

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

THE ANGUISH OF EXISTENCE IN POETRY: THE EXAMPLE OF CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO'S POETIC CONTENT

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Abstract

Okigbo's poetry gives expression to personal experiences of man, the emotions and impulses and the resultant effects of elusive hope and a rejected self- striving to redeem its crushed pieces. Thus the experience of pain, despair and inner hurt described as anguish majorly dot the lines of Okigbo's poetry, especially, in his selection of poetry 'Labyrinth, incorporating "Passage". The feelings of despair and anguish are in the domain of psychoanalysis stemming from the inner recesses of the individual. The experiences manifest as reminiscences which are perceived as "bittersweet" which is a feeling of both pleasure and pain. Every soul, therefore, is a pilgrim in the world and suffers the anguish of existence which issues out of the personal experiences of alienation from the realities surrounding oneself and from society. This paper is a literary study of Okigbo's poetic contents as personal experiences and reminiscences of his life. The essay explores the motivations of anguish, loneliness, and despair as psychoanalytic tools of analysis of the poems. Specifically, nostalgia, feelings of pleasure and sadness are identified as the driving impetus and impulses in the poetic persona's psyche. These metaphors demonstrate the strivings and elusiveness of perfection in human existence.

Keywords: Poetry, psychoanalysis, anguish, nostalgia, reminiscences.

Introduction

Emotions and reminiscences form a good part of the forces driving creativity. The poetry of Christopher Okigbo is replete with these emotions felt as experiences. Very well-known African and Nigerian poet, Okigbo is classified in K. E. Senanu and T. Vincent as "one of the most enigmatic and yet fascinating modern poets" (173). Okigbo is greatly involved in the arena of poetry and holds sway over his generation as a poet within the short life he lived. His poetic prowess according to ChinyereNwahunanya stems from a family link with his maternal grandfather who was a chief priest, stating that "Okigbo has a ritual link with a priestly role which he could not escape from, and having been sequestered from the priestly role by his education, his poetry becomes an avenue for performing that role as he grows up" (108). Seen as a reincarnation of his maternal grandfather, and known for his cultural root, most of Okigbo's poems have been classified in the domain of myths, rituals and prophecies exemplified in his collection of poetry in "Labyrinth" and "Heavensgate". A Roman Catholic in his youth and a product of Western education, Lewis Nkosi writes of him:

Okigbo was acutely aware of the spiritual distance, he had already travelled from his native culture which in specific terms meant a severance from that segment of the population who remained the custodians of the indigenous culture, part of his poetic effort, therefore is directed toward regaining this lost equilibrium by reintegrating himself into his indigenous culture and religion. (150).

Okigbo's family relationship stands out strongly in the understanding of lines of his poetry. Obi Nwakanma describes him as: "a famous poet, a school teacher, a classic teacher, civil servant..., insipient arms dealer, soldier, as well as a returned prodigal of Idoto goddess, a husband and a father; he also instructively captures Igbo cosmological worldview and the Nigerian political economy in transition which shaped Okigbo's life and influenced his poetry" (Gloria Chuku 423). Okigbo lived a short life and much of his poetry is published posthumously. His poetry is appreciated through the understanding of his personal experiences and his connections and relationships with his culture, much of which comes as testaments and submissions by his friends and contemporaries. For example, Dan Izevbaye, in a paper titled, "Why Okigbo Matters" at the 50th anniversary of his death held at the University of Ibadan, says of him:

Okigbo's poetic development was a progression from the personal exploration of the self in the early poems, to a re-connection with his community in form of the religious sacrifice to his domestic gods, followed by a concern with the fate of suffering heroes like Awolowo and Lumumba, ending with his political engagement in the last poems preparing him for his heroic sacrifice. The poetry finally incorporates the heroic element that had not been prominent in the earlier poetry because it was the product of an age where the heroic ethos was lacking bringing out the satirical elements in the last poems. (GbenroAdesina).

Thus, Okigbo's earlier poems are mostly about a young man's quest for experience and self-attainment of true self-knowledge. He garnered a lot of knowledge from classical texts he encountered from his study of Latin and Greek and provided a close approximation to the religious context of African art and performance. In the words of Lewis Nkosi, "Okigbo tries to combine these two elements within his work, his more ambitious undertaking, however, lies in the attempt to fuse Christian and African forms of religious ritual, with their accessories of myth and symbol into a unified sensibility able to resolve his personal dilemma..." (156). Okigbo is caught in between aligning with Western Christianity on the one hand, and the indigenous African tradition on the other. This is found in his poetry which is mainly influenced by religious and African arts or non-religious content, filled with such symbols and images. Among titles published during his lifetime were "Heaven gate" (1962). "Limits" and "Distances" (1964), and 'Silences" and "Path of Thunder" (1965). His collected works were published as "Labyrinths with Path of Thunder" in 1971, four years after his death.

Scholars have therefore studied the poetry of Okigbo laying much emphasis on myths, and biography, language as factors of the artistic endowment. Some have also looked at his poetry from socio-political and economic standpoints. Hence, K. E. Senanu and T. Vincent in A selection of African Poems, think that "the poems that were written in his memory by admirers and fellow poets all over the world represent a significant portion of the literature of war in Nigeria" (173). Okigbo played a significant role during the Nigeria-Biafra crisis. In addition, Okigbo's poetry is majorly mythical and ritualistic. In this instance, Dan Izevbaye in the essay, "Living the Myth: Revisiting Okigbo's Art and Commitment", approaches Okigbo's poetry as a personal quest for spiritual rejuvenation which continues to no avail. He observes that "the recurrent return to the point of passage is a relentless drive towards death seen ambiguously as the ultimate goal and state of perfection as well as the perfect form of transition" (13). The matter of transition and passage are ritualistic references that feature prominently in the poetry. These form much of the language of the poems. Going further, the writer using language as a weapon and social product explored "the role of poetic diction, the tense politics of the 1990s and the poet's intense temperament in determining his peculiar choice of resolution to the dilemma at the

centre of his poetry” (13). Using language enables the elucidation of the textual and contextual issues in the poetry.

A.N. Akwanya in “Literary Criticism: From Formal to Questions of Method” observes the importance of language in poetry and states:

Destinies of poetry and language are intertwined, and superficial understanding of language as a tool is bound to a view of poetry also at the surface level. But since the organic function of language is located at the time where historical existence becomes possible for man, or human existence itself, poetry must be something profoundly important for man and connected to who he is (85).

Language gives records of past events in the poems of Okigbo. He uses legendary and mythic names such as “Mother Idoto”, “oil bean”, “Labyrinth” and many more to portray such myths and connect to his identity. Language in poetry equally has a social face as evidenced in *Masks and Tasks* reporting of Russian Linguist V. N. Volosinov who says that “the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more of changes still in the process of growth” (Lewis Nkosi 155). The importance of the word in the poetry is therefore much more felt in the lyricism and rhythm of the poems. Similarly, the importance of language is heightened in *Studies in Poetry*.

Okigbo considered as learned is a good use of words among the older generation of poets and has this much said of him: “Okigbo is among the prominent poets that use language in a way that is reminiscent of English metaphysical poetry” (Ademola O. Dasylva and Oluwatoyin B, Jegede 139). Language is connected to rituals as a mode of incantation. Further review of Okigbo's poetry inquires into the question of meaning whereby, most criticism of Okigbo ends up as “exegesis”. Annemanu Heywood's essay, “The Ritual and the Plot: The Critic and Okigbo's Labyrinth” states that “the difficulty is that Okigbo's poetry is by consensus, unordinary. It is held to be “prophetic”, or “ritualistic” or “mythic” (46). Generally, Okigbo's poetry comes off as classical and proverbial, and in essence has hidden meanings. Heywood further cites Anozie “as the first to call Okigbo's poetry “ritual” and still refers to Okigbo as ritually exploring the process of creative intuition, or as “mythically” projecting the poet's personal experience, but the terms are merely ornamental” (46). The choice of words in the poems portrays a sense of sublimity.

However, some critics think that the poetry of Okigbo has rather been trivialized as it follows the European tradition. This idea is featured by Emeka Nwabueze in his essay, “Ranking of African Literary Writers and the Canonization of Texts” in Damian U. Opata and Aloysius U. Ohaegbu in *Major Themes in African Literature*. He states:

The other early African poets – notably Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J-P Clark, Michael J.C. Echeruo, Romanus Egudu, Kofi Awoonor, Dennis Brutus, and Oswald Mtshali are good poets whose art is marred by too much imitation of European poetic tradition. This makes their poems obscure since using an alien culture to discuss indigenous experience tends to trivialize the experience and sometimes render it incomprehensible. Chinwizu and Onwuchekwe Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike accuse these poets, of such flaws as poor diction, borrowed imagery and unconscious departure from traditional African poetic tradition. Insisting that poetry is not a “puzzle” but an “auditory medium” (198).

This argument on the trivial nature of the poems of these writers from across the African continent may therefore not carry considering the diversified nature of poetry as more than creativity. This is supported by re-echoing of Heidegger's projecting of poetry as "something that man takes into his service for his ends: Poetry is not merely an ornament accompanying existence, not merely a temporary enthusiasm or nothing but interest and amusement... Poetry must be functional at the point of emergence of man as man, and therefore in the processes became a historical being" (Akwanyana 114). Poetry creates an inroad into the historical events and experiences of the poetic personae.

Scholars have equally discussed Okigbo's poetry is autobiographical, for example, Lewis Nkosi asserts that in both "Heavensgate" and "Limits" Okigbo reinvests himself into the poem, mingling the autobiographical details with peripheral social observation, sometimes making witty comments on the figures who have taught, influenced, aided or abetted his progress" (15). Okigbo's life's journey features much in the lines and context of his poetry. This assertion resonates in Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post-Colonial African Literature in which it is said that in the interpretation of autobiographical poets, we find "not echoes but definite incidents – recorded landmarks in the author's life" (ChinyereNwahunanya 107). This affirms the fact that personal experiences are major elements in poetry. Nwahunanya continues:

Autobiographical poems validly assign the voice of the speaker to the author himself since the speaker in such poems invariably has a career identical to that of the poet. Such a speaker is therefore just used as an agent for the expression of that author's personality or state of the soul. We, therefore, need to know the life of the author to be able to enter fully into the circumstances that went into the creation or moulding of that soul in the first place (107).

It is therefore pertinent that knowing the experiences of a poet helps to understand personal issues and elements of the poetic personae as they are obvious in the poems under study.

Abel Olayinka observes that the poetry of Okigbo is known to be "simultaneously famous and notorious for his style of versification. Some of the major strengths of Okigbo as a poet and literary giant, and icon of African Literature, famous for his exploits is the genre of poetry" as relayed by, were his prophetic vision and capacity for myth-making. Captured in his statement that as a poet with an endowment for prophecy, intimations of the political crises as "the Nigerian civil war had been foreshadowed in his poetry long before the events happened. This prophetic vision is one of the qualities that continues to endear his works to generations of literary critics and readers of his works" (KazeemUgbodaga); hence the preponderance of war and political themes in the poems under study. Further critical discourse and analysis have dwelt greatly with the formalistic analysis on the symmetric, language and personal elements as factors of poetic content. There are also the aspects of the socio-political discourse of these poems in which issues of national concern are raised, providing poetic platforms to condemn the negative forces in their society in order to bring about improvement. Poets, therefore, "assume the role of spokesman for their people" (Ademola O. Dasylva and Oluwatoyin B. Jegede 141). These aspects of critical attention have still left some gaps in the discussion of Christopher Okigbo's poetry. This study, therefore, makes a literary exploration of the motivations of anguish and despair in the personal experiences of the poetic personae using the framework of Psychoanalysis. The metaphors: "passage" and "labyrinth" are factors of anxiety that bring about anguish and alienation of the individuals in the poetry.

Conceptual Framework

Okigbo's poems give strong expressions to personal experiences, emotions and impulses, some

of which are painful, and traumatic leaving off residues of despair, hopelessness, loneliness, fragmented self, and disillusionment. These feelings and manifestations are better understood in the field of psychoanalysis. These feelings emanate from the innermost part of the poetic personae, although not located precisely, yet they manifest as unconscious acts. Psychoanalysis describes the individual's motivations and impulses and explains individual problems. To Andre Green Psychoanalysis “concerns itself with individual subjectivity; it is the domain of experiences, the meaning given to them through conscious and unconscious mental processes and how these come to be represented in mental life” (p. 8). The idea of subjectivity explains the fact of individual differences in the internal world and experiences of the past and living out of new experiences.

Psychoanalytic theory is a part of social critical theory. However, BogdanPopa thinks that "An important strength of Psychoanalytic critical theory is that it grasps the strong association between the social and the psychic, without reducing the psychic to the social, nor the social to the psychic” (28). Psychoanalysis as a social theory has a clear mandate to explore the internal and mental aspects of the individual behaviours. It helps to understand the “internal representational world of an individual concerned with both the conscious and dynamically unconscious ways in which the mind creates and imbibes experience of self and others with meaning, and that these are permeated with a range of effects” (Vivian Green 12). Okigbo's poetry dwells more on personal experiences and autobiographical issues much of which has latent causes of despair. This idea as canvassed by Obi Nwakanma in an interview states:

In his words, poetry responds to the temperature of its world. Contemporary Nigerian poets are no different in responding to the sensibility that shapes their art- in terms of its use either for provocation or for celebration. Okigbo's poetry was no praise song. If anything, I situate Okigbo in the tradition of the elegies- the lament for a disappearing world and the lament for the dark world inherited after the colonial raping of the land. (Madeleine Thien).

Okigbo's life was ceaselessly a life of tumult and paradoxes. These paradoxes, whether bitter or sweet could inspire anguish and pain in the individual.

Anguish as a psychoanalytical trait in humans relates and connects with a complex concept of angst which simply represents anxiety. It is an undesirable state of the mind. Heinz Kohut says “anguish appears upon the vulnerability of the self, or the threat of fragmentation of the self and is a consequence of the inability of the psyche to regulate its self-esteem and maintain it at normal levels” (Adriana BauabdeDreizen). Okigbo's vulnerability is hinged on the fact that he takes a lot of risks trying his hands on so many things at the same time. This is captured in the Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo, which has it that “when he fell in August 1967 in Ekwegbe close to Nsukka where his poetry had come to sudden flower seven short years earlier news of his death sent ripples of shock in all directions” (Chinua Achebe and DubemOkafor viii). The sudden death of Okigbo and the shock of his death brought in his friends and contemporaries great pains and anxiety.

Lacan's idea of anguish exposes the fact that it generates “a feeling or development of the effect, some of them are love, hate, happiness, sadness and those that pathetically express the subject's defenselessness with regards to the others, such as fear, fright, terror, panic” (AdrianaBauabDreizen). Anguish may manifest as fright, panic, despair or any other unpleasant sensation, coming on the fringe of death instinct and pain, described as an inseparable, holistic experience comprising Psychological, existential and physical components

of threats as a result of unprocessed traumatic memories stored in the mind. The tone of Okigbo's poetry reflects the idea of unprocessed memories as records of childhood and growing up experiences which are very critical to the appreciation of his poetry. He is greatly overwhelmed by the unconscious acts. More so the greater lines of his poetry are repetitive and rhythmic, all of which emanate from the inside and shape his psychic as seen in the lines of the poem:

Before you, Mother Idoto

Naked I stand:

 Before your watery presence,

 A prodigal

 Leaning on an oil bean,

 Lost in your legend

Under your power wait I

On barefoot,

 Watchman for the watchword

 At Heavensgate; (K.E, Senanu T, Vincent 173-4).

It is therefore clear that personality, as well as biological factors greatly affect the individual's emotional and behavioural response to pain. Pain is always elaborated within a particular character structure and has different meanings within an individual leaving off deposits of anxiety and anguish.

Anguish as Poetic Content

Okigbo's collection of poetry "Labyrinth" and "The Path of Thunder" are reflections of past and dashed expectations of the poetic personae. It refers to his childhood experiences and environments and he goes back memory lane to invoke the lost idyll which contrasts with the polluted environment of contemporary times. He refers to Mother Idoto and Jadum among other allusions" (Dasyuva 144). The symbolism of Mother Idoto is that of resignation by a prodigal son seeking re-acceptance from his waywardness. This idea of prodigality is common in Okigbo's poems, "especially his returning to the water goddess, Mother Idoto in absolute repentance.

"Barefooted". Using the recurrent styles such as lyricism, incantation, rhythm, the poem "Heavensgate", the first in the series is in the nature of invocation, a prayer to the goddess for inspiration, for the watchword" (Donatus 1 Nwoga 172). The use of invocation and incantation is an unconscious act. There were influences of the "Heavensgate" poems when studied as a struggle to understand the nature of his personality. Much anguish is expressed and felt by friends and contemporaries who mourn Okigbo's sudden exit. There are reminiscences of him, felt and expressed much of which are contained in his memorial poems, as in the following expression: "Okigbo's exit was, for me, totally in character. I can see him clearly in his white "gown" and clean trousers among the vast crowd milling around my bombed apartment, the first spectacle of its kind in the Biafran capital in the Second month of War" (Achebe and DubemOkafor). Okigbo's untimely and early death as a Major in the Biafran Army during the civil war was a shattering development for the nation and a tragic loss of a gem.

Obi Nwakanma gives an account of Okigbo's life as one of those who shared ultimately the intensity of Okigbo's life and work as he was a witness to the great passions which ruled the poet's existence as captured by Martin Banham in "Review of Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir/Christopher Okigbo: Thirsting for Sunlight" writes: "Christopher is a major poet with a reputation well beyond West Africa, an artist who in his life and work flew tantalizingly close to the flame. Okigbo was a man of many talents and- in his short life but merciful life- many trades.

He was a civil servant, teacher, librarian, publisher as well as a poet, passionate in all that he did" (Martin Banham 126). Testaments on Okigbo indicate that he abhors any form of discrimination in his poetry. Okigbo thought of himself in universal terms as a poet unrestricted by social or racial boundaries. He was a man imbued with very unique qualities. Major Atuu paid his last respect of this fallen hero, a selfless man: "You stood face to face with me and your patriotic monument melted away under a heedless heat of a fire enkindled by a mad majority." (Achebe and Okafor : 41).

To Major Atuu, Okigbo's entry into the field of conflict was an act of heroism, although he noted that some did not see it as such. He observes that a modern battlefield is more often a field of slaughter and sacrifice than the field of heroes. Sadly, modern warfare and weapons of war cannot differentiate between a poet and an ordinary soldier. The response by the literary community to Okigbo's death ranged from unbelief and grief culminating in the tributes collected by Achebe in 'Don't Let Him Die,' to the now infamous fictional trial of the victim.

Reacting further to issues from Okigbo's poetry, Obi Nwakanma observes the fact of childhood memories in Okigbo's reminiscences of his mother, Anna's death when he was only five years. Okigbo absorbs the pain of the loss of a mother as expressed poetically in "Heavensgate" (The Passage), a poem in which he vividly describes the solemn procession of the character's funeral ceremony held for his mother at St Odilia. He relays the terrifying scene as it unfolds in a child's vision, and says:

Silent faces at a crossroad:
 Festivity in black
 Faces of black- like long black
 Columns of ants
 Behind the bell tower
 Into the hot garden
 Where all roads meet
 Festivity in black
 O Anna at the knob of the panel oblong
 Hear us at the crossroads at the great hinges.
 Where the players of loft pipe organs
 Rehearse old lovely fragments
 Alone... (Obi Nwakanma:11).

This x-rays Okigbo's pain at the death of his mother of cholera at Amawbia. He wept bitterly and later documents this agonizing experience in his poem as historical, for the world to remember her by. His poetry is nostalgic and a poeticized version of his personal experiences. Furthermore, the thought of carefulness to keep to the tenets of the church and the personal zeal to embrace the tradition of the worship of the goddess keeps him in a dilemma, captured thus, "Rain and sun in single combat;/ on one leg standing/ in silence at the passage/the young bird at the passage. /Silent Faces at crossroads:" (K.E. Senanu.T. Vincent 174). Okigbo is thereby in a constant state of fear and confusion as to what to do. This thought pattern undoubtedly creates constant anxiety which in the long run manifests as anguish and a painful state of mind.

Conclusion

This paper projects the "journey motif"; an everyman figure enmeshed in the search for the elusive truth. It stems from the fact that every soul is a pilgrim in the world and suffers the anguish of existence which is a continuation of the search for a settled existence that ever remains unattainable; so that the poems and life of Okigbo portray the search for settled humanity and

nation. This he did not achieve as he was gunned down in the war, fighting for the liberation of Biafra, The metaphor of labyrinth enumerates the different phases of the hopelessness of life and an individual's quest for perfect humanity. But, at all events, what emerges, in the end, is a general philosophical view of life which can never be fully grasped from random poetical inspiration; the kind of which gives rise to the occasional poem. Thus, life is tinted with pain in the midst of seeming sweet pleasures and efforts as striving for perfection becomes elusive.

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