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## The Wandering Minstrel in Contemporary Nigerian Literature: A Study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's Poetry

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Alex Chinwuba Asigbo<sup>1\*</sup>, Lotachukwu Loveth Amalukwue<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>PhD Department of Theatre Arts and Film Studies Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka Nigeria

Email: <sup>2</sup>ll.amalukwue@unizik.edu.ng

Corresponding Email: <sup>1\*</sup>ac.asigbo@unizik.edu.ng

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**Abstract:** *The art of minstrelsy is very prevalent in traditional African society. Minstrels abound in these societies and they are mostly regarded as singers, musicians or reciters of poems. They are notable for their itinerant nature which makes them familiar with the goings on in their immediate societies. Even with the transition of most African societies from oral to written culture as a result of colonialism which introduced the Western system of education in Africa, the activities of these minstrels have not ebbed. Instead, it has found renewed expression on the pages of the collection(s) of poetry of contemporary Nigerian and by extension, African poets. This paper studied two collections of poetry of the poets under study; Akachi-Adimora-Ezeigbo's Heart Songs and Waiting for Dawn and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's The Voice of the Night Masquerade and The Chants of a Minstrel. It employed Formalism (New Criticism) theory in the analysis of these works. This paper showed that Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo writes from the angle of a wandering minstrel which affords her the opportunity to permeate different segments of her society. Ezenwa-Ohaeto on the other hand employed, not only the masquerade minstrel personae in his collection of poetry, The Voice of the Night Masquerade but equally structured the work on the circular movement associated with the entrance and exit of the Night masquerade. Also, he equally writes The Chants of a Minstrel from the angle of the mad man and itinerant minstrel persona. The research concludes on the note that these contemporary Nigerian poets studied have succeeded in continuing the art of minstrelsy prevalent in their cultural milieu even as they incorporate their wandering/itinerant nature in their works.*

**Keywords:** *Wandering Minstrel, Minstrelsy, Nigerian Poetry, Contemporary, Itinerant.*



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Minstrels in traditional African societies are varied and are usually categorized according to the position they occupy in rendering their performances. Finnegan, (1970, p. 82) identifies four categories which include the royal court poets (minstrels), recognized religious poets, itinerant poets and the less specialized poets. The last two categories of minstrels are the focus of this article. They are of great interest because they are similar to the poets/minstrel found in pre-colonial Igbo society. Again, Finnegan is of the view that they are common in West Africa and other "...traditionally uncentralized societies of Africa..." (1970, p. 98).

The traditional African minstrel is itinerant in nature in that he moves from one place to another and as such, is closer to the society. Egya, (2006), maintains that:

His (minstrel/poet) closeness to his society and his more grounded knowledge of it arise from the fact that he is not confined to a single place, a thinking corner of the community, from which vantage he philosophizes. Rather, he moves about, often on foot, coming into contact with people and events in the society. (p. 180)

The minstrel in traditional African society is always on the move and as he wanders, he becomes better informed about the happenings in his immediate environment and as such, sing these songs in the language the people will understand. These minstrels sing almost of all facets of human condition, and these according to Orajiaka, S and Unegbu, J. include, "the challenge of poverty, the bitterness of barrenness, the felicity in a marriage, the eminence of an individual, the reality of death and dying" (2013, p.197). They go on to state that the minstrel in traditional African society equally acts like a counsellor, instructing and giving suggestions about ways to solve a problem. The ability of the poet to do these shows the edge he has due to the wealth of his experience gathered during his tour of different places.

The minstrel in traditional Igbo society is equally notable for his wandering nature. Egya maintains that, "The minstrel is a travelling musician... (2006, p. 179). Also, Ogene (2012, p.12) observes that the mmanwu (masquerade) minstrels are always on the move, even as they criticize the ills in their community. In speaking about Onyekulufa (a group of masquerades performing at night), he (Ogene) opines that the announcing of the ills perpetrated by some members of the community and their subsequent exposure by the above mentioned masquerade indicate movement. This is because the masquerade has to traverse the length and breadth of his community in order to announce such evil "to the whole villagers, in the late hours of the night" (2012, p. 13).

Also, it is not only the night masquerade (the mmanwu masquerade minstrel) that criticizes the ills in traditional Igbo society and by extension, the African traditional society. One of such masquerades is Njokoya. Nnyagu (2020, p. 42), in his description of the Njokoya masquerade, explains that the masquerade in entertaining his audience

...chants, he dances to the delight of his teaming members of the audience who laugh and clap for him. As a gadfly whose responsibility is to use his chants to reform the society, Njokoya nurses no fear in ridiculing any evildoer in the society.

Nnyagu goes further to explain that the carrier of the said masquerade is a member of the community that owns the masquerade and as such is familiar with the happenings in his society and this arms him with the needed information he needs as he satirizes the ills in his community.



Since the traditional minstrel is always on the move, so is the modern day minstrel in that the poets under study borrow this aspect from the traditional (Igbo) minstrelsy. A close reading of the collections of poetry under study shows that the poems therein indicate some level of motion, which shows that the poet persona, like the minstrel in traditional Igbo society is also on the move; traversing every area of his society even as he comments on the happenings in and around it.

### **New Criticism Theory**

New Criticism is one of the branches of Formalism. Formalism is the literary theory which holds sway in the Anglo-American world and dominates literary studies in the 1940s through the 1960s. Though this theory cannot be called a contemporary one but one of its concepts (close reading) which emphasizes the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations has been incorporated into the way literary critics today support their readings of literature. Dobie (2002, p. 33) maintains that the emphasis placed on the close reading of a text by the formalist critics "...puts the focus on the text as literature." Literature according to Habib (2011, p.197)

... is no longer viewed as aiming to represent reality or character or to impart moral or intellectual lessons, but is considered to be an object in its own right, autonomous (possessing its own laws) and autotelic (having its aims internal to itself).

Thus, literature becomes on its own, a unique mode of expression. Based on this, one can say that New Criticism as a literary theory privileges the text in literary criticism as against their predecessor (biographical- historical criticism) which merely sees the text as an adjunct to history; an illustration of the "spirit of the age". To them (The New Criticism), the slogan, "the text itself" becomes the battle cry in an effort to focus readers'/critics' attention to the literary work (text) as the sole source evidence for interpreting it. This is because they believe that the meaning of a literary work of art cannot be known through authorial intention as this presupposes what the author wants to accomplish and not what he actually accomplishes. This often leads to intentional fallacy which, according to Tyson, (1999, p.119), the New Criticism coined to refer to "the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the meaning of the text".

The New Criticism equally views the text (a literary work) as "a timeless, autonomous (self-sufficient) verbal object" (Tyson, 1999, pp. 119-120). According to her, the New Criticism is of the view that "readers and readings may change, but the literary text stays the same" (1999, p, 120). Thus, the meaning of a literary text is as objective as its physical presence on the page. This is because the text is constructed out of words placed in a specific relationship to one another. What this means is that these words that are placed in a specific order creates meaning and this particular meaning cannot be realized if different combination of words are placed at the same place and in the same order. Thus, for the meaning of a given literary text to be realized in New Criticism, one has to carefully examine or "closely read" all the evidences provided by the language of the text itself, through the text's formal elements which include: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot and so on.

In view of the above, this paper adopts this critical theory as the theoretical framework for the interpretation of the given texts under study.



### **The Concept of Movement in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Heart Songs and Waiting for Dawn.**

A careful study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's poetry collections, shows that she writes her poetry from the vantage point of the itinerant or wandering minstrel as she permeates different segments of her society. This idea of movement is equally reflected in the works of other contemporary Nigerian poets. As modern day minstrels, they equally project the idea of moving from one place to another as the traditional African minstrels of old do. This could be gleaned from these poets' ability to comment on diverse areas of life in their society. They even touch on the diaspora because the world has become a global village and what happens in one clime invariably affects those in another clime. For instance, Adimora-Ezeigbo as representative of this group in the Preface to one of her collections of poetry comments:

This potpourri of poems inspired by disparate themes and other sundry events and experiences in three Continents-Africa, Europe and North America- is a signifier of our globalized reality today. Before you, then, is a well-garnished poetic dish meant... (2009, pp.7-8).

In Heart Songs, we see the poet Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, in the voice of a minstrel, satirizing and lampooning the government of the day, racism, bad leadership, cultism and so on in the following poems, "The isms of race", "Homeless", "Cultism", "Monkey dey Work, Baboon dey Chop" and so on. In another of her poems entitled, "Love Songs", we see the poet persona in the voice of a lover minstrel, expressing her love for her lover. Again, in the poems entitled, "Praise Songs", the poet as a praise minstrel is full of praises for nature, hard work, excellence in the discharge of ones' duties and so on. It is very interesting to note that the poet persona equally assumes "the memorial voice" in the poems under the heading, "Memorial Songs" in honour of some of her dead colleagues, relatives and some prominent Nigerians. Again, the poet persona as an experienced minstrel touched on women issues in the same collection of poetry as she explores various issues that concerns women in contemporary Nigeria society.

In Waiting for Dawn, we see the poet as she traverses the length and breadth of her society as a modern day minstrel. She sings the songs of her people while prophesying hope for them. The poet sees the collection of poetry as:

...a poet's attempt to exorcize the nightmares and terrors of our contemporary society by sublimating them in poetry. It is an attempt to sing of change which the world awaits with hope- a new dawn that will usher in peace. ...an attempt to explore creatively the significant events-including personal and interpersonal experiences- that impacted and continue to impact on us as human beings. (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2010, p.7)

From the standpoint above, one can understand why the poet minstrel is constantly on the move, though this time, on paper. A detailed analysis of the poetry collection -Waiting for Dawn-is a testament to the itinerant nature of the poet minstrel that is brought to the fore in each of the poems. Each of these poems suggest a movement from one issue that bedeviled the society to another. From the three major sub-headings in the collection of poetry (**Nightmares, Time of the Jackal and Serenades for Dawn**), the poet minstrel starts her singing with the songs of the individual nightmares of the members of the society. These are caused by the inability of the individuals concerned to take action when necessary or by armed groups encouraged by government's inaction. Here, we have poems like 'Action Time', 'Farming of Bones', 'Terrorism', 'Darfur', 'Tyranny' and so on which dwell on the nightmares people go through both within the Nigerian society and Africa in general.



Again, **Time of the Jackal** touches on social problems that are prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society. These poems ‘Muggers’, ‘Ghost-workers’, ‘Murdered Tongue’, ‘Education Starvation’, ‘Drug Addiction’, and so on explore these issues succinctly. The poet minstrel, in exposing us to the dangers inherent in these issues, warns in Okigbo’s *Labyrinth* that “/you cannot just with rag cover/ A festering sore and expect healing?” (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2010, p. 69). Thus, all hands must be on deck in eliminating them before they eliminate us.

Also, the poet minstrel as the gadfly of her society moves from the various problems that emanate from our society to that song of hope that is ushered in at Dawn. What the poet does with the poems in this section is to infuse the power of hope on the masses; to inspire them, even as they wait for that light at the end of the tunnel.

From the analyses so far, we can see that the itinerant nature of the minstrel in the traditional African society has not ebbed but has found an expression on paper. Thus, the contemporary Nigerian poet or the modern day minstrel, has always been on the move as this gives him/her the advantage of exploring issues that affect their immediate society in particular and the world at large.

### **The Concept of Movement in Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s *The Voice of the Night Masquerade and The Chants of a Minstrel***

In *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, we are presented with the circular movement of the mmanwu (masquerade/spirit manifest) minstrel poet persona. This collection of poetry starts with the invocation of the night masquerade, Akataka. This is aptly depicted in the poem, “A Call at Dusk”. This poem written in two parts inherently explores the dramaturgy typical of the masquerade tradition. It is in dramatizing the emergence of the masquerade through the depiction of the events leading up to it that one comes to appreciate the idea of motion/movement inherent therein. The first part of the poem makes use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ indicating that many people take part in the process of invoking the night masquerade but the events are played out through the voice of the poet persona. The poet persona’s description of the time in which the invocation takes place shows that it happened at mid-night:

...the potent hour,

Day meets night here:

A perilous time

A dangerous second... (1996, p.12)

A close reading of the poem equally shows that the invocation happens at ‘the cross roads’:

This is the crossroads

Spirits meet human

Water meets the land the child meets the adult (1996, p.12)

Thus, the movement of people to the cross roads to invoke the night masquerade for onward emergence from the ant hole which occurred in the second part of the poem, “A call at dusk”, to the ‘voice’ of the night masquerade criticizing the ills in the society as seen in poems like, “The treasure at home”, “Before God goes to bed”, “On the street at night”, “The chant goes on” and so on and its subsequent return to the ant hole in the poem, “The fading chant”, shows that the poet simply structured the collection of poetry, *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* on the mmanwu (masquerade) minstrelsy tradition of the Igbo culture.



Again, the concept of movement plays out in the collection of poetry, *The Chants of a Minstrel*. Ezenwa-Ohaeto emphasizes the fact that he is simply treading the path of his ancestors who are minstrels. To him, he is a modern day minstrel who "...roams across various countries and climes; observing, assessing and stimulating experiences" (2003, p. 7). Thus, he takes the minstrelsy associated with his Igbo culture a bit farther by exploring the contemporary concerns of his immediate society and the world at large. Having travelled extensively to some continents of the world, he is able (as a modern day minstrel) to "...absorb the sights of Europe, America, Asia or Australia and synthesize them with the sights of Africa" (2003, p. 7).

A close reading of the collection of poetry under study shows the different guises the poet chooses to convey some relevant societal concerns through the poet persona involved in some kind of movement. For instance, the poems under the title, "The Chant of a Mad Minstrel" are replete with that movement associated with mad people. Ezenwa-Ohaeto is of the opinion that "a man is said to be mad if he deviates from the norm and mores of the society" (2013, p. 137). Also, Ogu cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N. (2013, p. 137) clarifies further when he says that: Madness seems to be a label covering a wide range of asocial and amoral behavior, like running about naked on a market day, holding conversation with the high way and preaching strange doctrines. People who behave thus are socially branded mad.

Thus in the poem, "The pre chant", one sees the mad man poet persona manifesting the characteristics of madness which include movement to an undefined destination, constant repetition, conversing all alone on the way and so on.

I am on a journey  
I come from a village of chants  
I walk to the city of chants... (2003, p.13)

Again in the poem, "A minstrel tramping across the land", the mad man poet persona traverses his community without end:

I wandered in the day  
I wandered in the night (2003, p. 17)

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that the mad man poet persona walks about in the day time and at night, he wanders off again in his mind, even as he 'wandered' on issues affecting his immediate society.

Furthermore, "The Chant of a Wandering Minstrel", is a metaphor for the minstrel on the move and this plays out succinctly in the poems under the above sub-heading. In the poem, "the wandering minstrel", the poet persona presents us with his personal experiences resulting from his sojourn to different countries of the world. This poem is structured in his movements from countries like Germany, United States of America, England, Sweden and so on. From the experiences he garnered from these places, one can say one or two things about the countries discussed and her people. In the poem, "What I heard in the tram" the poet persona speaks out against racism. This attitude is prevalent in Western countries where the 'whites' discriminate against the 'blacks' of which the poet persona is a victim as can be seen from the poem. Again, the poem, "The fall foliage of new England" stresses the need for people to seek out those in need instead of seeking out inanimate things for their pleasure. The poet persona describes in detail the excessive love for vacation among the whites especially during summer.

It is also the season of peeping ecstasy  
A search that hypnotizes tourist hordes



From Boston to Cape Cod to Maine

To see leaves with eyes of childhood (2003, p. 39)

The poem shows that they spend resources and time for tourism as they move from one natural habitat to another but do not care for the person across the street.

If also the seekers will drive

Across the street to touch souls. (2003, p. 39)

Finally, the sub-headings, ‘The Chant of a Sentimental Minstrel’, ‘The Chant of a Mourning Minstrel’ and ‘The Chant of a Musing Minstrel’, contain poems that project the idea of movement discernible in Igbo traditional minstrelsy. Though the movements can be felt more, psychologically than physically but the point remains that there is a movement from one major concern in the poet’s society (either within the poet’s society or in the diaspora) to another.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

Despite the fact that the influence of minstrels in traditional African societies has waned substantially, their imprints are still felt on the pages of paper of our contemporary poets, often referred to as modern day minstrels. Culture is dynamic and minstrelsy is an aspect of Africa’s ethno musical culture. When a society that produces a particular culture transits from one level to another, its culture is equally affected as the one that cannot change with it are jettisoned while the others that can change assume new forms.

The minstrels or invariably, minstrelsy in traditional African society are greatly impacted by the changes in traditional African societies occasioned by the advent of the imperial masters. Colonialism brings about the introduction of formal education that privileges written poetry and that gives rise to the poets and their works under study. Fortunately, this transition from the oral mode to the written mode in African societies did not destroy this important aspect of our culture (minstrelsy). These modern day minstrels draw inspiration from the traditional African minstrels even as they imitate their itinerant nature which is an integral feature of these (traditional African minstrels) minstrels as we have seen from the analysis of some the poems under study.

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