

IDEOLOGY AND REVOLUTION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NIGERIAN POETRY: THE EXAMPLES OF ODIA OFEIMUN AND FIDELIS OKORO

BY

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Abstract

*This research is motivated by the dearth of research on the directions that twenty-first century Nigerian poetry has taken in over two decades of its existence. Its interest is in the revolutionary dimension that some of the poems have taken. It does not argue, however, that the preoccupation with revolutionary sentiments is peculiarly novel as regards Nigerian poetry. What it argues is that the revolutionary tradition which was birthed in the twentieth century Nigerian literature in response to colonialism has garnered a greater vim in the twenty-first century despite the so-called 'democratic' climate. Chosen for this task are selected poems from Fidelis Okoro and Odia Ofeimun, all of which were published in the twenty-first Century. Through the tools borrowed from Marxism, the research not only shows that the works are revolutionary but also the ways in which they are so. The dominant mode of reading in this research is the Althusserian symptomatic reading, but the Gramscian concept of hegemony and some other relevant Marxist concepts will also come in handy. There is, in this work, the treatment of Odia Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals* in terms of the perception of revolution as a Continuing process, through the evoking of what Ofeimun calls 'memories of unfinished Struggles'. Finally, in Okoro's *Pimples and Dimples*, a dissection of religious ideology and hegemony is undertaken. In all the cases, the aim is the depiction of the revolutionary, that is, the ways in which the texts have subverted ideological inhibitions to press for change in the order of things.*

Keywords: Revolution, ideology, Nigerian poetry, Ofeimun, Okoro

Introduction

Major voices in the African literary field have often espoused the belief in socially committed art, and many of the definitions of African literature or the genres within it often factor in this requirement for social commitment. In fact, commitment in African literature, and by implication Nigerian literature, seems to have been made into some sort of aesthetic, the condition of being of whose fulfilment earns any aspiring work the status of 'authentic' African literature. The above attitude of defining African literary art is found, for instance, in the words of Udentia O. Udentia about the nature and meaning of African poetry. Udentia writes:

Modern African poetry is an interventionist genre, an art form which, having assimilated the rich resources of African social experience, mediate them in a creative mode. Modern African poets, as purveyors of this socio-aesthetic consciousness, thus write about those things which are meaningful to the African, but as a private individual and a member of a social community: his passions and desires, his great aspirations and

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social affirmations, the character and structure of the polity, freedom, justice and social change (ix).

Udenta's definition of African poetry, of which Nigerian poetry is a major part, has in its womb a revolutionary seed. For Udenta, part of the poet's task is to cast 'in a creative mode the character and structure of the polity' (ix). Of course, as both facts and the literary recreations of them have shown, the structure of the polity is usually far from ideal. The distribution of power and resources is often heavily tilted in favour of a certain class. For instance, during the colonial period, the unfair relations between the colonial powers and their African colonies, together with the basic impropriety of the whole colonial project, created a stimulus for African poets to press for the 'freedom, justice and social change'(ix) that Udenta writes about. Furthermore, the arrival of independence was supposed to guarantee the fulfilment of David Diop's poetic vision of Africa 'springing up anew' in his poem, 'Africa'. However, it was not the case. In fact, the Africans who took over from the colonizers can even be said to have surpassed the whites in sabotaging the African dream. In Udenta's words, they 'became more enthusiastic than the erstwhile colonial force in cementing social inequality, political oppression, mismanagement of national resources and institutionalized corruption' (xi). This reality plunged African poets into a second phase of revolutionary writing. According to Louis James, this second phase is 'that of protest within Africa itself' (116).

It is in fact possible to say that African writers are perpetually in protest; that they are continually angling for some sort of revolution, that their works have always been inclined towards a revolt against the structure of the polity as well as the superstructural ideologies that aid in perpetuating the status quo, whether in a confrontational way or through what Femi Osofisan calls 'surreptitious insurrection' (11). Thus, the germ of revolution can be traced in the various preoccupations of twentieth century writers in their works. There is a revolutionary germ in the acts of the estranged individuals who enter into conflicts with society in post-independence fictional works. There is the germ of revolution in the character portraits of female heroes, in female-authored texts, who, through their actions, challenge the conventional stereotypes against women; surpass the given patriarchal bounds; angle for a more inclusive role for women in society and so on. It will therefore be false to assume that revolutionary and ideological concerns in Nigerian poetry are a twenty-first century phenomenon. What vacuum then does this study intend to fill out? We have had two decades of the twenty-first century. Much has been written within this period. In spite of that, none has sought to show that there is an intensely revolutionary dimension to a good number of the poetic works of the twenty-first century, particularly as it concerns our chosen texts. None has sought to show the relationship between this bold, mask-free, radically confrontational twenty-first century poetry and the prevailing political climate in Nigeria, without forgetting how it differs from the revolutionary literature of the preceding century. The above gap is what this research intends to fill out: the need to account for the tradition as it has continued to flower in twenty-first century Nigerian poetry, to show, through a Marxist theoretical lens, the peculiarities that pigment it.

The term revolution became popular in African literary criticism because of its dominance in the politico-economic discourse of Marxism. Revolution ordinarily means change, whether this change comes through violent means or some natural process or even

through peaceful negotiation. Some people appear to locate revolution more in the violent than the peaceful, seeing it as 'radical, transformative change (Mgbojirikwe and Onyebuchi 106) and 'often violent' (Neitzel 1). Paraphrasing Udentia, UzoechiNwagbara writes that revolutionary aesthetic concerns 'the literature of combat that brings about the freeing of humanity from the cordon of oppression' (118). In this research, the perception of the aesthetic of revolution is no more than the way in which the drive to bring about some radical change in the order of things is apparently made the mode of perception of a work, its aesthetic.

This research will be based on selected poems from Odia Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals* (2010) and Fidelis Okoro's *Pimples and Dimples* (2012). There is the need to show that revolutionary aesthetic in literature does not end with the twentieth century. Apart from showing that there is a thematic continuity in the last and present century, there is also the need to show how the latter differs from the former.

There are in fact influential works in African literary criticism that uphold the exploration of the 'revolutionary pressures' in African literature through a Marxist critical lens. One of such is Emmanuel Ngara's *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*. Ngara has argued that 'there is no necessary contradiction between Marxism and Afrocentrism in literary criticism. While Marxism originated in Europe historically, it is a truly revolutionary theory which is well suited to the task of liberating African literature and criticism from Eurocentricism' (7). Ngara further discusses what he calls *aesthetic ideology* as it pertains to the works of poets from Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries. Another significant text is Chidi Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature*. For Amuta, Marxism 'offers a natural anchor for all theories of culture predicated on the desire for freedom' (10).

Marxism, Ideology and the Perception of the Revolutionary

The problem with trying to give a simple, all-encompassing account of Marxism is that one is usually confronted with a large contentious body of works from the major Marxist theorists who no doubt have critically stretched the discourse beyond the pegs fixed by Marx and his ally, Frederick Engels. One may even find it more comfortable to, as Storey has done (82), talk about '*Marxisms*' and not "Marxism", in order to accommodate the distinctive conceptions found, for instance, in Classical Marxism, Althusserian Marxism, the Frankfurt School, the carnivalesque discourse of Mikhail Bakhtin, the Gramscian discourse of hegemony and so on. These approaches within Marxism are however united in that they not only purvey the differing ideological matrices that help to legitimize and calcify the unfavorable socio-political structure but also effecting a consciousness that is necessary for the challenge of and rebelling against the order of things. This part of the work will examine Marxism as it concerns literature, that is, literary Marxism. It will also make reference to the philosophies of certain other Marxist critics whose views help to clarify the status of Marxism as a literary theory. Through this means, the nature of revolution, that is, from the lenses of Marxism, shall be perceived.

Marxism distinguishes between base and superstructure in the understanding of the way humans produce their lives (the mode of production of their society). On the one hand, the base may be understood as a synthesis of the forces of production and the relations of production. Whereas the forces of production may be understood as the tools, production technology, raw materials and so on, the relations of production refer to the superior/infer

binaries of relationship that result from the mode of production of a historical period, for instance, lord/peasant relations, master/slave relations, and bourgeois/proletariat relations. On the other hand, superstructure consists of not just institutions but also the different forms of social consciousness produced by these institutions. These are ideological forms. These forms of consciousness may be religious, aesthetic, ethical, cultural, philosophical and so on. Art and by extension literature belong to the superstructure.

The relationship between the base and the superstructure is that while 'the superstructure both expresses and legitimates the base...the base is said to "condition" and "determine" the content and form of the superstructure' (Storey 83). It is to be understood that the part of the base which determines the content of the superstructure is the ruling material force', just as Marx and Engels have argued that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force' (The German Ideology 26). Literature then is an ideological construct and as Eagleton argues, 'the function of ideology is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society' (5). Literature cannot then be thought of as independent but as committed, as an ideological tool, as reflective of the mode of production of the historical epoch that produced it or the historical epoch which it captures. Thus the forms, styles and meanings of a literary work must be grasped as 'the products of a particular history' (Eagleton 3).

Even though Marxism views literature as ideological in terms of servicing the interest of the ruling class in capitalist establishments, it also sees it as an ideological weapon. The irony is that it is within the ideological space provided by literature that Marxist oriented writers of literature must engage the unfavourable ideology which legitimizes the subservience of one class to the other. Literature is one of the 'ideological forms' in which people become conscious...conflict and fight it out' (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 4). Marxist critics, in their bid to counter the ideology of the ruling class, establish an ideological criterion for art, if it must aspire to the status of 'great' or 'authentic'. For instance, in the work, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse gives two senses of the term 'revolutionary' in reference to a work of art, and subsequently aligns the authenticity of a work of art to the ideal sense of the revolutionary. He writes:

Art can be called revolutionary in several senses. In a narrow sense, art may be revolutionary if it represents a radical change in style and technique. Such change may be the achievement of a genuine avant-garde, anticipating or reflecting substantial changes in the society at large. Thus, 'expressionism and surrealism anticipated the destructiveness of monopoly capitalism, and the emergence of new goals of radical change. But the merely technical definition of revolutionary art says nothing about the quality of the work, nothing about its authenticity and truth.

Beyond this, a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and Petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation). In this sense, every authentic work of art would be revolutionary, i.e., subversive of perception and understanding, an indictment of the established reality, the appearance of the image of liberation (x-xi).

Marxist critics are usually inclined towards revolution, but they are also interested in making bare those social institutions that help to frustrate revolution; those mechanisms that help to hide the necessity for change from the consciousness of the oppressed; those institutions which make the oppressed begin to see their condition as normal; they are concerned in short with exposing ideologies or what the Frankfurt School of Marxism calls 'false consciousness,' or what David Hawkes calls 'a systematically false consciousness' (7). False consciousness refers to the way the oppressed class in society are made to see their condition as natural, as normal. They are given a false consciousness of normalcy, unable to recognize the many chains with which they have been bound to their situations.

What the Frankfurt School calls 'false consciousness' resembles what is encountered in Gramscian Marxism as 'hegemony'. The Italian Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, was interested in understanding the reason the capitalist governments of various countries have managed to keep revolution at bay. This leads him to the discourse of hegemony. According to Gramsci, through the paltry concessions, 'negotiations' and 'incorporations' that the ruling class engages in, 'the great masses of the population' give "spontaneous" consent to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group' (145). Hegemony is maintained when the masses thus begin to consider their condition as natural; when they begin to have the illusion that they are in charge because of the paltry concessions which the ruling class usually makes to them. Let us take the political practice of democracy for example. Democracy gives the masses a feeling of control, but in Gramscian wisdom, democracy is an illusion. In Gramsci words, 'in Republics, the election at fixed intervals of the Head of State gives the illusion of satisfying this elementary popular demand' (507). The concept of hegemony will be encountered again in this work in relation to F.U. Okoro's *Pimples and Dimples*.

It is important to explain the various senses in which the term ideology is used in Marxist criticism. We have already encountered it as 'false consciousness'. But at the basic level, ideology can be thought of as a set of ideas articulated by a certain group of people. These ideas inform the way this group behaves, or responds to certain phenomena. At this level, every literary theory may be said to be ideological. For instance, some people reject some readings, for instance a Marxist reading, of a text because they think it is ideological. They would prefer a reading that is entirely text-based, in which one gives attention to the structure of the text and so on. At this basic level of the understanding of ideology, one can say that their rejection of a Marxist reading is ideological because it is informed by a systematic set of ideas which prescribe how a text should be read. It is what Theodor Adorno means when he writes that 'any literature which therefore concludes that it can be a law unto itself, and exist only for itself, degenerates into ideology no less' (193). This sense of ideology is the reason that there is usually the ironical situation in which one ideology accuses another ideology of being ideological.

One Marxist scholar who has contributed in the semantic evolution of the concept of ideology is Louis Althusser. Although there is still the sense of 'false consciousness in Althusser's conception of the term, for ideology according to him depends so much on obviousness', the reason it elicits such reactions as 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!' And thus hidden from one' ('Ideology' 172). His sense of the term differs from that of classical

Marxism in that ideology is not conceived as some ideas about society but as the lived reality in society. Thus, for Althusser, men live out ideology. To him:

So ideology is a matter of the lived relation between men and their world. This relation that only appears as 'conscious' on condition that it is unconscious, in the same way only seems to be simple on condition that it is complex, that it is not a simple relation but a relation between relations, a second degree relation. In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an imaginary, 'lived' relation. Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their world', that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence (*For Marx*, 233-234).

In another work, in fact, an important work as far as the Althusserian theory of ideology is concerned, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser sees ideology as the Representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (162). There is in this work of Althusser's a distinction between what he calls the (repressive) State Apparatuses and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). On the one hand, (repressive) state apparatuses include the army, police, government, courts, prisons, and administration. On the other hand, the ISAs comprise the family ISA, religious ISA, legal ISA, educational ISA, political ISA (which includes political parties), trade-union ISA, cultural ISA (that is, sports, literature, arts) and communications ISA (which includes press, TV and radio). As regards their distinctions, Althusser argues that all the State Apparatuses function both by repression and by ideology, with the difference that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression, whereas the ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology (149).

Methodologically speaking, the analyses in this work shall piggyback on the salient theoretical concepts examined so far. Some of them are of course ideology (both in terms of the Althusserian ideological and state apparatuses and the Leninist concept of useful consciousness), Gramscian hegemony and so on. The main method of reading these poems in spite of the various concepts mentioned above is the Althusserian symptomatic reading, a reading he borrows from Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*. In his *Reading Capital*, Althusser explains that symptomatic reading 'divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first (28). In symptomatic reading, a text may seem to answer questions that it has not expressly asked. For Althusser, these questions have been posed in the 'problematics' of the text, consisting of 'assumptions, motivations, underlying ideas, etc. From which a cultural text...is made' (Storey 96).

Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals*: The Revolution as a continuum

When one reads Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals*, one understands the truth behind his comment at the blurb of the collection that he decided to publish the work because there was the need to ensure that poetry never failed to bear 'the memories of unfinished struggles' (blurb of *Go Tell the Generals*). What Ofeimun means is that the struggle for better life for the

people, the quest for both qualitative and quantitative change, the drive for some improvement in the life of the poor masses, and in fact, the combat against injustice are not actually new. Thus in the collection, there is, to use Marcuse's words, 'a concern with the past: remembrance of something that at some point had lost its reality and had to be taken up again (Negations xx). Long ago, the struggles had begun. It will be foolhardy to imagine that they have ended now, merely because there is the so-called democratic dispensation. The collection was first published in 2008, even though much of the work seems to deal with memories from the previous century. Why does he choose to publish the poems in 2008, even though many of the poems were actually written before the dawn of the present century? Was it because of the fear of the military who probably could have visited such subversive writing with punitive measures? This question may be re-asked later as it generally concerns twenty-first century revolutionary poetry.

There is, however, a mnemonic angle to Ofeimun's revolutionary aesthetics in *Go Tell the Generals*. Ofeimun's work serves as some sort of memory aid. It seeks to remind the reader that the struggle had been and subsequently point them to the fact that they should continue to be, because they are actually 'unfinished'. In fact, if there had been lukewarm resistance in the past, there should be intensified vim in the resistance, in the strive for change; if there had been hopelessness and inertia in the past, there should be purposeful action and fired-up will, the will activated by disenchantment with past-and-yet-continuing sufferings.

The above can be found in Ofeimun's 'Memory I'. It should be mentioned here the way in which concerns for the Niger Delta predicament colour many of the poems in the collection. In fact, the section of the collection in which the poem is found is called 'Children of the Creeks'. In the poem, 'Memory I', there is a movement from the past to the present. The movement may even be said to be playing out in many of the poems in the collection. It is not surprising that the poem is appropriately entitled "Memory I". In Memory I, there is in abundance images of decay, poverty, deprivation and suffering in the creeks. These things are justification for the children to 'change the world' (18). The speaker tells us of a benevolent female character who has had so much influence on the lives of the children, the 'us' on behalf of whom the speaker speaks. From the description of this female being in the five parts of the poem, we get varied ideas of the real identity of the female being in part one of the poem, we perceive the she as some mother, like every decent mother, because of the physical agency ascribed to her. For instance, we are told that 'she wiped mucus rings from our noses' and 'she paddled us straight to school'. In part two of the poem, this female being gains the status of a goddess, some benevolent female deity: 'She, the angel of our creeks /To whom the elders poured libation' (19). And this had no 'need for help' to frighten us to the way of the truth. The female being is portrayed as an artist who sings in part three of the poem, but her song is not the nonsensical rhymes usually composed for children; hers is the song of revolution, of resolute commitment to change the world. As the lyrical persona puts it:

Always she sang as she paddled us
To school and back. She sang:
Stand tall, stand tall, you must stand.
No matter the tide, change the world. (20)

In part four the 'she' metamorphoses to a teacher. Whatever be the case, this female being is very important. This female being is the conscience of the community, bastion of communal revolution. Because she encourages the children to stand tall and change the world. We may make the mistake of assuming that she means the global world. But the question is what other world do the children know apart from the creeks? The creeks are their world.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the varied identities ascribable to this female being in Ofeimun's 'Memory I' fit perfectly together. She is at the same time a mother, a divine bastion of faith and protection, a committed artist, a teacher, a pedagogic force (as we see in the final fifth part of the poem). The revolutionary and confrontational aesthetics in the poem seem to gain energy in the final part, for we are told:

She taught us to question with sticks
So if they come again as they will,
-since they will come again for the loot.
She gritted her teeth: don't let it happen
To you, and you, it must not happen
To stand tall, stand very tall,
Whatever the tide, change the world. (22)

In the poems about the children of the creeks, the ones that do not openly project a violent protest and resistance against oppression and the structure of the polity' (Udenta ix). Merely serve to authenticate the necessity for change by capturing the pitiable plight and dehumanization the people of the creeks in a disgusting yet picturesque way. Such poems as 'Memory II' and 'Children of the Creeks' typify the above. In the former, there are frightening images of the 'explosions in our creeks' (23), of 'soggy wealth that was also death' (24), of wounded siblings' (24) and so on. The latter contrasts the status quo with the pre-crude oil period, in that way, revealing the gloomy condition of the people and the environment.

The poem that immediately follows 'Children of the Creeks' is markedly different from it. Whereas 'Children of the Creeks' is marked by plaintive complaint and wishful yearning, this succeeding poem entitled 'Sink their Ship' is one of confrontation, of countering violence with violence. But the kind of violence implicated here is one divested of immoral connotation; it is a sort of moral violence, the type Ngugi has in mind when he writes that 'violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust oppressive social order is not savagery; it purifies man' (28). Furthermore, one familiar thing about this poem is the occurrence of the pedagogic revolutionary female force that has already been encountered in Ofeimun's 'Memory I'. She is the one counseling violence in full measure:

If they hang your dog
Kill their cow
If they steal your purse
Burn their house
If they bring down your plane
Sink their ship
If they bring plagues to your door
Don't cry!
Till your 'balance of terror

Meets their 'balance of power
 And your 'one man one gun'
 Is bad fellow to their 'one man one vote'
 So that none would believe it ever again
 That your palms alone
 Are made for slave portions. (26)

This violence, as is found in the poem is not vendetta; it is purposeful violence. It is one geared towards humanizing the beasts of oppression. As the speaker in the poem says: 'And, don't call it vendetta, she said / It's the way to teach the strong / To climb from beast to person-hood' (26).

There is another angle to the understanding of the revolutionary in Ofeimun's collection. Although this angle is related to the project of inspiring revolution through the evocation of memories, it is significant enough to be looked at separately. This other angle has to do with the role of tributes in Ofeimun's revolutionary art.

The Revolutionary in Ofeimun's Tribute Poetry

Tribute poetry, which 'commemorates the contributions of a person, past or present' (Bugeja 124), has been a regular feature of many African poetry collections since the inception of modern African poetry in the twentieth century. In fact, it has strong connections with the ode tradition in English poetry as well as a stronger affinity with the praise-poetry tradition in Africa, and reflects the encomiastic dimension that poetry can take in any tradition. However, it has become especially popular in twenty-first century Nigerian poetry, to the point that some contemporary poets, like ObuUdeozo, have made it a favourite artistic inclination. In Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals*, tributes also feature remarkably.

First, many of the poems of tribute in Ofeimun's collection come under the section he labels 'elegies'. But our interest is not whether or not Ofeimun wants us to regard these poems as pure elegies, in the strict sense of a reflection on mortality, or the passing away of someone. The question is What do we find in the poems? What we find is that the poems in the section are more encomiastic than elegiac; they are elegies mostly in the sense that they are about people who are dead, people of the past who established themselves, through their actions, as archetypal models of enviable revolutionary ideals or qualities. The focus then is mainly on the qualities that these individuals exuded in the face of inhibiting and brutalizing conditions, not so much on dying, but on 'dying well'. In different poems, Ofeimun extols the revolutionary qualities of Kudirat Abiola, Alfred Rewane, Bola Ige, and Ken SaroWiwa. Put another way, the tributes are to the heroes of revolution. The word 'hero' has been used in the ancient Greek sense of people who have 'survived' death, not because they did not die, but because death did not overcome their legacies. Death means the cessation of existence, but these people still exist through their revolutionary legacies. That is the way in which they have survived death.

The poem, 'The Heart Has No Bone', was written as tribute to the late Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, the wife of the late MKO Abiola. Now, the implication of an Althusserian symptomatic reading is that what matters in the apprehension of the meaning of a work is not only what is said, but also what is unsaid. Thus, in our analyses, we shall relate the textual *said* to the textual *unsaid*, which is called the problematics of the texts. For instance, in *The Heart has No*

Bone', the part of the poem (the problematics) which is not captured in the poem includes: that during the brutal military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida, Kudirat's husband MKO Abiola won an election which was annulled by the military administration. This plunged the country into political crisis, which led to the assassination of protesters and arrowheads. It was during this period that Kudirat Abiola etched her name on the marbles of national history.

The historical problematics about Kudirat being the wife of MKO Abiola makes intelligible the statement in the poem that: 'She breached house-wifely tales' (36). That is part of what symptomatic reading does, 'it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first reading' (Reading Capital 28). It is this familial relationship that launches her into the fight for not only the release of her husband but also his instatement as president of the country. Even though she was assassinated, she became the foremost female protagonist in the battle against injustice and oppression during that period. These historical problematics are important in the symptomatic reading of any literary work of art, but this does not mean that the work itself is history. Pierre Macherey, whose *A Theory of Literary Production* is influential as far as symptomatic reading is concerned, frames it better:

This history is not in a simple external relation to the work: it is present in the work, in so far as the emergence of the work required this history, which is its only principle or reality and also supplies its means of expression. This history, which is not merely the history of works of the same nature, entirely determines the work: gives the work its reality, but also that which it is not, and this is the most important (93-94).

Thus, history is an important part of the work but is importantly not the work.

From the poem, we get a lot of information regarding the qualities that this woman possessed, the kind of person she was, and the mode of her resistance. First, we are told that she 'was a mascot'. The epithet of a mascot is worth considering. This description implies that she was the symbol of the resistance; she was the representative banner of the revolutionary rejection of oppression and tyranny. In her, all the qualities required of revolutionaries coagulate into one: readiness, resoluteness, fearlessness, self-sacrifice and so on.

Being a woman, she would have done no 'wrong if she merely kept quiet as society would expect people of her gender to be. But she is not the type to be undermined by wifely expectations. We read:

She breached house-wifely tales to stand
 up to gorillas dangling from silk cotton trees
 And crocodiles of river-beds leering at her
 As she climbed or swam against the tide (36)

The secret of her resoluteness in the face of danger and brutalization is her maxim of the heart, which in fact is the title of the poem. The persona says:

The heart, she says, has no bone that breaks
 Nor does it tear at tendons when storms throw
 Bolts and branches to flatten resolve:
 As nothing can break our mandate
 Let no head erect think of bowing (38)

In contemplating the tribute to Kudirat, there is, as in most other poems in the collection, a sense of the antiquity and inconclusiveness of the struggle, of revolution. It has always been in the nature of humans to oppress and it is equally in the nature of humans to at a point resist all those things which bear them down and undermine their natural inclination to freedom.

Another hero of revolution is Pa Alfred Rewane, one of those at the forefront of the fight to end military dictatorship under the auspices of the National Democratic Coalition, popularly known as NADECO. The poem, 'Ogidigbo', is an outstanding tribute to this man. Even the persona acknowledges that Rewane is 'one man [who] remains larger than every tribute' (41). Many of the references to him are directed at certain exemplary qualities of his. For instance, his fearlessness is eulogized in many places in the poem, like this one:

He stood
An iroko against buffalos on the stomp
Stout and tall in the halt light of morning
Unbending to hooves and horns that took
Death claps to the roots of stubborn hope
He was too large for praises and tributes
Osibakoro, the firm and fearless (41)

Not only is this man resilient and fearless, he is also kind and generous, for he is always the Patriarch of Salah and Christmas' (41). At any rate, the interest of the research lies in his revolutionary acts, his fearlessness in engaging the oppressor.

Bola Ige, the man about whom the poems 'Bola Ige' and 'A Chant for Uncle Bola' are written, shares certain similarities with Rewane. Both had to pay the ultimate price for the struggle; both were members of NADECO; both were resilient and fearless in the fight to oust the military dictator, and both 'stood against loot-sharers' (45).

To conclude this part, a restatement of the purpose of Ofeimun's tributes, the way in these tributes in themselves are revolutionary, is important. First, in line with Ofeimun's overall vision of revolutionary struggle as a continuing process and the need to keep the embers of revolution aglow in pursuit of the ideal, these tribute poems are inspiring mementos; they remind the reader of the primordial nature of the quest for an egalitarian society and the symbols of this quest. Thus, the poems are about the past heroes of revolution. A mention has been made earlier about the sense of heroism meant here; Rewane, Kudirat, SaroWiwa, Bola Ige, and so on are heroes, not because they did not die, but because their legacies survived death. To use the words of the persona in 'A Chant for Uncle Bola', these individuals 'will outlast all the assassins' (46).

The Sentient Sufferer: Gramscian Hegemony and Okoro's 'Kwuredible Eleshon Don Kwom'

Gramsci's reading of society in terms of hegemony is just one of those brilliant attempts to make sense of the capitalist nations through a Marxist lens and in a post-Marx setting. Gramsci's concern has been the explication of the reason there has not been considerable violent revolution in capitalist societies, despite the gross inequalities in the socio-economic structures. How does the ruling class maintain power and control (hegemony), in these political settings? How does the ruling class organize 'social hegemony and state domination?' (145). As was stated in the theoretical framework, the ruling class uses its elaborated intellectuals to

achieve this. Another way it achieves social hegemony and political domination, according to Gramsci, is through negotiations and incorporations. In order to assuage the popular demand for change, the ruling class can make paltry concessions, for instance, instituting democracy and organising elections at intervals. But as Gramsci writes, it is only an illusion. It is a way of incorporating the suffering masses into the Political setup in a way that merely serves the interest of the ruling class by strengthening the latter's hegemony. The result is that 'the great masses or the population give spontaneous consent to the general direction imposed on social life' by the dominant class (145). To the masses, they call the shots. In reality, what has been achieved is a false fulfilment of the 'people rule' ideal of democracy.

In such a society as Gramsci describes, it is just adequate that ideal revolution should start from a Marxist theorization of the condition of the masses. Understanding one's condition is one big step towards changing it. Revolution begins at the junction of theoretical anagnorisis. It begins at, to use Gramsci's words, 'the second level [of] philosophizing, which is that of awareness and criticism (626). Vladimir Lenin in his important book *What Is to be Done* proclaims that 'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement' (25)

The sense of theory here is that of the basic etymological implication of *theoria* as reflection. Thus, when the suffering individuals begin to engage in productive reflections on their condition, when they begin to peer through the glorious illusion dished out to them by their oppressor, they are engaging in revolutionary theorization and are making an important step towards changing their condition. This is what we find in Okoro's pidgin poem, 'KwuredibleEleshon Don Kwom' [Credible Election has Come) in his *Pimples and Dimples* collection.

First, there is something misleading about the choice of Pidgin in the poem. The common perception of many is that Pidgin is the language of the uneducated. People often regard Pidgin as the language of the common man, the language of the masses. This is the language in which this poem is written. 'Revolutionary art is supposed to speak the "language of the people"', suggests Marcuse (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 33), and this poem fulfils this not only in the basic sense of using Pidgin, but also in the deeper sense of addressing issues which bedevil the masses. In fact, the Pidgin we encounter in the poem is the heavily accented pidgin of an apparently uneducated northerner. But the absence of formal education is not the absence of critical capacity. Thus, in Okoro's poem, we encounter a sentient persona, who deconstructs the illusionary charade of the ruling class, who is not deceived by the distracting false consciousness created by the political leaders. The poem is a demystification of the hegemonic mechanism of the politicians.

The organization of a credible election is supposed to bring about qualitative change, but this is not the case, as the persona in this poem reveals. It is interesting to see way the persona contrasts the illusion created by the ruling class with the actual realities on ground, for:

Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still demdeykwuredible our money por Switzerland
 Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still hunger deykwurediblefeofle por Naijaland
 Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still no kwuredible jobs por kwontryfeofle

Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still demdey buy flinty house for Durban and Dubai
 Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still demdey double budget, double demchof
 Kwuredibleeshon don kwom
 Still nachof-choffolitics we dey see for Naija (55)

In spite of the much-touted credible election, there has not been any meaningful change. The change is merely quantitative: one criminal goes, another criminal comes but the culture and structure remain the same. The purported credible election results only in changes within the given institutional framework (Marcuse, *Towards a Critical Theory* 37), not qualitative change. Marcuse claims that 'social change is qualitative change if it establishes essentially different forms of human existence, with a new social division of labor, new modes of control over the productive process, a new morality, etc' (*Towards* 37). Embezzlement, poverty, inequality, unemployment and suchlike remain rife. The repetition of the 'still' is but a re-echoing of the continuity and immanence of the unsavoury socio-economic realities which should change.

The poem progresses to a large extent through binary opposition; by placing ideology and reality side by side, the persona reveals the former to be what it really is: ideology, that is, false consciousness, aimed at hoodwinking the suffering masses and consolidating the hegemonic hold of the looting ruling Class. Below is a tabular representation of binary opposition between the ideology of the ruling class and the obtainable reality, as we find in the poem:

IDEOLOGY (FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS)	REALITY
Original	Taiwan
PollowKwom [follow come]	Belgium
De main de main	Kwangala

The sentience of the persona is remarkable; one could easily dub him a Gramscian Marxist, because some of the points raised by him throw up some salient issues in the discourse of Gramscian Marxism, for instance, Gramsci's explication of the role of intellectuals in maintaining hegemony. Let us consider the following:

Dem say nadem be technokwrats
 Dem say nadem be demokwrats
 No mind say we deychof rats (55)

The usual assumption by the masses is that the so-called technocrats are not part of the dominant ruling class, that they are intellectuals who are there to make things better. According to Gramsci said, every class has its own 'organic intellectuals. The class that eventually triumphs, for Gramsci, is the one that has succeeded in 'elaborating its own organic intellectuals' (142). Thus, even though the masses have their intellectuals, these intellectuals

are not 'elaborated'; they seem not to exist. Contrastively, the intellectuals who represent the interests of the dominant class are 'elaborated', made to appear the only intellectuals.

In Gramsci's words, 'the intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government' (145). This is the reason, in the poem, the presence of technocrats and democrats in government does not bring about any change; the people still eat rats, the persona's metaphor for poverty and suffering.

Furthermore, the mention of 'demokwrats' brings us back to the idea of democracy. Gramscian ideas about democracy and the functioning of contemporary industrial nations resemble those of Marcuse. In fact, in many Marxist quarters, democracy is often indicted as ideology, in the sense of a false consciousness. Often, we hear that democracy is the solution to the problems of society, particularly in places where there is military dictatorship. However, democracy, Marcuse argues, 'would appear to be the most efficient system of domination' (56). The persona in Okoro's poem reveals the deceptive ideology of the dominant class about democracy as opposed to the authentic reality faced by the people:

Dem say we get demokwrcy
Wey dipperent prom militokwrcy
De thing we dey see nabarawokwrcy (55)

It is remarkable to note the binary opposition of 'dem' (they) against 'we'. The 'we' in the poem are the masses of the population to which the persona belongs. The 'dem' are, of course, the ruling political class who hold up democracy as the ideal, and election as the change proper, while in fact limiting the options of the electorate to their elaborated intellectuals who would maintain the thieving ideology and ensure that qualitative change always deterred. The use of 'we' creates some kind of fellow-feeling' between the persona and other sufferers. His insightful consciousness is thus aimed especially at his fellow sufferers, for the poem should actually engender a new way of looking at the whole affair of democracy and elections, a new consciousness.

To conclude this part, it is interesting to see the way in which the poem under examination adheres to what Marcuse expects from a work of art. He believes that a work of art should be 'committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity, becoming a vehicle of recognition and indictment' (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 9). Okoro's 'KwuredibleEleshon don kwom' not only recognizes the ideology but also indicts the socio-political structure. The persona in the poem is one with emancipated sensibility and imagination; one that has overcome the ideological illusion of his country. 'Eye weydey cry dey see road' [a teary eye is not necessarily incapable of vision] is a popular Pidgin proverb that illustrates the reality in the poem. The persona is that proverbial eye whose vision has not been supplanted by tears. The argument in this part of the research is that this kind of sentience and consciousness exhibited by the persona is one important step towards changing society. It may not have the praxis which immediately transforms society, but it is, to use Marcuse's words, 'a necessary element in a future praxis of liberation (*One Dimensional Man* 32).

Religion and Ideology: Towards an Athusserian Symptomatic Reading of 'E Don Tey'

The poem 'E Don Tey' is the most popular poem in the Pimples and Dimples collection, probably because it speaks to the frustrations that have characterised the Nigerian life and in a language that excites the Nigerian reader. But in what way can Okoro's poem 'E Don Tey' be said to be revolutionary in a Marxist sense? The poem in question is not concerned mainly with economy nor with the struggle between a proletariat class and a bourgeois class, at least in a strict Marxist sense. But the overall concern is with a somewhat primordial social condition that desperately needs to change, which is violence in the name of God, and what is attacked, albeit quixotically but with theoretical significance, is the root – religion. Of course, economic factor and certain kinds of class stratification feature within the wider context of religious extremism which is the primary concern of the poem, but the poem is Marxist not only because it features a concern with economic status and kinds of class stratification, but also because it reveals how class and economy are woven into the ideology that is religion. Again, this poem is revolutionary not only because it challenges the religious loci from which man gets the authority to kill his fellow man but also because it rebelliously shakes off the ideological shackle of religion that inhibits man from action but canonizes his docile passivity.

There are certain Althusserian problematics that need to be supplied for a fuller understanding of this poem. The Nigerian state is traditionally viewed as comprising the northern region and the southern region, and while the former is predominantly inhabited by Muslims, the latter has a preponderance of Christians. For a long time, the north has been the centre of many cases of religion-based violence. At the beginning of the poem, what the speaker does is to give a historical background to violence in Nigeria, locating its genesis in that fateful amalgamation by the British Lord Lugard. The problem started 'since wey Lugard lugard us togeer 1914'. Since then, this Nigeria has been plagued by one 'oso' after the other, says the speaker. *Oso*, the Igbo word which literally means 'race' or 'running', is a metaphor for unrest. The various instances of this recurrent unrest are mentioned. Pointed out also is the fact that the violence in Nigeria sometimes does not emanate from a disagreement within Nigeria. It is Sometimes the reverberation of 'religious sins' committed elsewhere. For instance

Dem say one man draw cartoon for Denmark
 Dey begin dey burn house for Kano
 Dem say another one give lecture for Berlin
 Dem begin dey burn church for Bauchi
 Person go shit for Denmark
 Na for Kano we go hear the smell
 Person go throw refuse for Berlin
 Na for Bauchi we go pay ESWAMA (18)

One of the revolutionary dimensions of the poem is the 'indictment' of God. We mark this trend when the speaker in the poem begins to ask God certain questions that imply His culpability, when in fact such questions should be directed at the actual perpetrators of the acts. The persona asks:

God Almighty, I wan ask qeshon:
 Na wetindeez innocent pikins do
 Deezipikinsweydey learn A B C?
 Na wetin dis innocent woman do

Dis woman weydem do D and C? (25)

The reason for directing these questions to God becomes clearer later in the poem. First, these people were supposedly acting in name of God. There is also the belief that people who die while fighting for God would be rewarded with seventy-two virgins in paradise. Now, there is the implicit hypothetical premise that the Christian God of the persona in the poem is the same as the God on behalf of whom these religious extremists act. The knowledge of this is important to understanding the direction that the poem takes. It is the same reason that the speaker interrogates God, probing him in a way that elicits dark humour, pain and thoughtfulness from the reader:

God Almighty, I wan ask qeshon:
Doz men wey throw twenty-one innocent pikins
Inside well for kaduna
Dash deir innocent brain for wall
Na you wey tell dem you go give dem seven seven virgins
For paradise?
Doz eleven boys weytly plain enter building for New York
Kill 2001 people
Na you wey promise dem September virgins for heaven
If datna true
Na how many virgin you go give dat woman
Wey bomb herself for Jerusalem market kill ifty people?
Abi na seven youn8 men you BO give am? (35)

The questions that the persona poses to God are thoughtful ones, and they reveal the power of religious ideology as well as its hollowness. They also set the stage for a revolt by the persona. This revolt takes two dimensions, the first evolving naturally from the second. The first is the rejection of the passivity which characterizes the Christian religion, in which long-suffering and forbearance are supposed to be exhibited in the face of persecution. The present situation in which he finds himself (he has been daggered) proves for him the impracticability of that model. In his words:

But what of me wey your son tell if dey slap me
For one cheek, make I turn the other?
De last time I do am na dagger dem carry chuk me for belle (35)

The incident of his impaling marks the point of departure for the poem. Having been impaled and as a result dead or about to die, he has decided to do away with the vengeance is for the Lord ideology which usually makes Christians the frequent butts of violence and persecution. Perhaps the reason for this revolutionary rejection of this ideology is the assumption, whether sarcastic or genuine, of divine complicity in the whole problem of religious violence. The persona is a vengeance-seeking youth who intends to disturb the abode of the celestial beings. This is the second dimension of his revolt: a plan to blow up the facilities where the virgins given to these religious extremists are produced, and of course to engage these extremists in heaven with sophisticated firepower. The confrontation is supposed to take place in another

plane of existence, heaven – an after-death destination for ‘good’ people in both Christian and Islamic religions. It is at this venue that this grand proactive revolt would take place and the persona wants God and His angels to steer clear to avoid ‘friendly fire tory’ (36).

Furthermore, it would seem that from the same-God premise that was pointed out earlier comes a same-heaven premise. This would mean that the heaven which the persona is talking about is simultaneously Islamic and Christian. Thus, the persona’s heaven is a place where the qualities of the Islamic heaven and those of the Christian heaven conflate, rather than conflict. Peter and Paul are in this heaven, and this is a quality of the Christian heaven, a place where the righteous would reunite with the saints of old. At any rate, in this heaven, people who died while fighting for God would be rewarded with virgins, which is Islamic and alien to the Christian heaven. Whichever way one sees the persona’s project, that is, whether it issues from a genuine belief in the existence of such a place called heaven as it exists simultaneously in Islam and Christianity or whether it is merely a tongue-in-cheek mockery of such a belief, one would still notice that the poem is an attack on religion. The quixotic nature of the persona’s revenge mission may make one label it as unserious, but even at a symbolic level, this poem is revolutionary.

There is another dimension to the attack on religion in the poem. The persona speaks revealingly about how religion helps to legitimize the socio-economic structure on ground. This criticism would be seen in his dissection of the relationship between the class of poor folk called Almajeri and the rich people who often use them as agents of destruction. Therefore, the Almajeri is as much a victim in the poem as the dead/dying corps member who we understand to be the persona. A good portion of the poem is, in fact, dedicated to delineating the social plight of the Almajeri. As in many Marxist criticisms of society, economy is an important factor here. Just as Macherey writes, ‘the composition of an ideology implies the relation of the ideological to the economic’ (93). The disparity that the persona draws in the socio-economic structure is very insightful and tear-inspiring. According to the persona:

After Almajeri don do boy finish for politishan
Impikin go do boy for politishanpikin
Datna if e lucky survive born pikin
Otherwise e go goAljeena go collect im reward
While politishanpikin go go Al Amerijeena go get im degree award (27)

With the help of the mallams, who are actually there to help maintain the hegemony of the rich, the condition of the Almajeri is made to seem ‘de thing wey God ordain... de divine order’(28) or that ‘na like dat God arrange am/everything get im place for nature’ (28), and all efforts are made to ensure that the Almajeri remain at the bottom rungs of the economic and educational ladders:

When politishan see say anything wan dabaru de divine order
E go jump commot with im mixing bowl
Carry religion mix with politics
Carry tribe mix with religion
Carry bomb put for inside
Carry cannon put for centre
Carry Almajeri put inside cannon

Go sidon dey watch news dey wait for harvest time
 Dem go send young people make dem go die go paradise
 While dem go dey run from one cave to another (28)

The education he is given is one that exhorts him to fight holy wars; the promise of a paradisiacal after-death experience if he should die in active service to God is enchanting to him and becomes a motivating force; death, or to put it more accurately, dying 'well', is a means of escape from the sufferings of this world – this world of hunger and want, this world of wandering. Religious ideology confers on him a certain false importance, the benefit of which is supposed to be reaped in some other-worldly paradise. The Almajeri, to use Althusser's word, has been 'recruited as a subject by the ideology called religion ('ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'). It is a recruitment to which the Almajeri has given natural consent, and his plight has been made to seem natural and rewardingly divine. In reality, his condition helps to maintain hegemony, the status quo, servicing the political and religious whims and caprices of the rich Alhajis:

Almajerina de rich man's paradise
 If poor people no dey
 How rich man go do zakat?
 If e no do zakat
 How Allah go bless am?
 If Allah no bless am
 How e go go paradise when e die?
 More Almajeri, more politics
 More Almajeri, more paradise (32)

The Almajeri thus becomes, in Gramsci's words, 'a mere "thing"' (647), and religion, economy and politics are collaborators in this terrible *thingification* of the Almajeri.

In conclusion, this poem answers some questions about the nature of religious violence in Nigeria, even though it did not ask these questions itself. Some of the questions that exist in the problematics of the text include: how does economy feature in the issue? How does politics come to be coloured with religion; in fact, how do they service each other? Who are the real victims of the ideological superstructure called religion, particularly in the Nigerian setting?

Conclusion

To conclude, this work was motivated by the lack of critical discussions of the chosen texts in terms of the revolution and ideology, using a Marxist theoretical framework and symptomatic reading. Beyond this, there was also the aim of proving the continuity or perpetual flowering of the revolutionary tradition even in the twenty-first century in spite of the democratic dispensation. The closing word or what may be called the thesis of this research is that the revolutionary tradition in modern Nigerian poetry which has the same temporal origin with modern African literature itself continues to blossom in the twenty-first century, and Fidelis Okoro's *Pimples and Dimples* and Odia Ofeimun's *Go Tell the Generals* are fine examples.

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