

A Chorus of Voices: Challenging, Changing, and Championing the Image of Africa in African Poetry

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Swimming against strong currents of perennial misrepresentation, African poets unleash on the literary landscape to thrust Africa and its values from the periphery to the center. The image of Africa and its people has been badly soiled, tarnished in western literature, art, and media, thus compelling Africans to squirm on their seats, as their revered homeland and her people are battered in the whole world, especially in the west. To crush the hallucinatory negative beliefs many harbor about Africa and its people, African poets in all agog rise to defend their homeland and way of life. Baffled by almost always being treated/perceived as eternal toddlers in need of perpetual control and paternalistic guidance, African poets such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Senegalese poet, politician, and cultural theorist who, for two decades, served as the first president of Senegal, and Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet, essayist, and winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, as well as Mbella Sonne Dipoko, a novelist, poet and painter from Cameroon paint a different picture of Africa, which is neither a utopia nor a lieu of doom and gloom.

To Professor John Lambo, in his book, *The Archetypal, the Mythical and the Sublime: Selected Essays and Criticism in Poetry*, “cultures, like personalities, tend to assert themselves, more so when their very existence is beset and menaced by alien cultures and civilizations. This claim is particularly true of African culture to which Africans still hold fast, in spite of Western or Oriental influences” (72).

Léopold Sedar Senghor takes umbrage at the derogatory image of Africa by clothing Africa and Africans in robes of excellence and dignity in “Murders”, a poem which celebrates the sacredness, almost divine qualities of the black race. He does such at the backdrop of regretting that the white race soils the black race. No wonder, James Michira says,

Many people in the Western world generally display a significant lack of knowledge about Africa. They never visited Africa and most certainly, they never will. Yet in their minds, most of them have certain images of Africa that they hold to be ‘true’ or ‘real’. They possess these images courtesy of the Western media through its representations of Africa- via television programs and documentaries, the movie industry, the Internet, as well as the print media including the newspapers, magazines, journals and books (<http://web.mnstate.edu/robertsb/313/imagesofafricamichira.pdf>).

In “Murders”, the image of the captured Senegalese (African) prisoners in France, who are made to “lie like lengthened shadows across the soil of France”, depicts such calumny. The image vividly suggests that blacks are treated like lower tier humans. They are pictured as people deprived of laughter; in fact, their laughter, like wood has been “chopped” or cut into pieces; they can only smile, but this smile is said to be “solemn”, grave, serious, not warm. They have been deprived of the “diamond” or bright time they once enjoyed, certainly before the coming of the white man. In another metaphor, black prisoners are likened to the best of “flowers”, which symbolizes the choicest or finest type or species, yet, ironically, they are unnaturally deprived of the best or finest things in life, such as the “diamond time” and their freedom: “you are the flower of the foremost beauty in stack absence of flowers”, the poet insists.

Apart from being the “plasma” or the living matter in spring (water being the symbol of life), the black man is the very “clay” or soft earth on which the water flows. He further states that the black man is the first human being (“sacred fecundity”) born of Adam and Eve (the first couple) in Paradise. He is also the first human being of the mysterious or unconquerable tropical forest; commands or lives in harmony with nature, “victor over fire and thunder”. The music of his innocent blood will eventually overcome or defeat weapon of mass destruction, such as “machines and mortars”. The black man speaks intelligently and logically; he is incapable of hate and deception, being innocent. Although to James Michira, “the Western public has been exposed to ... patterns of misrepresentations, which in turn have been solidified into stereotypes or generalizations about what Africa is all about” (<http://web.mnstate.edu/robertsb/313/imagesofafricanmichira.pdf>), the black race, to the poet, is eternal, cannot die and will continue to suffer, like “martyrs”, in defence of their beliefs and the principles for which they stand. It is under such understanding that Mamadou Badiane in his book, *The Changing face of Afro-Caribbean Cultural Identity Negrismo and Negritude* depicts the pride of founders of the Negritude Movement in their African heritage.

“Murders” abounds in metaphors which are meant to raise the black man represented here Senegalese prisoners to a level far superior to that of the whites; they are called dark or “sombre gods”, and because they are tall, slim and well-shaped, he calls them “slender poplars”. He also calls them “flowers”, “the clay and the plasma of the world’s...spring”, children or the “sacred fecundity” of the “first couple”, commanders of the mysterious tropical forest, of “fire and thunder” whose innocent song can “conquer machines and mortars”. The black man is intelligent; he is incapable of hate and deceit, and is, like a martyr, prepared to die for a just cause.

In singing the praises of the black prisoners in such elevated terms, Senghor clearly shows that he belongs to the Negritude movement. Negritude is a literary, and even socio-political movement, which calls for a rebellion against the French colonial policy of assimilation with the aim of moving backwards to the sources, to rediscover African culture in its pure, uncorrupted, and raw state. It has to do with the African’s struggle to find out its past, the lost Paradise, and then live in it. In this struggle, the African refuses to be enslaved by “assimilation”, a policy by which the French aimed at transforming an African into a veritable Frenchman in terms of education, socio-political set up, and general outlook. However, the insincerity of the French was later discovered by the Africans who went to study in France in the 1930’s. They realised, to their dismay, that they were discriminated against by the French; that they had no equal rights with the French. This realisation gave rise to the rebellious movement which has been called Negritude, a term coined by Aimé Césaire, a west Indian poet, who studied in France together with Senghor now called the Father of Negritude because of his extensive writings on the subject. As mentioned earlier, the poem “murders” is a classic example of a Negritude poem because it praises the black man and all his qualities in terms which are essentially exaggerated. In contrast, the white-men are villains and “Murderers” of the black-man.

In a similar vein, Senghor elevates the stature of black people in his poem, “Long, long have you held between your hands...” The poem deals with nostalgia or homesickness, the strong wish of the speaker, or the “I” in the poem, to return after a long absence, to his country, fittingly personified as having hands, reddish eyes, face, breast, mouth, head hair, and as speaking “gentle words”. By treating his country as if it were a human being, with human attributes and feelings, the speaker shows how dearly and precious his homeland is to him. Senghor writes from personal experience in France. In *The Negritude Movement: W.E.B Dbois, Leon Dama, Aime Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Frank Fanon, and the Evolution of an Insurgent Idea*, Reilanda Rabaka says while facing discrimination in France, Senghor “committed himself to demonstrating that he indeed did possess exactly those qualities and characteristics that Lalouse [his French priest] and other Frenchmen believed were utterly absent in Africa and among Africans: self-discipline, self-determination, and self-organization” (199-200).

The speaker as the first two lines of the poem suggests, is the absent warrior whose picture or “black face” his country holds in her hands and admires, wondering whether he is alive or dead: “Held as if already there fell on it a twilight of death”. The absent speaker regrets that he can only see his homeland through the imagination, and so urgently wishes to return. The repetition, “long, long”, “when shall I see again”, “when shall I sit once more”, emphasises the intensity of his feelings for and the urgency of the need to return to his country, a world in which “Africa’s rich moral heritage of dignity, discipline, diligence, faithfulness, honesty and sound integrity is being eroded” (Tayo).

He realises that he is living in a foreign land (“other skies”), where he is happy since he interacts with “other” human beings, availing himself of “other” knowledge (“springs of other mouths”), and another kind of human warmth. Yet, every year in springtime, the thought of his country excites him as if he had taken “run”. He would think wildly enthusiastic about his country and the tears she sheds on the “thirsty savannahs” probably because of his long absence. The spring causes him to be wildly enthusiastic about his country apparently because his homeland, as the term “thirsty savannahs”, suggests, enjoys spring the year round. The repetition of the term “other” three times in the second stanza clearly emphasises the extent to which the speaker feels that he is a stranger where he is. The speaker associates his country with all that is not corrupt, (“pure horizon of your face”), passionate and affectionate (“the dark table of your breast”), kind and friendly (“gentle words”). No wonder, “[a]s a proponent of the inherent value and importance of Africa, Senghor strove to reclaim its global significance through politics and literature by redefining it in/on its own terms and not according to west’s perception and definition of it as a tabula rasa or as the fossilized image of a primitive society” (Baker 53-71).

On the same score, Wole Soyinka’s “Gulliver”, inspired by Jonathan Swift’s novel entitled *Gulliver’s Travels*, deals with compatriotism. This kind of feeling is common with a patriot, one who loves his country, upholds its interest, and is even prepared to die for its course. The poem describes Gulliver’s painful experiences in Lilliput. Shipwrecked several miles away from his country on the coast of Lilliput, inhabited by dwarfs called Lilliputians, his feet, probably because of the salty sea water, were “scaled”, or developed horny or thorny outgrowths. He realises here that his presence is a kind of intrusion into the affairs of an awkward and alien people, or what he calls “a thumb assemblage”. In this alien land, he is afraid as shown in the “recumbent” (leaning, reclining) postures he keeps owing to the fact that standing erect would destroy their dwarfish houses. What he says and does is guided, otherwise he would be shot with a shower of poisoned or “venom-bodied” arrows or “needles”: “...A brief/ impulse of unguided knowledge raised/A shower of needles...venom-bodied”. The Lilliputians drug him, or give him a dose of medicinal water to drink which sends him into a profound sleep. He is then tied to several tumbrels or carts and dragged, as if dead, to a “desecrated temple”, or “a hall of sorts”. Alone here, he looks around warily or cautiously to learn something of their ways.

While here, two incidents cause him to win the disfavour and punishment of the proud, cruel, and flattering Lilliputians: “Peacock vain, mannikin cruel, sycophant”. The first incident occurs when he “squelched” or put off the fire on the Queen’s palace with his urine. This prompt action, done in all goodwill and without ulterior motives, earns him the hatred of the Queen—he is accused of disorderly, indecent behaviour, of breaching taboos. However, he is eventually pardoned by the king, and he and the people “passed the rapid days/in feasts of love, in mirth and mutual service”.

After declaring war on the Blefuscoons, the Emperor asks Gulliver to capture the ships of the Blefucoons, and he willingly offers his help by capturing some of them but, refuses to capture all the ships, saying he would not trample upon the liberties of innocent people. He thinks he could arbitrate between the belligerent factions, but the king and his ministers opt for complete destruction. His hesitation to annihilate the Blefuscoons is regarded as rebellion because he enraged the politicians by advocating a moderate or “temperate victory” in the war with the enemy, the Blefuscoons, to whom they are related. He is accused of blasphemy, that is, speaking irreverently or disrespectfully of God or sacred matters. For the Lilliputians, the fire is a heavenly or “cosmic conflagration”, and Gulliver has no right to squelch such a fire. He is also accused of having “Secret powers” because no normal “human bladder” can eject enough “piss” or urine strong enough to put off what is essentially a star-cause or “sidereal flames”. Finally, he is accused of arson and polluting the atmosphere with “carrion”, that is putrefied or rotting stuff, capable of causing “plaques, Arson is a crime of intentionally setting on fire private or public property. The crucial question this accusation raises is: how could the conflagration be caused by both an arsonist and sidereal forces? This is clearly a contradiction, a serious error in thinking which suggests that the Lilliputians are not being honest—all they are doing is finding faults, giving Gulliver a bad name, however innocent he may be, to punish him. The sentence or punishment is loss of sight, including such “abnormalities” as “foresight, insight/second sight and.../... vision”. Gulliver’s eyes have to be pulled out with “heated needles” because, for them, his fault results, not from bad intention or ill-will but from his inability to see well: “the fault is not in ill-will but in seeing ill”.

In “Gulliver”, injustice, inhumanity, corruption, and pain abound. “Gulliver” could be said to be an allegory or sustained metaphor of Soyinka’s attempts to be a servant of the state, a servant with a strong sense of duty and love for his country, but who is unjustly treated and punished. In this narrative poem, then, Soyinka ridicules human nature, human follies and the petting of human aspirations. Like the Lilliputians, man is jealous, corrupt, ungrateful, petty, and invariably involved in intrigue, and acts of destruction directed against fellowmen. Such treatment is at variance with Soyinka’s spirituality. After all, “African spirituality is deployed as literary trope in Soyinka’s creative works...” (Celucien 51-69).

Written in eight long strophes, with lines of unequal lengths, the poem contains stylistic features typical of Soyinka’s craftsmanship. We have, for example his careful choice of images, words and expressions which relate to the subject matter of the poem namely, injustice and pain: “A shower of needles, full-fanged, venom-bodied”, as well as “famished blades” clearly refer to the poisonous and deadly arrows of Lilliputians who are always anxious or “hungry” to cause pain to Gulliver. It is equally important to notice Soyinka’s propensity or tendency to use Latinate (polysyllabic) and unfamiliar words, for example, he uses the word “obfuscating” instead of “confused” or “bewildered”, “necropolis” for cemetery, and “Imprimus” for the more familiar expression “in the first place”. Albeit these polysyllabic words render his meaning difficult, they augur well with the grand and elevated sentiments of his poetry. Equally significant is his effective use of sound and rhythm to convey meaning. For instance, the use of the sibilant sounds in “famished blades”, “heated needles”, “Abnormalities of view-foresight, insight/ second sight and all solecisms of seeing-/called vision”. The alliteration and intend rhyme here give the poem a musical quality, yet the harsh sibilant sounds, “s”, clearly reflect the harshness or cruelty of the Lilliputians, thus criticising Africans who fail to live up to expectations, and drawing attention of the populace to the flaws of their own leaders. “Soyinka... takes all levels and forms of writing seriously – there is an ‘Everman’s Soyinka that has wide, popular appeal....” (Biodun 278).

On his part, Mbella Sonne Dipoko’s “Rulers”, like Soyinka’s “Gulliver”, touches on the sense of compatriotism. The poem describes the fate of wicked, corrupt and irresponsible leaders who in their public speeches boast of their achievements by giving a cooked up or false inventory and list of things they have done for their countries and peoples. Notwithstanding their claims and the false sense of euphoria (well-being), they strive to impose on the people, the people, who, ironically, are said to be very poor and miserable without any prospect or hope for a good future: “Rulers unroll scrolls of wretched landscapes”. It is important to note the contrast made by Dipoko between the misery of the people and the extravagant lifestyle of the rulers who, in “gorgeous” appeal “boast and drink and dance under chandeliers/ in castles” or imposing mansions.

In fact Dipoko is laughing or mocking at this rulers for thinking that they can deceive the people all the time. The poet aptly calls them “parrots”, a metaphor which suggests that the rulers like parrots are unintelligent imitators who simply repeat mechanically certain catchwords and slogans in their speeches with the aim of hoodwinking the people. Usually, things do not work out the way they would want. High-sounding speeches cannot quieten a hungry people. This is clearly shown in the fact that the castles in which the rulers are making merry are being “threatened” with destruction by the people. Here, the poet uses two pertinent similes to drive home the ideas of imminent destruction of the castles and, of those who inhabit it. First, the mirthful castles are compared to “pleasure boats in a furious ocean”. Like “pleasure boats” menaced and eventually capsized by angry or furious waves when the weather is rough and the tides-high, the pleasure castles will eventually be destroyed by the angry people who are tortured by hunger. Second, the castles are compared to “insects that dance around streetlamps/looming in the fog of a stormy sky”. Though the insects at night fly around streetlamps to get some light and warmth, their pleasure is short-lived; given the unfriendly weather. The storm will eventually destroy them. The image of the storm, like that of the “furious ocean”, stands for the anger of the people which will eventually compel them to pull down the castles and then their despotic inhabitants. Such criticism of African leadership is a manifestation of love, as the writer serves here as a tool for social change.

It is important as well to note that the scene takes place in “a rainy night”, in a “seismic night”. Seism means an earthquake, while night represents darkness and death. Both terms therefore suggest terror and alter destruction. The image of the flooded ocean” in the last line of the second stanza also suggests destruction. Like water which overflows and dominates the land, the people’s anger overwhelms the land, the people’s anger overflows and overwhelms the rules in their castles, thus reversing the order of things. The fact that “salt water” drips or trickles from the “faces and farms” of the people would suggest how thoroughly overwhelming exhausting the whole revolutionary experience has been.

The violent overthrow of the ruler cannot be said to be complete without the people apprehending him, before he “downs” or dies, to tell him in his face what harm he has done to them and the country. Arresting him is also necessary because he may escape and form a resistance group which may threaten or dash into pieces their hopes for a better future. The metaphor, “reticent sea-gull” in the poem refers to the fallen ruler who has been uncommunicative (“reticent”); like a gull, he has been stupid and fraudulent. The poem suggests that only those who err or wander from the true path, “stray crows” can mourn such dishonest rulers.

Dipoko’s “Rulers” clearly has a prophetic and a patriotic tone; prophetic because it foretells the inevitable tragic end of fraudulent rulers; and patriotic, because it expresses the deep-seated feeling of a poet who loves and is devoted to his country and would therefore want to see it prosper and governed by rulers to whom justice and rectitude, rigour and selflessness mean much more than mere rhetoric or high-sounding speeches.

The poem deals with a topical issue, corruption and irresponsible leadership, showing once more that Africa is not a utopia, but its issues are those affecting the western world, as well. From the analysis of the poet’s use of imagery, metaphor and similes, we notice that, like Soyinka, Dipoko packs too much unsaying into his lines, a practice which suggests that he uses language precisely, selectively and economically. For instance, example, the choice of words which suggests that darkness and death loom over the pleasure castles: “rainy night”, “furious ocean”, fog, “stormy sky”, “flooded ocean”, “seismic night”, “stray rows”, and “wicked kingdom” abound in the poem.

Like “Rulers”, “Upheaval” is another prophetic poem inspired by Dipoko’s strong sense of patriotism or love for his country. The poet foretells the impending overthrow of the tyrant and the pains that go along with it in the poem: he is said to be sitting on a “sinking throne... waiting to... die”. As the tyrant thinks of his imminent overthrow, “the time to come”, he wept bitterly for three successive nights, regretting the fact that his hope or expectation to rule for long is shattered, dashed into pieces: “... in the tyrant’s heart a hope shivered”. That the tyrant is experiencing a terrible psychological pain, arising from his acute sense of uncertainty is visibly shown in the image of dim or “particles of light” in his eyes. The author compares the “particles of light” to “tiny petals, or coloured flower leaves, on a mourner’s overwhelming black robes, to show how very small and insignificant the lights in the tyrant’s eyes are. What is true of his eyes is their general dimness which suggests cheerlessness. Like the petals which wither and die after a very short time, the “particles of light” in the tyrant’s eyes would soon disappear, giving way to utter darkness. The poet displays fairness in projecting flaws in Africa, but such critique does not cancel the fact that the western media presents Africa as an inherently negative, corrosive world. As Hogg Cloe states, “is one of the most powerful tools used to spread information. With that power comes responsibility, both on behalf of the producer and of the consumer. Information from the media should be absorbed with a grain of salt, and with awareness of the extent to which it creates and perpetuates profound paradigms that exist in our minds” (<https://impakter.com/africa-western-media>).

In this imbroglio or complicated state of things, castle pets feel uncomfortable: sensing danger the horses neigh and cats beg for wings, that is, they wish to fly above or escape from the impending doom. Like the pets, the tyrant would equally want to escape, yet this is all wishful thinking. By equating the ruler’s wishes to that of animals, Dipoko subtly brings him down to their level. Again, this poem, like “Rulers”, deals with a topical or contemporary subject, namely, the overthrow and tragic end of tyrannical rulers who enforce their wills on others. As shown in the foregoing analysis of the poem, Dipoko uses language precisely and economically, with the words and imagery pointing squarely to the idea or subject being described. Words and phrases such as sobbed, shivered, “particles of light” in the eyes, “horses... neighed”, “cats begged for wings”, “sinking throne”, all point to the tragic experience that is to come. Thus, in just two stanzas written in lines of unequal length, Dipoko foretells the sad fate of tyrants. The alliteration consisting essentially of the harsh sibilant sounds (s), apart from rendering the poem musical, reflects in very subtle ways the harsh reality of the experience being described, namely, the inevitable downfall of corrupt and irresponsible leaders.

From the foregoing, one can safely infer that African poets, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Wole Soyinka, and Mbella Sonné Dipoko debunk misconceptions about Africans and Africa in their poems. Africa has been consistently presented in the west as a place of perpetual doom and gloom, inhabited by weird humans in endless strife and groping in the dark cloud of every aspect of life. Such perceptions and trends are perceived as realities in nearly every household in the world, especially in the west, thus African writers fight back. To Peter J. Schraeder and Brian Endless, “Whereas some of these trends remain constant, such as the tendency to focus on the negative and sensationalist aspects of African politics and society, others have evolved in accordance with changing international realities, such as a decline in focus on Southern Africa in postapartheid era in favor of greater coverage of perceived threats in North Africa” (34). While African poets seem to grossly elevate the status of the black race in their poems as a fitting response to the hyperbolic and perennial misrepresentation of their continent and its people, they turn on their own bad leaders, suggesting, in a telling manner, that Africa is not a paradise and her people are not angels, yet not inherently a wasteland of constant pain as depicted in the western world.

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