



Post-dictatorship Protest and Ecocriticism in Selected Works of Ogaga Ifowodo

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ABSTRACT

This article explored selected poems of the Nigerian poet and activist, Ogaga Ifowodo, in order to highlight the writer's yet under-researched but invaluable contributions to the country's evolving cultural archive. Following a concise survey of existing commentary on Ifowodo's work, the study argued that his protest poetry, prison narratives and eco-critical criticism deserve greater scholastic attention and scrutiny for the ways in which they imaginatively document the tumultuous political repression in Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that his engagement with the ecological and socio-economic fall-out of oil exploration in the country's Niger Delta region from which he hails marks his oeuvre as a unique contribution to contemporary reconstructions of Nigerian nationhood situated in the intersections between literary historicisation, political resistance as well as cultural and eco-critical activism.

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INTRODUCTION

Ogaga Ifowodo was born in 1966 in Oleh, Delta State, part of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He became a student union activist in the early 1980s during the reign of the military dictator, Ibrahim Babangida. Upon graduation, Ifowodo worked as a human rights activist when Sani Abacha was military Head of State of Nigeria. He was arrested in 1997 while returning from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit in Scotland, having called for stronger sanctions against Abacha, the same dictator who had hanged Saro-Wiwa, the renowned Niger Delta poet, playwright and activist in 1995. Ifowodo was set free from prison in 1998 following local and international campaigns for the release of detained writers which included the likes of Akin Adesokan and Nnimmo Bassey.¹ Ifowodo has won various awards including the 1993 Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Poetry Prize, the 2003 ANA/Cadbury Poetry Prize, the 2005 Gabriel Okpara Poetry Prize and the 1996 Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Poetry. His manuscript of the poems entitled 'Red Rain' won a national prize in 1998 before it was published as *Homeland and Other Poems*.

Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton identify Ifowodo as belonging to Nigeria's third generation of writers, whose formation was 'marked by more than two decades of military despotism in Nigeria, the highpoint of which was the illegal detention of Ifowodo and Akin Adesokan by the regime of the late Abacha in 1997'.² These writers, according to Adesanmi and Dunton, 'had acquired a creative identity markedly different from the second generation writers' such as Niyi Osundare, Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, and Fetus Iyayi. Adesanmi and Dunton define the second generation as those 'born into the colonial event but their formative years were mostly shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis.' While this schema of periodisation is

¹ Oyeniyi Okunoye, "Alterity, Marginality and the National Question in the Poetry of the Niger Delta 1," *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, no. 3 (2008): 413–36.

² Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations," *English in Africa* 32, no. 1 (2005): 7–19.

not without its uses, Aghogho Akpome has argued for a different approach that proposes to situate the orientation of such works more accurately, stating that:

current Nigerian writing as well as a cross-generational array of texts may be more productively described as post-military dictatorship (or simply “post-dictatorship”) cultural expression in view of the enduring influence of prolonged periods of military interventions on textual production in Nigeria well beyond the return to civilian rule in 1999.³

Indeed, Nigerian literature published since 1960 when the direct British colonial administration ended – whether in verse, drama, or narrative fiction – bears the indelible imprint of the excesses of the country’s string of successive military rulers from 1966 onwards. This point is foregrounded in Gbemisola Adeoti’s observation that military interference in the Nigerian political space is a major influence on new literary experiences and innovations.⁴ Furthermore, Agada Nwachukwu traces the anger of post-war and post-dictatorship Nigerian poets not only to the failure of the elite culture, but also the negative correlates of the civil war, the Niger Delta question and, has been noted, successive military dictatorships. Nwachukwu believes that, for the post-war poet, these are issues of fundamental interest that writers cannot ignore:

The pre-war poets may have perceived poorly, or in themselves were yet to “percolate” for intimate consideration, or possibly still were regarded as too common place to require his attention; tranny and oppression, corruption, suffering and persecution, ineffective public utility network, military intervention and military leadership.⁵

POST-DICTATORSHIP COMMENTARY, THE NIGER DELTA AND ECO-CRITICISM

Oyenyi Okunoyè notes that the situation of the Niger Delta has necessitated unique contributions from the region’s writers, making for contemporary Nigerian poetry that has sustained a remarkable trans-ethnic literary practice. He identifies poets from this region as exploring the link between the shared agony of the people of the Niger Delta and a tradition of political protest and resistance across regions and periods.⁶ The negative fallouts of the ecological degradation of the region due to oil exploration have engaged many commentators.⁷

Ifowodo has published four collections of poetry: *Homeland and Other Poems* (1998), which focuses on military rule in Nigeria; *Madiba* (2003), which captures the anger and hopes of his generation; *The Oil Lamp* (2005), which bemoans the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta region; and *A Good Mourning* (2016), which protests against the oppressive acts of the military dictator, Ibrahim Babangida. Ifowodo has earned himself a reputation as one of the most committed Nigerian poets of his generation. In addition to his apparent socio-political commitment, Ifowodo’s poetry has been praised as being one of the most aesthetic of the so-called third generation.⁸ According to Inyabri, Ifowodo’s poetry ‘gives sheer artistic pleasure to the listener/reader, even in the midst of pain’ through his ability to show the pain of repressed Nigerians while at the same time moving the reader toward hopeful vistas of life.⁹

Ifowodo’s art is concerned with problems of political leadership in Nigeria. Commentary on his poetry has, in most cases, been very complimentary. Various critics have described Ifowodo’s poetry as an alternative to earlier literary discourse in Nigerian poetry, which usually centred on ancestral worship, colonialism, love for nature, and nationalism. Adesanmi and Dunton agree that Ifowodo’s poetry is a shift from the usual poetic themes of ritualism and cultural nationalism that predate his writings in the pioneer and early poets in Nigeria. They explain that Ifowodo derived most of his poetic inspiration during and after his experiences in prison.¹⁰

Ushie Joseph, however, appears to offer a different explanation. He believes that much of Ifowodo’s poetry is devoted to the more general concerns of Nigerians’ contemporary issues. He is of the view that Ifowodo’s works are still focused on the condition of the deprived. Ushie avers that Ifowodo’s works are universal in context and theme, but he also agrees with Adesanmi and Dunton that prison experiences under Nigeria’s military junta are crucial to Ifowodo’s works:

³ Aghogho Akpome, “An Overview of Modern Nigerian Literatures and Provisional Notes on ‘Post-Dictatorship’ Cultural Expression,” *Imbizo* 12, no. 2 (2021): 17-pages.

⁴ Adeoti Gbemisola, “The Military in Nigeria’s Postcolonial Literature: An Overview,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, No. 16 (Nov. 2003); Pp. 111-127, 2003.

⁵ J O J Nwachukwu-Agbada, “Post-war Nigeria and the Poetry of Anger,” *Wasafiri* 6, no. 12 (1990): 3–6.

⁶ Okunoye, “Alterity, Marginality and the National Question in the Poetry of the Niger Delta 1.”

⁷ A. Odoemene, “Social Consequences of Environmental Change in the Niger Delta of Nigeria,” *Journal of Sustainable Development* 4, no. 2 (2011): 123-135.

⁸ Idom T Inyabri, “Humour as an Aesthetico Existential Strategy in Third Generation Modern Nigerian Poetry,” *Global Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2012): 99–106.

⁹ Inyabri, “Humour as an Aesthetico Existential Strategy in Third Generation Modern Nigerian Poetry.”

¹⁰ Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations.”

Given the fact that the formative years of third generation writers were marked by more than two decades of military despotism in Nigeria, the high point of which was the illegal detention of Ogaga Ifowodo... it is no surprise that the genre of prison narrative has developed so early in the new writing.¹¹

Ifowodo's prison narratives represent an important step that was followed by his protest verses. According to Jide Balogun, Ifowodo's poetry has been instrumental in the struggle for his land and people:

There could be no better way of situating Ifowodo's poetry in the affairs of the Niger Delta other than social commitment... Ifowodo uses his poem to explore the sociological imperative of art to mediate the crisis of the Niger Delta.¹²

Commenting on the versification on the cover page of Ifowodo's anthology, *A Good Mourning*, Femi Osofisan argues that 'Ifowodo takes us on an itinerary that shifts from one notorious platform of human bestiality to another—from the slave trade to the Holocaust, the theatres of wars in Palestine and the Congo.' He highlights how Ifowodo

invokes the power of poetry to hurt and to wound, and yet, through its ineffable beauty, bring healing. Mourning is 'good', therefore, because even as it shocks us into remembrance, it at the same time helps us affirm the ultimate triumph of human goodness over the horrors of history.¹³

Sule Egya sees Ifowodo's commitment to eco-human engagement as a means to participate in the general cultural struggle in his Niger Delta region. This struggle aims to protest against an establishment that does not care for the people living in the terrain from which they extract national wealth. Egya confirms that Ifowodo's eco-human engagement is largely seen in his third volume of poetry, *The Oil Lamp*, although his earlier volumes, namely *Homeland and Other Poems* and *Madiba*, hark back to real disasters that befell the people in the late 1990s and early 2000s – for example, the arrest, doctored trial, and judicial murder of Saro-Wiwa and eight other people from Ogoniland. While describing Ifowodo as an activist who writes as an insider, Egya notes that Ifowodo's style creates a considerable distance between himself and the victims. Egya observes that 'while the poet mostly withdraws his own voice, he projects the dialectic voices of both the oppressed (man and earth) and the oppressor'. He sums up by claiming that Ifowodo's poems utilise novelistic techniques in their polyphony and 'many-languedness'.¹⁴

Chris Onyema's view is in line with those of other critics on Ifowodo's ecological poetry as an alternative press cast in the form of narration that captures the Niger Delta environmental experiences across the three major phases of Nigeria's history: the pre-colonial era, when there was ecological peace in the land, the colonial era, and then the post/neocolonial era, which has been marked by pollution and exploitation. Ifowodo's poetry blames both foreign and local agents of bioterrorism. Ifowodo is also seen as projecting his voice to evince a literature of place through varied riverine lexemes, terms of location and imagistic expressions that are in accord with the social, historical, and environmental conditions of the Niger Delta area. Most of his poems are channeled towards the eco-condition of the Niger Delta before its devastation by crude oil exploitation.¹⁵

Alabere Monsur notes that Ifowodo's *Oil Lamp* focuses on the mayhem unleashed on the people of the Niger Delta region by the authority. He claims that the book 'beams its searchlight on the armful and dreaded experiences of the Ogoni, Odi, and Jesse people with the oil companies as well as the Nigerian government.' In his discussion on the manner in which the government and the multinational oil companies deals with natives and the environment, Monsur portrays the region as a conquered territory.¹⁶ For his part, Sunny Awhefeada is interested in Ifowodo's preoccupation with the Nigerian condition of socio-economic and political anaemia, as

¹¹ Joseph Ushie, "Niger Delta Threnodic Verses: G. EbinyoOgbowei and OgagaIfowodo," *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Niger Delta*. Ed. ChinyereNwahunanya. Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 2011, 527–49.

¹² J. Balogun, "Ogaga Ifowodo's Poetry and the Struggle for Emancipation in the Niger Delta Region.," in *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*, ed. Nwahunanya C. (Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd, 2011).

¹³ Femi Osofisan, '*Ogaga Ifowodo's A Good Mourning*'. (Lagos: Parresia Publishers, 2016).

¹⁴ Sule E Egya, "Eco-Human Engagement in Recent Nigerian Poetry in English," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49, no. 1 (2013): 60–70.

¹⁵ Chris C Onyema, "Alter-Native Press: Implicating Subaltern Discourse in Ogaga Ifowodo's Ecological Poetry," *AFRREV LALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2015): 135–51.

¹⁶ A. H. Monsur, "Ecocriticism: A Tale of Distress and Agonies in Ogaga Ifowodo's *Oil Lamp*," *Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies (JOLLS)* 9, no. 2 (2019): 15–22.

well as with the various types of dehumanisation that have been affected by Nigeria's military dictatorship. The era detailed the censorship of writings and the harassment of intellectuals by military leadership, which was the vogue and style of the military administration. Awhefeada traces Ifowodo's acumen back to his days at university as a student union activist who challenged the junta regime. Ifowodo is credited with leading the famous Anti-SAP riots of May 1989 which the General Babangida-led junta quelled with all its military might, leading to several deaths. Hence, as Awhefeada shows, upon graduation, Ifowodo was already prepared for his struggle for justice through protest poetry.¹⁷

Niyi Akingbe situates Ogaga Ifowodo among the younger generation of Nigerian poets whose thematic preoccupation centres on the subjugation and repression of the citizens by successive Nigerian military regimes. According to Akingbe, 'Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) was chosen to elucidate the psychological trauma that accompanies life in exile. It is significant to note that General Sani Abacha's military regime is the primary focus of the poems that explore the interface between political dissent and exile'. Akingbe ponders the horrible experiences of military oppression in Nigeria and other parts of Africa and aims to determine the meanings generated by the literary depiction of torture, incarceration, and killing within the context of the abrogation of fundamental freedoms.¹⁸

This resonates with Heather Hewett's recognition of the links between Ifowodo, Akin Adesokan, Kunle Ajibade, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, all of whom were at one time or the other imprisoned and tortured, and whose incarceration deeply affected other writers throughout the country. She claims that 'the sum total of all these events – the political imbroglios, the collapse of the nation's infrastructure, and the attendant decline of opportunity – has led Adesanmi to coin the term "dismembered present" to describe postcolonial Nigeria'. Hewett ultimately observes that during the time of these writers, a revitalisation of Nigerian literature had been on the rise, specifically in poetry.¹⁹

ANALYSES OF SELECTED POEMS

This section analyses the following Ifowodo poems: 'My Prison Bed', 'Vivien's Jailer', and 'Her Bed is Vacant Again' which largely protest the neglect of the Niger Delta region by the Nigerian government. The poems are taken from *Homeland and Other Poems* (henceforth, *HOP*) and *Madiba* (henceforth, *MDA*). Crude oil exploration by oil companies in the region has immensely impacted on ecological degradation of the environment. This deplorable condition of the environment and the subsequent plight of the people is what Ifowodo laments in some of his poetry. His interest is closely linked to that of Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged by the Abacha's regime in 1995. Saro-Wiwa was at the forefront of agitation for equitable distribution of crude oil resources accrued from Ogoniland when his life was cut short. Ifowodo's prison experience was triggered by the tense atmosphere that characterised the military leadership of General Abacha's totalitarian government from 1993 to 1998. In a bid to unsettle the military regime, Ifowodo took his protest to the Commonwealth Summit in Edinburgh in 1997, to press for more sanctions against the Nigerian government. He was detained upon his return to Nigeria and sent to the Ikoyi Prison in Lagos. His release from prison gave birth, through poetry, to an aggressive resistance to the unacceptable activities of oil multinationals and to the government in power.

Some prisoners, as a sort of compensation for situations beyond their control, channel their energies and experiences into writing. Cherry Clayton's comment on prison writing clarifies some of its objectives:

Prison writing offers us a model of literature responding strongly, with all the resources of one particular, limited human identity, thrown back upon itself, to a particularly punitive expression of a given state's power to curb dissent.²⁰

The tone of Ifowodo's prison poetry aligns with Clayton's views. The poet's opinion is strongly at variance with the actions of those in power. His poems decry the deprivation, gross injustice, and utter neglect that the prison system suffers.

In 'Vivien's Jailer', Ifowodo creates a fictional prison that satirises the real prison system. Although it does not recount one of his personal prison experiences *per se*, the poem is a protest against jailers and the pitiable state of Nigerian prisons. It is also written in memory of Vivien Stern, a crossbench member of

¹⁷ Sunny Awhefeada, "Nigerian Poetry since 1990: History, Disillusionment and Regenerative Praxis," *Lagos Notes and Records* 15, no. 1 (2009): 223–40.

¹⁸ Niyi Akingbe, "The Articulation of Social Decay: Satire in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry," *African Study Monographs* 35, no. 3/4 (2014): 183–203.

¹⁹ Heather Hewett, "Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation," *English in Africa* 32, no. 1 (2005): 73–97.

²⁰ Cherry Clayton, "Post-Colonial, Post-Apartheid, Postfeminist: Family and State in Prison Narratives by South African Women," *Kunapipi* 13, no. 1 (1991): 22.

the British House of Lords, who miraculously survived the Guillain-Barré syndrome that she contracted due to her regular visits to prisons. Stern's interest was in the human rights issues of penal and prison reform. Like her, Ifowodo decries the imprisonment of people for trivial offenses such as stealing peanuts or snatching purses. In the opening of the poem, the speaker points out the cruelty of jailers:

A cruel irony sought one too human
for a joke so cold it scorched the tongue
that laughed. An impish glee and a can
of tricks hemmed his dark sarong.

All is not sleight-of-hand – the master-
torturer knows the bone to break
and the fleshly cast of plaster
to cover the damage in a freak. (MDA, 74)

The speaker cautions against an act too heinous to be laughed at. The 'master- / torturer', who 'knows' the horrific job so well in these lines, represents a prison warden. In lines 7 and 8, the speaker uses a metaphor, to expose the torture of inmates. Here he equates the cover-up of atrocities by wardens to a 'cast of plaster' over untreated injuries. Using irony, he condemns prison as punishment for crimes in the next stanzas:

Oh, if you try hard enough, pull
together all the wisdom of the world
and for what you lack, seek the school,
you too will, with sufficient hate and a word,

raise the prison to punish crime:
the stealing of peanuts or private water,
the snatching of a purse and the prime
murder – every known or human hunger

damnable by the menacing arm of law,
you will lay brick upon brick and carve
the club to break the digging claw. (MDA, 74,75)

The speaker decries acts by jailers to punish crimes. In lines 9 and 10, he implies that the prison system is inexorably resistant to change. Lines 12 and 13 indicate that the warders take the law into their hands. The jailer is accused of punishing all types of crimes, from mere 'stealing' to 'prime murder'. In lines 17 and 18, the speaker creates the metaphoric image of a weapon produced specifically to prevent and damage initiative. This form of torture is harmful to instinctively purposeful activity. The culture of torture in prison sets the tone of the poem in the next stanzas:

How to banish light and air and starve
a living room of the stray morsel
of life? To prevent the groan of death,
the smell of unwashed bodies and unwashable
sores, of the spilling buckets of human waste

kept in the corner of the cell? How to keep
the stench of the putrefying prisoner
bottled beneath the leaking roof? Lose no sleep,
the jailer quips, joying in the answer. (MDA, 75)

The speaker uses a set of rhetorical questions to expose the horrors of prisons: lines 20 and 21 query the warders' intention to snuff out life from prisoners. The speaker uses putrid images such as 'groan of death', 'smell', 'unwashed bodies', 'unwashable sores', 'human waste', 'stench', and 'putrefying' to expose the appalling living conditions of prison. Lines 27 and 28 show the jailer's inhumanity to the plight of prisoners. In the stanzas that follow, the speaker deploys italics to reveal some tricky aspects of prison life:

*Here is the elusive cure for crime:
the convict and soon-to-be-convict
shall measure each second of time
to be served against the profit* 30

*in the act. The walking cadaver,
the TB plague and the epidemic death
prove deterrence to all but the thief and the murderer
who alone get the rap and deserve no mirth.* 35
(MDA, 75 original italics)

The speaker sees resilience in the prisoners, despite their inhumane conditions. Lines 31-33 suggest how offenders evaluate the period spent in detention with the essence of the crime they committed. Lines 33-35 are indications of the terminal ailments plaguing prisoners. The speaker reveals some of Vivien's health challenges further:

*And there is greater crime and torture for her
that would serve with gentle hand
light and air to the haunted hall, breaker
of the absolving walls of guilt, who would stand* 40

*and spray with tar the jural brick. But since
a dwelling homelier than the body's flesh
cannot be, a prison then of her own body
the ossification then of fluid and flesh,*

*the freezing of joints. Only the blinking
of the eyes to prove a living thing. Applaud
she must then – though stern and stunning
the sentence be – this jail where frozen blood* 45

*cements cell to cell for the perfect prison.
The key in his hand, locks rusted, head or tail
the jailer wins. Or does he? Listen
to Vivien's voice assailing walls anew. And hail!* 50
(MDA, 75, 76; original italics)

The speaker expresses some solemn concern about Vivian's health. Lines 37-38 refer to Vivien's own unjust imprisonment by her illness. 'Ossification', 'freezing joints' and 'blinking of the eyes to prove a living thing' indicate the symptoms of Vivian's weakness and paralysis of limbs. In lines 46-49, the speaker suggests that she has no choice but to appreciate or praise her own jail—because it is the 'perfect' prison—more 'perfect' than 'real' jails because it really paralyzes her—the condition that 'real' jails strive for in their occupants. The poem ends on a philosophical note. Lines 50 and 51 suggest that the jailer appears to go unpunished for the crimes committed against prisoners; however, the rhetorical question 'or does he?' asks if he is indeed free and gives a hint at Vivien's possible victory. The speaker ends by offering a warning to the oppressors about the possibility of another attack: 'Listen / to Vivien's voice assailing walls anew / And hail!'

The poems, 'Her Bed is Vacant' and 'My Prison Bed' in *Homeland and Other Poems* and *Madiba* focus on prison conditions. 'My Prison Bed' is included in the section of his book entitled 'Behind the Wall', where he critically examines the prison system. Ifowodo's perception of the prison system shows a denunciation of poor infrastructure but with less horrific experiences than Brutus. He narrates his prison ordeal, and that of 'Akin', upon their imprisonment by the Nigerian oppressive military regime in the poem entitled 'My Prison Bed'. In the opening stanzas of the poem, the speaker describes a location he adopts as a temporary berth:

The first night gave signs of what was to come.
A reed mat on bare concrete, sand shovelled
in by foot from a beachy frontage, showed
what little room for comfort between flesh

and floor. Elbow for pillow, I smuggled
a dream of liberty into the small 5

fraction of night for which a trained army
of mosquitoes was ready to spill blood. (MDA, 82)

The speaker highlights the anxiety he feels about his 'first night' in prison. The first four lines show how little 'comfort' there is in the tiny space, with the 'reed mat' for a bed and the 'bare concrete' floor. The proximity between 'flesh / and floor' draws attention to his actual body, with only 'Elbow for pillow'. He anticipates an attempt at sleep that is fraught with incessant mosquito bites. The mosquitoes are personified as 'a trained army' that is 'ready to spill blood', truncating the speaker's 'dream of liberty' in the same way that the operation of 'a trained army' truncates the dream of a freedom fighter. The 'trained army' in this fanciful metaphor echoes the clampdown on civil rights and political activists by soldiers in Nigeria during the era of military dictatorship. The speaker goes on to narrate the events of the next day:

At dawn, five fingers pressed on the right cheek
branded me with ill-presumed tribal marks, 10
leaving me wondering why, seeing that Akin
with the right to the marks had a clean cheek.

You could say the first night was glorious, gave
a false picture, if spent in an office
whose chairs were made to vacate their tables; yes, 15
you could say we merely slept on duty! (MDA, 82)

The first two lines re-emphasise the speaker's uncomfortable sleeping posture. He ponders over what seems like 'tribal marks' on his face, caused by the pressure of his hand. Marks of this kind, he feels by rights, belong to his colleague, 'Akin' Adesokan who hails from the South West of Nigeria, a region whose people are often identified with facial scarification. 'Whose chairs were made to vacate their tables; yes / you could say we were merely sleeping on duty' suggests the inconveniences of sleeping in a space that is meant for office accommodation. In the stanzas that follow, the speaker discloses another location the second night:

No pampering place awaited us where we
were driven the second night. Stripped
now of all belongings but sleeping clothes,
the jailer's 'Not exactly like your bed 20

at home,' aimed at soothing two forlorn nights
in a row, mocked with uncommon cruelty,
the unhappy end of a journey home.
The worked steel barrier clanged, clicked shut its huge

and black padlock of Chinese make, shaking 25
the fog of tiredness out of our heads.
the room was, admittedly, large, nothing
close to the pride-of-place cell of prison. (MDA, 82)

The speaker points out that the second prison is different from the former one. Lines 20 and 21 show that this jailer retains some sympathy for prisoners. The words 'aimed at soothing two forlorn nights' show this jailer attempting to alleviate the suffering of his charges. The use of alliteration in 'clangd, clicked' recreates onomatopoeically the sounds of 'the worked steel barrier' to the cell, and these sounds awaken the speaker's consciousness of his imprisonment. The speaker admits that the 'room' is not as bad as a normal prison cell when he says 'nothing / close to the pride-of-place cell of prison'. It is a large room that is not as cramped as the previous one where the inmates had to assume awkward sleeping positions. So, it is not only the physical condition of the prison that is different, but the attitude of the warders. The speaker highlights the poor sanitary condition of the bedding in the next stanzas:

Exhaustion dropped me down
to sleep, only to be sprung to my feet 30

in an instant by the foul smell of the

pillow. I turned on the fluorescent light
to examine the beddings. How glad I
was to have perished the thought of sniffing

them in the dark! Under the light, they seemed 35
a salvage of the dung-heap, drenched and dried
under rain and sun, spat and pissed upon
to suit them to prisoners and their needs. (MDA, 83)

The thought that this may be better than the other prison is quickly discarded as the speaker lies on his bed. His choice of words such as: 'foul smell', 'salvage', 'dung-heap', 'drenched', 'spat', and 'pissed' suggest putrescence. The poem provides insight to all of its readers into the deplorable state of the prison system. Ifowodo is more subtle in exposing the sexual details of prisoners through poetry. There are a few indications and signs of prisoners' sexuality in the poem 'My Prison Bed'. In the following excerpt, the speaker reveals the discovery of stains on the prison bedding as he scrutinizes it:

One such prisoner, I presume, startled
out of a wet dream, sprayed his vital fluids
to draw lines and ringed blotches on the foam.
Any sleep this night or the nights to come

lay in this bed or bare concrete without 5
a mat. I turned the foam, beat and brushed it
with a broom, turned also the foul pillow
and made peace with the smells of sleep in prison. (MDA, 83)

The speaker detects 'fluids' presumably from an ex-inmate 'on the foam'. Lines 2 and 3 indicate that there are nocturnal emissions or 'wet dreams' on the foam. The speaker's attitude is relatively understanding and phlegmatic toward his unknown predecessor's 'startled' sexual act of 'spray[ing]' the 'vital fluids'. Line 6 shows that the speaker's concern is eventually more on having some sleep than on the sexual past of his mattress. Ifowodo's speaker provides fewer details about the sexuality of prisoners because he is more concerned about the dehumanising and unforeseen attitude of warders towards the plight of the inmates.

Ifowodo on his part thematises the effects the incarceration of a male partner has on a 'woman' in the poem entitled 'Her Bed is Vacant Again'. The poem, a tribute to Winnifred Madikizela-Mandela (Winnie), highlights the resilient spirit and doggedness of her crusade for South Africa's liberation. It centres on Winnie's activism and the effect of her husband's absence from her bed. Ifowodo contends with the harassment and detention of Nelson Mandela at the hands of the Apartheid authority moments after his preliminary marriage activities with his wife Winnie. The poet celebrates the grit and forthrightness of purpose with which Winnie confronts the obnoxious restrictions placed on her and her lack of freedom to carry on her task as a married woman and mother during her husband's absence in prison. The poem opens with a woman anticipating the return of her husband:

When finally he returns to his portion
of the bed, a poem grew ecstatic and said,
Now the wedding can take place
and loneliness will no longer burn her pillow...
But her bed is vacant again! 5 (HOP, 37)

The speaker expects the return of the male figure of the union. Lines 1 and 2 indicate the man's excitement to continue the crafting of a poem with a related theme. The phrase 'his portion of the bed' shows the man's ownership of a share 'of the bed' and suggests that they are separate – not lovers – equal partners in the bed where each occupies her or his space. The speaker uses a metaphor in 'loneliness will no longer burn her pillow' in which the trauma of 'loneliness' is given the dangerous power of fire. In the next stanza, the speaker addresses the challenges she faces in the absence of her partner:

The union, it's true, was in a time of cholera
leaving her nurse and patient in the plague:
she could not mend socks or tattered coat

serve a favourite dish at the dinner table
or soothe a child to sleep in quiet arms. 10 (HOP, 37)

The speaker highlights some of the activities of the ‘woman’ in the absence of her husband due to his involvement in the struggle. He uses medical images such as ‘nurse’, and ‘patient’ to illustrate the effect of the struggle on the couple. The speaker portrays the woman as both a ‘nurse’ and a ‘patient in the plague’. The terms ‘cholera’ and ‘plague’ are presumably used to illustrate the burden of the apartheid as a destructive, debilitating and wasting disease. The phrase ‘a time of cholera’ implies that the union was contracted during the Apartheid era, when the struggle for liberation was protracted and destroyed family life to the extent that the woman could not carry out normal household duties such as ‘mend[ing] socks or tattered coat’ or ‘serv[ing] a favourite dish’. Her commitment to the struggle supersedes her attention to domestic tasks. In the next part of the poem the speaker points out some of the difficulties the woman experiences:

And she lacked bedtime stories too —
or she could have rocked her kids to sleep
to the cry of death and funeral songs
the hardpacked rage of work hostels?
She could have mimed the sirens and dogs 15
outside her guarded doorpost
for lullabies of a peaceful night? (HOP, 37)

The speaker creates binary oppositions between peace and violence. There is an opposition between ominous and frightening sounds such as ‘funeral songs’ and the noise of ‘sirens and dogs’, and the innocent and soothing sounds of children’s ‘bedtime stories’ and ‘lullabies’. He wonders whether the woman used the sounds of violence as lullabies and if so, given the violence of her context, whether they were appropriate to be used as such. In the next stanza, the speaker exposes the potential of the woman:

She was toughened by the plague
as the baobab by perennial drought,
primed to renew life from gnarled tissue 20
in any hole they cared to dump her.
They sent colour-trained dogs to sniff danger
from her skin but only stroked the fire in her bones,
forcing her who could have loved blindly
to draw gridlines for her heart. 25 (HOP, 38)

The speaker extols the woman’s inner strength in an extended simile in which he compares the woman’s tough resistance to the ‘plague’ with the baobab’s ability to survive many seasons of ‘perennial drought’. Lines 20 and 21 refer to the woman’s resilience which, like the ‘baobab’s ‘gnarled tissue’, has the ability to sprout no matter how bad the conditions are. And lines 22 and 23 suggest that there are dogs trained to attack based on human skin colour. Lines 24 and 25 refer to a change in the woman’s attitude, from ‘[blind]’ or indiscriminate love to adherence to emotional ‘gridlines’ that guide and restrict her affections. In the next stanza, the speaker reveals that the woman’s marriage is likely to take a different turn when the man returns:

So if after he returned to their marriage bed 25
It is cleaved anew by a sword
forged only to sever love, let’s recall
the vows sworn to a cause wider
than the known world—than two selves
in singular joy or pain. Oh let us recall 30
that the two were pledged from the start
to an uneasy walk where two roads must be right
if in separating the journey they lead home. (HOP, 38)

The speaker exposes what might befall the union when the man returns in these lines. He asks his reader to ‘recall’ that this marriage is a commitment not just to ‘two selves’ but ‘to a cause wider / than the known world’. This is why their taking ‘two [different] roads’ might seem ‘right’ if their diversion ‘lead home’. The leading ‘home’ is a metaphor for their most satisfactory destination – national liberation – which both partners

may approach through ‘separate’ paths. The speaker deploys a paradox, in which the ‘separation’ is a sign of its opposite, unity, under certain circumstances. The two spouses may have to take different approaches in their commitment to the struggle for the purpose of emancipation. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker sums up his feelings and fears:

So if after he returned her bed is vacant again
let the poem rewrite itself and say: 35

*the wedding took place and lasts
in the colours of a new day.* (HOP, 38; original italics)

The speaker envisions the outcome of the marriage between the two. Lines 36 and 37 suggest that if the two achieve the purpose of the ‘wider cause’, then the marriage is successful, even if the two parties are not sharing a bed. The poem presents the struggle of partners whose efforts in different ways contribute to the same goal – the emancipation of their nation.

CONCLUSION

The last poem provides a fitting close to this article which has highlighted Ifowodo’s yet under-researched but invaluable contributions to the constantly growing and evolving cultural archive of the Nigerian national discourse. The foregoing analyses have demonstrated how Ifowodo’s protest poetry, prison narratives and eco-critical criticism imaginatively and critically document Nigeria’s troubled political and socio-economic under the burden of the brutal military dictatorships of the 1980s and 1990s. Ifowodo’s engagement with the ecological and socio-economic fall-out of oil exploration in the country’s Niger Delta region also marks his writing poetry as an important contribution to re-articulations of Nigerian nationhood. For these reasons, his works need to be given greater attention than it has received so far in pedagogical and critical domains.

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