



Africa Lost and Lost and Lost

Tanusri Dutta

II year M.A, D.O.S. in English, University of Mysore, Manasagangothri, India

tithi1987@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT-*Loss, in many ways, is related to Africa; especially Africa under colonial domination and the impact of various forms of loss is evident in various forms in the African life and culture. This paper tries to study the element of loss found in different forms in African poetry written in or translated into English focusing on some celebrated names like Gabriel Okara, David Diop and Kofi Awoonor. This paper, at its end, tries to highlight the fact that, “loss” as a theme, enriches the African poetry to a great extent though different sorts of loss affect the African life and culture in many ways.*

Keywords: Loss, Colonization, Profit, Oral Literature.

1, INTRODUCTION

Africa has lost. Loss of liberty, loss of life, loss of tradition, loss of language, and loss of hope- these losses run through the African life since the interaction with colonial power and onwards. Empty spaces created through those losses have been filled but, not with the elements of Africa's own self all the time. Cultural miscegenation through the authoritative practice of colonial power affects the African life and life style multi-dimensionally as it is noted by Moses Isegawa in his introduction to the Penguin version of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* through the following words: “Colonialism...dispossessed, dislocated and destroyed people's idea of themselves by trampling on their culture and trying to replace it with the colonizer's culture” (Isegawa2001:xii). Thus, “loss” comes as a dominant theme in African literature, especially in African poetry, and at the same time, African poetry also goes through the structural and stylistic changes that, to an extent, could be counted as loss.

Under the colonial rule, African writers sympathetic to the nationalistic movement were often censored, exiled or imprisoned. Civil war in Nigeria and Angola, anti- colonial wars beginning in Madagascar in 1947 and continuing onwards, the rise of many brutal dictatorships, the imprisonment of many of Africa's eloquent and passionate writers, political and economic repression and exploitation- all of these facts heavily influence the African poets' sense of loss and the acknowledgement of it. The introduction to *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English* selected by Adewale Maja- Pearce notes the suffering of some African writers under the colonial authority in the following words:

It is virtually impossible to function as a writer in Africa without at some stage falling foul of the authorities...Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor, Arthur Nortje and Frank Chipasula all suffered imprisonment or exile or both as a direct result of their work. Brutus and Chipasula continue to live in exile in the United States; Nortje committed suicide in a room in Oxford in 1970. He was 28 years old, five years



younger than Christopher Okigbo, the celebrated Nigerian poet, who was by a stray bullet in the opening months of the Civil War.

(Maja- Pearce 1990: xiv,xv)

But, despite experiencing so many losses, optimism is not a rarity in African poetry. African poetry experiences the losses, acknowledges them; and then steps towards rejuvenation with fresh optimism. The introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* edited by Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore observes the fact through the following way:

The effect we believe, of reading these poems can not be one of unmixed sadness or despair. There is still, in the continent and its poetry, a sense of youth, of new beginnings and untried possibilities ...The poets ...obviously feel that it is their task not only to lament tragic and often irrecoverable loss, but to identify the points of growth and renewal in their world.

(Beier and Moore 1986:19)

This paper is attempted to attend the African poetry written in or translated into English focusing on Gabriel Imomotime Okara, along with David Diop, Kofi Awoonor; and to search the elements of loss that are thematically presented in African poetry, as well as lost from African poetry due to traditional linguistic miscegenation.

2, “ I WANT TO UNLEARN...MOST OF ALL I WANT TO RELEARN

Gabriel Imomotime Okara, one of the most serious and significant African poets, writes war poems, deals with the motives of childhood, innocence, nostalgia and so forth. The sense of loss comes as a grave fact in some of his poems and he treats the issue with due seriousness. At the same time, with great poetic prowess, he puts forward some words that seem to carry the optimistic tone of overpowering these losses.

“Suddenly the Air Cracks” (Senau and Vincent 1982:51-53) is one of the finest war poems of Gabriel Okara, that depicts the destructive nature of air raids but, at the same time, celebrates the resilience of human spirit. But, the concluding three lines of the poem gravely indicate the loss of life because of such raids. Okara celebrates, no doubt, the resilience of human spirits; but he is not at all unaware about those “mangled bodies stacked in the morgue” who are out of any human spirit. Alongside celebrating the human resilience, Okara seems to be critical to an extent about the reluctance of people shown towards that “mangled bodies stacked in the morgue”, as he concludes the poem terming those dead bodies “memorials of the day”. The word “memorial” might have been deliberately chosen to convey the message that, the loss of life should not be overlooked reluctantly rather these dead bodies should be taken into account as “memorials” that remind people of the loss and instigate them to protest such recurrence.

“The Snow Flakes Sail Gently Down” (Senau and Vincent 1982:45) is one of Okara’s highly complex poems which has been written on the poet’s first experience of snow during his visit



to America. The second stanza goes on through a dream in which African images have been presented lively. The word “root” significantly refers to the original African values when the poet says “ my root” and he presents the “ up rooters” as “ tired and limp, leaning on” the poet’s roots. He also sees his roots “denting the up rooter’s spade” and he qualifies “their” roots as “abandoned”. The entire stanza upholds the African values and asserts the firmness of African root against the spade of colonial power. But the key factor of the stanza could be the first line of it where the poet says, “...I dreamed a dream.”Presenting the stanza through a dream makes the door open for multi- angular interpretations. Dream can be of two kinds; one is the dream of upcoming desires that carries the tone of hope and optimism and the other is the dream of nostalgic past that comes out of despair. This second kind of dream has been dreamed as a healing ointment on the injured past and people dream it, as it is the truth through they themselves know the reality.

Okara dreams the entire second stanza. It could be his optimism for future. But in that case, it would not be necessary to depict his wish through a dream in literal meaning. Thus, the other interpretation comes forward. The dream could be such a one that comes out of great despair. The dreamer possibly knows that, it is not true. Actually, the up rooter’s spade might have been successful in its attempt; the native “root” of the poet might have been uprooted itself. But, as everything possible in dream, the poet might have turned the vector upside down towards his favor and dreams the situation as he would like it to be. The loss of own value and culture might have forced the poet’s inward psyche to go through such a dream. So, the dream stanza could be evaluated both ways; as an acknowledgement of loss and an attempt to heal the consequent pain through a poetic-visionary treatment, and also as an optimistic wish to fulfill in the coming days.

Another poem by Gabriel Okara has been titled after “Once Upon a Time” (Narasimhaiah 2004: 129-131) that carries the sense of cultural loss all through. The authenticity and purity of African culture have been overpowered by the artificial formality of so called Western civilization. The poet acknowledges the loss and expresses his dissatisfaction. He then, earnestly desires to bring back that native African authenticity as he urges the coming generation through the following words:

But believe me, son

I want to be what I used to be

when I was like you, I want

to unlearn all these muting things.

Most of all, I want to relearn...

...show me how

I used to laugh and smile once upon a time, when I was like you.



(Narasimhaiah 2004:130,131)

The choice of words here is very significant as the poet uses words like “unlearn” and “relearn” which may convey the connotation of deliberate and intellectual attempt to overthrow the imposed artificiality and practice that native authenticity.

In one of his recent interviews, Gabriel Okara says that his poem- “The Mystic Drum” (Narasimhaiah 2004: 132,133) is a love poem, and the mysterious “she” is his beloved. But, the way of construction and the ending of the poem might have been interpreted in a different way. The poem is full of African traditional images like rhythmic drum beating, dance, song, etc. But, being failed to grab the desired attention and recognition, the speaker decides to pack his drum and turn away and “never to beat so loud any more”. Had he got the deserved attention, he would not have turned away and would not have stopped beating his drum, dancing or singing. From this viewing angle, it might have been interpreted that, if, likewise, African culture and tradition had got the proper attention and treatment from the outer world or colonizer’s civilized sense, these culture and tradition would have flourished instead of being dimmed day by day. The sense of cultural loss might have been found there in the poem that might have been motivated the poet’s inward psyche to depict such a poem. This poem ends with a pessimistic note but same sort of occurrence is depicted in the poem, “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” (Narasimhaiah 2004: 125,126). Cultural conflict is also there and lack of recognition too. But, this poem ends in optimistic tone unlike “The Mystic Drum”. Thus, the sense of loss is overshadowed by firm assertion of optimism. The sense of loss can also be found in some lines of the poem “The Fisherman’s Invocation” by Gabriel Okara as the poet says,

And we learn to dance to half familiar half strange songs

We learn to dance to half familiar half strange

Rhythms...(Senau and Vincent 1982:48).

The poem has been written on the celebration of a child’s birth. The celebration outwardly looks like the typical African trend but the aforementioned lines express the sense of cultural miscegenation. The rhythms and songs become “half familiar half strange” in which the native authenticity has lost its dominant authority. The loss of this sort of native cultural trend is acknowledged by the poet through the expression- “half familiar half strange”.

3, DAVID DIOP- “SPLENDIDLY ALONE”

David Diop belongs very much to the protest period of African writing. The theme of loss has been found there in Diop’s writing. Diop is very explicit about the loss and firmly critical as well about the responsible force behind the loss. And, more importantly, he is highly optimistic about regaining all that have been lost. David Diop depicts the sufferings under colonial power and so called civilization through firmly explicit words and with the tone of strong disgust in his poem “The Vultures” (Senau and Vincent 1982:70, 71). The loss of



pride, of hope, of labor, of culture, of religious belief and so forth under the colonial authority and civilization is recognized in the poem. The words like “kicked”, “slapped”, “vulture”, “talons”, “blood stained”, “painful”, “bitter”, “extorted”, “broken”, “desolate”, “torn” are combined to create sense of strong disapproval and hatred. But, the poem ends with a firm optimistic assertion as the poet says, “Spring will be reborn under out bright steps” (Senau and Vincent 1982:70, 71). The same sort of expression can be found in a short poem by David Diop translated from French into English and titled after “Defiance against Force”. The poem says;

You, bowing, you, crying
You, dying, like that, one day without knowing why.
You, struggling, you watching over another’s rest
You, looking no longer with laughter in your eyes
You, my brother, your face full of fear and suffering
Stand up and shout NO!

(Reed and Wake 1967: 28)

Depiction of heavy loss, of life, of power, of peace and happiness and so forth is very evident here but the last line, like of “The Vultures”, and confirms the protesting spirit in Diop and the capitalization of the last word “no” reinforces the statement even further.

4, SENSELESS ‘CATHEDRAL’

Kofi Awoonor’s short poem “The Cathedral” (Senau and Vincent 1982:144) is another very significant one containing the theme of loss. The “tree” symbolizes the natural, peaceful, heavenly, African spirit which has been uprooted and replaced by “A huge senseless cathedral” (Senau and Vincent 1982:144).The cathedral symbolizes foreign religion and the adjective “senseless” indicates the hollowness of the foreign religion in front of African eyes. But, the peaceful spirit of Africa has lost its place to that “senseless” religion and it is not only loss of belief, rather this loss is also accompanied by other sorts of loss too like loss of place or land, of unity, of culture, of peace and so forth.In fact loss is a dominant theme in African poetry but it is not the African poetry all about. This very fact is noted in the introduction to *Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* where:

Costa Andrade’s “Fourth Poem of a Canto of Accusation” refers to the ...pitiful loses..., the 50,000 slain indiscriminately after the attack on the Launda prisons in February, 1961. Angola’s revolutionary anger is matched by that of the new Black South African Poetry, running from Mazisi Kunene’s “Thought on June 26” through Mtshali, Sepamla and Wally Serote. Its grief is echoed from San Tome and Mozambique; anticipated in the powerful anti- colonial poetry of David Diop...; given an ironical twist in Okot P’Bitek’s “Song of Prisoner” or...in the Congolese



poets Tati-Loutard and U Tam'si...But Africa does not wish to appear always and only as the victim of its own tragedy.

(Beier and Moore 1986:20)

5, CONCLUSION- 'AFRICA LOST AND LOST AND LOST'

The sense of loss can be also associated with African poetry by its structure and language. African poets have chosen to write in English or French sometimes because they feel that what they have to say can be better expressed in a language which has been developed for literary purposes for many hundred years; sometimes because they are anxious for poetic frame wider than the frontiers of their country. "The language implanted by colonialism continue to carry, for better or worse, a great part of Africa's creative expression"(Beier and Moore 1986:22).Thus, some native African languages like Yoruba, Serer, Xhosa, Malagasy, Ijwa and so forth have been remoted from literature to a great extent. Then, searching for a poetic style which is both African and contemporary, some of the very native expressions might have been lost its true appeal. Because of the dominance and practice of written literature, orality loses its appeal and existence day by day.

As much the Africans lose, as much deep and grave their sorrow and sufferings become; that much these are reflected in their poetry, that much seriously they treat the loss. Through the process, their poetry becomes rich, affluent and grave. Their poetry becomes touchier, more passionate, more committed, fiercer and more assertive. On the other hand, through writing poetry in English, though some of the nativities have been lost, the more attention has been gained. African poetry becomes more global, more familiar, more popular and more celebrated. Thus, the ultimate outcome produced by "loss" can be logically measured as "profit"! The African "moon" is dancing to the gentle night wind and it is "peace unsoiled by the murk and dirt". Through the "loss", African poetry is now "sparkling with ever new joys" as it (Senau and Vincent 1982: 67) "bit by bit acquire(s) the bitter taste of liberty"!

REFERENCES

- [1]. Beier, Ulli and Gerald Moore, eds. Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*. 3rd ed. Middlesex: Penguin, 1986.Print.
- [2].Isegawa, Moses. Introduction to *Petals of Blood*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.Print.
- [3].Maja-Pearce, Adewale,ed. Introduction to *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.Print.
- [4]. Narasimhaiah, C D, ed. *An Anthropology of Commonwealth Poetry*. India: Macmillan,



2004.Print.

[5]. Reed,John and Clive Wake,eds. *A Book of African Verse*. London: Heinemann, 1967.

[6]. Senau, Kojo and Theo Vincent, eds. *A Selection of African Poetry*. Essex: Longman,
1982. Print.