

Poetry As A Veritable Tool For National Integration In Multi-Ethnic Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper sets out to examine how poetry can be use as a veritable tool for national integration in multi-ethnic Nigeria. Ethnicity has been among our country's most difficult and enduring problems. Over the years, Nigeria has been suffering ethnic clashes which usually results in loss of lives and properties. The researcher observed that poetry has the ability to sensitize people and make them learn to live together in peace in spite of the ethnic differences. This motivated the researcher into finding out how poetry can be employ as a veritable tool in curbing ethnic clashes and thereby achieve national integration. Survey research method is adopted for this research. Books relevant to the topic were critically reviewed, analysed and used for the study. The theoretical frame-work adopted for the study is Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory. This literary approach is relevant to this study because it advocates that its concern is with the type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think and feel or act in a particular way. The researcher recommends that since people look to poetry for articulation, poets have to devote adequate attention to its writing. This study will be useful to every Nigerians and to the students who may wish to carry out further study in the related areas. The researcher observes that if poetry are carefully handled, it will play vital role in curbing ethnic clashes and in realizing national integration which can be characterized by tolerance and respect.

Introduction

Poetry which is among the three major genres of literature is a mode of expression throughout history and across various cultural boundaries, poetry has held an important place. As it were, today throughout the world poetry continues to delight and to inspire. Poetry is the language of the emotion; the medium of expression which people use when they speak from the heart. Through poetry, the poet can easily communicate

and pass his message across to the people. The poet can use his literary work to create awareness that will help people to behave well in the society. Through poetry, the poet can sensitize the public and inform them of the impending danger of any act of lawlessness. The thrust of this paper therefore is to examine the fact that poetry is a veritable tool in controlling problem of ethnicity, realizing and sustaining national integration. Ethnicity has been among our country's most difficult and enduring problems.

Calhoun et al (1995:237) notes that ethnicity is the internal, domestic equivalent of the global cultural divisions that have produced many nationalist movements and both civil and international wars. As it were, Nigeria as a multi-ethnic nation have been experiencing various ethnic conflicts. Many people have lost their lives and properties to conflict of ethnicity in Nigeria. As a result of this there is urgent need to work out modalities that will take care of the problem of ethnicity.

The Definition of Poetry:

Poetry is literature and literature is a method of expression. It therefore means that poetry is a method of expression. Obi (2001:70) notes that; Defining poetry implies saying how poetry expresses thought by means of suggestion and invention. In poetry what is invented or created consists of images, rhythm and sound and these are employed for suggesting what the poet wishes to express.

On that same note, Egudu (1977: :ixv) opines that poetry is a method of literary expression, which suggests by means of imagery, rhythm and sound. Akere (2009) asserts that the beauty of a poem will be derived from the appeal of the style of the writer; that is the way words, phrases and sentences are :employed to create a particular communicative and artistic effect. Maduakor (1991:2) says ‘the poet is one who is able to give language a new exploration.

Poetry in a general sense can be defined as the expression of the imagination through the working and re-working of language. It is

distinctive as an expressive form by the way in which it uses and exploits the resources of language. Language itself is a social practice. Due to the fact that language forms the basis of sociability, language is intrinsically social. As it were, the social dimension of poetry is essential to its very definition because all forms of social interaction which forms the basis of national integration takes place within language. It is on the basis of this, that the social character of poetry that is relationship with society is constituted.

The Purpose of Poetry:

As we know it, poetry expresses thoughts, ideas, experiences and the feeling or emotion associated with them. This function however, is not peculiar to it as for example economics and political science can as well perform this function and sometimes even better than poetry. So this purpose of expressing thought and feeling therefore can be considered secondary in poetry. This is because it is not the thing said but the method or way in which it is said that characterizes poetry .The aim of this method is the organization of beauty; and that is to say, the expressive or verbal beauty, with the pleasure which results from it. Therefore, the creation of beauty is so central to poetry that definitions of poetry equate it with beauty.

According to Matterson and Jones (2011: 2) many people, even the well-educated and well-informed people were not as far as they know in the habit of reading poetry at all. Yet when they needed something to express their feelings at

certain critical situation such as at the loss of a beloved one, it is to poetry that people usually turn to, expecting to find something that will embody their own emotions and put them into memorable and moving language. They noted that this need for poetry is one important reason for poetry's endurance throughout human history. They further assert that at times of personal and national crisis, as well as at the occasions of joy such as a marriage or the birth of a child, people look to poetry for articulation. Watson(2004) in his *Anthologies of Poems* for weddings and for christenings readily testify to a need for poetry, reminding us that, poetry is not a luxury, as it is vital to the sense of ourselves and of our engagement with the world and with each other.

Focusing on the feminist movement, Lorde (1970) insisted:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change; first made into language; then into ideas, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizon of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As Williams (2002;36) has put it in his poem 'Asphodel, The Greeny Flower'

It is difficult
To get the news from poems
Yet men die miserably every day
For lack of what is found there.

From the fore-goings, one can rightly assert that poetry is a constant in human culture, that part of being is contained in our ideas and definitions and our need for poetry. As noted above, at times of personal and national crisis, people turn to poetry, which in some ways seems to make sense of their condition, to give shape and more importantly form to otherwise inchoate, inarticulate sensibilities. Poetry can therefore say to remain a popular form and primarily a medium for the exploration of personal, national and emotional issues and feelings. As it were, it then means that ethnicity, which is one of the difficult and enduring problem of Nigeria and the issues of national integration can be addressed through poetry.

Conceptualizing Ethnicity;

In analysing the various facets of Nigeria's reality, ethnicity is a crucial factor that cannot be ignored. As already pointed out earlier on, ethnicity have been Nigeria's most difficult and enduring problem. Calhoun et al(1998:237) observe that ethnicity is an internal domestic equivalents of the global cultural division that have produced many nationalist movements and both civil and international wars. Ethnicity has always been associated with political, religious, juridical and other social dimensions of human experience. In Nigeria, contemporary ethnic and religious crisis and clashes can only clearly understood within the context of their linkage to ethnic politics.

Nnoli (1980:107) conceptualises ethnicity as a social phenomenon associated with interactions

among members of a society, consisting of diverse ethnic groups characterised by cultural and linguistic similarities, values and commons consciousness. Nnoli further notes that ethnicity provides a solution to the problems of exploitation, oppression, deprivation and alienation. Sanda (1976:33) views ethnicity as 'the active sense of identification with some ethnic unit whether or not this group has an institutional of own, or whether it has any real existence in the pre-colonial epoch. According to Badru (2000), ethnicity can say to be an intensification of ethnic identity in the context of multi-ethnic existence. In the words of Nwaezeigwe (1998:2) ethnicity is an exhibition of common ethnic identity in difference to the members of other cultural groups within a definable geo-political setting. That is to say that an Igbo man, for example, can be conscious of his 'Igboness' and still be objective in his dealings with a Yoruba man in matters of common interest. A critical study of historical linkage of ethnic tribes in Nigeria will confirmed this fact. Osaghae (1986:1-2) notes that ethnicity is product of competition for scarce resources between groups in multi-ethnic society.

From the study so far, one can correctly assert that ethnicity is a force which has resulted in a resurgence of ethnically inspired conflicts. Nigeria, for example, has had ugly experiences of such conflicts in different quarters including the destructive civil war of 1967-1970 which claimed many lives and properties. The bone of contention has continued to be how to

accommodate and also carry along the various ethnic groups (both minor and major) that make up Nigeria. Actually, ethnicity among Nigerians is associated with a strong belief in a perceived cultural and linguistic diversity of the country. One can also see ethnicity as the result of socio-cultural differences. Ethnicity has been identified as one of the major problems militating against national unity and integration of Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that the paper wants to discuss how poetry particularly in Igbo language can serve as a veritable tool in sensitizing Nigerians on the need to live together in peace in spite of our ethnic and linguistic differences.

Theoretical Frame-work

The study adopts Aristotle's Rhetorical theory as the bases for this study. According to Abrams (2009:311), the theory advocates that the study of literary work will be based on the means and devices that the writer uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on the audience that will persuade them to see the writer's point of view. In the words of Mckeon (2001:1820-29) persuasion means to influence, to explain, to urge and to advice. He further notes that there are three kinds of modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, the third on the apparent proof provided by the word of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. The concern of Aristotle's rhetoric

theory is with the type of discourse whose chief aim is to persuade an audience to think and feel or act in a particular way.

Usually, in order to achieve the above, poets employ various poetic devices. According to (Wikipedia 10/6/2013), poetic device is a technique or tool used in poetry which helps to improve the quality of the poetry. Poetic devices include figures of speech such as alliteration, metaphor, simile and personification. Other poetic devices include repetition, rhythm, rhyme, stanza etc. The chief aim of employing poetic devices as the case may be is to persuade an audience to think and feel or act in a particular way. And this is exactly what Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory is contending.

Poetry as a Veritable Tool for National Unity and Integration:

As already noted above, ethnicity which has been identified as the most difficult and enduring problem of Nigeria has also been recognised as one of the fundamental problems militating against national unity and integration. In this paper, we are going to examine the part the poet will play to create necessary awareness with regards to the influences of ethnic consciousness which usually lead to ethnic crises and clashes. The poet will use his work to sensitize the citizens by reminding them as well as warning them that ethnic crises and clashes always lead to destruction of lives and properties in all its ramifications. The poet regards himself as duty bound to sensitize his people to burning issues- both socio-cultural and national issues in his

country. The poet as a literary artist uses his author's vision of life through which he is a teacher to educate the society by letting people see through his own mirror of experience. Nwadike (1992:12) quoting Alan Casty observes that;

The writer's subjects are for him, important because they represent something beyond themselves. With them he examines his life and ours, comments on its truths and untruths, criticize, sympathize, evaluate, explores the meaning of being alive.

As one can observe, the poet usually write through his experiences in life. Obi (2010: 491) notes that such experiences the writer draws from the socio-cultural settings which in turn influence and pattern people's attitude and actions. For present study, the experiences will emanate from the influences of ethnic consciousness and past ethnic crises and clashes on people and Nigeria in general. Typical experiences on which the poet can base his literary work are as follows;

Recurrent Riots ;

Due to ethnic consciousness, recurrent riots has characterised the government of Nigeria. This is basically because the government failed to take necessary actions and decisions over burning national issues.

Increased Agitations;

As it were, there are increased agitations from different quarters in the country which is constituted along ethnic lines with the clear motive of pursuing ethnic interests. Covetousness has been the order of the day. The

desire to acquire more of everything is a serious problem in Nigeria. Many people are not satisfied for where they are and what they have. This has resulted to increased agitations.

Increased Clamour for Ethnic Self-Determination;

A critical study of the burning socio- economic and political issues in Nigeria over the years shows that there are increasing clamour for ethnic self-determination. This has been presenting a serious challenge to national unity and integration.

Exhibition of Common Ethnic Identity;

There are intensified exhibition of common ethnic identity. People tend to show the feeling of allegiance to their ethnic group in the context of multi- ethnic existence. They tend to exhibit ethnic identity in difference to the members of other cultural groups within a definable geographical setting.

Competition for Scarce Resources;

There are competitions for scarce resources between groups in multi-ethnic society of Nigeria. This has resulted in a resurgence of ethnically inspired conflicts. Nigeria has had a fair share of such conflicts, including the bloody fratricidal civil war of 1967-1970.

The above five points are typical examples of burning or socio-cultural and national issues which emanates as result of ethnic consciousness in the country and which is now ravaging our societies. This is the typical situation where the poet plays his vital role of sensitizing his people of these burning or socio-cultural and national

issues through his spokespersonship. Due to the fact that the poet wants his people to react immediately to these burning issues, he employs instruments of visioning and mirroring to call their attention, warn of the impending danger, reflect, bring to view his points, ridicule or satirizes, caricature or applauding good virtues and or overhauling a part of human system.

At this juncture, the poet will also use the instrument of persuasion which is the contention of Aristotle Rhetorical theory. This theory is relevant to this work because it advocates that the study of literary work like poem will be based on the means and devices that the writer uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on the audience that will persuade them to see the writer's point of view. These entire instruments the poet is employing will in turn influence and pattern people's actions and reactions alike as they begin to see that there are elements of truth in what the poet is saying. This will in turn bring a positive change in the society .And this will lead people to national consciousness as against ethnic consciousness. The end product of the whole exercise will be national integration.

Now let us examine an Igbo poem to illustrate our point. In one of Ogugua's poem titled 'Oji Onu Egbu Oji'(A braggart) he frowns at the propaganda attitude being exhibited by some Nigerians which is capable of generating another civil war similar to the previous one that

Qnu gi a gbawakwala
Dika igwe na-eti aku

Obi gi o kowekwala ozo dika futubol?
I tiwekwala umu nne gi ndi Nigeria
Dika Dick Tiger?
Oji onu egbu oji
(Has your mouth started sounding
Like palm-kernel breaking machine
Has your heart started swelling again like
football?
Have you started beating your fellow
Nigerian
Like Dick Tiger
The braggart have you started (to make
trouble) again?).

In the poem, the poet refers to the bloody fratricidal civil war of 1967-70 and its catastrophic effects and posits that Nigeria is still mourning the aftermath of the war. Thus he said in the next stanza;

Nigeria aka agbasighi mkpe
Ndi I dubara n'onwu ike
Site n'okwu onu gi
Na ajo omume gi

(Nigeria has not finished mourning
Those you led into untimely death
Through your speaking and evil conduct).

The poet observes high rate of aggression, riots, increased agitation, unhealthy competition for scarce resources between groups in multi-ethnic societies, exhibition of different forms of ethnic consciousness and provoking utterances in the country. Through these experiences from the religious, economic, socio-cultural and political setting of Nigeria, the poet cautions those Nigerians whose actions and inciting utterances are capable of generating crises to the detriment of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. Such groups of people the poet calls to order by way of admonition; that it is better to live together in

peace and be our brother's keeper in the last stanza of his poem as follows;

Udo na ihunanya ka mma
Ndi Nigeria ka anyi biri n'udo
Burukwa ndi nche umunne anyi.

(Peace and love are better Nigerians let us co-exist in peace And be our brothers' keeper).

We observe that the poem is full of philosophical thought and moral lessons. It will inculcate good conscience in the people especially in the youths. In commenting on the poem Ikwubuzo (2002:177) notes that the emotion of anger and fear engendered by what the poet is saying is heightened by his use of language. He observes that the intensity of the unguarded utterances of the fury and aggression displayed by the people, is perceived in the imagery encapsulated in the three similes the poet has used people's provocative utterances are comparable to the kind of noise generated by a kernel-cracking machine, their heart swells like a football while their physical assault to one another is comparable to the boxing action Dick Tiger.

All these are just pointing to the fact that there are lots of aggression and tension in the country because of its multi-ethnic nature. But the contention of this paper is that if people are exposed to this type of poems, it will go a long way to cure the aggression and tension which mostly originate from ethnicity. The poet Ogugua through his poem is advocating that it is better for Nigerians to learn to love one another and co-exist peacefully in spite of the multiplicity

of the ethnic groups that made up the country. This is the best way to realize and sustain national integration.

Also, in another poem titled 'Ezi Onye Obodo' (A Good citizen or good member of society) in *Akpa Uche* p. 70 ; the poet Maduekwe teaches that a good member of any society that has the work he/she is doing for living still willingly render services to his society. Thus he says as follows in these lines of poem:

Ezi onye obodo
O nwere oru o na-aruru onwe ya
O na-agbata tinye aka n'oru obodo
O na-edowe gburugburu ya ocha

(A good citizen
He has the work he do for a living
He come to assist in the community's work
He keeps his environment clean).

The poet in the first stanza of his poem teaches that a good citizen must not be an idle person. That a good citizen is one that has the work he is doing for a living. The poet also notes that he is someone who willingly assists in doing the community's work. A good citizen is always trying to see that there is peace and order in his society. He observes that he keeps his environment clean; for cleanliness they say is next to Godliness.

In the second stanza, the poet continues in his teaching; thus he says

Ezi onye obodo
O zuru ire, kwusi ya iku asiri
O gbochiri aka, nochie ya iwe nke mmadu
Ya na ukwu ka o na-aga etu o choro.

(A good citizen
He trains his tongue, and stops it from gossip
He guards his hands from stealing
And his legs to be under his control).

In this stanza, the poet notes that a good citizen trains his tongue and stops it from gossiping. This is very important point because people's misuse of their tongues have caused problems in the country, Through misuse of the tongue, many people have created problems for themselves and for the nation. No wonder the Bible-New King James Version (2002:1754-55) in James 3: 6 notes as follows:

And the tongue is a fire,
A world of iniquity. The tongue
Is so set among our members
That it defiles the whole body
And sets on fire the course of nature
And it is set on fire by hell.

The Bible also notes that if anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. There is therefore the need to guard our tongues.

In the second stanza of the poem, the poet teaches that a good citizen doesn't take what belong to another person .And so the poet notes that a good citizen prevents his hands, and restrains it from taking what does not belong to him. He also observes that a good citizen guards his legs and make sure that he has control over them. Indeed, the issue of having control over one's hand is a serious issue because some people's hands tend to take whatever their eyes see. And that is automatically stealing, which leads to death in most cases. The poet teaches that a good

citizen guards his legs so as to make sure that it is only to reasonable places that his legs will always carry him to. That is to say that failure to restrain one's legs, they can carry the person to where he/she might not wish to go.

In the last stanza of the poem, the teaching goes as follows:

Ezi onye obodo
O nwụwa obodo a na-akwa
Ezigbo bụ aha a na-etu ya

(A good citizen
When he is sick unto death, the people will
be crying
Good is what people call him.)

Here the poet instructs that when the poet is sick and at the point of death, the people will be crying because of his good character. It then means that people will not want to lose him because of the vital role he plays in the society. Due to his good conduct people will be calling him "good".

The poet employs repetition as a means of persuasion in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effect on the readers that will persuade them to agree to the poet's point of view. In the poem "Ezi Onye Obodo", "ezi onye obodo" was repeated at every first line of the five stanza of the poem. This repetition apart from serving as a means of persuasion also serves as emphasis on the character of a good citizen.

In relating this poem to the study on the issues of ethnicity and national integration, one observes that the qualities of a good citizen in all its ramification will automatically enhance national integration. One notes that from the

poem, the good citizen is always working for the peace and progress of his nation. The good citizen is not ethnic conscious as such he will not involve himself in rioting with slightest provocation as many Nigerians tend to do today because of ethnic - consciousness. The study reveals that ethnic-consciousness leads to increased agitations, clamour for ethnic self-determination, exhibition of common ethnic identity, competition for scarce resources and other forms disorderly actions that are capable of generating crisis. In view of this, the poet Maduekwe in his poem "Ezi Onye Obodo" advocates that a good citizen cannot partake in disorderly actions that can cause crises in his nation.

The paper therefore urges Nigerian poets particularly the Igbo poets to endeavour to channel their literary works towards educating the citizens on those experiences that will make people especially the youths develop national consciousness.

Summary and Conclusion

From the study carried out, ethnicity has been recognized as one of the fundamental difficult and enduring problems militating against national unity and integration. Instead of folding its arms and watch the militia groups pursue ethnic interests in a way that is dangerous to the peaceful co-existence in Nigeria, the government need to sit up and live up to their responsibility. The democratic process has not been able to handle the problem of ethnicity and religious divide in the country. There are

influences of ethnic consciousness such as recurrent riots, increased agitations, increased clamour for ethnic self-determination, and competition for scarce resources between groups in Nigeria multi-ethnic societies. The situation in the country has generated aggression and tension among Nigerians and these often lead to ethnic crises and clashes. As it were, in this paper, we have studied poetry and established that by its nature as a way of expression; that it is a veritable tool for national unity and integration in multi-ethnic Nigeria.

Naturally, good things are not always easy to get. And as such for us to attain national integration in spite of the multiple ethnic groups, the paper submits that the Igbo poets have to make a conscious effort to carefully articulate in their poems things that will cultivate national consciousness in Nigerians and discourage ethnicity in its entire ramification.

The study therefore asserts that peaceful co-existence, loving one another, observing the African culture of being our brothers' keeper and inculcating the qualities of a good citizen are the best ways to attain national integration and also sustain it.

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