

Dignity and Indignity: Society's Moral Albatross in Wole Soyinka's "I Love my Country" and Niyi Osundare's "A Song for Ajegunle"

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Abstract

Every member of society has a price to pay for being on the roll. This subsumes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1762) collectivist theory by which the self must be subjugated to the collective will, and John Locke's postulation that people have the right to take laws into their hands if the agencies entrusted with such responsibilities fail to do as expected. Failure by society, usually represented by the few but vocal and visible privileged, is therefore the springboard from which social upheavals take off. The French Revolution (1789), more recent Arab Spring (2011), and spasmodic but rising waves of public dissent in Nigeria and other developing economies are pointers to the need for an introspective social scan to purge, or at least reduce incidences of inequalities, oppression and subjugation against a section of the society before cataclysmic social crises blossom. Could Karl Marx's vision of over a century ago be coming home to roost? In this paper, the theories referenced above were exploited to interrogate two selected poems (Soyinka's ballad; "I love my country" and Osundare's "A Song for Ajegunle"). It is the writers' position that the social imbalances resulting from inequitable distribution of Nigeria's collective patrimony has become a malignant tumour slowly but surely consuming the nation's soul, and the moral burden is on all citizens. Prompt and apt remediation is required if a seemingly inevitable apocalypse is to be averted. Change should indeed start now, and it involves all.

Key words: Collectivist theory, John Locke, Arab Spring, Social upheaval, Social inequality,

Introduction

Dignity is the quality of being worthy of respect, connoting that indignity is a situation where respect becomes inappropriate. Society has a way of foregrounding certain members, in terms of respect, ahead of others. Certain individuals are counted worthy of esteem or high regard and society honours them. Some exude dignity/respectability through their dressing mode, some through their brilliance, patience, material possession, doggedness, friendliness, care, discipline, general demeanour, etc. to earn an exalted place in society. Such identity often comes with privileges which place them above the rest of society, and the unwary elite might soon find himself disconnected from the *hoi polloi*. However, from whom so much respect is given, so much dignified carriage is expected.

The Nigerian socio-political space is replete with instances of 'big men' who often parade social corridors decked in appurtenances of affluence, 'social connection' and influence. Such men and women enjoy or demand from a hapless society privileges which tend to portray them as above-par partners in the social contract. At the collective level, certain groups in society, usually signified by location, colocation, occupation or association acquire, legitimately or otherwise, social privileges which place them at an advantage over others in the larger society. They constitute the bourgeoisie, the elite who usually conflate in an exclusive fraternity of subjugation of the 'uninitiated' rest of the society. In each society, they represent the power block that determines the nature and direction of the community. Their abode is usually the 'Government Reservation Areas' (GRA) and low density enclaves where social amenities and utilities are at peak performance. This sharply contrasts with the enclave of the downtrodden, the "wretched of the earth" who barely eke out a living often by toiling to enhance the comfort of the privileged lot in the society. Also, they are often so ensconced within the protective cocoon that insulates them and their ilk, they deliberately take over the rudder of social life, thereby creating an ideology of hegemony and acquiescence in the masses in an effort to perpetuate dominance.

The social disequilibrium which such disparity engenders could be as serious as an outright revolution, but resentment builds up gradually, steadily and unnoticed, awaiting the final trigger to an inevitable cataclysm which, unfortunately, is often

non-partisan as it sweeps both guilty and innocent, rich and poor, ruler and the ruled in a vicious blitz. Since both rich and poor, privileged and deprived operate within the same social space, it becomes the responsibility of either to look after the welfare of the other; the rich need the poor to run the wheels of social traction while the poor need the rich to oil the wheels. The failure on either side to play its social role thus becomes a burden, an S.T. Coleridgean albatross which must be worn around the neck like a cross by the perpetrators.

Wole Soyinka and Niyi Osundare are two of Africa's greatest contemporary writers/social commentators who, through the medium of poetry, constantly interrogate factors that threaten the socio-political landscape.

Problem Statement

Politics is mainly about human interactions, especially as regards the struggle to attain and retain power and control over the people and the system. Political poetry is the versification of opinions, reactions, perceptions about social power and control in the society. Egya (2009:1) describes political poetry as that sub-genre that focuses on failed leaders and systems, the deliberate pillaging of public resources by leaders and the subjugation and suppression of the downtrodden masses. It is thus a variant of protest poetry, as seen in Ojaide's (1989) *Endless Songs* where he employs a historical perspective in his analysis of the traumatic fate of the Niger Delta people of Nigeria, especially from the plundering of the people's common patrimony. A plethora of verses, songs, prose works, speeches and other forms of artistic expressions have been employed by different artistes across the African landscape to protest issues like the discriminatory horrors of Apartheid, inequitable social order among independent African states, imbalance in the distribution of opportunities and other areas of local and global contention.

This type of poetry has become inevitable and is indeed burgeoning because of the relentless onslaught of the condescending opportunism of the privileged few and docile acquiescence of the hapless masses, even in practising socialist communities. While the oppressors wallow in splendour, the oppressed, upon whose sweat the wealth of society is created, squirm in hurtful squalor. The political poet therefore assumes

the garb of a knight in shining armour set to deliver the people from their tormentors, the voice of the downtrodden masses, or the irrepressible *vox populi* who seeks to catalyse public sentiment in empathic attitudinal change, or jumpstart the necessary social upheaval that would turn social tides around. The question is; are they winning? Does the upsurge in public dissent as witnessed in the recent sweeping Arab Spring owe its impetus to these powerful voices? It is in this mould that the selected works of Wole Soyinka and Niyi Osundare are considered.

Theoretical Framework

The underpinning basis of this study is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1762) collectivist theory which prescribes that the political or economic system be firmly placed in the hands of the masses, without anyone being favoured over another. It claims that government derives its legitimacy from the governed and hence, its right to exist also rests with the governed. It directly contradicts capitalist ideology where socio-economic and political power is based on capacity, privilege or sheer opportunism. Some individuals are fortuitously privileged by association, birth, chance, appointment, competence or even fraud to be socially better placed than the average person. Collectivism places the welfare of the generality of the people over the interest of a few privileged. Where collective good appears not to be the focus of the leaders, people are liable to rise, sooner or later, often violently, to demand for the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Methodology

Wole Soyinka's "I love my country" and Niyi Osundare's "A song for Ajegunle" are subjected to content analysis mainly through the employment of Semantic principles to investigate the sociolinguistic implications of the writers' positions. A little dose of Freudian psychoanalysis is also applied in explicating why the masses react the way they do in the face of gross deprivation and disenchantment.

Data Presentation

Niyi Osundare's "A song for Ajegunle" is an ode to a suburban community ensconced in a decrepit corner of a mostly urban Lagos metropolis. Ajegunle has, over the years, become an eponym for squalor, neglect, violence, frustration and social degradation. The roads (so called for want of a worse caption) are bad and often waterlogged, it lacks good water supply, transportation, schools, recreation facilities and other utilities that signify government presence and make human communities worth living in. No wonder people derisively refer to it as a 'Government Rejected Area'; a pun on 'Government Reservation Area' (GRA). In a similar vein the people appear unkempt, pugnacious and malnourished, short tempered and ill-mannered; a likely fallout from the frustration of unfulfilling living. Curiously, the community is open to all manner of migrants, maybe because there's really not much to protect. Osundare, like a curious bird in search of a temporary perching place, is an overawed spectator who could not fathom the reality of society's neglect of a people situated and intermingling so readily with the over-pampered inhabitants of the pristine nearby neighbourhoods of Ikoyi and Victoria Island. He expresses a strong foreboding of an imminent social eruption:

31I saw you sprawled out
32Like a stream without a bed

42I saw you sprawled out
43Like a cat with hidden claws.

48I saw you sprawled out
49Like a wounded snake

In these lines the poet gently but surely blames society for the poor state of affairs in places like Ajegunle. Osundare presents in rather graphic form the social and physical landscape of Ajegunle, showing from the almost inhuman ugliness of the environment the extent of decay that has beset man's conscience, just like the Ajegunle environment.

Wole Soyinka on the other hand, is a co-inhabiter of an unnamed but implied country. Although similar disparities exist

among the two communities in focus, Wole Soyinka's oppressed community does not lie in quiet and docile submission to oppression and double-facedness. He speaks up for the downtrodden masses in his community in a language which contrasts sharply with the despondency of the Ajegunle ilk. This community, although not as faceless as the Ajegunle community, actually derides its oppressors and regales in a moral edge over them as it struggles to eke out a living on whatever is made available by the powers that be. Soyinka represents the dogged stubbornness of the downtrodden who, in spite of glaring deprivation and unfair treatment by their leaders, refuse to throw up their hands in hapless frustration and defeat:

When e turn me so, I twist am so,
E push me I push am, I no go go!

In presenting his case of a constitutionally federal but practically disparate country, Soyinka paints a portrait of a nation once divided by a bitter fratricidal war, forced together in an unholy alliance of divided interests in which one part (not necessarily demographically delimited) 'hides' the nation's resources while the other 'seeks' resources to enable them make economic headway. 'Country Hide' is therefore a metaphor for political leaders, policy makers, sectional hegemonists of geographical, stratal and/or religious bent who routinely loot the commonwealth for personal or group gains at the expense of the helpless masses. There is however an ironic twist in the malevolent patronage of Country Hide and the deferential acquiescence of subjugated Country Seek. Both oppressor and oppressed perennially connive in a one-sided collaboration of subjugation which renders freedom from class oppression unattainable soon.

Analysis

Osundare's account is a synchronic portrait of two divergent communities within a city while Soyinka presents a diachronic view of the progressively deteriorating state of affairs in a polarised nation. "A Song for Ajegunle" conjures, right from the outset, a picture of extreme hardship, debilitating hunger and a lifestyle of intense deprivation lived in the make-believe realm of psychoactive drug addiction:

³⁶You stretched out your calloused hands
³⁷Switched on your weed-infested smile
³⁸And spread your battled history
³⁹Like a tattered mat for my calling feet

A persistent history of struggles, hardship and harrowing deprivation is all that Ajegunle indigenes have to offer the itinerant visitor, yet the stranger is easily absorbed into the fold, there's enough of the misery and neglect to go round!

³And spread your battled history
⁴Like a tattered mat for my calling feet

Osundare's portrait of physical appearance, the environment and social habits fuse into a grotesque symmetry of repugnancy; nature is made to conspire with man and government to make life in Ajegunle a living hell. There's indeed no beauty or respite here! The streets of Ajegunle are largely putrescent, unplanned and unappealing, the homes (hovels) are repulsive, hardly the haven they should be. Just as nature and its foot soldiers (milling mosquitoes, flood and disease) pummel the poverty-stricken inhabitants night and day, the man of the house transfers the heat on the wife and children and life in Ajegunle remains an endless orgy of frustration, anger, violence and disease.

At the other end of the social welfare pendulum are the overfed inhabitants of Ikoyi and Victoria Island whose 'bursting barns' and green lawns are replenished with the sweat of the severely stark and malnourished Ajegunle horde in a case similar to Soyinka's 'Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop'. At the end of the day's chores, the toilers in Ikoyi homes can only lie

⁶...sprawled out
⁷Like an empty bag on the threshold
⁸Of Ikoyi's bursting barns

while their wives and daughters, tired nannies, collapse under the 'murderous' nuisance of "Senior Service brats" who care very little about their welfare. They keep the Ikoyi/Victoria Island family clean, nurtured and full, then promptly retire to their filthy hovels

hungry, tired, dirty and hopeless. Life is so unfair and unjust, Osundare insinuates. This is indeed a tale of two cities within the same city, a case of City Hide and City Seek in the frame of Soyinka's poem.

The poet however cautions: the seeming acquiescence of the forlorn inhabitants of Ajegunle, a metaphor for society's double standards in provision of social welfare, is the peace of the graveyard. Religion's ensnarling injunctions aptly captured in 'The salaaming clarion of manacled mosques', the artificial, drug-induced contentment displayed in public as 'toothless swagger of beer parlours', and society's laws, are merely temporary checks to an inevitable outburst. The neglected masses in the society whose lives are as unplanned and unattractive as 'the daub of apprentice painter' and who society has drained of self-respect and rendered inconsequential 'Like a sheath with an absent cutlass' indeed typify 'a stream without a bed', a ticking time bomb whose rupture would ultimately sweep the whole of society away in a cataclysmic backlash. He warns that this docile, downtrodden, seemingly quiet cat is merely hiding its claws. The real threat of this 'wounded snake' is buried within the bosom of a people who suffering has turned into a 'cesspool of brewing rage'! His diction is blunt, precise and unequivocal. His message is clear; the present state of affairs is certain to brew nothing but trouble.

Whereas Osundare interrogates the physical and social environment to foreground his concern about social inequalities which pose serious danger to societal wellbeing, Soyinka focuses on human activities and inactions to explicate the unfair disparity between the haves and have-nots in the society. He employs the popular and innocuous media of pidgin and music to explore, tongue-in-cheek, matters of grave public concern. His lines drip with characteristic Soyinkan sarcasm and bluntness. Unlike Osundare who is a bemused, empathetic intruder on Ajegunle's bedraggled landscape, Soyinka assumes the posture of an aborigine, a dyed-in-the-wool son-of-the-soil who is familiar with the checkered history of his homeland for which he declares a patriotic affection, attachment and commitment:

I love my country I no go lie,
Na inside am I go live and die
I know my country I no go lie,

Na im and me go yap till I die

His historical account of Nigeria's 30-month civil war, fought to enforce a united country, is ironical because the consequence of all the bloodletting is a nation split into two perennially contending and interacting blocs of the repressor and the repressed. His explication of the Nigerian situation traverses socio-economic, political and cultural spheres: The oppressor enjoys the connivance of the oppressed and reconciliation is therefore made easy and recurrent:

¹⁸Make you no worry, both nations be friends,
Even when they fight, they soon make amends.
When one back itch, di oda go scratch,
When one lay egg, di oda go hatch.

The non-symbiotic yoking of two essentially unlike groups is shown to be as difficult to break as a pair of Siamese twins. Yet one takes advantage of the docility of the other:

³⁰One go proud, di oda so meek,

and gets away with the most outrageous actions, to the detriment of the naïve partner:

³²One country go slap di oda go turn cheek
And soon they're playing hide and seek
Di lovely twins of whom I speak;
Mr Country Hide and im broda Seek

This situation, Soyinka chimes, encourages the advantaged group in this incongruous union to commit glaring and daring acts antithetical to the collective good, unchallenged. The effrontery with which the nation's commonwealth is being looted, to the delight of a few and the chagrin of the masses, is worsened by the unabashed arrogance of the perpetrators. He instantiates with the much publicised case of N2.8 billion that went missing and, upon purported investigation, was declared not missing again! Known culprits of grievous acts of corruption are let off the hook and often find their ways into the corridors of power while less privileged masses face severe penalties for lesser

crimes. Soyinka humourises this act of grave social injustice in an effort to highlight its ludicrousness:

³⁶ Mr Country hide two point eight billion
 E tell Country Seek, broda, carry on,
 Seek from Turkey to China Sea
 Di more you look di less you see.
 You tief ten kobo dey put you for prison,

⁴¹ You tief ten million na patriotism,
 Dem go give you chieftaincy and national honour,
 You tief even more dem go say na rumour,

He is however quick to console the miserable masses that the situation has an expiry date:

⁴⁴ Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop
 Sweet pounded yam, someday e go stop!

A society cannot preserve this awkward social system without consequences; the country's once thriving economy has taken a nosedive, agriculture and other indices of development which the nation gloried in have gone comatose and it appears that the only thriving industry in the nation is the corruption industry which is also dominated by the privileged and connected. Social services are hardly available anymore and living standards, including the health sector have been badly affected. The cost of living, and the cost of dying, Soyinka laments in a dash of morbid, sardonic humour, have risen! Only the initiated could survive the harrowing times.

It is expected that a government elected by the people to represent their interests, especially coming on the heels of an unelected, unaccountable military junta, would demonstrate its allegiance to the general will by coming up with programmes to ameliorate the plight of the people, but in each case here, even government itself appears to be in league with the ubiquitous Country Hide to befuddle the people while milking them dry of the last vestiges of dignity and comfort. It seems every step taken is a step towards the cliff edge! The country was driven into strangulating debt through importation of largely unnecessary items of ostentation, merely to enable certain individuals make illicit money. The climax of these, Soyinka asserts, was the declaration of a campaign of 'Ethical Revolution' by a government

which was everything but ethical! The poem reaches a crescendo in its hilarious and scornful pun on this incongruity:

163 One morning time I wake for my bed
And di radio sing, I sick for my head?
No! make I talk true di ting wey e talk
Na something called Ethical Revolution

167 Etika Revo kinni?
Etika Revolution
Etika Revo how much?
Etika Revolution

171 Make I take small snuff make I clear my head
E be like I still dey asleep for my bed
Etika Revo wetin?

Beyond the 'madness' of so much thoughtless wastefulness the country was consumed in a mad rush to grab as much of the nation's wealth as the perpetrators' hands could reach; every excuse was concocted to fuel a few people's avarice, it didn't matter anymore

131 Choose your project, give am a name
Construction, destruction, it's all the same.
Inside Kaduna two bottomless pits
Smashed some innocent lives to bits!
Low cost housing became mass graves
136 One man chops while di oda grieves,

Even when severe prices were paid by unfortunate innocent victims, government's response was largely nonchalant or at best, pretentious.

As the account of gross abuse of the people's trust reach an unbearable climax, the frustration, disgust and disdain for corrupt, uncaring and absolutely detestable leadership which had been thrust upon the country can only be aptly captured in the outburst;

Abeg drop dead!

Conclusion

In the two accounts of a social order that treats its people in disproportionate ways, the poets call attention to the extent of filth, pain, disaffection and retrogression which the greed and inconsiderateness of a few people can bring on an entire society. Both Osundare and Soyinka blame society for complicity in perpetuating this crime against some section of the society by being silent or complicit, and therefore would deserve, on the day of reckoning, to be swept away in the rampaging flood ensuing from the violent and destructive overflow of the 'stream without a bed'. Although the trick of applying the carrot and stick treatment to lure some unsuspecting or greedy commoners into the fold of complicity may work to delay or hush public outcry for a while, the denouement would eventually come. They show at the end, that the finale to all these can only be cataclysmic. This can be prevented if society, around whose neck the social albatross of neglect of the downtrodden masses hang, will look inwards and mend its ways. The day of reckoning is indeed at hand!

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