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Satire and The Images of Bestial Leadership in Okpanachi's *The Eaters of The Living*

by

Dr (Mrs.) Foluke R. Aliyu-Ibrahim

Dept. of English University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State

Abstract

One of the functions of literature is to serve the society, to make it better. Thus African poets have often been pre-occupied with the socio-economic and political conditions of their people. Okpanachi's collection of poetry The Eaters of The Living is an expose of the bestial leadership Nigeria (and indeed Africa) has been unfortunate to have. Corrupt leadership has naturally led to the institution of oppression of the people in a bid by the leaders to perpetuate their rule. This paper explores the images used by Okpanachi as he responds to this issue. The paper concludes that the satiric mode of discourse could serve as a tool for the (re) conscientisation and re-humanisation of both the leadership and the people.

Introduction:

For an African poet and his works to be relevant, he must show some commitment to prevailing political, social and economic issues of his society. (Amuta, 1989:116 and Dasylva & Jegede, 2005:140). This is one role which the poet has played throughout history. This is done with the aim of making the society a better one. It is a duty which Okpewho considers as one of the most useful a poet can perform (1985:20). The poet, who is usually on the side of the people, has adopted various techniques to criticise the leadership.

The major concern in Okpanachi's collection of poems *The Eaters of the Living* (2006: henceforth, all quotations from this edition shall be by page number only) is bad leadership in Nigeria (and this can be transposed to the African society as a whole) and its evils. This leadership is of the two types witnessed in Nigeria- military and civilian. This is evident in several of the poems. Lines such as 'Bones crushed under the menace of boots' (Silence of time:10), 'The ruts of tanks' ('Code of silence':13), 'Of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council' ('Manifesto':14), and words such as 'the general', 'guns', 'bullets', 'coups', etc which abound in some of the poems, are indicative of conditions and circumstances under military rule. References to civilian rule in the collection include 'She is the wet nurse/Of arse(m)bly men' ('Dirtied as this poem':80), 'I am not tired/Of a sacred dome' ('I am not tired':25), 'The size of the ballot/The excess of the results' ('We give you this country':11).

The leaders are presented as having desecrated the land with their '...pagan songs/Of apostasy' ('We give you this country':12) by 'raping the maid' (Nigeria). This has led to hunger and deprivation among the people 'With hunger fire/Churning in their stomachs' ('Our homestead':18). The people's situation is compounded with other forms of oppression such as '...a strangled/Voice of Liberty/stifled in freedom' ('Silence of time':10) and the leadership 'Wielding whips and swords/Unleashing pain and miseries on simple men' ('Where to stand': 21). For the people, it is a hopeless situation as they are caught 'Between the sea/and the warriors' tanks' ('Map':17) such that 'Dying was more precious' ('Silence of time':10). For this, the poet calls the leadership 'bastards (that) have spat/On our beards' ('Our homestead':18). In different ways, the poet refers to the leaders as 'cannibals'. This form of cannibalism is however more gruesome as they eat their prey 'alive' as is aptly captured in the title 'The Eaters of the Living'.

This paper examines the poet's use of satiric language, the dominant mode of discourse in the poem, and the images used to capture this piece of real life. The paper limits itself to only seven of the eight sections of the collection as these are the sections relevant to this paper.

Satire

Poets have used various techniques in their response to the socio-economic and political circumstances of their societies. One of such forms is satire which writers from ancient Greece and ancient Rome to our present century have used to comment on their societies. Okpanachi, in this collection, employs satire as the dominant mode through which he criticises the leadership of his country (Nigeria). He sees the leaders as being responsible for Nigeria's woes.

Satire is the criticism of people, institutions or the society as a whole by ridiculing them and their vices. The aim of satire is to bring about improvement (Harris, 2004:1) thus satire is an attack but not a direct attack of its object (Njogu, 2001:2). It usually employs devices of comparison to foreground the similarities or differences between the subject and object (Harris, 2004:1).

Irony is a common device of satirists. Others include exaggeration, oxymoron, innuendo, simile, metaphor, etc. Indeed many of such devices are capable of being used for satiric purposes in literary works. This is true of the collection of poems under consideration here.

Okpanachi in this collection, *The Eaters of the Living*, joins Horace, Pope, Chaucer, and Soyinka, among many others, who use satire to critique happenings in their

societies. To Okpanachi, the leadership is largely responsible for the country's problems. They are aided by the Western world and the Press. The collection chronicles the leadership's corrupt practices in a funny and witty manner. He however changes tone whenever he talks about the aftermath of this bestial leadership on the nation and its people. In other words, when Okpanachi makes reference to the leadership in the collection, the dominant mode is satire. However a seriousness of tone is evident whenever reference is made to the people and their suffering. In some, the tone suggests bitterness and anger, in others it is a tone of resignation, with some yet indicating defiance.

It is within this context of the 'duality' of tone that this paper classifies the images used by the poet in the collection and their analysis.

Images of Bestial Leadership

Irony, exaggeration, simile, metaphor, and allusion are the devices Okpanachi uses to satirize Nigeria's leadership.

'Manifesto' (:14) is a satiric representation of a coup-speech. The poem parodies the original Armed Forces Ruling Council of the General Ibrahim Babangida regime. There is irony in the use of the word 'revolutionary' as a revolution is usually a welcomed event by a long-suffering people; yet all the things promised the people by the persona are ironically horrific. For example, 'I shall give you/The precious ornaments of/Chains, handcuffs/And narrow cells'; 'Then I shall take you /To the height/To reach for the star/You shall never touch'; 'I shall bleed your head/To make you reasonable/And inject you with poisoned/Bayonet to keep you alive'; and 'I meet you at a tryst/That is an ambush'. The poem ends with an ironic invitation of the people to a feast where the people themselves will be served as food.

The satire on the promises of the government is re-emphasised in 'Lying with the Calendar' (:76). The poet refers to such promises as 'sacrificed promises' 'sketched in the dust'. The persona goes down memory lane from 1990 when the government promised that 'Everyone will fetch water/From under his bed', through 1995 when the people were told they would 'Pick electricity from ashes/And smoke of the firewood'; 1996 when the people were told that 'hunger shall be banished/From our republic'; 1997 when '... every leaf/Shall cure all diseases'; to 2000 when 'We will all sleep/In paradisiacal mansions'. 'Making of hero' (:30) sarcastically portrays how after killing a man unjustly, the leaders turn him into a hero to satisfy the people.

In ridiculing the leaders, Okpanachi compares them variously to gods, angels, and animals. Stolyarov II (2007) says one gets one of the most effective and constructive

kinds of humour by 'reducing a real-world situation, person, or idea to its absurd logical extreme, or magnifying its flaws by making obviously absurd statements'. What Okpanachi has done reminds one of the Elizabethan Great Chain of Being. (Damrosch, Dean, Keach and Levin 1995:111). This chain enabled the Elizabethan to rank every existing being or thing within a category in the chain. This Chain is topped by the Supreme Being, followed by the angels, man and then the animal and plant kingdoms. Man could choose to be either angel-like (with admirable qualities) or animal-like (depraved). Just as each group had its place in the chain, each member had its place within the group; for instance the lion was the highest ranking member of the animal kingdom, while the oyster was the lowest.

In 'The god we made' (:34), a satirical re-presentation of the Lord's Prayer, there is an allusion to the leader as a god. However, this god is a god of censorship 'And slavery. /lord of sapped/Economy and/Emaciated babies'. It is a god of oppression and lawlessness, which kills and maims the people. The poem ends with a sarcastic reference to the leader as a 'clay-footed god'.

An allusion to the omniscient and omnipresent qualities of the Supreme Being is made in 'The Eye' (:31) and 'Flee' (:40) to describe the all-embracing and authoritarian power of the leaders. In 'The Eye' even the thoughts and dreams of the people are known by the leaders. The people's inability to escape the suffering is emphasised in 'Flee' as wherever they might plan to go, the omnipresent leader is there 'arms spread/In the entrance of your/Destination.' In 'Where to stand' (:19), the poet sarcastically calls them 'blind gods/Wielding whips and swords/Unleashing pain' on the people. The first line of 'Your Excellency' (:55), i.e. 'The angel of power', is a metaphoric reference to the leader. He is satirically hailed as 'So excellent/ So good but lives and feeds/On power'. He is then called 'The weevil /And maggot... the hovering vulture/...The benefactor of minions'.

The next group on the Elizabethan Great Chain of beings is Man. In 'The concert of cannibals' (:56), the poet compares leaders with the lowest ranking member of this group, namely children – naughty, noisy children who are seen as nuisances. 'The actions of the leaders are described as noisy, power games jarring on the ears. But the persona sarcastically pleads on their behalf:

But forgive them for they are like
Children in whose presence
You cannot sleep...

The tone of the first four lines of 'My song' (:58) is that the chant of a naïve, ignorant, and boastful child in the midst of his other friends comparing toys. In this case however the toys are guns. When the leaders are portrayed as adults, the poet refers to them as mad ('Sail', :44)

Just below man on the chain is the animal kingdom. The persona in 'I am not tired' (:25) calls the leaders chameleons, ever-changing promises made to the people, and the instability of government policies. The poet compares the leader to termites and locusts in 'The eaters of the living' to depict the destructive nature of bad leadership. Although no one is specifically mentioned, the 'they' is an innuendo referring to the leaders because 'they' 'eat the skin of the poor' and 'devour the people'. In 'Your Excellency' (:59) the leaders are said to be weevils and maggots – destructive and repulsive images used to capture the deadly and obnoxious acts of the leaders. One line further in the poem, the leaders become 'The hovering vulture', an ugly animal which feeds on carrion. 'The mice king' (:60) is a satiric portrayal of the leader and his court made up of 'rats barking like a dog/...jackals croaking like a frog/... lizards/As court jesters' and soldiers who are compared to ants.

To further drive home the sub-humanity of the leaders ('We give you this country':11), there are two separate instances in the collection where the leaders are called 'cannibals'. These are in 'The concert of cannibals' (:56) and 'Dialogue'. This cannibalism is of a more horrifying type because the action is carried out on the living as contained in the title of the collection, 'The Eaters of the Living'. In the poem of the same title, the imagery of termites, locusts and cancer cells are apt as the leaders in their greed to 'eat' as much as they can, consume everything: the good (money, names, reputation), the bad (festered sores, and corpses) and the ugly (phlegm). In what he calls 'a politics of the belly', Bayart (cited in Christensen, 2005:3) says that the imagery of eating is a reflection of the use of the word 'eating' in vernacular terms to refer to the rush for the spoils of government office that characterised postcolonial Africa. Christensen adds:

In the context of postcolonial African political struggles, the language of inequality continues to revolve around the metaphors of eating and, by extension, cannibalistic consumption...Not surprisingly, accusations of cannibalism feature prominently in postcolonial Africa's "occult economies" where the elite grow ever wealthier - and more obese - as if by magical means (:3).

Thus in 'The Eaters of the Living', Okpanachi ridicules the leaders when he describes the usual state dinners as a place where the people will be eaten ('Manifesto':14). In 'Where to stand' (:19), the poet says while these state dinners, which he calls "rituals of the vultures", are going on, children are starving. As Mbembe says (quoted in Christensen, 2005:3), the metaphor of food (eating) becomes appropriate and efficient because Africa is characterised by poverty.

There are satiric references to the official residences of the Nigerian leaders in the collection. For example 'We give you this country/... from where to Rock/the nation' ('We give you this country':11) is a satiric reference to Aso Rock, Abuja, the official residence of Nigeria's leaders since 1992. The word first calls to mind the gentle rocking of a baby to calm it (to sleep), before being substituted by the image of dangerous waves trying to capsize a boat. This is achieved by the tone of defiance in the poem. Employing anthimeria, the poet through the use of capital letter 'R', satirically implies a reference to the residence of the leaders.

Elsewhere in the collection, the poet employing metonymy uses a quality of the place name, **ASO ROCK**, to depict the hardness of the heart of the leaders in persisting in corruption to the detriment of the masses. He says:

Someone lend me the mouth
To laugh, the tongue to talk
Into the sealed ears
And breathe reason, mercy
Into the heart of Rocks (:79)

Here also the capitalised 'R' indicates that he is using their official residence to refer to the leaders.

Another instance of the use of metonymy for satiric purpose is in 'The delicacies of the gods' (:67). The last stanza of this poem is an extended rhetorical question wondering among other things, 'What species of greed/Have you created in the dry rock/deaf to the weeping of the children'. Here, 'rock' refers to the residents of Aso Rock while 'dry', (an overstatement because a rock cannot be wet in the first place), is an indication of the insensitivity of the leaders.

'I am not tired/of a sacred dome/Inhabited by infidels' ('I am not tired':25) shows yet another use of metonymy. In this case, it refers to the dome of the National Assembly. A more direct satire of the 'People's Representatives' is in 'Dirtied as this poem' (:80) in the lines: She is the wet nurse/of arse(m)bly men.

Okpanachi uses allusion to poke fun at the leaders. "The god we made" (:34) as said earlier is an allusion to the Lord's Prayer. The title of the poems in Section 3 'Beliefs' is also an adaptation of a biblical prayer 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not die'. The poet changes it to 'The Lord is our executioner/We shall not live' (:37).

There are also references to earlier literary texts in the collection. These interpretations re-emphasise the satiric intent of the poet. The poet borrows the title of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* in 'The god we made' (:34) where the leader is satirically praised as 'lord of the famished/Roads'. In 'The delicacies of the gods' (:67), the leaders who are described as 'coin collectors' are compared to the miserly Silas in Elliot's *Silas Marner*. In another poem 'The path' (:57), the leaders are said to 'Wear the old skin/of Caesar' which signifies their inordinate ambition. Old age in the poem is an image of wisdom with old sandals signifying experience, all of which the poet implies the leaders of his country lack.

References to historical events meant to satirise the leaders include 'The delicacies of the gods' (:67) where rather than their prayers being answered, things get worse as 'Imelda's apostles became multitude'. Imelda Marcos as First Lady of The Philippines was reported to have had a ridiculously high number of shoes. She and her husband were eventually indicted for stealing government money by the succeeding government of that country. There is reference to the then economic policy first initiated by the Babangida regime, the Structural adjustment Programme. This is in the lines 'lord of sapped/Economy and/Emaciated babies' ('The god we made':34).

The poet employs the image of the sick patient and his doctor to satirise Nigerian military leaders who give such reasons to justify their forceful over-throw of other regimes through coups. In 'Patriots at dawn' (:66), the satiric intent is in the manner 'The doctors knock down the door/To the ward of the ailing patient'. Rather than give a cure, they are 'armed with master keys and poison'. The satire is emphasised with the pun on the word 'dawn'. Coups in Nigeria are usually announced at dawn, yet dawn is universally seen as a period of rebirth, regeneration, when things get better (see 'After the dawn':61).

'Machines die' (:51) is a satire on the transportation and environmental systems of the country. On a deeper level, the machines could be the people dying of 'strokes, punches/And potholes' brought about by bad governance. The satire is enhanced by the alliteration in the poem.

Images of the Aftermath of Bestial Leadership on the People

The satiric tone begins to wane and disappears totally in poems that discuss the consequences of corrupt leadership on the nation and the people. 'We give you this country' (:11) is a satiric gesture of defiant resignation while the strong ironic tone of 'I am not tired' (:25) shows resignation in the face of such bad leadership.

The poet uses images to depict a broken, bastardised nation. For instance in 'The mirror' (:29), the country as a broken, blood-stained mirror, 'each piece/Is peace broken' reflects the rose. This image is however not the traditional image of love. What is reflected is blood, 'Splashed across/The land'. In some of the poems, the poet is so bitter about the activities of the leaders that he presents a pathetic and tragic situation for the nation and its people. In these instances, he presents the leaders as a class destroying the people in a mad frenzy. Here he uses images of animals of prey. He compares them to leopards, lions and elephants ('Our homestead':18); he calls them vultures and scavenging dogs ('The spectators':38); foxes, chameleons, hedgehogs and porcupines ('After the dawn':61); and a pack of wolves ('The delicacies of the gods':67). Satire would therefore not be an appropriate tone to use in this circumstance where 'the song bird calls/The tune of disaster' ('Where to stand':19).

'After the dawn' is a bitter tale of the atrocities of the leaders. The nation is presented as a holy land which the chief priests (i.e. the leaders) have defiled. In other poems, the leaders are false prophets, priests and messiahs that have failed their people. Instances of these are in 'Where to stand' (:19), 'I am not tired' (:25) and 'The delicacies of the gods' (:67).

The poet sees the nation as a physically and psychologically abused woman/mother ('Dirtied as this poem':80), or as a virgin girl, raped and brutalised ('We give you this country':11 and 'Our homestead':18).

The poet in 'I am not tired' (:25) calls the nation 'the Republic of Sisyphus'. This image from the Greek mythology suggests pessimism; a never-ending ordeal, not for the leaders, but for the people. To emphasise this never-ending ordeal, Okpanachi, in the collection, introduces the second oppressor of the people – the Western World:

Let the dawn come
With broken medals
Of slavery, in the new century
Games of vampires,
Wearing the crucifix
Of the IMF and SAP ('After the dawn':61)

Thus what the people should expect is 'a Christmas/Without a messiah' for the leaders have turned themselves to 'the magus/of your (the people's) pain' ('Manifesto':14). In 'The delicacies of the gods', the West is implicated thus:

The intercessors came swiftly
In the voice of Human Rights
So what holy chip god
Listens to our invocation
With the sketch work of nuclear
Bombs tucked in his cassock
The IMF as his cross medal

This image of the cross recalls the reason given by the West for the subsequent slavery and colonialism of the African people. The poet thus uses images of predator animals for the coloniser- vultures ('Rage of age':32); sharks, crocodiles and sea brutes ('Sail':44).

To depict the effect of bad leadership on the people, Okpanachi uses images of natural disasters in some of the poems. Thus in 'Our homestead' (:18) the persona says 'Our land cracks/In the cloud of droughts' while he asks:

Where is the place
To stand
As Katrina and quakes
Jolt the ground...
I tremble
To face the floods
Drowning my heart

This is even 'As the typhoon/Of greed sweeps on' ('Hunger': 23).

Not surprisingly the poet adopts the age-long images of night, darkness, nightmares and broken dreams to depict the people's suffering, oppression, and disillusionment. Instances in the collection are in 'The god we made' (:34); 'Hangmen' (:43); 'After the dawn' (:61); and 'The delicacies of the gods' (:67).

Summary

The images used by Okpanachi in the collection together depict a hopeless situation. There is no overt suggestion as to how this can be remedied. Those who dared confront the leadership are killed as history is etched 'In the blood of/our youths/Who dare face/The sun' ('Code of silence':13). This and other types of terror

discussed in the collection, ensure that 'The code of silence/Is written across/ Our (the people's) lips' ('Code of silence':13).

This might seem as if the poet advocates silence in the face of oppression. However as can be observed in the collection, this 'silence' is the militant type, the type that is defiant in the face of hunger, suffering, oppression, and even death:

(a) Here I stand
Pronouncing death
To the thieves, the impostors
The hangmen
And the false gods ('Where to stand':19)

(b) ...Sir, send soldiers
And the police
Upon us like hounds
Here we stand! ('Hunger':23)

(c) ...I stand looking straight into their eyes
Before their sanctuary of corruption
In loud defiance ('Of deities and worshippers':41)

The poet in the acknowledgments page (:6), salutes those 'who understand the unspoken language of the mute, who believe that the mystery of silence speaks with the magic of courage'.

In addition, as said earlier, satire is the dominant tone employed by the poet in poems where he describes the leaders and their activities. On the other hand he uses a serious tone to discuss the consequences of the activities of the leaders on the people. The value of the satire is that first, this indicates that the poet sympathises and identifies with the suffering masses.

The second value is tied to the resolution of the corrupt leadership in the country. The people have been physically and psychologically traumatised by the bad leadership. This is fear resulting from suppression, terror and pain unleashed on the people by the leaders as shown in the analysis of the collection. One effect of this satire would be to present the leaders in as ridiculous a light as possible. This is with a view to making them less threatening enough, so as to be challenged by the people. Stolyarov II (2007) says:

By ridiculing false, dangerous, or inconvenient

aspects of society, humour can make them less threatening and can facilitate a quicker recognition of their flaws by the general public.

In using satire therefore, Okpanachi strives to achieve one of the satirist's purposes which is 'to correct, for the improvement of humanity' (Harris;2004:1).

The 'silence which Okpanachi advocates is ironically not the quiet type, but the very loud one. It is the 'defiant silence' which changes institutions and societies for the better. Okpanachi has thus attempted to use poetry as an instrument for 'the galvanisation of feelings and emotions in the pursuit of a collective cause' (Amuta;1989:177).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to classify the images used by the poet in the collection, *The Eaters of the Living*. The poems are largely concerned with the bad leadership plaguing the nation. The conclusion is that satire is the dominant tone used in poems that discuss the leaders while a more serious, pathetic and tragic tone is used in poems that focus on the people. With this satiric tone, the poet, using different figures of speech, compared the leaders to gods, angels, children, mad men and animals. The work also attempts a discussion of the images used to discuss the consequences of such bad leadership on the nation and the people.

It is our conclusion that the satiric tone is meant to correct the perceived ills in the society as it makes the leaders less threatening for them to be challenged. Therefore we propose that the 'silence' which the poet advocates in the collection actually means defiance as a way of redemption for the people.

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