

THE POETICS OF SOCIAL DIALECTICS: ICONOCLASM OF JUVENAL AND
THE SOCIAL REALISM OF DASYLVA'S SONGS OF ODÁMOLUGBE

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Abstract

Conflicts are a common feature of the governing class and the downtrodden masses. Since the mid-nineteenth century, this has been the preoccupation of social realism literature. But in antiquity, Roman poet satirists like Juvenal, portrayed the social conditions in their works. In their realism, they merely highlighted socio-political ills, but were unable to engender some action from their readers. However, poets of post-colonial Nigeria, such as Demola Dasylva, among many others, have shown vision in their poetry of resistance against the socio-economic and political contradictions in the country. It is against this backdrop that this article seeks to explore the reasons behind the paradox in the approach of both generations of poets, towards an apparently similar social situation.

Keywords: Social Dialectics, Iconoclasm, Social Realism, Juvenal, Demola Dasylva.

Introduction

Social Realist literature does not portray people from a Critical Realist perspective. Rather, critical realism puts oppressed and exploited people at the epicentre of its works; people for whom we must have sympathy; people who rebel only as individuals; those who are incapable of changing their lives and of building a new society. The primary source of the subject matter of works of Social Realism is made up of problems related to life; the work, thoughts and actions of the people who are either trying to construct a socialist society or who are struggling for their rights in capitalist, rather than socialist, countries.

However, the literature of Social Realism, portrays the people as a great, regimented force; the creative and moving force of history. This literature shows that the broad masses are those who play the decisive role in historical events. The movement developed largely as a reaction against Romanticism, which was iconoclastic in its attitude towards

social issues. But Social Realism embodies the tension between technocracy and populism and between scientific and romantic criticism.

Attempts at deconstructing the formalism of classical texts by subjecting them to interpretative nuances of contemporary social critical poetics have, however, been frowned upon by scholars, who see that as being irrelevant today. What, with its substitute at the end of the nineteenth century with Naturalism.(Wightman M., 2011) But, contrary to such scholarship, social realism essentially continues to be the means by which we explore our lives and tell our personal stories. It is the means by which we relate to others who superficially we appear to have nothing in common with. It is also the means by which we examine our hopes and fears and understand our motives and new possibilities for ourselves. Only Social Realism in Literature and other genres can achieve this in ways that none of the other genres can. Of course, the point can be made that there were different levels of reception of classical texts, even when the historical veracity of a textual content may be shrouded due to its age. This should nonetheless prevent our subjecting it to the instrumentality of contemporary interpretative analysis. The above may appear an excuse for a comparative juxtaposition of Roman Juvenal's iconoclastic bitter skit against the oppressive environment of his first century CE society and Ademola Dasylva's realistic *résistance* of the socio-economic decay of his figurative 'Obai' and his passionate call for action/transformation. But then the visionary sensibilities of his *Odámolugbẹ* are perhaps rather auspiciously timed at this period in the life of our agonising and angst-ridden nation, just as the indignation, of Roman Juvenal merely elicited a critical realism that was only iconoclastic.

Ostensibly, Juvenal's works were provoked by *saeva indignatio* (savage indignation) at the atrocities assailing Rome of his period:

quid referam quanta siccum iecur ardeat ira,
Cum populum gregibus comitum premat hic spoliator
pupilli prostantis et hic damnatus inani iudicio?

Need I tell you how anger burns in my heart when I see
The bystanders jostled back by a mob of bravos

Whose master has first debauched his ward, and later
Defrauded the boy as well? (*Sat.* 1.45).

Dasyuva's collection also appears equally propelled by an 'Ira' (anger, wrath):

a patriot's ire, /detonating offering/
at their scumber: compradors/of
multinationals; at home-grown tyrants,
political mercenaries:/ at them: murderers of
our motherland (*Odámolugbe*, 26).

This puts him in a state of *iracundia*, with an angry disposition that is sustained throughout the collection.

I

Juvenal's iconoclasm as also reflected in his verses, perhaps mirrors the material/historical conditions of his day, but at another remove, it shows his attitude to life; Juvenal was a bred-in-the-bone *rentier*, with such tendencies as contempt for trade, indifference to practical skills, intense political conservatism, with a corresponding fear for change and revolution; all these, combined with an abysmal ignorance of, and indifference to, the economic realities of his period, necessitated his over-simplification of the solution to all problems in moral terms, consisting in the right conduct by existing authority.(Green:26.) This necessitated the composition of resistant literature during this period. The verse form in ancient Rome was identifiably the trademark of dissident literature. It was also the popular form of criticism during the despotic empires of Claudius, Nero and Domitian, among others in ancient Rome. These works bore the anguish and aspirations of the dispossessed masses. The sight and sounds of poverty are felt constantly in their verses, particularly, atrocities of the ruling class and their economic barons who collaborated during this period.

Most of the features of Roman life attacked by Juvenal were the result of a long and irreversible process:

Sed cum summus honor finite computet anno
Sportula quid referat, quantum rationibus addat,

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Quid facient comites quibus hinc toga, calceus hinc est
Et panis fumusque domi?(Sat. 1. 120)

When the Consul himself tots up, at the end of his year,
What the dole is worth, how much it adds to his income how
are poor dependants to manage?
Out of this pittance we must pay for decent clothes and shoes
– not to mention our food.

The squalor and impoverishment of the middle class is here being attacked, as this once affluent class scramble for the dole at the doorstep of the rich. These, as also in other cases, were developments which could not possibly have been altered by the work of a poet.

Was it, then, the focal intent of Juvenal to express indignation and disgust at the vicious society he lived? And to what end? It is clear from indications in the satires, in which names of persons or categories that command influence in his time were attacked. Hence, these notorious characters from earlier generations are presented as *exempla* to illustrate crimes and vices that are still flourishing. As when he attacks “Crispinus – the Delta-bred slave”, hitching his shoulders under Tyrian purple, and challenging good society with his millions.

There is a pre-occupation with socio-political issues among ancient Roman resistant poets like Juvenal, which presents rather interesting features when juxtaposed with those of contemporary Nigerian writers of similar ilk, such as Dasylva. The political class has the duty of setting examples for the rest of society, so their behaviour becomes an issue of interest. For instance, when Juvenal lampoons any member of the elite for immoral behaviour such as *incontinentia*, (insatiable consumption) this usually is seen in terms of political ineptitude. In other words, when an emperor or any member of the Roman nobility is attacked for sexual and sumptuary excesses, it usually has political connotations. *Incontinentia*, was also traditionally associated with tyranny. Moreover, when Juvenal retails with passion and vividness, his unique montage of diurnal life in Rome, viewed through the acerbic eyes of a class-conscious, resentful and slightly down-at-the heels poet, he is showing his disaffection for contemporary reality.

Juvenal in the disposition of his predecessors (Horace and Persius) betrays a dose of nostalgia for an idyllic *mos maiorum* (ancestral custom, way of life). Theirs was reactionary; a dissent against the travails of their class, and those below but was not transformational.

Since the days of the flood,
When Deucalion anchored his ship on a mountain peak
To search for a sign, the days when hard stones
quivered
To living softness and warmth, and Pyrrha confronted
the first men with their naked mates, has there ever
been so rich a crop of vices? When has the purse of
greed
yawned wider? when was gambling more frantic than
it is today?(Sat.1.81-4)

This reaction was usually, either against the Emperor's despotism and/or also the *captatores* – these were influential men of Greek extraction in government who did poor clients out of hoped-for legacies. The *captatores*, along with the Greek *arrivistes*, connived with public figures to exploit the masses.

A provincial governor, exiled for extortion, boozes
and feasts all day,
Basks cheerfully in the wrathful eyes of the gods; it's
his province (Sat.1.23-50).

Juvenal's *rentier*-based realism manifests in an inability to see beyond this status quo. Indeed the social content of Juvenal satires is hinged on the theme of crumpling social values, and on the impotence of the old middle class, to which he belongs, when confronted by a ruthless, unprincipled, and business-minded class of people. Consequently, his reactionary iconoclastic vituperations merely highlight this degeneracy; just as Umbricius, a decent educated *rentier* of the middle class like the poet, sticks to moral principles and expects certain traditional privileges and monopolies in return; only to discover that the new turn of events is threatening to sweep him into history. And so in the third satire, when Umbricius says:

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Cedamus patria. Vivant Artorius istic
et catulus, maneat qui nigrum in candida vertunt,
quis facile est aedem conducere, flumina, portus,
siccadam eluvium, portandum ad busta cadaver
et praeberere caput domina venale sub hasta (*Sat.*3. 29-
33)

Let us depart from Rome.
Let your Artorius and Catullus, sanitary engineers
and municipal architects,
Live and remain, men who by swearing black is
white get all the juicy contracts...then pocket the
cash,
And fraudulently file their petition in bankruptcy
(trans. Taiwo E. F.).

He is lamenting this turn of events, and the tragedy of it all is that no conceivable alternative exists for him. Hence options available for a *déclassé* gentleman, are narrowed between subservience and the rusticity of Cumae.

Non est Romano cuiquam locus hic, ubi regnat
Protogenes aliquis vel Diphilus aut hermarchus,
Qui gentis vitio numquam partitur amicum,
Solu habet. Nam cum facilem stillavit in aurem
Exiguum de naturae patriaeque veneno
Limine summoveor, perierunt tempora longi servitii (*Sat.* 3.
119-125)

There is no respite for honest Roman, when Rome is ruled by
some/either Protogenes or Diphilus, or a Hermarchus, secret
agents,
who, like all their race, never share friends or patrons.
For when a small venom drops in that ready ear
I'm out, through the back door,
my long years of meritorious service all gone.
(Trans. Taiwo E.F.)

For Juvenal, it is difficult to jettison the feudal relationship of the republican period, which thrived on a personal, human relationship that contained a good deal more than mutual expressions of commitment. But what he now saw was the methodical reduction of this feudal model into pure money-driven rat race at all levels; bereft of personal contact, worse still, affection. Money has become the criterion for winning professional respect.

For instance, one can visualize the scenarios in Juvenal's Rome as portrayed in the satires between the 2nd and 4th centuries BCE, most of which betrayed a passion for respectable ancient mores. Juvenal provides a most striking instance of attacks on vice in high places, particularly at the imperial court. "He was a typical product of his age in that he regarded his society, above all its class-system, as a fixed, immutable datum. And he never envisaged its abolition" (Green, 1989:254). The Roman society in antiquity was essentially capitalist, with the prominent role of wealth in sustaining the power structure.

Thus in Classical antiquity iconoclasm was a major motivation of social realism in poetry. These poets share a generally pessimistic vision, based on 'mythic realism in their archetypes, more worshipful than "actful"' (Osundare, 1986:29). In other words, they believe more in talking than in taking action. The Roman poet moralist sometimes wears a philosophical mask with a stoic or epicurean shade. At such times, he is rather an uncompromising idealist, whose preachment eulogises the *mos maiorum*, helpless about the present, living in lethargy and stasis. Although realism manifests in their works, it is merely iconoclastic, a nostalgia for the past, a clamour for the way the ancestors lived and solved their problems.

II

Social realism envisions society through character and plot, as if one were viewing the actual scenario, especially in drama and the novel, but, interestingly, the verse form is also acquiescent to the instrumentality of realism in the portrayal of society. Sometimes one forgets the language the poet uses in conveying the picture, as one is submerged in the 'story'. The content, that is, 'action' or theme, is ordered in a coherent sequence that invites the reader to relate to it much as we relate to the events in our own lives; so we are, as it were, sucked in by the 'story'.

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Poets of postcolonial Nigeria, on the other hand, have a clear social vision based on their highly developed ideological consciousness. Poets of postcolonial Nigeria on the other hand, have a clear social vision based on their highly developed ideological consciousness. This is clearly demonstrated by Dasyiva in his poetry under focus. There is no indication of a desire to return to some idealised romantic pre-history, but if at all, only in so far as it is a normalisation of the present. The poet, in referring to himself as Odámolugbẹ (an Ekiti word for indigenous poets), sees himself as a poet with a moral contractual obligation and vision. Therefore, in this collection, he makes use of diverse folkloric-cum-poetic techniques to convey his discontent with the contemporary realities of his mythical Obai (Nigerian) society, which is one of the traditional roles of indigenous Yoruba poets. *The Songs of Odámolugbẹ* is composed in five movements: "Declaration", "Songs of Obai", "Telling Tales", "Requiem for Martyrs" and "Song of a Drunk." In the griot's lamentation of the burial of Obai's glorious past, in 'To me the Lord offered a scroll', he sings thus:

A map, a wonderful geography
Of my Obai, my country:
To the south,
Silk-ocean so darkly, kisses the shores,
Roads, rails, and rubies;
The electric and telephones lines
Once potent, proud, sparkful, rich,
Now devastated, dormant!
Clucking gulls flew o'er the gullies...
(*Odámolugbẹ*)

In the words of the poet here, the once glorious Obai, has become a shadow of herself, since, 'the soldier-ants and pepper-soup platoons/termite at her root' have plundered her once vibrant fortunes.

However, when Odámolugbẹ, the poet persona, employs the backward look, it is only as a means to move forward with the

knowledge of what can be achieved. After forty-five years of unfulfilled expectations, waiting for Obai to awaken 'from her sickly slumber' the persona suddenly snaps out of his lethargic mien:

Then, the crude force of this rude rival awoke
The *Joshua* in me as I watched the frail frame
Of my Queen devoured by instalment...
(*Odámolugbẹ*, 51)

He assumes the persona of the biblical Joshua in order to rescue his Queen from further devastation and desecration by 'This Usurper' and 'Brute.'

This recalls the words of Soyinka (1976:63) in which he states that "in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward, the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder." These flashbacks are conspicuously shown in *Odámolugbẹ*, focus on the physical features of his society. In 'the News, Like the acetylene flame,' *Odámolugbẹ* refuses to be pacified as he grieves over

The twigs and the grass preyed upon, crushed
Under a world of greedy armoured-ants and soldier –
tanks... (*Odámolugbẹ*, 53)

As he watches, helpless, trapped, as 'scavengers' scramble 'over the flesh' of his 'hapless Obai,' he knows this is the wake-up call:

'Compatriots arise'
...arrest Obai's enthralled dignity,
As we watch her squandered prosperity,
Leaders in vainglory transgress,
And leaches the gamblers' congress...
...arrest this siren of frightening convoys in daylight
As bandits parade as democrats...the 'Area Boys' in
power milk the dairy dry, and teddy-wolves make our
children cry,

Their general, the general hope annulled,
Like douche, the caged sacred python all appalled.
(*Odámolugbẹ*)

In addition, the content, as indicated in their themes or 'action' not only portrays ideology, but the form – rhetorical satire – which provides the plank for this

Mother Obai, do you ask why we're up in arms?
When true justice, equity are never a right,
But murdered media, imposed starvation, a right?
Now we insist: patriotic and purposeful leadership
Must pilot to the Promised Land this colossal
Stateship!

(*Odámolugbe*)

Realism manifests in these words and goes beyond the mundane or what Barkhtin (2003:125) refers to as "definite semiotic materials, through which they become a practical part of reality surrounding us", and also aims at the essence of reality. Our attention is held not by the nature of the words on the pages, but on the action those words convey.

Describing Obai's critical sickness, in 'She is sick, I'm afraid', he grieves as follows:

A long infection and peptic...
Like the Ogunpa flood the devouring
Words came, devastating, tearing into
My frame, fragmenting my being –
... a sense of loss benumbed my bleeding heart:
'No, not now beloved, you must not die!'
this usurper, a brute, stole
my crown, devastated my kingdom and
my Queen ravished, desecrated! (*Odámolugbe*, 51)

Under the circumstances, we are not only lost in the story, but we are able to relate to the events the way we do those in our lives, as the characters portrayed are real to us.

In "Goloba", *Odámolugbe* consciously jokes with the word 'Goloba' and 'Global' to make readers scoff at the so-called idea of

globalisation. Even though the *Goloba* fowl was big, it served no good purpose, the visual image of

A chick among was 'gressive and greedy...
Ate more often than others,
All over me he'd pecked,
(*Odámolugbẹ*)

provides verbal pictures of the poet's encounter with the chick.

The image of a bellicose chick suggests greed in consuming "more often others". This is evocative of home-based tyrannical politicians and their mentality. These groups of people are notorious for their avaricious and egocentric nature. These were normal members of the society, until their greedy and aggressive behaviour, established them as an oppressive and exploitative class. The fact that all were chicks by the same mother hen, rules out the possibility of an external influence. But then, 'several cycles of identical chicks, had "Golobalized" it into a "new-breed politricksters." The poetical "Goloba", for Dasylva, symbolises oppression, aggressiveness and duplicity. These characterise the behaviour of the big powers in this so-called global village, where the 'Haves', perpetually pauperize the 'Have-nots'.

...stole often from others' shares/
Grew up bigger and stronger than others/
For his size, we called him *Goloba* (*Odámolugbẹ*, 78)

Besides, the dubious nature of these big powers that operate in the global village is portrayed as, "forcy and foxy, forcing/ Other fools to scurry"(78).

No reader is left in any doubt about the pulsating and rhythmic beat of this collection of poetry which, in the words of Falola, are persistently social protest and resistance poems, whose themes are of the failure of the state and socio-political structures.(7)

Religion has become a major source of crisis in Obai, as the poet notes in 'The babel is here':

Rifles of strife, the cross and the crescent;
Senseless defence of some nameless ghoul!
The arrows, the spears, the smoky guns,
Bloody bastards, menagerie, preying!
(Odámolugbe)

The hypocrisy of it all is contrasted against the readiness of both religions' adherents to kill and maim one another at the drop of a hat! At the end of it all the poet wonders:

What cross? What crescent? What crisis?
The wow-*wha* of a rabid dog,
Their criss-cross crisis,
The babel is here!
(Odámolugbe)

And indeed, the Babel is here – as if in a prophetic vision, the griot envisioned its arrival. What with the cacophony of their bloodthirsty and murderous religious fanaticism – the *Boko Haram* sect, has turned the whole country into a Babel of sorts. The strength of Dasylva's depiction of the ravaging effect of poverty in Obai, through his poet persona is reflective of his sentimental attachment to his native Obai. It also shows a deep-seated desire for transformation of his society and people from the forces that perpetuate such inhuman conditions, via his poetry of resistance. This same disposition, perhaps, informs his gesture of aiding a traumatised compatriot in 'Refuge-E':

...a pair of broken sticks, its blistered hands:
towards me it floated
on two frail poles, its legs,
walking hardly at all!
...my warm assuring smile; infected, its bare
notched lips parted
an unmoisted cavern, its starving mouth.

I carried
The man-bone effortless,
Now a cradling Mongol, to the
Waiting van, the healing centre:
(*Odámolugbẹ*)

In the wake of his song of sorrow for the traumatised compatriot in 'Refuge-E', the poet further laments the depredation of the motherland by those whose duty it is to protect the interest of the masses. Describing them as 'victims of hope', Dasylva recalls the "ululations, confusion, the dying, the dead/ tumbling, rumbling before flashes of fiery bullets," events of the aftermath of the annulment of June 12, 1992, freest and fairest election, ever in Nigeria. Even the winner of that election was not spared by the junta, as they, "mauled down the mighty, how he fell/like the Olumo in a quake-fall". The use of the metaphoric "Olumo rock" intensifies the devastating and catastrophic effect of the murder of the acclaimed winner of that election. But for the poet all hope is not lost, even in the face of such catastrophic event which, "Robot-monsters wove a death dance/ who maim and slaughter our generation/to their abattoir of greed and avarice." The realism of it all is a wake-up call, to his Compatriots:

Arise! disenfranchised masses in arms
Let go the crying babies bearing arms,
For Amalekites and Agag of the annulled hope,
Let him drink the destruction: the divine instruction.
(*Odámolugbẹ*)

The poet's aspiration for socio-political change in his mythical Obai, is divinely ordained, as he evokes an exegetical reference to king Agag of Amalek, who was made to 'drink destruction, by God. Despite his hinting at the possibility of divine intervention in Obai's travails, *Odámolugbẹ* is not averse to a proactive initiative; as revealed in the words he uses in the 'Compatriots': this I see, I feel, and believe.

The stench of our fouled life;
Eclipsed dotted oasis, and sky-line

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Of superfluous riches
Amidst a vast swamp of Poverty that
Awakes the storm in our desert,
Overwhelms the oasis, slimming
Bahkans and sand dunes of our sandwiched
Being; then we will think the best, only
Then we will decide the best.
(*Odámolugbe*)

The poet here expresses his unshakeable conviction in a bright future for his compatriots, even though our lives have been fouled, amid “dotted oasis”, even though some flaunt “superfluous riches”, in the midst of “vast swamp of poverty.” Niyi Osundare aptly sums up the poet’s trenchant vision in the following words:

Dasyuva combines the clamorous clarion of the Town-crier with the grave, visionary anger of the Old Testament prophet. The result is a relentless assault on those who have corrupted Nigeria into a land of “crying babies”, “disenfranchised masses”, and “man-bone” refugees.

Conclusion

The poet-satirists of both ancient Roman and Nigerian societies portray in their works perspectives that are driven by social dialectics and existentialist aesthetics in which they mirror socioeconomic reality through a critic of social types who are at the centre of their perceived social malaise. For the ancient satirist, the emperor and his court are seen as a model for socio-political vices and duplicity. The same theme is highlighted in the poems of Dasyuva whose visionary poetics are used as a plank in interpreting the deplorable mode of life in his mythical Obai. Pretentiousness among the ruling class in Rome and Obai manifests in their oppressive style of governance, which is not in the interest of the masses. The preponderance of selfish ambition and greed, among other vices, necessitates the bitterness with which the two poets in this study – Juvenal (a Classical Roman poet) and Dasyuva (a contemporary Nigerian poet) – have approached the subject matter. Despite the differences in the

clime and period, the similarity in their thematic delineations, enhances the frontiers of social realism.

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