance. They'd party with their hosts for several markets, bringing instruments and food. Unoka enjoyed the season because the rain had stopped and the sun shone brightly each morning. He also enjoyed the delicious food and pleasant company. *The Meaning of Life* (Achebe, 4).

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has its setting in pre-colonial and colonial Africa (Igbo land in South-Eastern Nigeria). The above extract depicts pre-colonial African (Igbo) society and through the character of Unoka, we are able to see how these minstrels move from place to place with the aim of entertaining their host and for material benefits. This equally captures what Joel Adedeji calls *Alawada* among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria.

FEMINIST THEORY

The term "feminist theory" refers to the branching out of feminism into the realms of theory, fiction, and philosophy. The study's overarching goal is to learn what causes gender inequality. Anthropology, sociology, communications, media studies, psychoanalysis, home economics, literature, education, and philosophy are just some of the disciplines that look at gender roles, interests, responsibilities, and feminist politics. It is ever-changing and draws heavily on the ideas of other critical theories. To paraphrase what Dobie has to say about the state of feminism and criticism: (104). According to Abrams(23), "the great variety of critical vantage and procedure, including adaptations of psychoanalytic, Marxist, and diverse poststructuralism theories, manifests among those who practise it" in feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism, according to Tyson (85), "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) either contribute to or challenge women's economic, political, social, and psychological oppression." Bressler defines feminism in Amaefuna (290-291) as the "strive[s] to understand the ways in which women are oppressed—socially, economically, politically, and psychologically," with the ultimate goal of "reducing and ultimately eliminating" that oppression. Feminist criticism spans a vast terrain, with many significant departures from the tenets of British and French feminism. 'Feminist criticism in

the United States received a major stimulus from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and has differed somewhat from its counterparts in France and Britain,' writes Habib (254).

FEMINIST CRITICISM IN AFRICA

Feminism in Africa is an off shoot of the main stream Western feminism. Feminism is generally understood as a movement that seeks to emancipate women and place them on equal pedestal with men. Unfortunately, feminism in Africa is given a negative tag and often interpreted, according to Nkealah in Amaefula, (292), as being "anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion in its theoretical framework". Thus, what emanates from Africa as African feminism are theories (feminist criticism) that are geared towards a better understanding and interpretation of literary works of African feminist writers and critics. The plethora of African feminist theory/criticism is a testament to various perspectives from which African writers view feminism. From African feminism, Africana womanism, STIWANISM, Nego feminism to Snail-Sense Feminism, African feminists have shown concerted efforts at re-theorizing Western feminism in a way that captures their socio-cultural beliefs as Africans.

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that feminist criticism (African feminist criticism) is very apt in the analysis of the poems under study. This is as a result of the fact that the collection of poetry under study aligns with the African feminist theory (The Snail- Sense Feminism) which is very apt in the analysis of some of the selected poems in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Heart Songs*.

THE MINSTREL PERSONAE IN *HEART SONGS*

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is one of the prominent female voices in Nigeria literary scene. She is well known for her creative outputs in novels, short story fiction and children's literature. Her foray into the genre of poetry came much later but was equally successful with three collections of poetry to her credit even as she won the prestigious ANA Poetry Prize for her first volume of poetry, *Heart Songs*.

In this collection of poetry, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo dons the garb of a female minstrel and this affords her the opportunity to make valid observations on pressing issues that threaten her fellow women, the individual, the collective existence of her immediate society and the world at

large. In the poem 'Casualty', she assumes the persona of a female minstrel while employing the art of storytelling from her Igbo culture as she narrates the impact of excess workload on the academia in tertiary institutions. Through the inquisitions of the young casualty, we are made to understand that the 'purported travel' by the old casualty is necessitated by the need to meet the demands of her job in the academic world: '... That in this profession, you either 'publish or perish' (2009:23). The poet persona equally laments how unconducive the Nigerian environment is for research, thus leading to mass exodus of the intelligentsia to developed countries.

That in this place, one is bereft of ideas and ideals?
That this land kills initiative, smothers inspiration?
And gobbles imagination? (2009:23)

The poem equally exposes the dilemma faced by women especially when the demands of work interferes with their traditional roles as home keepers and nurturers of their homes. With the hue and cry over women empowerment, this poem takes a swipe at its inadequacies as career women give their careers the upper hand than their families as can be seen in the following lines: "...That progress at work must come before other competing roles?"(2009:23)

This impacts negatively on their families especially their children who are left at the mercy housekeepers or nannies to cater for them.

Will he derail, become
Drug addict, rapist, thief or terrorist
Pedophile?

In the absence of proper parental care... (2009:24)

The poem ends on a pessimistic note as the female minstrel persona asks probing questions on what becomes the outcome of the child. This question supports the poet's idea of feminism which emphasizes individualism and complementarity of the sexes in homes whereby couple take on roles at home with the aim of complementing one another. Where this is lacking, then, it is a question of how its effects manifest on the children.

Furthermore, the poet through the female minstrel personae, celebrates Nigerian women as they break the shackles of patriarchy to rise above the society's idealized notion of 'African woman' in the poem 'In praise of the artist'. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo shows that Nigerian women are capable of achieving international fame in literary world like the artist-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie-who she dedicated the poem to. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

is a renowned novelist whose works have won many awards which include: The Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for fiction for her third novel, *Americanah*, the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for *Purple Hibiscus* and so on. In the poem, the poet shows that she is a minstrel well tutored in traditional praise songs as she displays her artistry that leaves nobody in doubt of her ability. The use of local musical instruments like *ikoro*, *tom tom*, *ubo-akwara*, *udu*, *ichaka*, *ogene* and *odi* show that she is deeply rooted in the tradition of her people.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo through this poem celebrates African women and at the same time shows that African women are not docile, unintelligent and economically dependent on men but can hold their own in the male dominated society such as ours in Africa. This vision of strong and independent African women promotes individualism which is one of the tenets of Snail-sense feminism.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has equally proven that she is one of Nigeria's leading female voices in poetry in the tradition of oral artists of the past (minstrels) in her collection of poetry, *Heart Songs*. According to Sackeyifo, "Adimora-Ezeigbo has effectively adapted salient features of Nigerian folklore to address contemporary issues in the world of the Nigerian child (female) of the twenty-first century" (2009). In the poem, 'Power to the Women', she extols the importance of women empowerment in the following lines:

'Women empowered'

Is millions helped

In the home

At work... (61)

From the above, one can see that the positive result of women empowerment is felt throughout the home, the workplace and the society at large.

As a singer and advocate of gender equality, she maintains through the poem that prosperity and harmony in homes and the wider society can only be achieved through equal rights for men and women.

Gender equality

Marches hand in hand

With children's well-being

Produces prosperity and

Harmony in homes

Welcoming it. (62)

This poem clearly highlights Adimora-Ezeigbo's idea of feminism. She does not believe in the combative nature of feminism practiced in the Western world but in the complementarity of the male and female folks. This notion of complementarity is highlighted in the above lines in that women still desire to work alongside men even though they have been empowered in order to contribute meaningfully to the family and society at large.

Also, as an accomplished female minstrel poet, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo sings a song for the oppressed women in her society in the poem, 'Violated Ogoni women'. This poem is based on the experiences of the Ogoni people in Rivers State of Nigeria and their women in particular. A peaceful protest by Ogoni women against oil pipeline traversing their farmlands which they know will lead to the destruction of their crops resulted in dire consequences on their psyche, welfare, and their potentials as Ogoni women. These experiences turned scores of hitherto empowered women into paupers at best and prostitutes at worst. Thus, these issues form the crux of the fabric with which Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo weaves a quilt of the trauma and agonies suffered by Ogoni women over the years. In the poem, she captures the pains of the women through the images of "tears" "...colourless like your life" (124) and "blood" "...red like your soil" (124). She depicts the helplessness of the women as they are exploited by armed security men with nobody to come to their aid:

you watch

your daughters

ravaged

by men armed

to the teeth

some younger than you...(124)

The viciousness that characterize the actions of these armed men bears a testament to the fact that they are on a mission to kill, maim and destroy. Cases of sexual violation of the feminine gender have been in the forefront in recent times especially in places where armed conflicts are involved. The above scenario is reminiscent of the Nigeria-Biafra War and the Rwanda War that were notorious for rape and many other forms of inhumane conduct and war crimes by the military. These actions of the military against helpless women in the land are never investigated or punished. Even the popular Oputa Panel that was set up to investigate the

Ogoni problem achieved nothing as the findings and recommendations of that report were never implemented. This pessimism is the crux of the rhetorical question in the poem:

Oputa panel

Ring, ring again

Will anything come out of it?

Another white paper... (125)

Again, the fact that no female victim of rape wants to be tagged with the stigma of rape due to the obnoxious Nigerian culture that classifies rape as a taboo makes the situation annoying. This makes the poet to sing courage into these victims of rape when she says:

...courage fails you not

resolute

you scream it: RAPE!

let all that hears it

tingle. Burst with pain (126)

Their acceptance of the rape incidence and their ability to speak up goes a long way in their healing as well as prick the conscience of those concerned to punish the perpetrators of this evil and prevent it from happening in future. Also, it exposes the ills that have eaten deep into the fabric of the society.

CONCLUSION

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is well versed on the roles of minstrels in traditional Nigerian (Igbo) society. In traditional African society, a minstrel is a person with traditional validation, who

interrogates and exposes evil deeds and is therefore qualified to be called a moral agent/informer. He/she plies his/her art in the spoken form and through this, he/she taps from both the physical and the mythical properties of his/her environment. He/she observes and makes pertinent comments on issues affecting the wellbeing of his/her society and hopes to be able to cause a positive change and reformation in the attitudes of his/her people towards enthroning positive moral and ethical values that will bring about positive development. This idea/role of the minstrel is what the poet has achieved, though not orally but in the written form and in a different platform.

As a result, the poet (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo) has emerged as one of Nigeria's leading female writers even as she employs the art of minstrelsy to sing about her people's hopes, achievements and inspirations. The effectiveness of this creative output situate her poems with the performance poetry of Niyi Osundare and Ezenwa-Ohaeto and equally makes them accessible to the masses. Through them, she articulates her visions of her society and sings of them in a manner reminiscent of the traditional minstrels of old. Her works espouse her Snail-Sense Feminist theory which advocates for a subtle negotiation of interests by women as against the combative mode of Western feminism.

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