

# CHAPTER 3 ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED AFRICAN POEMS

## J.P. CLARK'S "AGBOR DANCER"

### Background of the Poet

John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo was born in Kiagbodo to Ijaw parents on April 6, 1935. He attended the Government's College, Ughelli and later studied at the University of Ibadan. After graduation, he worked as an informant officer in the Ministry of Information. He later served as a professor of English at the University of Lagos. He retired in 1980.

J.P. Clark, as he is popularly referred to, is a renowned Nigerian poet and playwright. Among his popular works are *Poems* (Mbari, 1961), *A Reed in the Tide* (1965), *Casualties: Poems 1966-68* (1970), *State of the Union* (1981), *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988). His work celebrates Africa, and he stands as the gatekeeper of his people from the overwhelming burden of injustice and corrupt practices.

### Subject Matter

The poem is a description of an Agbor dancer, whose beautiful dance movement catches the attention of the poet persona. He is overwhelmed by her grace and vibrant steps, which he describes in the first three stanzas of the poem. However, the poet reveals a serious struggle within him in the last stanza of the poem. He tries to make a decision – either to accept or ignore the communal call.

### Themes

The central theme of this poem is cultural alienation. Others include the celebration of African traditions, search for identity, as well as regret and repentance.

#### *Cultural alienation*

The Agbor dancer is a metaphor for Africa as a continent with rich and diverse values. However, with the advent of the colonial masters, many African sons and daughters are lost to the irresistible influence of western values at the expense of their motherland, Africa. The first lines of the first two stanzas reveal the amazement of the poet persona who suddenly discovers the unique traits of his culture. It appears he is coming across this experience for the very first time. At a metaphorical level of interpretation, the poet expresses his separation and displacement from his motherland.

#### *Celebration of African culture*

The dance steps of the Agbor dancer is a metaphor for the uniqueness of the African culture and traditions. Through the response of the poet persona, the reader is equally thrown into the world of admiration for the Agbor dancer, as if he or she were present during the event. Therefore, it is no gainsaying that African culture and traditions are distinctive. They have survived through severe hardship, especially from the dominating influence of other colonial cultures. They however remain fresh, strong and endearing.

#### *Quest for identity*

This theme is essentially supported by the poet persona's rhetorical question "Could I, early sequester'd from my tribe free a lead-tether'd scribe...?" Having turned his back earlier at his people, the poet realizes that he cannot identify with his people. His betrayal creates a gap and a longing to identify again with his tribe.

#### *Repentance and regret*

Although not clearly captured in the words, the search for identity comes with a mixture of repentance and regret. There is a longing to come back home, to answer the call and "lose myself in her warm caress".

#### *Language and Style*

The poem contains four stanzas. Each stanza is made up of a *quintet*, that is, the stanza contains five lines each. Therefore, the poem has 20 lines. The use of rhyme and rhythm in the poem projects the musicality of the poem and identifies with the rhythmic movement of the Agbor dancer. The rhyme scheme is a, a, b, c, c, such that the first and last two lines of each stanza is a rhyming couplet.

The poem is a lyric, but the effective use of imagery and symbolic representations brings out the complexity in the poem. As much as the poet persona is kept in the state of suspense, the reader is also enraptured by the symbolic representation of the poem.

### Poetic Devices

**Repetition** – The repetition of the words ‘see’ in the first lines of the first two stanza provokes a sense of discovery and appreciation in the poem.

**Simile** – “Limbs like fresh foliage in the sun”.

**Enjambment** – “See how entangled in the magic ... maze of music”.

**Alliteration** – “Magic maze of music”.

**Assonance** – “Tingling quick to her finger tips”.

**Rhetorical question** – “Could I, early sequester’d from my tribe... free a lead-tether’d scribe”.

**Personification** – “Tremulous beat wake trenchant...”

### SYL CHENEY COKER’S “MYOPIA”

#### Background of the Poet

Syl Cheney Coker was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone on June 28, 1945. He is from the Creole family, whose ancestors were returned slaves from the West. He was educated in Freetown but later went to study at the University of Oregon, California. During the oppressive and dictatorial regime of President Siaka Steven, the economic situation of the country took a downward plummet. As a result of his actions, the poet was exiled from his country in 1997. He once taught at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria and at the University of Philippines. His collections of poetry are *The Road to Jamaica* (1969), *Concerto for an Exile: Poems* (1973), *The Graveyard also has Teeth* (1980), *Blood in the Desert’s Eyes* (1990) and *Stone Child and other Poems* (2008).

#### Subject Matter

The poem reflects the social conditions of the poor masses. Their terrible state is as a result of the actions and inactions of the leaders. While the masses die gradually as a result of poverty and malnutrition, the leaders are only concerned about how to further enrich themselves. The poem is therefore a reaction to the living conditions of the masses in the country. It also exposes the extravagant lifestyle of the leaders.

The first stanza exposes the unhealthy and homeless peasants of the society. The misery of these people is portrayed. The second stanza reveals the insensitive and carefree nature of the leaders. Here, the leaders are accused of being nonchalant, myopic and lacking vision to organize the society. The last stanza is a reaction of the poet to the problems of the society. The speaker views himself as an agent of change.

#### Themes

There are four important themes to be discussed in this poem. These are bad leadership, poverty, segregation, challenges of vision and mission for a change.

#### Bad leadership

This is the main thrust of this poem. The poem is an expose on the problem of bad leadership which is prevalent among many African countries. The contrasting imagery of peasants shivering along boulevards reveals a society which thrives on the rot of its citizens. It exposes the lack of initiative of many leaders towards providing a thriving environment for its citizenry to flourish.

#### Poverty

The first three lines of the poem expose the reader to the wretched state of the masses. Because of the lack of good governance, the peasants are left drenched and shivering. Here, there is focus on the plights of the poor masses. Africa is generally portrayed as a poor continent. Millions of people die as a result of the low living standard which is common in many communities. However, the reason is not the lack of human and material resources, it centres primarily on bad governance.

## **Segregation**

The theme of segregation is suggestively illustrated by the division of the society into two fundamental groups. These groups constitute the rich and the poor. However, the rich however feed on the backs of the masses. In the third stanza, the poet situates himself in-between the two groups as a middleman. For the rich, he serves as a judge; while for the poor, he positions himself as a fighter for their liberation.

## **Challenges of vision**

The title of the poem here brings out the significance of this theme. The combination of bad leadership, poverty and discrimination highlights Africa as a visionless state. Here, the poet, while identifying with hardship and difficulties, laments the spate of vision in Africa. With no one to stand for truth and justice, Africa is indeed at the mercy of her own children.

## **Mission for a change**

The poem is a revelation of the problems facing Sierra Leone people and Africans in general in the hands of dictatorial leaders. It is also a song for a revolution on the need for a change. It is a subtle advocacy to rise against dictatorial tendency at all cost.

## **Language and Style**

The diction of the poem provokes a high use of imagery. Although the language is simple and comprehensible, the tone remains harsh and condemnatory, particularly in the last stanza. Divided into three unequal stanzas, the 21-line poem is a lyric. The diction effectively describes the sufferings and tribulations of the peasants and the failure of the political leaders to rise up to their social responsibilities.

## **Poetic Devices**

**Repetition** – There were certain words/expressions repeated to lay emphasis. Word such as ‘boulevard’, ‘hanging’, ‘make me’ and so on.

**Paradox** – ‘the boulevard of misery’

**Metaphor** – ‘the boulevards of this country are railway tracks...’

**Enjambment** – If the skeletons of stillborn promises

Dry up in the catacombs

**Alliteration** – ‘skeletons of stillborn promises’

**Pun** – let me be the hangman hanging myself  
hanging them hanging the day.

## **SOLA OWONIBI'S "HOMELESS, NOT HOPELESS"**

### **Background of the Poet**

Sola Owonibi was born into the royal family of Oba J. B. Owonibi in 1963. He attended Durbar Modern School and St Andrew's College of Education in Oyo. He graduated from the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University. He is a poet and novelist. He currently teaches at the Department of English Studies and Mass Communication, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria. His poetry collections are *The Banished Bard* and *The Songs of a Fool*. He is also the author of *Peace by Pieces*.

### **Subject Matter**

The poem identifies a peculiar group of people in the society who are referred to as the dregs of the society. This group includes the poor, the homeless, the helpless, and they survive through begging for alms. These people are usually despised and relegated by the society. They are not reckoned with and are treated as irrelevant.

However, through the poem, the poet persona gives these forsaken people a credible personality. In fact, he identifies them as a crucial part of the society whose role helps to stabilize that society. He portrays them as ‘necessary’. Through the constant use of the pronoun ‘we’, the poet persona identifies with them, referring to himself as part of this group, and thus establishes a connection. This, to a large extent, justifies his position in his argument.

### **Themes**

Here, there is the question of identity, abject penury, hope and contentment, and the theme of life after death.

### **The question of identity**

The poem opens with a striking metaphor “we are the natives of the street”. This addresses the lack of recognition on the part of the downtrodden of the society. The society never recognizes them as humans, neither appreciates nor considers their plights and condition. The poet persona gives a voice to this group of under-privileged people by giving them a name, a significance of identity.

### **Abject penury**

One striking feature of this group of people is their state of abject penury. Many of them have no homes, living under bridges and are at the mercy of the elements. In fact, they struggle twice hard to survive. They more often than not resort to begging before they can get their next meal. The poet, through this poem, seems to underscore a point that poverty is not an excuse for the inhuman treatment meted out to the beggars of the society.

### **Hope and contentment**

From the title of the poem, *Homeless, Not Hopeless*, the poet emphasizes the worth of the downtrodden in the society. He raises a philosophical statement that poor people are without honour. For all its worth, they are no doubt the poor beggars. But they are also a source of blessing to the rich in the society. Ironically, they are also role models in the sense that they appreciate and value the little they have, part of which is life. However, the rich usually live an unsatisfactory life, even with all what they have acquired.

### **Belief in life after death**

There is a belief in the future after death. Here the poet persona adheres to the universal theme of life after death. The last two three lines of the poem lay more emphasis on the issue of hope, saying that against all odds, there is a better future for the downtrodden of the society. The future may however not come in this present world, but would certainly manifest in the next, a world vividly described as “the second phase”.

### **Language and Style**

The language is very accessible and it reflects the mindsets of the poor masses. There is an imagery of poverty, anguish and depression, which affect the mood of the poet persona. However, the tone radiates confidence and hope. Despite the clarion call for recognition, there is no use of harsh and angry words. There is subtle display of intention.

### **Poetic Devices**

**Metaphor** – “we are the natives of the street”, “Angels, we open gates” etc.

**Personification** – “when death opens the gate”.

**Irony** – “we embrace the cozy cardboard bed laid on stinks”

**Rhyme and repetition** – “We are lack” ... “that take your lack”

**Emjambments** – This is quite common throughout the poem, with the lines running into the next. E.g. “Angels, we open gates ... of your blessings”.

### **Questions**

Discuss the dominant theme in J.P. Clark's *Agbor Dancer*.

1. The words ‘homeless’ and ‘hopeless’ are significant in the Sola Owonibi’s “Homeless but not Hopeless”, how appropriate is the use of symbols in describing the feelings of the poet.
2. With reference to Syl Cheney's poem-Myopia, comment on the style and language use of the poet in driving home his point.
3. Africa is a dynamic and vibrant continent. Discuss this assertion, using J.P. Clark's *Agbor Dancer* as a reference point.