

I Sing a Discordant Melody; I Tell a Different Story

Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike

Ekele m unu.

I greet you all, ladies and gentlemen.

I am honored to share with you the artistic processes that molded my life as a bearer of songs; a story-teller. I hope I may be able to sate the eclectic appetite of a people whose cultural and literary affluence is an inspiration to many a writer.

When I say, “I write,” I mean, “We write,” because I’m speaking for a people. “I” is collective in most African literature, particularly in poetry. This can be seen in the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, in which Aimé Césaire proclaims, “My mouth will be the mouth of the misery that has no mouth; my voice, the freedom of those voices which fall into dungeons of despair.”

I am from the Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria. The Igbo have a rich cultural history and heritage. Idioms, riddles, aphorisms, anecdotes, folklores, and proverbs embellish the oral tradition, intersperse the language, and serve communicative purposes as well as instructive purposes.

In Igboland, stories assume great importance and therefore are venerated. Stories do not serve only to illuminate community values, but also remind people of individual and collective responsibilities—responsibilities towards building a society that is both harmonious and congenial for human development.

The importance of stories is highlighted by Professor Emmanuel Obiechina, a foremost Igbo scholar, in the 1994 Ahiajoku Lecture Series, an annual forum for the promotion of Igbo civilization. He stated that, *akuko ka e ji a muta okwu* (the story is the medium through which we understand the word); *akuko bu ndu* (story is life).”

Chinua Achebe, the Igbo writer, also underscores the primacy of stories. He tells us through a character in his book *Anthills of the Savannah*: “The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.”

Sadly, my people still paddle in darkness, because we have “blind elite” as Véronique Tadjo, a writer from Cote d’Ivoire, makes us realize in her allegorical novel *The Blind Kingdom*. For her, “the problem with our continent [Africa] resides principally in its blind elite. The bourgeoisie could have been a factor for progress but in fact were rapacious and blind and have failed the majority of the people.”

The tragedy of the misrule in Africa is further highlighted by the late Nigerian poet Ezenwa Ohaeto in *The Chants of a Minstrel*.

The idiot-king does forget
Despite the mighty rage of fire
It finally settles down as ash.

In most nations of Africa, it is a fact that the government expresses scant respect, or none at all, for the sacred language of literature; the language that, ironically, has nurtured a positive image of

Conrad's so-called "Heart of Darkness" on the "whitewashed" minds of the world; that has to a great extent lessened the blight of our shameful inadequacies in the international arena.

I have always admired the African writer, because, as the Ugandan writer Goretti Kyomuhendo has said, it's easy to lose hope when one lives in Africa, and I'm compelled to quit writing altogether. Yet I can't. This brings me back to the subject why I write what I write.

I remember the 14-year-old scribbling a lopsided verse across the blackboard: his first; a satiric doggerel of the acronym GRA, the exclusive Government Reserved Area of the elite. He parodied it to mean Government Rejected Areas, alluding to the infamous slums where he grew up.

A year or so later, stricken with infatuation, he tried to impress a big-bosomed girl by presenting to her his first novel, a handwritten sappy romance. All she offered him was a smile; nothing more.

In 1996, he was compelled to tackle some personal gloom. To worsen matters, General Abacha, Nigeria's late ruler, plunged the university system into the muck, and this teenager beheld his undergraduate dream spiraling out of control, like a maniac.

Grappling with bile and despair, he picked up, quite inadvertently, dear William Shakespeare sitting in an oblique and forlorn pose on a cobwebbed shelf in his uncle's library.

The Sonnets!

Shakespeare accompanied him in many a heedless adventure: the young lad tossed his heart and soul head-on into a world of words. A world more fantastic than any Tolkien or Rowling could have conceived.

George Orwell said that one cannot assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early development.

The past is always redolent. It makes us intelligible to the next generation.

African writers, old and young, dead and living, have often armed themselves with prose, poetry and play, as arsenal of remonstrance and resistance. Look at our glorious history, the bloody crepuscule of colonialism, the heady meridian of Pan-Africanism, the hazy twilight of nationhood; the recurring motif remains: Dispossession.

Early and other Francophone writers couched their story in "Négritude"; a literary and political movement developed in the 1930s aimed at restoring the cultural identity of black Africans. Though the founders made us believe that they were fighting French colonial racism, the truth is that Négritude heightened the dialectic between possession and dispossession.

The Anglophone writers on the other hand, were not fixated on blackness, because they realized that color was never enough to sustain an opposition, so they expanded their story to embrace all facets of the African reality and explicitly denounced dispossession without situating the language within the insularity of any ideology.

The point I am making is this: Whichever way one looks at the above premises one cannot

dissociate the story from the context of dispossession.

In his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot talks about fidelity to tradition and a "continual surrender of self" to the vast order of tradition. Permit me to localize Eliot's premise to suit my argument. As an Igbo I recognize that story-telling does not occur in a vacuum, but builds on tradition. Story-telling embodies our relationship with the past, the present and the future; in fact it connects with and embodies the continuity of tradition.

Anyway, much as I would like my writing to be far removed from the theme of dispossession; I cannot. My dilemma is even echoed in one of my poems, "River Urashi":

I am no bearer of manifold tales of my tribe
I am cosmopolitan in prodigal ways, garbed in the city peacock's colors
Errant son, scornful of the magic of songs . . .

Dispossession. Exploitation.

That is the pestilence ravaging our farms. Despoiling homes; destroying lives. I am no stranger to it, to the manic collusion that transcends color and race. Lamenting the fortune of the oil-rich communities, Nnimmo Bassey, a Nigerian environmental poet, chanted in his book *We thought it was Oil but it was Blood*:

These pipes dry our lands
These pipes drain our souls
These pipes steal our dreams.

See why I find it difficult to free myself from identifying with tradition? Even when I shut my eyes, I still picture fumes of gas flaring. I still perceive the odors of oil slick. How can I tuck myself under the smug poetry of romance or philosophy when my mind is daily assaulted by the pestilence eating away my land? Should I embrace the call of being a politically disengaged man and become what Jean-Paul Sartre called a "bastard?"

No, my writing will continue to ring as one long, uncompromising squall. Let despoilers hear! Shearers of songs hear! Hackers of tongues hear!

This is why I write what I write – because I am unable to spit in the face of the king who is deaf to the millions crying out for bread; the blind king who is aroused by bloodshed and desperate to reduce the ancestral earth to a collage of mushroomed waste.

I do not want to embrace pessimism, because hope is haunted everyday in Nigeria, so what I am saying is this: I echo the endless song of a distraught people. I sing a discordant melody. I tell a different story.

Dalu nu

Thank you.