GENDER, NATIONALISM AND OTHER INTERVENTIONS IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S HAIKU POEMS

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Abstract

The focus on form and content has remained one of the major ways adopted, universally, by critics interested in poetry studies. In modern Nigerian poetry, however, the experimentation with forms, which, have tentacles in home grown (oral) sources and external borrowed forms, has received copious attention. This attention is shared between oral and western forms relegating other forms that modern Nigerian poets have adopted in their engagements with the postcolonial conversations in Nigeria. This article examines the "haiku poems" in Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's *Dancing Masks* (2013), *Mixed Legacies* (2019) and *Broken Bodies*, *Damaged Souls and Other Poems* (2022) to demonstrate the interface between form and content in modern Nigerian poetry. The article interrogates the popular premise of "generationalising" modern Nigerian poets and fashions out standards that rightly place modern Nigerian poets in their respective generations. The postcolonial premise of the study unravels how the poet's penchant for the "haiku form" has objectified the dystopias within and outside her homeland. The conclusion of the article identifies the ambivalent texture of the poet's haiku stanzas as against the dominant unified focus on gender in her prose titles. .

Keywords: Form and content, haiku poetry; Adimora-Ezeigbo, modern Nigerian Poetry, Gender, Nationalism

Introduction

A general appraisal of the evolution of modern literary forms in Nigeria will return a valid result that recognises the prominence and impact of female writers. Like we have progenitors in the male category such as Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka,

female writers such as Mabel Segun, Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe- Leslie blazed the trail in the history of female writers in Nigeria. Interestingly, Mabel Segun, who of the three is best known as "champion for children's literature in Nigeria," gives the impression that Nigerian female writers started horning their arts at the same time with their male counterparts. In her interview with Wale Okediran, she says:

Flora Nwapa is not the first published Nigerian female writer. In 'Nigerian Women in the Arts', Phebaan Itayemi, now Phebean Ogundipe, has this distinction. Her short story, which won a British Council competition in 1946, was published in an anthology ... I am the second Nigerian female to be published abroad. In 1954, twelve years before Heinemann published Flora's first novel, 'Efuru' (1966), three poems were translated into German and published in a German anthology, 'Shwarzer Orpheus'. In 1958, one poem and a short story were similarly published in another German anthology. Before these foreign anthologies were published, I contributed short stories, poems and essays to the Ibadan University College magazine, the 'University Herald' (1950-54). In 1962, I was the only female writer included in 'Reflections' - still before Flora's debut with her novel. In these early days, poetry and short stories were usually published in anthologies. Single author collections were rare.

With specific regards to poetry, a close scrutiny of these beginnings show that while female poets, especially Acholonu and Ogundipe-Leslie, had used journal platforms like *Black Orpheus*, *The Muse*, *Omabe*, *Okike*, *Opon Ifa* and anthologies such as Robin Morgan's (ed.) *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (1984) and Margaret Busby's (ed.) *Daughters of Africa* (1992), the tempo in poetry writing fizzled out immediately it began. This point was made by Obi Maduakor when he noted that:

> It is in the area of poetry that the Nigerian female writers are still trailing languidly behind the men folk on the literary scene. They have distinguished themselves in fiction with the work of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and

> Ifeoma Okoye; and are coming up gradually even though slowly in drama with the plays written by Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme. And yet, it is in poetry that the young Nigerian writer is provided with the best opportunity for developing his talent. (75)

But Aderemi Raji-Oyelade. (2004) adjusts this premise by revealing that:

> Before Acholonu and Ogundipe-Leslie, the first female writer to produce a volume of poetry was Mabel Segun (*Conflict and Other Poems*); and with others like Phabean Ogundipe, Francesca Yetunde Pereira, Ifi Amadiume and Flora Nwapa, the first slim body of Nigerian female poets established an ethereal presence, almost silhouetted to a critical enterprise which favoured and found connection with a literary tradition dominated, controlled and patronised by men. (2)

Notwithstanding, the year 1985 remains a watershed in the evolution of female poetry in Nigeria. With Catherine Acholonu's *The Spring's Last Drop* and *Nigeria in the year 1999* and Molara Ogundipe- Leslie's *Sew the old Days and Other Poems*, Nigerian female poets produced the first books of poems in numbers and started asserting themselves on the landscape of poetry writing in Nigeria. Despite this feat and the consequent steady development of female poetry in Nigeria, in the words of Lloyd Brown "The women writers of [Nigeria] are the other voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space" (3). Irene Salami attempts to contradict this statement by claiming that this observation was in the past by saying that "Before [Wole Soyinka won] the Nobel Prize, African women were nearly invisible in literary criticism. Irrespective of [their] significant creativity in oral literature, and the obvious elevation of their status ushered in by feminist movements male writers continue to dominate the literary scene" (124). However, attempts at "generationalising" modern Nigerian poets have not only exposed the complexity of the endeavor but also showed that female poets have remained invisible.

Modern Nigerian Poetry, the Crisis of "Generationalising" and the Invisibility of Female Nigerian Poets: An Overview

Funsho Aiyejina's seminal essay, "Recent Nigerian poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition" seems to have pioneered the attempts at "generationalising" modern Nigerian poetry. The attempt was seen as premature at that time as critics such as Harry Garuba noted that "For a body of writing as 'young' as Nigerian poetry in English, to suggest over-categorical demarcations at this point in time would be foolhardy [...] The ambiguity heightens when writers said to belong to one generation are still active and producing work two or three generations after the one to which they are said to belong" (Garuba 2005: 51–52). Garuba's objection is trite to the extent that there are identified poets of older generations still in the art of writing. For instance, from the first generation, John Pepper Clark produced *Remains of A Tide* in 2018, two years before his transition, while Wole Soyinka recently released *Wole Soyinka: Selected Poems 1965 – 2022: A Retrospective* (2023). Niyi Osundare, of the second generation, also did *Green: Sighs of our Ailing Planet* (2021), among others. However, to say the attempt of Aiyejina is premature is preposterous as his catalogue can always be subjected to refinement. After many more years, Oyeniyi Okunoye, in 2011 and 2022, came up with a "generationalisation" that appears acceptable to critics. In his latest theorising, in "Second Generation Nigerian Poetry: Activist Writing in Popular Idioms", he contends that

> Nigerian literary history so far recognises three generations of modern Nigerian poets... The core members of first generation writers- Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, and Clark- Bekederemo, Chinua Achebe- were born in the 1930's...The Second- generation Nigerian poets [such as, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare and Okinba Launko, were]... Born in the 1940's and 1950's... The Poets of the third generation... were born after Nigeria's independence in 1960. (2022, 394)

But this categorisation is inadequate or misleading for at least two reasons. One is that it shuts out female poets and their impacts in the evolution of modern Nigerian poetry, the weightier reason is that the slating of generations using the periods of birth as premise is defective. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo serves a very good example to prove this point. By the order of birth period, Adimora-Ezeigbo belongs to the second generation but she is far outside that generation because Umez (2021, 172) noted that "it was not until 2006 that Adimora-Ezeigbo started paying serious attention to writing poetry, [and] this yielded in her first three volumes of poetry". In actual fact, she produced her first book of poetry, *Heartsongs*, in 2009, a time when her peers, such as Niyi Osundare, Okinba Launko and Odia Ofeimun, in the "generationalising" of Okunoye have been well established as poets. From the foregoing, it is clear that an enduring and encompassing parameter aimed at "generationalising" modern Nigerian poets must depart from this exclusive format of period of birth set by Okunoye. Necessarily, the substitute should be the year of the poet's "first appearance" or period marked by an epoch, for instance in (national) history or aesthetics, in which the poet's voice appears mostly dominant. Ogundele (2008, 136-154) initiated this model designating the generations in modern Nigerian poetry as pre civil war, civil war and post- civil war poets. This has to be continually cultivated, especially from the last designation, to align with known historical epochs in order to accommodate respective (new) generations of (emerging) poets.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and the Metamorphosis from a Story Teller to a Poet

Many critics come to the agreement that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is one of the talents that has used her creativity to alter the writing formats in Nigeria. The accreditation is always linked, justifiably, with her prose works which have earned her prominence. Arndt (2008, 24) speaks on this saying that:

> Since 1960's, African women writers have also contributed to the intertextual dialogue of writing back. The Nigerian,

> Flora Nwapa was the first female novelist to enter this counter discourse, with her novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970). Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo ranges among the most outspoken and prolific writers of this approach. Many of [her] writings... do not only challenge colonialist literatures, but African men's literatures as well.

In the two "Forwards" to Evelyn N Urama's *The Writer in the Mirror*: *Conversations with Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo,* Newell (2021, ix) is first to affirm Arndt's statement by saying that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is "a talented scholar and critic, an influential women's activist, and a gifted prolific writer who has produced award-wining books in various genres over a period of nearly forty years". Oloko (2021, xiii) completes the encomiums by asserting that Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo:

> ...is an unavoidable statistic for illustrating how the gender geography of Nigerian writing has been reconstituted to correct a canon that has been under intense scrutiny for its maleness, since writing of serious literary worth began in the country. She shares the Igbo ethnic, geographical, historical and cultural propinquity with Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, and all draw from the heritage repertory and resources that the background offers. As the youngest among these writers, the task for Adimora- Ezeigbo is to forge her own path into the canon. To do so means she would have to write in a way that takes into account the successes and fame of these predecessors, but also presenting alternatives, variations and varieties with cultural materials, more or less.

Notably, mostly edited book projects such as Patrick Oloko's *The Fiction of Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo*: *Issues and Perspectives* (2008), Sackeyifo and Diala-Ogamba's *Emerging Perspectives on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo* (2017), and critical works by Nwachukwu- Agbada (2010), Egya (2011), Ogunyemi (2013) and Hunsu (2015), have focused on her prose works which earned her prominence before her experimentation with poetry. In engaging those titles such as *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996),

House of Symbols (2001) *Children of the Eagle* (2002) and *Roses and Bullets* (2011), her narrative about the Nigerian civil war, the perspectives look at her reconstruction of gender roles. Nwachukwu- Agbada (2010, 86) summarises this fact thus:

> Adimora-Ezeigbo... has ... used her novel to negate certain patriarchal assumptions about women while not missing out on any opportunity to project the hitherto uncelebrated superior facets of female panache and comportment in an otherwise unfavourable climate of mutual social and cultural mistrust.

In another vein, Adimora-Ezeigbo also singles out as a gender theorist. Her indigenous gender theory, "Snail Sense Feminism" theory, is different from other (Nigerian/ African) gender brands such as Womanism, Femalism, Motherism, Nego Feminism and Stiwanism. In the estimation of Oloko (2021, xiii), through her *Snail sense Feminism*:

> *Building on an Indigenous Model*, Adimora- Ezeigbo added her voice to the varied and enthralling theoretical discourses in feminism and gender studies showing how African women negotiate existence in their unique patriarchal environment, her framework of complementarity and women's resilience in gender relations is slow, steady and sturdy snail.

However, it appears that after those efforts in prose and theory, Adimora- Ezeigbo has created latitude for herself in poetry by engaging in other issues without compromising her commitment to her interrogation of gender roles. In the past two decades, her five poetry titles include: *Hearts Songs* (2009), *Waiting for Dawn* (2010), *Dancing Masks* (2013), *Mixed Lagacies* (2019) and *Broken Bodies*, *Damaged Souls and Other Poems* (2022). An indication that her poetry has become a global brand is evident in the hoisting of her poems in global anthologies such as *Anti-Terror and Peace*: *IFLAC Anthology* (2016).and *World on the Brinks*: *An Anthology of Covid- 19 Pandemic* (2020).

The isolation of *Dancing Masks*, *Mixed Lagacies* and *Broken Bodies*, *Damaged Souls and Other Poems* (henceforth, *DM*, *ML* and *BBDS*, respectively) in this article, can be justified. On the one hand, the three titles contain the poet's "haiku poems" under study. On the other hand, her experimentation with the haiku, a Japanese/ Asian form of poetry inspires an interest that is born out of the fact that her innovation takes a path different from other Nigerian poets accustomed to adapted western forms.

The Haiku, Adaptation and Peculiarities in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Poetry: An Overview

Adimora- Ezeigbo's poems in haiku first appeared in *Dancing Masks* where, under "Haiku Connections", we have nine compositions while under "Haiku symphony", in *Broken Bodies*, *Damaged Souls and Other Poems*, they are in 29 stanzas which, the poet says, are compiled with other "poems ...written between 2019 and 2020, especially in 2020 at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic" (vii). In *Mixed Legacies,* we have seventy titles distributed as 59 and 11 verses into two sections: "Terror Legacy: Terror Haiku Poems" and "Joy Legacy: Sunshine ¬ The Beauties Around".

It is observable that the poet's haiku poems cover diverse subjects and their motivation differ to some extent even though the overall philosophy of diversity is largely retained. Celestine Okafor, for instance testifies about *Mixed Legacies* within a context that sees the poet as a second generation female poet in Nigeria when he says:

> Few renowned second generation feminist writers in Nigeria and Africa like Professor Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo, are still prolific. A quick flip through the numerous previous works of this celebrated African literary scholar reassures the reader that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo is still concerned about the socio cultural conditions of her environment as she has shown, once again, in her latest collection of poems entitles *Mixed Legacies*. She remains abhorrent of society's violence, bloodletting, brutality and

> corruption, as she celebrates great men and women who have impacted positively on the same society (blurb, *Mixed Legacies*)

This is further corroborated by the poet as she reveals that in *Mixed legacies* (viii-ix):

> Some of the poems were inspired by unspeakable criminal and corrupt activities trending in different parts of the country ...including the Boko Haram and herdsmen spate of killings, abductions and rampage. Incidents of kidnapping and armed robbery were part of it. Police brutality and extortion of money at checkpoints also received some attention in the collection. Appalling human rights abuses, the shooting of defenceless men, women and children in the land, rape incidents suffered by women of varying ages and killing of unarmed protesters have provided the topic of some poems. Others are ritual killing, cultism and cattle rustling... Indeed, corruption has many faces in our country and wears many robes. However a section of the collection celebrates great men and women, especially writers and academics who [have] died [and] living achievers who have made indelible marks on the literary and academic landscape of the country and beyond.

In his "Foreword" to *Dancing Masks* (11), Tanure Ojaide, submits that the purpose of the collection is "to capture the state of things" within the context of "human experience" but makes another interesting point when he says:

> The poet uses imagery from the African indigenous tradition, especially the Igbo folklore, and also from Western/ classic and Christian traditions to express the complexity of the world we live in [and] the turbulence of contemporary life and society anchored on family, friendship, and a commitment to humanism of sensitive and fair social values.

The issue of the relationship between the poet's sources of imageries re-enacts the fact that for the African poet, inspirations or adaptations are drawn from oral and foreign sources. Ruth Finnegan, in her seminal book, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970) had associated some poetry forms such as lullaby, marriage and work songs, among others, with women. But Charles Bodunde in *Oral Traditions and Aesthetic Transfer: Creativity and Social Vision in Contemporary Black Poetry* (2001) explored how modern African poets have used these oral forms to interrogate conditions of dystopia on their landscape. Adimora-Ezeigbo's haiku poems under study are therefore a hybrid that garnishes the adapted form of poetry with local resources from her Igbo background and many more.

However, explaining the genesis of her obsession with haiku, Adimora- Ezeigbo, in her interaction with Umez (2021, 175) revealed that:

> I got acquainted with Japanese poets in 2010 when I was in Tokyo and read many poems written in this form... I fell in love with the haiku form when I studied Ezra Pound (a close associate of T.S. Eliot) and read his very imagist poems such as "Alba" and "In a Station of the Metro."

As the cited interaction continued, it was clear that her fascination is fuelled by the conviction that "A poet is an image maker... [and that] poetry succeeds through the deployment of graphic imagery" (176). Abrams and Harpham (2012, 170-1) stress that imagism, as "a distinctive feature of modernist poetry" ...was a poetic vogue that flourished in England, and even more vigorously in America, approximately between the years 1912 and 1917. It was planned and exemplified by a group of English and American writers in London... The Imagist proposals... were for a poetry which, abandoning conventional limits on poetic materials and versification, is free to choose any subject and to create its own rhythms, uses common speech and presents an image...that is hard, clear and concentrated.

Tangentially, Abrams and Harpham (2012, 157) also relate imagism with objectification in their meaning of haiku poems, thus:

> Haiku is a Japanese poetic form that represents¬ in seventeen syllables that are ordered into three lines of five, seven and five syllables¬ the poet's emotional or spiritual response to a natural object, scene or season of the year. This strict form, which relies on the short, uniform, and unstressed syllabic structure of the Japanese language, is extremely difficult in English; [consequently] most poets who attempt the haiku loosen the rule for the number and pattern of syllables.

For reasons in this excerpt, Adimora- Ezeigbo's haiku poems do not conform strictly to the original haiku outlines. Structurally, her haiku verses are separated by caesuras giving each stanza an independent status but this does not obstruct the thread as the poems can be read in a single plot. Conversely, the poet also breaks the thread by interjecting with new topics or resuscitating topics that seemed abandoned or concluded in the previous threads.

Tropes of Nature, Home and Alien Lands in Adimora- Ezeigbo's Haiku Lines

In *Mixed Legacies* (ix), which features the highest number of haiku verses in the studied collections, Adimora- Ezeigbo delineates the content of her haiku lines by revealing thus:

> I have given free rein to this preoccupation. I find the haiku a suitable form to explore issues that traumatise as well as gladden my heart. Most Japanese haiku are about nature or Natural objects such as the seasons, landscapes, the sea, trees, flowers and animals, especially birds. Some also celebrate love. However, I use the form to recreate of capture disparate subjects and experiences¬ political, social, cultural, nature and love. My experimentation with the haiku is more in terms of content and form....

More than this, however, the Covid-19 pandemic afforded the poet the opportunity of expanding her scope of haiku lines to capture issues of universal import in *Broken Bodies*, *Damaged Souls and Other*

Poems. Although the section titled "Songs in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic" is dedicated to the pandemic, her haiku lines on the same subject expose the universal and national experiences of the period. Like all nations of the world, the plague sieged on every part of the poet's country as seen in "Let me flee to Jos" (*BBDS*, 72) where the cities of Jos and Kano are used to express the fact that the "Coronavirus scourge" has ravaged the country. The virus, which the poet in "Dreaded visitor" (*BBDS*, 73) and "Coronavirus" (*BBDS*, 73) describes as "Dreaded visitor/ From the belly of China" and "Breaker of tall dreams", respectively is seen, in "The rat that bloodies" (*BBDS*, 72) as having "razor- sharp teeth" that afflicts or terminates the life of its victims. The poet affirms her claim in "Lying prone in bed" (*BBDS*, 73) when we are told that:

Lying prone in bed
Gutted by Covid-19
She prayed for healing

The resort to spirituality by the victim not only exposes the seeming helplessness of medical science to arrest the plague but leads to a justified query in "How the do you rout" (*BBDS*, 73)

How the do you rout
Invisible enemies
Bent on killing you?

In all these, the only solace the poet renders is in the word of caution which indirectly relates with strict adherence to health protocols set for survival in "Be cautious, beware" (*BBDS*, 73). She says:

Be cautious, beware
Of death that comes stealthily
Named Covid- 19

In capturing "disparate subjects and experiences", the poet impresses on the scope of her mirrored spaces as projecting a universal and cosmopolitan outlook in *Dancing Masks* with compositions such as "Sea of heads: Bristles" (78) and "Grim faces thought ¬creased" (79). Whereas the poet admits to the complexity of humanity and the universe in describing them as "indecipherable hieroglyphics/ akin to

ancient Egypt's". In the latter, her interpretation of the gestures of different nationalities at the Waterloo train station confer hybrid status on all spaces:

Sea of heads: bristles
curls, floppy mops: hybrids at
Waterloo station

Unfortunately, the interface between nationalities reminds of gory experiences. For instance, in "Benin bronze in London" (80) where the past and present are brought into account, we have:

Benin bronze in London
uprooted, living in bondage
handiwork of plunderers

The dislocation of the artefact from its home base, Benin, reminds of one of the atrocities of colonialism, which saw many sacred artworks from Africa ferried to museums abroad. The identification of the perpetrators of the act, and her reference to them as "plunderers" foreground and criminalise the unjust acts perpetrated by ex-colonial masters.

The context of universality also runs through her musings on Nature. The poet appreciates the seamless, ordered routine of nature in "Silvery shape-shifter", (86) thus:

Silvery shape-shifter
Dazzles; breath-taking, charming
sun bows out in style

The aesthetic in the alliteration on the first line compliments time markers in the baton change between the day and the night to impress on the harmlessness of nature, its utility, social and recreational values. The restorative and healing potential of nature are projected in "The rains are coming" (*BBDS*, 71) while in "Deep in Igbo heartland" (*DM*, 81), the flora and fauna of her Igbo home land is described as a "paradise" because of its alluring attraction to tourists. However, nature also has its disruptive and hurting tendencies in change of weather and natural disasters such as the harmattan season, drought and flooding in

"Harmattan welcomes" (*DM*, 45) and "Drought! farmers lament" (*DM*, 83), respectively.

Beyond its cyclical nature to heal and hurts, the poet uses the tropes of nature not only to spur emotional feelings of love but also to connect with her ancestral memory and endowments. In the rage of the coronavirus crisis, the necessity of the expression of love gains resonance in a metaphor of care encapsulated in nature. An example found in "Hide me in your arms" (*BBDS*, 71) reads:

Hide me in your arms
As green leaves protect their fruits
In the time of blight

This protective metaphor also finds an antithesis which relays the reality of the time in "My love wants me close" (*BBDS*, 71), with particular attention to the last line in this excerpt:

My love wants me close
But everywhere is unsafe,
Even birds shun trees.

The poet also uses her lure for nature in other two basic ways of memorial and as pathway through which she re-enters the mythical realm for inspiration. In "My precious mother" (*BBDS*, 71), she likens her departed "precious mother/... [to] the colours of rainbow" while in "O River Goddess" (*BBDS*, 71), the poet implores the "River Goddess", a custodian of a river which is an agent of nature to "grant (her) "passage to the hosme/ Of the ancestors".

Feminist Temper in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Haiku Lines

Like she did with some of her novels already listed and in her monograph: *Snail Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model* (2012), Adimora- Ezeigbo addresses gender sentiments in her haiku lines but in ways that are distinct. Her intervention must have been triggered by what she calls "Some harmful practices against women in Nigeria" such as "Widowhood rites, Denial of rights to own property, Male child preference, Violence against women, Discriminatory laws and policies

and Unequal access to political posts" (4-11). Her theoretical model, which synchronises with her writings in prose, is propped by her philosophy of accommodation and tolerance. The kernel of the theory (2012, 27),

> ...derives from the habit of snails which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationship with men. Women in our cultures ¬from different parts in Nigeria¬ often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men....to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal culture [women need to] accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men.

The profundity of the poet's protests on offences against women consists in gender infractions such as rape and acts of violence which have attendant physical and psychological impacts on the woman. For instance, in "My virginity¬" (*ML*, 44) and "Her virginity"- (*BBDS*, 74), it is unclear who the poet blames for the loss of "virginity" but it is suggestive that she lambastes crass opportunism in men who capitalise on the innocence and uncontrolled "passion" of women in amorous relationships. The foundation of this connects with the perception of the African society that sees women as sex objects of intangible beings. This posture is foregrounded in demeaning rhetoric which the poet sampled in two instances. In "Words cut deep, drew blood:" (*ML*, 45), she says

> Words cut deep, drew blood:
> "You are only a woman
> Fit for the other room"

The same statement resounds with greater import in its connection with "slavery" in "Wounding words draw blood" (*BBDS*, 74), it reads:

> Wounding words draw blood
> "You are only a woman
> Fit for sex slavery."

This tendency to see women as sex objects becomes the reason for offences such as rape, sex trade and commodification of women. The poet's indicts the callous rapists or paedophiles and expresses her

empathy for its victims in "Raped at age thirteen" (*LM*, 43 and *BBDS*, 74); explaining that the perpetual psychological trauma of rape leaves the "mind" of the victims "ghost trapped".

Notwithstanding, the platform for pointing out the offences against women also becomes her fertile ground for critical self-assessment. The poet is concerned with indecent dressing or nudity which is synonymous with her women folk. She says in "Dancer of fortune" (*ML*, 49):

Dancer of fortune
I see you and my heart jolts
Your nakedness offends

The criticism becomes terser in "Iroko de-robed" (*DM*, 82) where she describes nude women as:

Iroko de
-robed
sheer nudity: shorn of leaves,
food to nurture goats

Her infraction of "iroko", "leaves" and "goats" in these lines are profound imageries that castigate the self-demeaning attitudes of women and the relegation of sanctity and morality. Perhaps, Akachi-Adimora-Ezeigbo's construction of her imagery around "iroko" here is quite instructive particularly as Tsaioor (2011, 104) noted that ..."The iroko is a strong and powerful tree, which serves as a symbolic image of solidity and rootedness in his cultural ontology, deep grounding in sacred tradition and the passion for their longevity and continued efflorescence".

In *Trafficked*, Adimora- Ezeigbo in her story of Nneoma, exposes the international dimension to women trafficking. The protagonist of the novel is Nneoma whose ignorance, sheer gullibility and lure for independence get her submerged in the web of a syndicate that specialises in trafficking girls abroad for sex trade. In a clairvoyant tone "The sky then was pale" (*BBDS*, 75), nature witnesses and testifies to the regrets that await women lured abroad for employment which turns out to be sex trade. The victims are apparently oblivious of what lies

ahead that in "Our lives aren't for sale" (*ML*, 44 and *BBDS*, 74), where the poet notes, with regret, that …"Millions are ready to buy/ From the sex/ greed market" women for the mere purpose of sex. But the poet puts the blame on the victims with a warning for prospective adventurers in "Words from the wise bird" (*BBDS*, 74):

Words from the wise bird:
Embark not on a journey
That is doomed to fail

In responding to the overall condition of women, the activist tone is set in "A sparrow, pursued", (*ML*, 45), where the poet restates her commitment to protect and defend oppressed women but more overriding is her calls on women to join in the combat against actions and social norms that are anti-women. This call, which is rife as the poet demystifies and effeminate men in "The men, castrated" (*ML*, 49), is a chastisement out of complacency that is long entrenched as seen in "Women, stamp your feet" (*ML*, 52) where the poet charges:

Women, stamp your feet
On the reddened earth and cry out:
"Our mumu don do!"

Literally, "mumu", in the last line, means "foolishness" which aggregates the carefree attitude of women which has given so much leverage to men in the social space. This same import is contained in "Women of my land" (*ML*, 49) where, "ashes" refracts inactivity and indifference to gender oppression

Women of my land
Adjust your wrappers, pull them tight
Your heart blooms with ashes

Beyond this, a global call is made in the task that asks women to shake off their "Slave mentality" which makes them to always support men, "cruel oppressors/ Who deflower your girls" (*ML*, 49). "Women of the world" need to begin to reverse the narratives by "March [ing] to murder rape" (*ML*, 45) and "dismantle Patriarchy" (*ML*, 48) in all manifestations. The poet sees a high prospect of freedom "New days

hail new dawns" (*ML*, 56) but issues a caveat in "Stars of the world, unite" (*ML*, 56)

Stars of the world, unite
Swift as far-sighted eagles, swoop down
Assault old and new beasts.

The metaphors of "stars" and "far- sighted eagles" evince the potential of women, vision and combat readiness but unity remains sacrosanct as the poet sees oppression against women as amoebic, a hydra-headed "beast" that breeds a new from its decapitated old.

Adimora- Ezeigbo's Haiku Verses and the State of the Nation

Adimora-Ezeigbo's lens in viewing the condition of her nation begins by accepting the reality of negative transformation from a past state of utopia in "Glorious days are gone" (*BBDS*, 72) for example. Her reason for this submission is the fact that her country languishes in decay. Her parable of the general decay is objectified in "We sit at table" (*DM*, 85) where fruits that should feed the nation have become "worm-infested". At the centre is the failure in leadership which has replaced the responsibility of governance with fetishism (*DM*, 84) while cluelessness, corruption and crass ineptitude remain symptomatic with leadership. In "Hearts of granite reign" (*BBDS*, 72) the experimentation with the civilian and military leadership styles has the same failure verdict:

Hearts of granite reign
Hiding guns in flowing clothes
Shattering the Land's peace.

The symbolism of associating leadership with "granite" shows their imperviousness to reason and chronic ineptitude but in "Hiding guns in flowing clothes" criticises acts of tyranny which extends to the emasculation of the press which is supposed to be the conscience of the state in "Media watchdog groans" (*ML*, 52). The mismanagement of the country is responsible for many citizens leaving the country in "Migrants long for home" (BBDS, 71), sadly, their crave to return home to build their nation remains a mirage as the nation keeps coming

under successive bad leadership. The sorrowful new identity of a formerly great country, in "Your name: Backwardness" and "You, Giant in the sun" (*ML*, 46 and *ML*, 47), from the former poem is that:

Your name: Backwardness
Your identity: Tyrant
Giant with clay feet.

In "Killing days are here" (*ML*, 51), the once peaceful nation has regressed into "killing days" and "mourning times" as a confirmation of the prostrate condition of the nation which also resonates, cynically, in '"Bumblebee country" (*ML*, 47):

Bumblebee country
noisemaker of Africa
you gobble your kind

With the crisis of leadership comes abject decay in infrastructure in "Bare trees", (*ML*, 42) where the leaders have preferred going on medical tourism to fixing the medical facilities in the country. The security situation of the country, as seen in "More rounds of killings" (*ML*, 50), shows that the quotidian acts of terror and kidnapping for ransom have soared to bestial height. The act of kidnapping is tacitly linked with abduction in "A goon came, calling" (*ML*, 44), "At dusk the men came" (*ML*, 48) and "Riding furiously" (*ML*, 48). The poet identifies the abductors as ... "men [who] came/ Atop those metallic horses/On a killing spree. (48). At the end of their invasion, in "A new set taken" (*ML*, 46)

A new set taken
Maidens devoured by brutes of
A demented faith

The apparent reference to the kidnapping of schoolgirls in Chibok, Dapchi and other towns in Nigeria is an indication that the criminals have no religion and sense of humanity but the poet assures in "Kidnappers beware" (*ML*, 44) and "There is only one head" (*ML*, 51) of the comeuppances that are grave and imminent.

The common denominator is that kidnapping and abduction are seen as acts of terror and have caused dislocation, desolation,

alienation of victims from homelands and descent into barbarism in "A village once full" (*ML*, 47) and "Dapchi, crippled down" (*ML*, 47). As a retrospect, the poet notes that terrorism was unheard of in Nigeria until the rampage of "Deadly Boko Haram", which the poets says marked the beginning of "End- time scourge" that has not only hit the nation but has remained, especially in "Terror multiplies", (*ML*, 50) which reads:

Terror multiplies
Comes gaily in various shapes
Carnivorous ogres

The poet profiles herdsmen as terrorists in "Herding sacred cows" for holding lives of their herds/ cows more sacred than that of human beings and their barbaric acts of rape, devaluation of women and "killing men like goats" (*ML*, 41). Not only this, she realises that terror activities have remained with the nation on account of its international link, for instance with "Extremist groups [who have also] storm [ed] Syria [killing] women [and] children" (ML, 45). While charging victims, in "Orphans of the world", to resist and to "protest/ rues reckless killing" (*ML*, 42), an appeal goes to the conscience of the criminals in "Wait, halt you carnage", (*ML*, 43).

For the poet, terrorism thrives for lack of education and negative [religious] indoctrination in "Bloodstains on your hands", (*ML*, 46), "Tabula rasa¬" (*ML*, 41) and "Escape to the caves" (ML, 41). The negative indoctrination that spurs their inhuman acts is revealed in "Three on a mission" (*ML*, 42) which alludes to the prize of seventy-two virgins for Jihadists in paradise in one of the verses of their religious book.

Three on a mission
to maim, destroy and slaughter,
virgins their reward

But the poet in "You who kill for faith", (*ML*, 43) disagrees and exposes the error in this doctrine that supports senseless killing of human beings for paradise prize thus:

You who kill for faith

Darkness and light have no link
Evil hawks bear you away

The abdication of leadership, which has propped up criminality has trickled down to the collapse of institutions. The security institutions, particularly the Nigeria Police force, come under close scrutiny as the poet sees the force as inept, corrupt and unpatriotic in "Are you crime fighters?" (*ML*, 50), and "The gallant police march¬" (*ML*, 51). They are not only "members of the underworld?" (*ML*, 50), they are "Highway daylight thieves/ Trained for extortion" (*ML*, 51) who eliminate innocent and harmless citizens in "Police brutality" (*ML*, 51)

Police brutality
In the eye of raging storm.
Trigger-happy men saunter in.

It is this highhandedness of the police force and security officers of the state that triggered a nation-wide youth protest, "Sorosoke", and received attention in *Sorosoke: An #Endsars Anthology* (2022).

On the whole, the poet is alarmed by the rapid disregard for human values in her intervention on organ poaching and harvesting. The background is in "The boy plantain seller" (*ML*, 43) but "Poacher of organs" (*ML*, 43) criticises the offence:

Poacher of organs
Evil merchant of human flesh
Your cup of blood fills. (43)

Using Lagos as a microcosm, the situation in her country in "Lagos defies laws", (*ML*, 46), embodies lawlessness, filth, indifference to civility and savagery:

Lagos defies laws
City with litter problems
Cans, plastics, everywhere

This explains the poet's perplexity in "You may rebuke her", (*ML*, 47) where she suggests thus:

You may rebuke her
A country of ostriches

But don't rebrand her.

A reiteration is made in "Restructure in peace" (*ML*, 42) where the solution to the nation's problem is to,

Restructure in peace
or cause conflagration,
and reap a bloodbath

Although this suggestion to dismantle the colonial legacy agrees with the feelings of many citizens, its actualisation remains a mirage, sometimes frustrated by the political class who are benefitting from the misrule as the nation continues to trudge along with the unresolved baggage and many more unidentified by the poet.

Conclusion

This article's engagement with the haiku poems o Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo has relayed the nexus between content and (borrowed) form in poetry. The poet's domestication of the borrowed form facilitates and reinvigorates her expositions on the thrusts that have enlivened her creativity in other genres in a way that justifies her canonisation as one of the accomplished writers in modern Nigerian literature. It is observable that in the amorphous texture of the isolated verses, the poet moves radically away from her liberal, non-confrontational posture associated with her novels, especially. In her poetry, she uses her bluntness and combative approaches as catalysts to raise the consciousness of women to their rights and her nation to the need to rekindle the sterling status it has lost. Essentially, her vision for a just society through the revival of humane values remain sacrosanct for peaceful in her nation and the world.

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