

Violence and Violation of Human Rights: Perspective of Law, Popular Culture, and Literature in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Poetry

Samson Osariemen Eguavoen (Ph.D.)

Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City.

Abstract

This paper works from the multidisciplinary perspective of law, popular culture, and literature to explore Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry concentrating on her haiku poems which make up a subsection of her Mixed Legacies entitled "Terror Legacy: Terror Haiku Poems." The paper exposes the interconnectedness of law, popular culture, and poetry as it argues the link between violence and the violation of human rights. The reading of Adimora-Ezeigbo's Haiku poems corroborated by some popular songs on this subject matter reveals the dynamics of our political terrain and its effects on the psyche of citizens. The research reveals that the goal of the poet in the depiction of violence in her poetry is not only to historicize and poeticize violent events but to escalate the situation of innocent members of society to such a point that justice will be allowed to take its course and bring the guilty to receive the necessary punishment. It is also her goal to create an atmosphere for psychological healing. The research concludes that Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry is active, affective, and therapeutic. Her choice of the haiku form as a vehicle for the highlighting of violence and the violation of the human rights of vulnerable members of society is borne out of the aptness and concreteness of this Japanese form of poetry.

Keywords: Haiku, legal hermeneutics, popular culture, constitutional rights, violation of human rights, injustice, violence

Introduction

The multidisciplinary perspective of Law and Literature explores a variety of ways the discourses and practices of law can intersect and interact with the stories of literature. This perspective became popular with James Boyd White's *The Legal*

Imagination. From this perspective, there are two observable dimensions from which law and literature can interact. The first dimension has to do with exploring elements of legal studies or jurisprudence in literary works while the second interrogates legal discourses as literature. This paper, however, argues its position from the first dimension. Okot pBitek recommends this dimension for African literature when he opines that: “The artist proclaims the law but expresses them in the most indirect language: through metaphor and symbol, in image and fable. He sings and dances his laws. It is taught, not in school of law, not at the inns of court, but around the evening fire, where elephants and hares act as men” (39). Okot pBitek’s position above demonstrates that literature, especially African literature mostly reflects natural law and its upholding or violation. It also highlights the link between literature and popular culture. When there is a violation of natural law, the writer or artist highlights the effects of the violation on the rights of the victims of such criminal activities. This paper through hermeneutics or legal hermeneutics explores the intersection of human rights theories and poetry using Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Terror Haikus* as a case study.

Literature also interacts with popular culture as it does with law. Popular culture emerged following industrialization and urbanization and has escalated with the advent of globalization. Popular culture is not a constant but a variable with shifting forms and entities. It has been equated with memorable texts and with mass or commercial culture at different times. It has even included literature or some genres of literature at other times, for example, the Onitsha Market literature trended as popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s in Nigeria. Popular culture has been identified as that which is highly favoured by many. It has also been argued that it originates from the people, not imposed on the people but an authentic culture of the people for the people, a folk culture. Popular culture produces works that resist immediate pleasures and satisfaction; which are experimental in terms of their media; are ambitious in that they express unusual and thoughtful feelings and messages; are often conscious of the history of their particular genre; and require some familiarity with a wider field than with the piece of work itself. Popular culture adopts different widely admired media or forms endorsed by the

people at a particular moment in history as its vehicle of expression. In contemporary times, some of its adopted forms are popular music, stand-up comedy, spoken words, and others. These forms are disseminated through the radio, television, and internet (Instagram, Tik-Tok, Facebook, WhatsApp, Vskit, YouTube, Twitter, and others) in the shape of the film, short video, audio, or written messages.

John Storey identifies that popular culture has been defined from Antonio Gramsci's Marxist ideological standpoint as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' which operates in the interests of dominant groups. Storey further explains that as a site of struggle, it is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it that emerged from the spontaneously oppositional culture of 'the people.' He expounds that the site of struggle is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two opposing groups. It is a terrain marked by resistance and incorporation. Hall pursues this position further when he argues that popular culture is a site where 'collective social understandings are created'; a terrain on which the politics of signification are played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world (122-123).

Popular culture has the power to influence poetry the same way poetry has the power to influence popular culture. Literature and popular culture at times pursue the same subject matter. For example, the subject of violence and violation of human rights which this paper explores in Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry has featured in popular music including Bob Marley's 1979 "Redemption Song", his 1973 "Get up Stand up"; Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care About Us"; Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do wit It"; Shania Twain's "Black Eyes Blue Tears"; Majek Fashek's "Police Brutality"; and recently, Falz the Bad guy's "This is Nigeria." This paper following the connection between literature and popular culture also highlights the thematic interconnection between Adimora-Ezeigbo's Haiku poems and popular media in terms of Human rights violations. Sophia McClenen and Joseph slaughter define Human Rights as:

the proper name of a particular set of promises about a future of social equality and justice, about the 'advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of

speech and belief and freedom from fear and want' as the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) articulated in 1948. This means that there is always a gap between the imagination of human rights and the state of their practice. (4)

From the foregoing, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a product of a very utopian dream. Though utopian, the declaration is a necessity for the peaceful cohabitation of the different members of the world society. These rights are commonly understood as being those rights that are inherent to all human beings not dependent on their race, gender, or descent. Quoting the United Nations' Staff College Project, Comfort Obaje and Ambrose Uchenunu identify that these rights are legally guaranteed by human rights law, protecting individuals and groups against actions that interfere with fundamental freedoms and human dignity (227). They also differentiate between human rights violations and abuse and clarify that violations occur when the rights of individuals are denied whether by state or non-state actors. These denials become abuse when such violations occur on a large scale. They note that further human rights abuses occur when arbitrary arrests, killings, torture, rape, repressive legislation, discrimination, and others are carried out systematically against any community or section of society.

Human rights are universal and at the same time national. For example, Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "No one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." This prohibition is restated in Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and extensively developed as a legal standard in the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Moreover, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights similarly upholds the prohibition against torture (Human Rights Watch 2004). From the national angle, the human rights of every citizen of a country are engrained in the country's constitution. The human rights of Nigerians as bonafide citizens are contained in sections 33 to 39 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This paper works with these sections of the constitution to explore how

Adimora-Ezeigbo reflects on the instances of violation of human rights in her country using the medium of poetry.

As a hermeneutic study, this paper is mainly interpretive. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry reflects the violation of constitutional human rights through poetic simulations and versifications. Her "Terror Haiku Poems" are analysed in this essay as legal interpretations of violence and violation of the inalienable human rights of Nigerians through poetry. The poems in this section of Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Mixed Legacies* reflect the violence and violation of human rights in our society by depicting them as situations of terror. Terror reflects the violation of the right to life and peaceful existence or co-existence of a member or group of members of a state, nation, or country who are as well citizens of the world. The metaphor of terror is equivalent to that of violence as well as that of the violation of human rights.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, as a poet, is concerned about society especially, her immediate one, Nigeria. This concern has been noticed by critical reviewers of her poetry. Ajayi, one of the critics whose attention has been drawn to her poetry, considers her a poet whose caustic eyes capture the very essence of Nigerian inanity. Looking at Her *Dancing Masks*, he adjudges that she legitimately recommends herself as a poet who cannot be ignored in the criticism and evaluation of modern Nigerian poetry. For Chukwueloka, another critic, Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry serves as a weapon for social criticism and reformation in the quest to free and purge the society of certain forms of vices and evils that militate against its peace and highly expected progress. However, Nte, another of Adimora-Ezeigbo's critics notes that her poetry explores things bothering humanity and society from a variety of periscopes or perspectives. His perspective is also in pursuance of the poet's concern for society.

Of her latest poetry collection, *Mixed Legacies*, which is the primary text for this paper, Patrick Oloko observes that the poet "has focused her lens on fields of experience common to all readers" (back cover, *Mixed Legacies*). In this same collection, Celestine Okafor notes that "Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is still concerned about the socio-cultural conditions of her environment...She remains abhorrent of society's violence, bloodletting, brutality, and corruption" (back cover, *Mixed Legacies*).

The positions these critics hold concerning Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry, though different from the concerns of this paper, are not only germane but direct our thoughts toward the poet's desire or quest for a peaceful society. This paper's argument highlights the legal implications of the action(s) of members of the society as can be hermeneutically detected in Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry and some popular musical pieces.

Police Brutality as violence and violation of Human Rights

One of the forms of violence and violation of human rights present in Nigeria and reflected in Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry is the one created, caused, and exacerbated by the police. This form is often labeled police brutality. On this, the poet herself notes:

Undoubtedly, there are honest and hardworking men and women in the Nigeria Police Force, but the immoral and violent activities of many among them have given the police a bad name, and in a way have tarnished the image of the government as well as rubbished the much-publicized fight against corruption, a cardinal point in every government's claim to legitimacy. (viii)

The poet depicts her feelings about police brutality and other police-related violence and violation of human rights in haikus 54 and 52. In haiku 54 she looks at it from the perspective of random shooting ascribed to accidental discharge as quoted below:

Police brutality,
In the eye of raging storm.
Trigger-happy men saunter in.

The poet here indicts the police for violating the citizen's right to life when they perform their responsibilities in an unprofessional manner whether done with or without the intention to kill, cause terror, or trauma. Through this poem, the poet subtly advocates for the right to life of Nigerian society in support of what is stated in the country's constitution. In section 33, sub-section 1 of the 1999 constitution, the Nigeria constitution states that: "every person has a right to life, and no

one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offense of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria." The activities of trigger-happy law enforcement officers violate this section of the 1999 constitution. Trigger-happy police officers violate the right to life of tax-paying citizens which they are employed to protect as stated in the Nigeria Police act Part II subsection four which highlights that "the police shall be employed for ... the preservation of law and order, the protection of life and property and the due enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged..." when they threaten them with firearms bought with tax money and for the protection of the same citizens. Publicly displaying firearms alone on a non-threatening occasion is enough to cause trauma or panic attacks in innocent citizens. The poet is not alone in her indictment of police brutality. The late Nigerian reggae artist, Majek Fashek does the same in his song by the same title from the album, Prisoner of Conscience escalates this evil when he sings "Dem kill all innocent souls" and "insanity/Dem dey loot dem dey shoot/ Dem kill all leaders of tomorrow." Fashek, from the above lines from his song, tags their behaviour as "insanity." Michael Jackson also does the same in his 1985 song entitled "They Don't Care About Us." In the fourth stanza, Jackson sings:

Tell me what has become of my life
I have a wife and two children who love me
I'm a victim of police brutality, now (Mhbm)
I'm tired of being the victim of hate
you'r raping me of my pride.

Jackson asks in the first line of the sixth stanza of the song: "Tell me what has become of my rights[?]"

The poet also looks at and indicts the violation of human rights by the police from the perspective of extortion of money from road users as is the focus of haiku 52 quoted thus:

The gallant police march –
Tramp! Tramp! Trained for extortion
Highway daylight thieves.

The poetic instance cited above violates the citizens' right to own property because armed with guns and in uniforms bought with the taxpayers' money, the police make the citizens part with their hard-earned money by duress directly or indirectly. The poem also highlights an ugly aspect of corrupt police life by mentioning that they are "trained for extortion." This statement is particularly satiric as it stands ironically against the police regulations Act which states that "a police officer may not receive presents (other than gifts from close personal friends or relatives) whether in the shape of money, goods, free passage or other personal benefits, and may not give such presents" (Nigeria Police Regulations 1968: undersection 46). The idea of the police being trained for extortion buttresses Edwin Sutherland's theory of Association succinctly applied by H. Oby Okolocha in her paper that explores religion and terrorism in Ahmed Yerima's *Heart of Stone*. Sutherland's theory logically reasons the idea that criminal behaviour is learned. Okolocha summarises and clarifies this point thus: "learning includes the varied techniques of committing the crime, motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes" (143). Though some persons may rationalize that the police go into the extortion of money from citizens because they are not well remunerated, the logical explanation for their behaviour remains that it is learned on the job and it is a reflection of the rot in the system.

Majek Fashek in his song cited above refers to extortion as looting and as such could be regarded as a criminal activity. No wonder in haiku poem 50, the poet is forced to question the role of the police in fighting crime and upholding the law when she interrogates:

Are you crime fighters?
Or members of the underworld?
Men in black uniform.

These questions are follow-up queries on the human-right-violating activities of these public servants and others who are supposed to protect and uphold the law. The questions also reflect the poet's mood as well as refract the general loss of confidence in law enforcement institutions in the country.

Criminal Activities as a Source of violence and an indication of Human Rights Violation

The activities of criminals form a very strong source of violence and violation of human rights in our society. Through the activities of these notorious members of society, terror is driven into the very core of the weak and unprotected of society. These criminals either in gangs or insurgent groups raise a disturbing concern for the poet. Ritual killing, one of the crimes that have become rampant in society is the focus of haiku 15 quoted thus:

Poachers of organs
Evil merchants of human flesh
Your cup of blood fills

This poem indicts those who violate others' right to life for ritual or other purposes. A particular case of this kind of crime made news headlines recently. This case reflects and justifies the poet's concern. The situation where one who has been in the business of making law is arraigned for engaging in organ poaching, though not for ritual purposes, is particularly disturbing.

The criminal activities of kidnappers and assassins are the focus of haiku 16 extracted below:

Kidnappers, beware—
The grave digger does hide
His act from the corpse.

The ugly trend of kidnapping is not only disheartening for the loss of the victim's freedom but further nauseating when the kidnappers end up killing the victim even after collecting ransom from the family. Haiku 17 also pursues the same subject matter:

A goon came, calling
That dark, still night of sorrow
And left with your life.

The activities of kidnappers violate the kidnapped person's right to liberty as stated in section 35 subsection 1 of the constitution thus: "every person shall be entitled to his personal liberty and no person shall be deprived of such liberty." Saul Levmore notes that "ransom kidnapping deprives the victim of

liberty and is thus a kind of false imprisonment, itself a common law felony. But the ransom component adds a threat of something worse and this resembles blackmail and extortion” (197). John Adebisi Arewa confirms: “In criminal law, kidnapping is the taking away (asportation) of a person against the person’s will, usually to hold the person in false imprisonment (confinement without legal authority) for ransom or in furtherance of another crime” (141).

The activities of members of secret cults and the violence they spread is the focus of haiku 56:

Gathering of wild birds
Of prey in secret places
Bloodbath in bondage.

Being a member of a secret cult violates sub-section 4 of the 38th section of the constitution which states that “nothing in this section shall entitle any person to form, take part in the activity or be a member of a secret cult.” The crime of getting involved in killings as part of cult activities is part of the poet’s focus in the above-quoted poem.

The activities of herdsmen are the focus of haikus 1 and 51

Herding sacred cows,
Raping devalued women
Killing men like goats.

51
Killing days are here
Mourning times capture our gaze
The elegance of cows.

The activities pointed out in the above haiku poems violate section 34, sub-section 1 of the constitution which states that—“every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly—(a) no person shall be subject to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment (b) no person shall be in slavery or servitude.” Obviously, raping devalues women and as such as pointed out in “haiku 1,” such women that have been raped become “devalued women.” If men and women are treated

less or equal to animals, killing them is a complement to their undignified and degrading treatment. Falz, a popular Nigerian rapper indicts the criminal activities of Fulani Herdsmen in his 2018 song entitled "This is Nigeria," a remix of Donald Glover's "This is America." He sings: "There is plenty wahala sha/ Fulani Herdsmen still they slaughter/ carry people they massacre."

Gender-Based Violence as Violation of Human Rights

Sexual violence is another form of violation of human rights that comes into focus in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Terror Haiku poems. This is the focus of haikus 47, 41, and 45. Haikus 47 and 45 are concerned with violence perpetuated by men on women. This form of violence can take the shape of battery, assault both physical and mental or emotional that leaves women scared as is captured in the haiku poem quoted below:

Then she arrived, scared
Brutality your name: Man
One year is enough.

In three lines, this poem reflects violence in a heterosexual relationship where the man is a criminal who engages in the battery of a fellow citizen because she is his wife or sex partner. The poem also reflects that this particular man is a serial or habitual batterer because "one year is enough" to detect his bad or criminal habit. The haiku poem 45 cited below builds on the above quoted one. It highlights both the physical and psychological impacts of the violation of a woman's rights to life and peaceful existence in a violent marriage or relationship:

Frame broken by toils,
Mind mangled by brutal acts
In this era of woes.

Just like the haiku poem cited above, the violation of women's human rights is also the focus of Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with it." She sings: "I've been takin' on a new direction/ But I have to say/ I've been thinkin' about my own protection/ it scares me to feel that way." Shania Twain's "Black Eyes Blue Tears" also dwells on the same subject matter. She sings in the first stanza of the song: "Black eyes, I don't need 'em/

Blue tears, give me freedom.” She adds in the second stanza: “Positively never goin’ back/ I won’t live where things are so out of whack/ No more rollin’ with the punches/ No more usin’ or abusin’.” Women who are abused by their husbands or presumed lovers go through a lot of emotional traumata as can be determined in the tone of Turner’s and Twain’s songs above.

Haiku poem 13 highlights the violation of a female or girl child’s right from a different dimension. The focus this time is on rape.

Raped at age thirteen
My bruised thighs lathered crimson
My mind a ghost trapped

Haiku poem 20 also explores rape as a violation of human rights further:

My virginity—
Gone with the wind of passion
As your pound of flesh.

In addition to Haiku poems 13 and 20 cited above, Haiku poem 29 also explores rape and other sexual abuses but this time as part of the feedback from terrorist attacks.

A new set taken
Maidens devoured by brutes of
A demented faith

Though women are not the only victims of terrorist attacks, their adoption and retention in captivity like in the case of the Dapchi girls make this example of the violation of human rights, an escalated one.

The essence of depicting and singing of Human Rights violation

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s depictions of violations of human rights, just like some popular musicians have done through their songs, reflect the loss of humanness in society. Her concerns in her depictions of moments of human rights violations

through her "Terror Haiku" just like the concerns observable in extracts of some cited popular songs in this paper, has not been able only to highlight these moments of rights violations but also to cause an emotional steer resulting from emotional contagion which is expected to lead to taking up cases of those whose rights have been and are being violated in order to ensure the restoration of the humanity thus trampled upon by perpetrators of human rights violation. This kind of reaction is what Bob Marley calls for in his songs "Redemption Song" and "Get Up, Stand Up." In "Redemption Song," Marley prescribes that one way we can stop people from violating our human rights is to emancipate ourselves from the mental slavery that we imposed upon ourselves. He states in the second stanza of the song: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery// None but ourselves can free our minds." This proposed solution to the problem of human rights violation is so important that Marley emphasizes it by repeating these two lines as the first two lines of the next stanza of the song. In the song, "Get up, Stand up," Marley prescribes the need to not let other people trample upon our rights as he invites in the first stanza of the song thus:

Get up, stand up
Stand up for your right
Get up, stand up
Stand up for your right
Get up, stand up
Stand up for your right
Get up, stand up
Don't give up the fight

This revolutionary therapy to stop the violation of human rights is so important to Marley that it is repeated several times throughout the song. Law, literature as represented in the poetry of Adimora-Ezeigbo, and popular culture as represented by popular music and the songs cited in this essay are in synch with the rejection of any situation that promotes the violation of the human rights of any member of the society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been observed that there is a tendency for some persons in authority or positions of power legal

or illegal be it as a husband, law-enforcement officer, armed gangs etc. to violate the human rights of persons without positions of power or those who are vulnerable based on their social positioning especially women and children. These poems and songs are vehicles that highlight the instances of these violence and violations of the rights of vulnerable members of society. Adimora-Ezeigbo's Haiku poems and the popular songs cited in this research are affective in reflecting the empathic nature of the poet and musicians as well as in moving the readers and listeners to the point of empathy and action. They are active in rejecting any action or behaviour that promote violence and violation of rights. The poems and songs are written and sung in such a manner that they can be adjudged therapeutic because they are effective in helping the affected or violated to feel or gain relief from the tension(s) of thinking that they are alone in their predicament or that nobody cares about their situation.

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25 *Violence and Violation of Human Rights: Perspective of Law, Popular Culture, and Literature in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Poetry*

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