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Dedicated Verses and (Social) Interventions in the Poetry of John Pepper Clark

Kayode Niyi Afolayan 

University of Ilorin, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: Kayode Niyi Afolayan, Email: kay4layan@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Despite his transition in 2020, the ranking of contemporary poets in Nigeria today will reveal John Pepper Clark as the most prolific poet. This pedigree notwithstanding, his numerous compositions have received token attention compared to his contemporaries, such as Wole Soyinka, and other Nigerian poets of other generations. Among others, one critical reason that has been adduced for Clark's less visibility is the eclectic nature of his poetry. This paper, in taking a closer look at some selected verses in the poetry volumes of Clark, navigates the social impulses in his poetry by isolating some of his "dedicated verses." In validating the importance and centrality of "dedicated verses" to the poet, the paper delineated typologies and forms of his "dedicated verses" and outlined their relationship with the critical social issues in the postcolonial spaces he mirrored. The conclusion of the paper affirms the heterogonous credentials of Clark's poetry, and argues that by paying attention to the "dedicated verses," critics can have access, not only to the musings and inspirations which predicate his interventions on the conditions of dystopia but also get exposed to the poet's commitment to the eradication of identified social ills and healing of those fractures that have ruptured his postcolonial space.

Keywords: Dedicated verses, social interventions, postcolonial space, dystopia

Introduction

In his overview of the evolutionary trends in modern Nigerian poetry, in "Second Generation Nigerian Poetry: Activist Writing in Popular Idioms," Oyeniyi Okunoye makes the following identifications:

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. (394)

Within these categorisations, however, studies of poets in the first generations have drawn distinctions between Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark. For instance, Biodun Jeyifo's evaluation of the three poets, in *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Post Colonialism* (2004) testifies that although Okigbo "produced small but very distinguished body of work exclusively in poetry; Clark wrote some plays and produced a work of monumental scholarly research, but achieved fame as a poet" (5). Indeed, at his death on 13th October, 2020, Clark had produced nothing less than eleven (11) book volumes of poetry making him, arguably, the most prolific among his peers and one of the most reputable poets in modern Nigeria poetry.

Despite this intimidating record, the critical attention that Clark's poetry has received is not as robust as those of his contemporaries. But in recent times, scholars have attempted to address the dearth of critical interventions on Clark's poetry. For instance in *Connecting the Local and the Global Across Literary Genres: Emerging Perspectives on J.P. Clark and His Works* (2022), [a] "publication and presentation of [Clark's] collection [s] designed to mark the second anniversary of the poet's transition into the ancestral realm" (ix), the editors noted while explaining the rationale behind the conference that gave birth to the essays in the book:

The aim of the conference was to draw global and national attention to the rich and diverse artistic compositions and critical writings of J.P. Clark as well as investigate the corpus in terms of how Clark deployed local frameworks and motifs to speak to, and about the universal issues of times... Although a renowned writer both locally and internationally...Clark's works have not received the critical attention they deserve. (ix)

As it turned out, Clark's poetry took a backseat because, of the fifteen articles compiled from papers presented at the conference. Only three titles: "John Pepper Clark's *Casualties* and the Nigerian Experience: A Spatio-Temporal Perspective," "A Pragmatic Assessment of Polarity and Modality in J. P. Clark's *Streamside Exchange*" and "An Eco-linguistic Reading of J.P. Clark's *Night Rain* and *Home from Hiroshima*" by Isaiah Ayinuola Fortress and Lily Chimuaya, Obinna Iroegbu and Destiny Idegbekwe respectively, focus on the poetry of Clark. While the titles of Obinna Iroegbu and Destiny Idegbekwe are concerned with linguistic studies only the title by Isaiah Ayinuola Fortress and Lily Chimuaya is concerned with literary engagement. Furthermore, the protean linguistic and literary engagements with Clark's poetry in the book lack rigor and fresh insight; readers are taken round the well-known circus of Clark's old poems leaving out verses from his latest verses in *Still Full Tide* (2013) and *Remains of a Tide* (2018).

Inquiries into why Clark's poetry have not received commensurate attention have been the concern of some critics. Femi Osofisan, for instance, harps the detachment from politics and the many tributaries as basis for the insignificant attention given to the poetry of Clark. In *J.P. Clark: A Voyage* (2011), he asserts,

Unlike Wole Soyinka, Odia Ofeimun, or Niyi Osundare, JP is one of the writers who prefer to speak through their works rather than through interviews or public speeches. He restricts by instincts from the public eye, shunning the publicity that most artists cultivate...[his] new works show the poet from a new angle, even though intimations of this fresh direction can be found in some of the previous works...there is a deeper immersion of the poet in the landscape and history of his people and of his birthplace. (14-15)

If Clark has received commendations above his contemporaries on the score of his poetry output, his tropes and its heterogeneity have been major areas of contention amongst his critics. While affirming ambivalence as texture of his poetry, the poet, in “A Pledge,” one of the poems in *Once Again A Child* (2004), outlines: “I will make a poem/ Of every matter of interest I can/ Salvage from the stream of my life/” (*SFT*, 251). Elimimian, Isaac Irabor engages this issue of eclecticism (or heterogeneity) in Clark’s poetry but also lashes out at some unnamed critics:

...critics have not argued that Clark mars his verse by marrying extraneous cultural reflections which bear no relationship with one another, the argument has been advanced that, unlike his contemporaries, Clark has either been too imitative of foreign influences, or ... he has not shown sufficient concern for the tradition and culture of his African background ... These negative criticisms arise from critics’ failure or unwillingness to appreciate the variety of cultural imagery which impact on Clark’s verse ... the traditional or indigenous, the foreign and the heterogeneous... (28)

Fred Akporobaro also made a similar submission to the effect that: “J.P. Clark shows ... a powerful imagination in the transformation of local and national experience into an original and inspiring artistic vision and language in which local imagery, cultural, political and nationalistic concerns are blended together” (406). The same trace is seen in Lewis Nkosi, while agreeing with Elimimian and Akporobaro on the fluxes of imageries in Clark’s poetry, he criticizes the poet for giving lean attention to public life in his verses:

John Pepper Clark...is less ambitious in his programme than either Soyinka or ...Okigbo... [he] employs to good effect imagery strongly evocative of the Delta region of the Niger, imagery depicting the tropical swamps, heavy rainfall, special vignettes of village life. His rhythm can be monotonous, keeping to an unvaried pattern ... [However, he]... is a poet with very little capacity for sustained intellectual thought ... (161-62)

After the submission that Clark has deployed diverse forms of imageries in his verses, Nkosi’s conclusion cannot hinge on a suggestion that presents the poet as bereft of “intellectual thought” as shown in the many verses composed by the poet. This perhaps justifies why Nwachukwu-Agbada disagrees with Nkosi by exhibiting the strengths in Clark’s eclecticism. In “A personal voyage around Canon J. P. Clark”, he explains,

The trouble with becoming canonical as opposed to being merely a candidate for the canon is that one does not get to retire or rest. Value and weight come to be measured against what one has done and everything one has ever created becomes the subject of continuous scrutiny. The canonical playwright or poet is continuously prodded and poked to see what gives and what doesn’t. In the case of J.P Clark, whose most memorable contributions in poetry happen to be in the lyric form of the craft, some measure of stress must necessarily have attended the constant attention the works receive. (Nwachukwu-Agbada)

By paying “constant attention”, the burden shifts to the critic who must attempt to harmonize the diverse tentacles in Clark’s poetry. This, Nwachukwu- Agbada furthers, is achievable by observing “how [Clark’s] status in [his] canon has shaped culture and the poetic progeny coming after him... Another way is to read the man [Clark] himself on poetics and aesthetics in his significant essay, *The Example of Shakespeare*” (Nwachukwu-Agbada).

Clark’s poetry works have been condensed into two books- *Still Full Tide* (2013) and *Remains of A Tide* (2018). Whereas *Remains of A Tide* (*ROAT*) brings together his compositions between 2014 to 2017, *Still Full Tide* (*SFT*) is a collation of the following

book of poems: *Selections From Poems* (1962), *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) and *Casualties* (1970), these had earlier appeared as a single book titled *A Decade of Tongues* (1981). Apart from these, we also have *State of the Union* (1985), *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988), *A Lot From Paradise* (1999), *Afterword* (2002), *Once Again A Child* (2004), *Of Sleep and Old Age* (2003), *Overflow* (2008) and *Cruising Home* (2011). Therefore, this paper, in looking at Clark's "dedicated verses," argues that by isolating some recurrent themes and typologies which run through Clark's corpus, proper articulation can be given to the dominant aesthetics and issues that have inspired his robust poetry writing career.

Space, Dystopia and the Postcolonial theory

Most critics who have attempted a theorization of African (Nigerian) modern poetry agree on the complexity of the endeavor. For instance, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, in their engagements with the poetry of the first generation in modern Nigeria poetry, in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980), demanded for an approach that would sequester modern Nigerian poetry from what Nkosi, in his work already cited, calls "European linguistic elements" (127). Similarly, Chidi Amuta, in his search for "a literary criticism that [is] predicated on a theoretical outlook that couples cultural theory back to social practice" (7), advocates for a dialectical approach premised on Marxian ideology. However, in "Inside and Outside the Whale: 'Bandung', 'Rwanda', and Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies," Biodun Jeyifo presents the postcolonial theory as most applicable in any engagement with the politics and social traumas in ex-colonies, but he also admits to its pitfalls by saying:

...colonial and postcolonial studies meant, unambiguously, the study of literary and cultural traditions of the formerly colonized nations and societies of the developing world... But that was postcolonial studies before what could be described as its decisive 'pact' with postmodernist High Theory. If the focus of postcolonial studies did not exactly shift from the Third World after this pact, it certainly became bispecular (some would say cross-eyed), its critical gaze simultaneously turned toward Western poststructuralists and postmodernist intellectual currents and the writers and writings of the developing world. Indeed, nothing marks the bi-specularity more than the fact that the three most visible postcolonial theorists, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, are as much 'Europeanists' as they are 'Third Worldists'... [because] they came into high, global visibility not on the basis of works on Third World writers, but on account of powerful engagements of Western poststructuralist figures, principally Michel Foucault (Said), Jacques Derrida (Spivak) and Jacques Lacan (Bhabha). (5-6)

In looking at the dedicated verses of Clark with the postcolonial theory as tool, we are exposed to varied cosmopolitan experiences of the poet's nation which happens to be an ex colony. However, the encounters have limitless scope, permissible under this theory as the issues are linked with experiences of other lands and those that predate contact.

Interpretations of Clark's Poetry

Typologies of Dedicated Verses in Clark's Poetry

Clark composed nothing less than three hundred and eighty (389) poems which are distributed as follows: In *Selections from Poems* (1962) and *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) there are thirty five poems. *Casualties* (1970) and *State of the Union* (1985) have

forty poems each while *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988) and *A Lot From Paradise* (1999) contain twenty five and twenty- six poems, respectively. *Afterword* (2002) has just three poems but *Once Again A Child* (2004), *Of Sleep and Old Age* (2003), *Overflow* (2008), *Cruising Home* (2011) and *Remains of a Tide* have forty- four, fifty- eight, twenty- six, twenty- six, forty-seven and forty-five verses, respectively. It is worthy of note that a disaggregation of the pieces shows that more than half of Clark's compositions are dedicated verses with *Still Full Tide* and *Remains of a Tide* having not less than One Hundred and twenty seven and twenty six dedicated titles respectively.

The dedicated verses by Clark are not only easily identifiable in those title indexes that highlight locations, they are overtly encrypted in the names, pseudonyms or acronyms of persons etched in the titles or as subscript under the titles. Clark's dedications touch on variety of subjects such as seasons or weather conditions in "Night rain" (*SFT*, 7- 8), "New Year" (*SFT*, 17), "Easter" (*SFT*, 23), "Easter 1976" (*SFT*, 118- 120), "The draught" (*SFT*, 358), "New Year" (*SFT*, 395) and "Devotion" (*ROAT*, 51). There are also dedications anchored on physical or spiritual spaces sometimes, names of deities or cities get mentioned in instances such as, "The Imprisonment of Obatala" (*SFT*, 6), "Olokun" (*SFT*, 12), "The water maid" (*SFT*, 16), "Ibadan" (*SFT*, 21), "Cuba Confrontation" (*SFT*, 46), "Bombay" (*SFT*, 109), "Victoria Island" (*SFT*, 121), "A Season at Yale" (*SFT*, 231), "A song of New England" (*SFT*, 234), "A Song of Harlem" (*SFT*, 235), "Songs for a city" (*SFT*, 367), "Lagos city" (*SFT*, 409) and "Aleppo" (*ROAT*, 53). His dedications are also concerned with animals and insects in examples that include: "Fulani cattle" (*SFT*, 5), "A shark's plea" (*SFT*, 473), "The spider" (*SFT*, 475) and "The chameleon" (*SFT*, 376).

However, the poet's recurring affinity with space is mostly entrenched in his "Kiagbodo" or "Ogobiri" poems. These poems, which move in the space of time, have manifested in at least two forms. The first aspect, which are reminiscences of his childhood are his "Granny Poems" (his poems dedicated to his elder siblings, his immediate or maternal parents) such as "My grandmother Konono" (*SFT*, 252- 5), "My grandmother Mojiriemu" (*SFT*, 256- 57), "My father in his thirties" (*SFT*, 258- 63), "Whenever my father fell ill" (*SFT*, 264- 5), "Granny home from market" (*SFT*, 269), "My sister and her fish" (*SFT*, 301- 2), "A note on granny Nene" (*SFT*, 307- 9) and "A room their own" (*SFT*, 384). Clark uses these poems to reminiscence on childhood indoctrinations and to show his fidelity to his ancestral origin and its worldview. Few of the poems in this category also historicize personal and collective experiences. For instance, "The meeting that first time" (*SFT*, 413- 417) where the poet introspects on the inception of contact with the western world. "Going to Ogobiri" (*ROAT*, 11-15), which he dedicated to Abiola Irele, his friend of the same Ijaw extraction, mythologizes the birth of the Ijaw nation and reminiscences on the collective nasty experience of slavery in relation to the squalor in the present Niger Delta space.

Indeed, the poet's dedicated lines attract readers to the respective personalities. But more than this, Clark's ingenuity, in using those lines as lenses that reflect his private life and the traumas of his postcolonial space, approves him as a cerebral poet and justifies his canonized status in the hall of accomplished international poets.

Clark's "Family Poems"

The pervading influences of Clark's private life in his verses show him as a family conscious poet. We begin with the prefaces in *Still Full Tide* and *Remains of A Tide* which have respective dedications that read: "For/ Egun my wife/ for decades of endurance and love (*SFT*, v) and "For/ My wife/ to the end". (*ROAT*, 5). Whether home or abroad, the poet always finds opportunity to express his fidelity and commitment to

his nuclear family as seen in “Letter from Kampala”, (*SFT*, 104), for instance. Sometimes, he uses auspicious moments, such as wedding anniversaries in “Anniversary 2012” (*ROAT*, 37) and “Devotion” (poems dedicated to his wife on their forty-eight and fifty- second wedding anniversaries, respectively) to valorize worthy virtues of spirituality and forbearance displayed by his wife. The poet is not oblivious of the threats that external influence pose on this valued relationship that is why, in “A man instructs his driver”, he admonishes talebearers, especially his domestic staff,

All you see in a day
Do not tell anyone,
Most of all, Madam,
Or you will find yourself
Right back in the street. (*SFT*, 359)

Clark was an Ijaw man married to an Ijebu woman from south west, Nigeria. At many instances he uses his inter-cultural marriage to objectify the possibility of unity among ethnicities in Nigeria. A typical example is in “Union song Nigeria”, where he reveals that his marriage remains “In fierce embrace/ By ...chance of grace” (*SFT*, 482), despite facing turbulent times. He furthers on this in “The Excuse,” a poem written “for The Okimba Players.” Clark uses the crisis in the marriage of a sister to his wife to explicate the tendency of frictions and to articulate the sacredness of mutual love and respect as antidote to crises in any union:

As my wife, a woman men see, and sigh
Being beyond reach, while their wives
Brim over with bile? In sum, then given
Her good sense in all things, at all times,
A gift so rare with the beautiful, I say... (*ROAT*, 40)

Still on his private life, the poet shares his moments of loneliness with his children in poems such as “The pilot” (*SFT*, 483), “Of faith” (*SFT*, 484) and “A note to my son abroad” (*SFT*, 397- 8). His down-to-earth conversations with his children in these verses at times reflect his disillusionment about life as an ageing poet, the preservation of his cherished art materials and the despoliation of his homeland by expatriate oil explorers.

Another very captivating engagement of Clark with his children is revealed in “A memo to my daughter” (*SFT*, 420-3) where the poet, by resisting proselytisation, reiterates his aversion to his daughter’s Judeo Christian perception as he philosophises about heaven and hell. As his moment of transition approached in “My last testament”, the last poem in *Of Sleep and Old Age*, Clark spells out his will that is averse to burial rites by imported religions. His instruction reads:

This is to my family:
Do not take me to a mortuary,
Do not take me to a church,
Whether I die in or out of town,
But take me home to my own, and
To lines and tunes, tested on the waves
Of time, let me lie in my place
On the Kiagbodo River.

If Moslems do it in a day
You certainly can do it in three,
Avoiding blood and waste;
And whatever you do after,
My three daughters and my son

By the only wife I have,
Do not fight over anything
I may be pleased to leave behind. (*SFT*, 385)

Further on this, he also requests for a private burial in “Naked truth” (*SFT*, 392) to complete the cycle of an unalloyed commitment to family life. On the whole, the connection between his family experiences and the Nigeria situation is a veiled statement that recommends a replication of those virtues, which sustained his marriage relationship, as panacea to the diverse predicaments that have befallen his nation.

Personal and Collective Impulses in Clark’s Poetry

Clark’s verses dedicated to his friends vacillate between his personal life and the experiences of his nation. His dedications, which relay the personal experiences of his friends, are seen in his “hospital poems” such as “A friend refusing surgery” (*SFT*, 349), “A week by a bedside” (In memory of Andy Akporugo) (*SFT*, 374- 6), “Excess baggage” (for Claudie) (*SFT*, 382) and “Three Tall Tales + One” (for Ayo Banjo & Dan Izevbaye), the last section in *Remains of A Tide* which contains “A “Medical Report” (*ROAT*, 67) and “A Passage” (for Kate Effiom...) (*ROAT*, 70). The examples of “his memorials” or “death poems” are in “Waiting for dead” (in memory of Abdul Aziz Atta) (*SFT*, 177), “Washing the dead” (for Sanmi Olakanpo) (*SFT*, 178), “Dressing the dead” (for Sonny Omabegho) (*SFT*, 179), “Seeing off the Dead” (for Remi Okediji) (*SFT*, 180), “In memory of Michael Cooke” (killed in a car crash outside Yale on his 56th birthday) (*SFT*, 232), and “Empty Days” (for E.J. latest on the list) (*ROAT*, 60). Largely, the poet uses his “hospital poems” to empathise about conditions of ill health, to philosophize or moralise about death, life and its ephemerality. His poems written in memorial or about the death of his friends and acquaintances retain these attributes but, while he uses those verses to rekindle the memories of friendship and their epitomising sterling achievements, the emphasis is more on the temporality of life and fatality of death.

Clark’s spotlighting of his prominent countrymen coincides with his interventions on the social issues of his nation. Notably, the historical incidence of the Nigerian civil war, which polarized Clark and his friends, provide one instance. What foregrounds those dedications is the fact that, his friends who took active role in that war by fighting on the side of “rebels”, criticised his “passiveness”. He was seen, using the words of Elimimian, as “an escapist [who shied] away from compelling moments and situations...that he showed less empathy and dynamism in the nation’s affairs” (58). Elimimian would later justify the decision by Clark not to actively get involved in that war by submitting that “Clark is in no way cowardly by any stretch of the imagination. He believes that the power of language – indeed poetry- can be far more effective than the open and hostile confrontation that the rifle or the sword knows. He also thinks that the artist has a calling which distinguishes him from other professionals” (59). In retrospect, the poet himself narrates what transpired between him and his friends in an interview with Amma Ogan:

...my friends, fellow artists, academics who went away to the East in great grief expected me to come with them and not going with them they felt betrayed... I was suspected...by the security people and I had to explain what I knew about the 1966 coup... [I] was accused of laughing at my friends who are dead [whereas] I was crying about the bodies that have been torn apart. (3)

This much is not only confirmed by Biodun Jeyifo in his posthumous tribute to Clark, “Days of Grace: For J.P. Clark, Balogun Otolurin of African Literature”, but we also see the implication that Clark’s (in) action had on his relationship with critics and junior artists which included Jeyifo himself:

We never denied his importance for us but neither were we eager to acknowledge it, let alone celebrate it... J. P. had been very distant, very aloof to us, and indeed to members of his own generation as well.... we in turn kept our social and intellectual distance from him.

As a matter of fact, in certain respects, the matter went beyond distance and aloofness to the dangerous waters of both declared and undeclared literary warfare. For instance, many poems by J.P., especially in the collection *Casualties*, were thinly veiled in their attacks on easily identifiable fellow writers and literary intellectuals. And famously, J.P. got a dose of this medicine in Ochia Ofeimun's "The Poet Lied". [But it was] Osofisan who would eventually write the definitive and authoritative biography of J.P. that led to the reconciliation between J.P. and W.S., both of whom formed the axis around which all others positioned themselves in this "war." (Jeyifo)

However, beyond Ochia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1989) and others disappointed by his 'inactivity' in that war. Clark's lines, in "The Casualties" (to Chinua Achebe), "Epilogue to Casualties" (to Michael Echeruo), "The playwright and the colonels" (to Wole Soyinka), and "The sovereign (for Michael Echeruo) expose the grim consequences of the war as justification for the poet's ideological stance. For the poet, the monumental losses, of lives and properties, justify the needlessness of that war. In "The Casualties," he says:

All casualties of the war,
Because we cannot hear each other speak,
Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd,
Because whether we know or
Do not know the extent of wrong on all sides,
We are characters now other than before
The war began, the stay-at-home unsettled
By taxes and rumours, the looters for office
And wares, fearful every day the owners may return,
We are all casualties.
All sagging as are
The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor,
The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war (*SFT*, 92)

Indeed, the dirgeful tone in these lines amplify the collective losses, but he furthers by lamenting a personal loss in Christopher Okigbo, his bosom friend that died in that war. We find the following relevant lines in "Friends":

The friends
That we have lost,
May be carried
Deep in our hearts,
But shallow is the burden
When placed beside
The loss to kin
Though we share with the dead
Club nor cult,
Our loss, large as the fellowship
We kept,
Is by that number
Relieved of the load
Which is square upon love. (*SFT*, 87)

While the poet identifies the failure of tolerance and love as catalysts of the war, “Epilogue to Casualties” (*SFT*, 95-6) cries over the relics of that war which still dot the spaces of conflict four years after the horrendous incident. But in “The playwright and the colonels”, the poet puts forward his belief in the power and potency of the pen in the art of mediation when, alluding to Wole Soyinka’s incarceration on account of his relationship with the “secessionists”, he says:

...The rest
Is history. Except the playwright,
When picked up like a rabbit on the road
In daytime, enroute to principals,
All set to proclaim another kingdom,
Swore between tears in the toilet:
 A triumphant ride
 Is coming in my wake
 Will raise again the race,
 And though my friend
 Refuses me gun by his side,
 With my pen I shall take
 Such a grape-shot, in the end
 All who read my tale,
 And who do not know how lucky
 I am to get away
 With holding charge,
 Will forget in our war
 Much more than *The man died* (*SFT*, 145- 6).

Unarguably, the civil war was a threat to the continued existence of Clark’s nation. The hope of the nation remaining together appears dim and impracticable in “The Sovereign” because, in his words, the union is the brainchild of “The foreign adventurer who forged...:/An amalgamation, / [of] Four hundred and twenty three disparate/ Elements/” (*SFT*, 142), together.

After the umbrage that greeted Clark’s civil war interventions subsided, the poet became less outspoken about issues of national concerns. However, the acme of his “silent” engagements continue to be visible in other dedicated lines such as “The Demolition of JK Randle Hall, Onikan” (Bulldozed by the Lagos State Government on Saturday, 24th September, 2016) (*ROAT*, 29), “Victoria Island” (*SFT*, 121), “Victoria Island re-visited” (*SFT*, 138), “Songs for a city” (*SFT*, 367), “Lagos song” (*SFT*, 409), “The sacking of Maroko” (*SFT*, 240-41), “Epitaph for Boro” (*SFT*, 136), “The Message from Boro” (for Sam Amuka) (*ROAT*, 56), “Niger Delta Burning” (*SFT*, 345), “The Niger Delta” (*SFT*, 412), “The Niger at Onitsha” (for Miriam Ikejiani- Clark) (*SFT*, 481), and “Triage” (for Alao Aka- Bashorun) (*ROAT*, 59) and “Witness of Truth” (for Itse Sagay) (*ROAT*, 32).

In “The Demolition of JK Randle Hall, Onikan” (Bulldozed by the Lagos State Government on Saturday, 24th September, 2016), the poet shows his disdain and distrust for the ruling elite in his country. However, his other poems about Lagos such as “Victoria Island”, “Victoria Island re-visited”, “Songs for a city”, “Lagos song” and “The sacking of Maroko” lampoon the crises of cosmopolitanism and the paradoxes of filth and beauty, wealth and poverty, hope and melancholy, serenity and squalor. So, Lagos, a city where “From all across a country/ Always in wrong hands,/ The young and hungry pour in daily/ To pass out in her arms”/ (*SFT*, 409), becomes emblematic for the social dislocations in the entire nation. The juxtaposition of Victoria Island and Maroko,

on the one hand, crystalizes class prejudices, corruption, prodigality and crass dishonesty of leaders while, on the other hand, it satirises the annihilation of the poor, crass insensitivity and irresponsibility of political office holders. The situation appears better projected in “The sacking of Maroko” where government had flattened a community inhabited by poor citizens and rendered them homeless. The resonance of “Col. Raji Rasaki, / Man of action defying all laws, / Has done in seven days clear/ What God and war did not in many a year”/ (*SFT*, 240), , in other varied patterns, is the refrain deployed to lampoon the quotidian abuse of power and the anemia of visionary leadership in his country.

Another space in the nation that gained attention, in Clark’s dedications, is the Niger Delta region. He returns to the nemesis of poor leadership in the waste that has prostrated potential and economic wealth in “The Niger at Onitsha” (for Miriam Ikejiani-Clark). But he anchors his mediation on the ecological crises triggered by oil exploration activities in “Niger Delta Burning” in which we have these lines:

The once evergreen trees,
Now standing sear in the swamps,
Lift up their heads to the skies;
They are filled with gas clouds and flares,
Likely burning on forever,
And all the flotsam oil on the rivers
Brings homes on the banks is fresh blight. (*SFT*, 345)

The sad reality is that oil spillage and gas flaring in that area have since taken a negative toll on the citizens. In “The Niger Delta”, the poet says, “These waters for so long.../ [have] Become a thing of some aura / [and has led]... to ...sorrow”/ (*SFT*, 412).

Consequently, we have the “resurrection” of Isaac Adaka Boro. “Boro”, as he was nicknamed, who was killed in the civil war, was a foremost rights activist. He had canvassed for the secession of the Niger Delta region from Nigeria before the Nigerian civil war. It is understandable, therefore, that in “Epitaph for Boro” and “The Message from Boro” (for Sam Amuka), Clark links the crisis of crude infrastructure with the affairs of the nation. The poet regrets how the blessing of oil, which ought to nourish the potential of his nation, has become a curse, in these lines from “Epitaph for Boro”:

Boom of oil
Has replaced
The boom of guns,
And politicians like
Soldiers go after spoils.
With wells run dry,
Before guns boom again? (*SFT*, 136)

The sandwiching of “politicians” and “soldiers” with the onomatopoeic reference to “boom” and “guns” presents a paradoxical and graphic detail of how personalities in the different experimentations with power in Nigeria fritter the nation’s wealth. But “The Message from Boro” contextualizes the negative condition and explains the perpetuation and implication of misrule:

Because a few
In the house, by some means,
Take the central bowl, then belch aloud;
Another few,
By every means,
Delayed but still by right allowed,
Will press, sad through the waste,

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For all truly of the estate
To enjoy each their due. (*ROAT*, 56)

Clark's diametric use of "few" and "Another few" in this excerpt accentuates the cold conflict between the led and the privileged citizens in the position of power. The poet's deliberate capitalization of "A" in "Another" and the graphic of the opposing "few" in low caps shows the dichotomy of class. His juxtaposition of "central bowl" with "belch aloud" point at gluttony and greed which have become emblematic of the Nigerian political leaders. But in saying "Delayed but still by right allowed, / Will press, sad through the waste", the poet subtly hints at a revolutionary action that would turn the tide.

The loss of moral compass in "Witness of Truth" (for Itse Sagay) and "Triage" (for Alao Aka- Bashorun) furthers the poet's protest against the negative situation of in his country. This is an example from "Triage":

The blind and others in the street
Most led by children who should be
At school, reduce me to a state
Of stone I will accept, if only
To throw it at his body
Of varied parts we want to see
Holds for such wealth in common,
But means, in fact, no more than
Mere boot to caste
With grip on ballot and gun,
These, indeed, are the ones too sick to treat. (*ROAT*, 59)

Unlike "Epitaph for Boro", "gun" here cohabits with "ballot" to show the similarity indexes in dispensations of leadership. There is a growing number of out-of-school children roaming the streets, this portends jeopardy and bleak future for the country. Disturbingly, just like the military leaders, who seized power through the gun, the politicians, who got to the corridors of power by the ballot, do not care about the ominous signs but are equally only interested in the steady siphoning of the "wealth in common" of the nation.

Clark's Diasporic Verses

Clark's traversing of other lands narrows down to two slants that have environmental and social linings. Although in "Calcutta" (*SFT*, 110), where he says, "Cow and man loll about/ In lice, share in streets/ Of slime the same bed/ And bath, as the palaces/ And slums in food"/, the poet decries the despicable living condition in the town that bears the poem title, most of his poems on environmental concerns of other lands reflect a lighter mood. We have copious examples in his lines that are concerned with his itineraries to other nations such as "Two moods of Princeton" (*SFT*, 49), "Nairobi National Park" (for Nyambura and James Ngugi) (*SFT*, 105), "Addis- Ababa" (for Mary Dyson) (*SFT*, 106), "Bombay" (*SFT*, 109), "Autumn in Connecticut" (*SFT*, 156), "A season at Yale" (for Michael and Yvonne Cooke) (*SFT*, 213), "A song of New England" (for Deirdre and Doralynnne Bibby) (*SFT*, 234) and "A song of Harlem" (for Evelyn Neal) (*SFT*, 235). The poet, in these dedications to his hosts or friends, relishes the flora and fauna and the natural endowments of those nations or the memorable experiences of the weather conditions and adventures to recreation hubs. Sometimes, the poet's loneliness while abroad triggers a feeling of homesickness that results in didactical monologues, for instance, about the futility of human aspiration in "A song for Harlem" (*SFT*, 235).

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However, his profiling of crises spots intersects with his parodies on social infractions precipitated by wars in Cuba and Syria in “Cuba confrontation” (*SFT*, 46), “Home from Hiroshima” (*SFT*, 48) and “Aleppo” (for Bode Emmanuel) (*ROAT*, 53). Like Wole Soyinka, Ogaga Ifowodo and Sam Omatseye did in *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* (1989), *Madiba* (2003) and *Mandela’s Bones and Other Poems* (2009), respectively, Clark’s iconizing of Nelson Mandela, in *Mandela and Other Poems*, exteriorize the manifestations of crime against humanity in the injustice of the apartheid system that subsisted in South Africa. His psychological probing into how Mandela spends his time, wasting away in solitary confinement on the Robben Island, in “Mandela”, (*SFT*, 165- 166) evokes pity and angst. But the poet recognizes Mandela’s stoic resistance, perseverance and fortitude in the fight against minority rule in South Africa. While appraising the Mandela complex in other identified figures, the poet sometimes uses those lines to mobilise for resistance. An example is found in “A letter to Oliver Tambo on the 75th anniversary of the African National Congress”:

If guns graze the beast, then use numbers!
The fight should be in the house
If should be in the farm;
It should be in the pit;
It should be in the office,
In the factories, in the streets,
As it is in schools from Soweto
To Guguletu, until it is
All over South Africa to the last beach.

The reference to “the beast”, in the first line of this stanza, resonates again in “The beast in the South”. The poet says:

At last the beast that moved south
Is exposed for all his hood.
Mere children, afraid to live
In the concentration camp
He has made of their land,
Stampede barb-wire and bullet.
As the old bury their seeds
In a field of gas, guarded by dogs,
The wailing is across the world.

Only the Witch of Whitehall
And her escort in the White House
Embrace the beast their people
Had hunted down to its den. (*SFT*, 171)

The institutionalized oppressive actions against blacks in South Africa, which culminated in Mandela’s incarceration of Mandela, spills into worse dastardly acts in the suspected state sponsored assassination of Samora Machel in “The death of Samora Machel” (*SFT*, 172). Clark’s veiled use of “the beast” in this poem, when linked with “Witch of Whitehall” and “the White House”, lampoons the Great Britain and the United States of America for their continued to support of the oppressive actions of the apartheid regime despite global outcries. The justification for the terse attack continues in “The news from Ethiopia and the Sudan” where we read:

In our times, so briefly touched
By the strings of troubadours, the mighty
Of the earth hear and see all right

But only care for their race at arms. (*SFT*, 174)

Like we have also seen in “Cuba Confrontation”, “Home from Hiroshima” and “Aleppo” the poet castigates the hubristic posture of these nations whose selfish and hypocritical dispositions that aid oppression, have continued to fertilise global chaos and unrest.

Conclusion

This paper has isolated some dedicated verses to demonstrate Clark’s consistency in his interventions on the realities in the diverse spaces that inspire or motivate his verses. It has been demonstrated that his predilection for dedicated verses affirms the eclectic nature of his poetry and that, by paying attention to those verses, the sensibilities in his poetry can be easily harnessed. It is not clear if the poet was conscious of the fact that he was developing a new genre in poetry writing with his dominant use of dedicated verses. The poet fully explored the capacity of his innovation to traverse diverse spaces and succeeds in rupturing all barriers so that, in his poetry, the reader is hardly able to draw the boundaries between what is private and public or what is local and global. However, the relevance of most of these lines are unable to reach their full capacity as they should have been more socially responsive by balancing the causes of dystopia with prescribed antidotes. This posthumous counsel is not beneficial to Clark but useful to poets who might want to fully explore the potential of dedicated verses in better ways than Clark.

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