

“Here Nothing Works”: A Stylistic Criticism of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s Poetic Reflections on the “Nigerian Factor” Phenomenon

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Abstract

This study attempts a stylistic criticism of select J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s poems that touch on the widespread backwardness in the Nigerian system as a result of which the country grapples with challenges of development. Focusing on the nagging question of the ‘Nigerian factor’ syndrome as being the social malaise partly responsible for the visible signs of underdevelopment in Nigeria, the study considers the despicable attitudes of typical Nigerian road users and the attendant alarming rate of carnage on Nigerian roads. The study analyses the schemes and tropes that Clark-Bekederemo deploys in the select poems to run a telling commentary on the prevailing breakdown of social order in the country among individuals, and the ineptitude on the part of government agencies, revealing the poet’s bemused state as to why Nigeria seems to swim against the tide of international best practices in national development schemes. The study concludes that a blend of literary interpretation with the analysis and description of stylistic markers could yield a stimulating understanding of a poet’s attitude to grave national issues

Keywords: Here Nothing Works, J.P. Clsrk-Bekederemo, Poetic Reflection, Nigerian Factor.

Introduction

The present researcher's earliest encounter with Clark-Bekederemo's poetry exposed him to the fact that the poet's forte lies in the reflection of his Niger Delta cultural background in his poetic composition. Therefore, his use of imagistic expressions to depict situations, beliefs, objects, the environment, among others, clearly cuts for him the figure of a quintessential literary writer-cum-cultural ambassador of the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In fact, a striking point of divergence between his poem "Abiku", apart from his tone, attitude or mood, and that of Wole Soyinka's poem also entitled "Abiku" is his deployment of common imagery in the Niger Delta world to give a distinct cultural perception to the *Abiku* (the wanderer child that revels in an endless rotational cycle of life and death) myth in Africa.

Beyond the present writer's understanding of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's extolling his cultural heritage in his poetry, he later had an insight into his concern for national issues when he read J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's popular collection of poetry, *Casualties*, which exposed him to J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's profound thoughtful reflections on the crisis of nationhood in the wake of Nigeria's civil war experience. Daniel (2008) in her work entitled "Clark-Bekederemo – The Weeping Poet" examines the poet's pain and anguish over the civil war in Nigeria as expressed in *The Casualties*. Focusing on the poet's lamentation of the carnage and wastage experienced by the nation during that trying moment of her political history, she emphasises the lessons of the war experience for the nation, especially in tackling the volatile Niger Delta issue.

Perusing Daniel (2008), we come to realise that there are two major lacunae in her treatment of Clark-Bekederemo's poetry which a further study could explore. First, the fact that she delimits her focus to the Nigerian civil war experience leaves some other issues of grave national consequences untouched. Besides, she does not dwell on the poet's use of language in the poems analysed, remarking rather cursorily: "The poet, through his effective use of language does not only cry for Nigeria's sorrowful history but warns the nation to avoid a repeat performance [...]" (Daniel, 2008: 154). Reference to the poet's language is evidently tangential, as she does not validate her claim by showing how linguistic devices in the poems she studies make the poet's messages effective.

It is Yeibo (2011a) that attempts to fill this gap when he examines the patterns of lexical choices and their stylistic value in Clark-Bekederemo's poetry. This focus, according to Yeibo (2011a: 139), is motivated by the fact that "[...] a great deal of studies on the writer's poetry focus on literary and thematic features, thereby neglecting the linguistic aspects". In another study, Yeibo (2011b) emphasises the place of syntactic analysis in the appreciation of the language of poetry, analysing the structural constituents of word groups and the textual functions they perform in Clark-Bekederemo's poetry. In both studies Yeibo (2011a; 2011b), it is clear that his focus in appreciating Clark-Bekederemo's poetry is mainly on the linguistic practices that characterise the poet's literary idiolect without evoking serious social issues that could project the poet as a committed writer that uses his poetry to enlighten and inspire action in a country desirous of national rebirth.

To this end, we have a dual concern in the present study. First, we identify some of Clark-Bekederemo's poems that revolve around the poet's engagement with the recurring decimal of the question of "Nigerian factor" in Nigeria's national life, thereby taking us further from Nigeria's civil war experience. Second, we attempt a literary interpretation of the select poems by examining the national issues raised in them and the poet's attitude to them. In so doing, we attempt to fulfil one of the functions of the literary critic as outlined by Chinweizu (1975: 34) which is to explore "themes and ideas, thereby illuminating the layers

of meaning beneath the surface of a given work; evaluating the work and situating it within the literary tradition". Hence, we adopt a literary-stylistic approach that is geared towards forging meaningful links between our intuitive response to the critical national issues generated in the select poems and the linguistic means that enhance meaning making. We equally attempt to suggest new interpretations of the poetic discourse, following Barry's (1995: 210) position that "Stylistics brings a special expertise to bear on the linguistic features of a text, and therefore sees a dimension of the material which the ordinary reader would be unaware of".

Clark-Bekederemo's Poetic Vision and Technique

The name J. P. Clark-Bekederemo in Nigeria's literary world is synonymous with the evolution of the poetry genre. Although the writer is also an acclaimed playwright, his poetry is, however, more striking because of its more open concern with the state of the nation. Elimimian (1989: 1) considers Clark-Bekederemo as one of Africa's major poets: "In terms of the number of poems he has produced, one can say that his overall output has been comparatively moderate. But in terms of the quality of his work, any objective assessment of him as a poet would rate him highly". In respect of his involvement in and contribution to the growth of the poetry genre in Nigeria's literary world, Bamikunle (1993: 315) observes:

Clark has been present since the beginnings of Anglophone African poetry. He has helped lay its foundation, establish its characteristics, and oversee the direction of its growth; he was and is still part of its formal experimentation, took part in the debates concerning the validity of the African use of English, and was involved in the controversy over how Western poetic traditions would fuse with those of Africa in the works of African poets.

Despite the acclaimed contribution Clark-Bekederemo is said to have made to the development of Anglophone African poetry, critics have heavily descended on him, casting great shadow on the question of commitment in his poetry. Clark in his preface to *State of the Union* says that he has been viewed as one "who is [...] aloof, remote, unengaged and uncommitted to any cause of the people" Elimimian (1989: 73). Commenting on the essence of commitment in African literature, Egudu (1975: 424) writes: "[...] modern African literature not only manifests glaring human relevance, but also reflects the writer's awareness of social reality coupled with an imaginative response to that reality". With regard to Clark-Bekederemo's poetry, Petersen (1981: 9) comments:

Contrary to the previous generation of West African poets who had a commitment to further the cause of independence and to extol Negro virtues, Clark's generation has no public commitment and no recognisable school of writing. Instead they are a loosely connected group of individuals [...] who do not share a common theme or style [...] they all write intensely personal, even private poetry. Their subject matter tends to be autobiographical, an examination of their feelings in response to various situations.

Petersen's (1981) submission above casts light on Clark-Bekederemo's poetic vision, as there does not seem to be a clear-cut ideological bent in his poetry, which critics have seen as containing random themes. In his first collection of poetry, *Poems*, Clark-Bekederemo treats numerous themes that centre on events of early childhood remembered by the adult poet who tries to make sense of them. Poems that fall within this category include: "Night Rain", "Streamside Exchange" and "For Granny (from Hospital)". There are also some

poems of his that dwell on private encounters such as “Fulani Cattle”, “Abiku” and “Ibadan”. Characteristic of these poems is their incidental or occasional nature, with little to string or bind them together.

However, in *A Reed in the Tide*, which is a collection that still largely contains occasional poems, Clark-Bekederemo begins to write political poetry. This leads directly on to his thematic concerns in another collection, *Casualties*, which chronicles the events that led to the thirty-month-long Nigeria’s civil war and captures the poet’s rumination on the horrendous tragedy of the war. The volume “discusses the war from the point of view of someone [...] who had access to inside knowledge which was denied to the general public [...]” (Petersen, 1981: 11). In *State of the Union* which followed *Casualties*, the poet’s worries about the Nigerian socio-political and economic problems are brought to the fore with the poet’s pessimism and disillusionment having clear expressions in the tone of the poems. Little wonder then that Elimimian (1989:73) submits: “The truth of the matter is, it is in *State of the Union*, more than any of his other works, that the poet’s awareness of contemporary socio-political reality becomes more apparent, and far more vigorously articulated”. Consequently, with such an ideological disposition, one may begin to change one’s perception about the non-commitment stance that critics have come to label Clark-Bekederemo with.

As to the question of the technique employed by Clark-Bekederemo in his poetic collections, one cannot but raise the issue of the synthesis of cultures, that is, the dual heritage that African writers of the poet’s generation had. Bamikunle (1993: 317) notes that “[t]o understand the evolution of Clark’s poetic technique, one must start with the concept of the double artistic heritage which he claimed from the very beginning of his poetic career”. The poet has both the Western and the African artistic heritage which enables him to fuse Western poetic form and certain Western-language practices with various elements of African traditional poetry. In an attempt to gravitate the Western poetic form that he adopts in his poetic writing, particularly in terms of language use, Clark-Bekederemo still largely stays faithful to his African cultural background.

Consequently, he uses images, symbols, patterns of language, myths and legends, beliefs and customs drawn largely from his Niger Delta background in Nigeria. According to Izevbye, cited in Bamikunle (1993: 318), the strength of Clark-Bekederemo’s most successful poems rests on his “recreation of the local environment” and his “genuine interest in the oral tradition which formed the extant tradition”. Elimimian (1989: 4) attempts to distinguish three stages of what he calls “Clark-Bekederemo’s lyrical development”, namely the apprenticeship stage, the imitative stage and the individualised stage. By apprenticeship stage, Elimimian (1989) refers to the body of poems in which the poet is trying to find his bearing, that is, poems which seem to have been composed through a process of trial and error. The imitative stage is that in which the poet borrows extensively from the Western literary conventions, having been fascinated by the style of great Western poets such as T. S. Eliot, Yeats and Hopkins. At the individualised stage, Elimimian (1989) sees Clark-Bekederemo to have cultivated his own poetic idiom with his image and rhythm not only distinctively unique and often intensely dramatic but also mature to reflect the subject matter he develops.

As a poet committed to political developments in his society, Clark-Bekederemo devises a poetic technique that would suit his motif. So, in his political poems, the poet resorts to the symbolic representation of political events in fables and the animation of nature to make philosophical statements. This “technique of disguising referents by ingenious euphemism” (Bamikunle, 1993: 318-319) is what the poet employs in the poem “The Leader”

where the principal symbols denote animals, as political actors are referred to as killers of cows, iguanas, storks and alligators. In so doing, the poet succeeds in describing the political conflicts and intrigues in very indirect images.

This new development turns out to be the dominant form of Clark's poetry in *Casualties*. Bamikunle (1993: 319) points out that the volatile political atmosphere then required such "political and artistic expediency", as it was "a time of emergency, when all kinds of decrees could be cited to put any given individual away". Consequently, Clark-Bekederemo "decided to turn the realities of the political crisis into myth and developed a system of ingenious and complex fables to convey his observations and interpretations of those events" (Bamikunle, 1993: 319). In the words of Izevbaye quoted by Bamikunle (1993: 319), "folktale and folksong provide the form for some of the poems" and that the folktale base of the poems is "probably why the language is essentially prosaic and primarily colloquial".

Hence, critics have come to associate prose-like language with the style of Clark-Bekederemo in some of his poems and the reason adduced to such a technique "probably arises from his desire to write accessible poetry that speaks to a reading public outside the university about important issues of state" (Bamikunle, 1993: 319). Consequently, Oboke (1978: 218) comments that "Clark uses more concrete images that are familiar and homely", stating further that "[...] the outstanding characteristic of Clark's poetry is the descriptive element, the ability to lend concreteness to his experience through simple visual images and well-chosen simple words"

The Select Poems for Analysis

It was Thumboo (1970: 388) that comments that "Clark's work possesses a refreshingly wide range of interests". Wide as such a range of interests could be, the writer hints that in an African context or the context of emerging nations where art is frequently tempted into propaganda, Clark-Bekederemo is quite conscious of the demands of his craft. To this end, his commitment to the volatile political climate in Nigeria's historical evolution is a constant in some of his collections of poetry, thereby cutting the figure of the artist in the submission of Gilroy (1986: 50) that "[...] every artist must give expression to the world he knows and cannot, therefore, be oblivious to political conditions in his society". No wonder then that Egudu (1975: 424) refers to the artist as a "social regulator and barometer of social morality".

Guided by these views and coupled with our sensibilities of the global treatment of Nigeria as "a country in its own planet", as it were, swimming against the tide of internationally acclaimed best practices, we focus on Clark-Bekederemo's poetic consciousness that runs a telling commentary on the Nigerian state. In particular, we consider as very grave the unseemly attitude of road users, especially those that are referred to as the 'commercial (bus) drivers' in the Nigerian parlance and the resultant alarming carnage on Nigerian roads day-in-day-out. And given the poor response of relevant national agencies to managing serious national issues including emergencies, we equally reflect on the general atmosphere of the collapse of social order popularly encapsulated in the phraseology "Nigerian factor". Going through his collections of poetry, we have chosen the "The Lagos-Ibadan Road before Shagamu" from *Incidental Songs for Several Persons* and "Here Nothing Works" from *State of the Union* to address the issues respectively. The poems are sourced from his anthology entitled *The Poems [1958-1998]* published in 2002.

Literary-stylistic Interpretation of the Select Poems

One recurrent issue in the Nigerian state which has not only hampered economic buoyancy but has also depleted the active population that could drive the economy is the nagging problem of road accidents in the country and the human factors that are the causative agents. It would be interesting to know, therefore, how the poet as the conscience of the nation captures such a mind-boggling social problem in the poem “The Lagos-Ibadan Road before Shagamu”.

From the title of the poem, the reader’s attention is called to a particular locale which is the subject of the poet’s concern. Given the fact that such a problem is widespread across the different geographical zones, the nominal group which serves as the title of the poem becomes a place signifier not just for that road in question but a miniature of Nigerian roads that have been generally tagged “death traps”. It may interest us to note that it is not just the poor state of the roads alone that is generally responsible for road mishaps; sometimes the decrepit vehicles and the untoward practices of (bus) drivers are predisposing factors. The title of the poem thus symbolises the theatre of all manner of absurdities that one could imagine being staged on a typical Nigerian highway. So, one would not be surprised to hear the poet recount:

*A bus groaned uphill. Trapped
In their seats, fifty odd passengers rocked
To its pulse, each dreaming
Of a different destination.*

The predicator element “groaned” used by the poet to capture the sound produced by the engine of the bus is an auditory image that is suggestive of the difficulty with which the mechanical system of the bus works. One could then perceive through the inner ears the offensive sound the engine produces as opposed to an ear-pleasing sound that vehicles in a society with values, which ply major highways as a means of transport, should have.

A semantic analysis of the word “groan” would reveal that the subject it should take ordinarily should be a living entity that is able to react to either a pleasurable or non-pleasurable stimulus. However, as the word is used in this poetic line, it gives the picture of a collocative clash where the bus which is an inanimate object collocates with the verb “groan”, breaking the rule of selection restriction, a semantic feature which stipulates that a linguistic element would share the same categorial feature(s) with its co-text. Normally, the nominal collocate of the verb “groan” should have been elements like “the injured boys/ladies”, “the wounded animals” and not the bus as portrayed in this line.

This deviant pattern obviously used figuratively by the poet could suggest the mechanical reaction of the bus to the decrepit condition of the road or the lack of maintenance to which the bus itself has been subjected by the owner. The groaning could also have resulted from the exceedingly unbearable load it carries beyond its capacity: the outrageous number of passengers “trapped” in it, personal effects and agricultural produce or goods. Although the poet does not give the maximum number of the passengers the bus could take at once, his use of the verb “trapped” suggests negativity and portends danger, as a captive is utterly at the mercy of his/her captor and may not be able to struggle for survival should there be further threat to his or her life.

The picture painted by the poet here is a customary sight on Nigerian roads, which the officials of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) are trying to combat on a daily basis. We must admit, however, that their efforts are largely being undermined by allegations of corrupt practices being levelled against some of their officials apart from the ignorance that road users demonstrate given the high level illiteracy among them and in some cases nonchalance.

Normally, passengers should be comfortably seated on a bus and enjoy a jolly ride on a roadworthy bus and a good road but the contrary is the case here, as the poet uses the adjective “odd” to qualify the passengers in a bid to underline the fact that theirs is a bizarre experience. In fact, his use of the adjective “odd” suggests that the poet pities their condition which is at variance with the best practices. Besides, the use of the verb ‘rocked’ is suggestive of the inconvenient sitting position that they find themselves as a result of which they will have to be swayed in diverse directions when the bus possibly bumps into bad spots on the road probably coupled with its possible worn-out shock absorbers crying for change. In such a terrible condition, it would be a mere fantasy or a matter of chance that the passengers would arrive safely at their destinations, as they are prone to danger given the awful condition of the road, the ramshackle vehicle itself, and the overcrowded passengers and their belongings exceeding what the bus was originally designed to carry. Little wonder then that the poet uses the verb “dreaming” to capture the passengers’ state of mind.

The dreaming referred to by the poet here is not the subconscious activity that takes place in the human brain during sleep but the wishes on the passengers’ minds as to what they hope for in not-too-distant a time. Such a dream could either come to pass or get shattered depending on the prevailing circumstances, hence the poet’s use of the progressive aspect evidenced in the “-ing” participle showing the temporariness of the action. The passengers’ psychological frame of mind could be hinged on the graffiti, which is a constant on most vehicles that are used for transport on Nigerian highways. The poet writes:

GOD’S TIME IS THE BEST, read

One legend, NO CONDITION IS

PERMANENT, said another.

This graffiti as aphoristic statements could have been injected into the poetic lines for any of the following reasons. First, they could suggest the people’s consolatory responses to the trying socio-economic conditions in the country, their ineluctable resignation to fate or an expression of the thick skin or coping strategy they have devised to bearing the pangs of social decadence in a society that has failed to deliver to its inhabitants the good amenities they need to enjoy life. Second, the maxims could suggest the paradox of the Nigerian situation where it is commonplace and of course foolhardy to bear stoically the challenges facing the country, hoping for divine intervention or believing that change is constant in life.

As noted earlier, there could be concomitant factors along the road that precipitate road mishaps. The poet cites the disposition of typical Nigerian drivers behind the wheels:

On over the hill Ashiru

Drove the lot, a cloud of Indian hemp

Unfolding among his robes.

The poet, by using visual imagery to appeal to the readers' sensibilities, touches on a culpable attitude exhibited by some Nigerian drivers who drive under the influence of stimulants such as alcohol and marijuana. In sane societies, drivers caught in such untoward acts are made to face the wrath of the law by getting fined and having their driver's licence withdrawn. But in the Nigerian society, drivers engage in such acts with impunity and in the process endanger the lives of innocent citizens. Therefore, the driver, Ashiru, mentioned by the poet is a prototype of the errant Nigerian drivers who by their delinquent acts cause carnage on the roads.

Although the poet may sound rather hyperbolic in his description of the quantity of the narcotic substance or of its smoke as "a cloud of Indian hemp/unfolding among his robes", the visual imagery suggests the massive quantity of the substance or of its chemical reaction physically and the imagined psychological effect on the driver's psyche. Therefore, the impression is given that the driver's taking more than enough of the stimulant would take total control of his psyche and eventually spell doom for the passengers in his custody. One is not surprised, therefore, that in no time the predictable happened:

On the hillside: like a stream

Was the going downhill, swift

Past recollection, straight into a bend

Upturned as a saucer, and

The journey split over in a ditch

In the early morning sun,

If the driver is under the influence of some stimulant, it is certain that he will be hyperactive and at such a dangerous spot as a bend where he should slow down and negotiate it with caution, he, instead, drives "straight into a bend". The use of the directional adverbial element "straight into a bend" is stylistic, as it shows the inevitable result of the driver's inability to control himself as well as the vehicle any longer. Even if the driver had not been under the influence of any stimulant, the accident could still have occurred because road signs which normally should provide clues to drivers about the state of roads may not be erected and even when erected, they could have been overgrown by bush or completely blotted out by the effects of the elements. In some cases, even when the road signs are rightly positioned, some road users who illegally got the driver's licence without passing through the required driving tests may not be able to interpret the codes. Vehicle inspection officers popularly called VIOs in Nigeria are culpable in this regard, as they have also been alleged of engaging in blatant corrupt practices, issuing driver's licence to incompetent adults and even the underage.

Consequently, the journey which the passengers had been "dreaming" would end at their respective destinations "spilt over in a ditch". The verb "spilt" creates a visual image of the vicious end of the journey, while the prepositional phrase "in a ditch" is a place deixis for that ever-lurking dangerous spot along the roadside for the careless driver to end his journey and that of his hapless passengers. At such a locale, the vehicle cannot but get "upturned as a saucer". The visual imagery used by the poet with the evocation of the saucer is suggestive of the crashing effect of the bus when the driver loses control. One can then imagine in the mind's eye the carcasses of the wreckage like the splinters of a broken saucer scattered in different directions.

It is instructive that the time of the day when the crash happens as depicted in the poet's use of the temporal signifier "in the early morning" reminds one of Wole Soyinka's poem "Death in the Dawn". Nwoga (1967: 191) writes on the poem thus:

This is a poem inspired by the poet's experience of seeing a man killed in a motor accident while travelling early in the morning [...] irony is clear in the title of the poem, as dawn implies beginning and hope, while death destroys.

In Clark-Bekederemo's own poem, the same time signifier suggests a period of hope and aspirations, as we noted earlier that the passengers were "dreaming". But instead of the hopes and aspirations being realised, disaster strikes, terminating all dreams.

When such a road accident happens, one would expect rapid response squads to be deployed to the scene for on-the-spot rescue. In the Nigerian society, the officials of the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC), the Fire Service and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) should constitute the rescue team. But there are usually delays occasioned by some logistic problem, leaving the victims to perish. In that circumstance, it is the bizarre that would follow, as "clamour of flies" would first answer "the alarm". The imagistic expression "clamour of flies" evokes both auditory and visual imagery. The auditory imagery is embedded in the onomatopoeic word "clamour", as flies in such a setting would buzz endlessly at the sight of the gruesome scene, while the visual imagery is in the hovering of the flies over the accident victims' bodies. Such is the gory site that one would find in a country with a failed system.

But it is rather disheartening that even when such an incident is to be reported in the dailies, the human feeling that should be reflected in the reportage is not evident in the stereotyped sensational headlines that editors use to report such a horrendous tragedy. The poet writes:

*No need of first aid,
All died on the spot,
Said the dailies.
... the driver
... escaped unhurt*

The use of determiners is stylistically significant in the above lines. Ordinarily, the accident victims should have had first aid had the accident not been fatal. But considering the terminal nature of the impact of the accident on them, one could understand the use of the determiner "no" before nominal group "need of first aid". In another sense, the use of the determiner could suggest that even if the victims could have survived the accident, the system has failed to provide the necessary aids that could save the situation. Therefore, the use of the quantifier "all" which serves as a nominal element in "All died on the spot" suggests the predictable result of the failings in a society that is not responsive to emergency situations.

As if to sound a note of warning to drivers who engage in untoward road users' habits and jeopardise people's lives in the process, the poet in a dramatic manner recounts that the driver "escaped unhurt". The verb "escaped" and its complement "unhurt" show the irony of the whole situation, as drivers who indulge in unsafe road habits and put people's lives at risk may themselves be lucky to survive. Disappointingly, instead of apprehending the culprit and charging him to court for human slaughter, the poet recounts that "The police / ... Are

looking for the driver”. One may have the impression that as the search for the culprit continues, the police would close in on him in no time but in the Nigerian context, how long the action of “looking” would take is left to one’s wildest imagination. For more often than not the search for the culprit may never be “completed”, hence the stylistic use of the progressive aspect. Why such a search may never come to fruition may not be far from certain lapses in the system whereby it is a possibility that the driver is not properly licensed and the vehicle may not be properly registered as well, making it difficult for the relevant agencies to trace the driver or the owner of the vehicle.

One may then begin to wonder if this scenario sounds like a fairy tale or there have actually been occurrences like it in the Nigerian society. To people that are familiar with what obtains in sane societies where there is orderliness, the situation in the Nigerian society cannot but sound to them as aberrant. But Clark-Bekederemo who seems to have a graphic representation of the workings of the Nigerian system advances reasons for the plausibility of the occurrence and the like.

So, Clark-Bekederemo in another poem entitled “Here Nothing Works” muses over what it is in the Nigerian society that works against sensible order. From the title of the poem, the tone is set for a completely depressing portrayal of the workings of the Nigerian system. The poet’s topicalisation of the adjunct element “here” in the title is an attempt to foreground the setting, Nigeria, as that to which the reader’s attention is called. For the spatial deictic element to have been drafted to the sentence-initial position as opposed to its possible retention in the sentence-final as in “Nothing Works Here” is stylistically significant. Besides, the use of the indefinite pronoun “nothing” as a quantifier suggesting emptiness as opposed to giving the situation some chance probably by using the quantifier “something” paints an entirely despondent picture of the poet’s assessment of the Nigerian system. The poet laments:

Here nothing works. Services taken

For granted elsewhere either break down

Or do not get started at all

When introduced here.

For emphatic purposes, the poet has to repeat the title of the poem in the first line and goes ahead to justify his claim. So, in the next sentence that starts on line 1, the poet uses the nominal group “Services taken for granted elsewhere” as his point of reference for assessing the situation. The post-modification of the noun head “services” by the poet is stylistically significant, as it intensifies the poet’s argument. First, the adjectival phrase “taken for granted” qualifies the noun “services” to stress the fact that what would work normally in some other environments without having to lose any sleep is what the people in Nigeria would have to grapple with. In fact, the poet’s use of the adverbial element “elsewhere” in the adjectival phrase sets the stage for comparison between two locales, “here” and “elsewhere” referring to Nigeria and other societies respectively.

While the poet gives the impression of the prevalence of the best practices in the distal deictic element “elsewhere”, the picture of the aberrant is painted of the proximal deictic element “here”. So, such services in Nigeria “either break down / Or do not get started at all”. The negative picture of the poet’s depiction of the workings in the Nigerian system is reinforced with the use of the ineffectual action word “break down” followed by the correlative conjunction “or” to give the alternative condition: “do not get started at all”. The

use of the negative particle “not” followed by the intensifying adverbial element “at all” gives the extreme condition of the degeneracy of the Nigerian system.

To substantiate his claim, the poet gives an instance of the project of supply of water for the people’s use and emphasises his disappointment:

... So supply of water

That is basic to life after air

Re-creates for the people

Desert conditions even by the sea,

In the lines above, the poet employs some style markers that enhance the delivery of his message. To underline the essentiality of the supply of water to human existence, he uses the relative clause “That is basic to life after air” to qualify the noun “water”. If water is the next essential thing after air, which humans need to breathe to survive, how accessible is it to the people of Nigeria? If “water is life” as it is commonly said, are the people really living based on the quality and quantity of water the system supplies them?

The poet then drops the bombshell that the supply of water “[r]e-creates for the people / [d]esert conditions even by the sea”. The import of the poet’s message in these lines is hinged on the antonymous words “desert” and “sea”. The metaphor of desert suggests emptiness, barrenness and attendant lack in contrast to the metaphor of the sea which suggests abundance of resources just waiting to be tapped for the good of the people. These metaphors are evoked by the poet to emphasise the fact that the supposed beneficiaries of the social amenity “the people”, which serves as the completive of the preposition “for” in the prepositional phrase “for the people”, have dryness and emptiness before them as opposed to abundance and fullness which they are supposed to have. The paradox of the situation is further heightened with the poet’s use of the adverbial element “even” before the spatial deictic element “by the sea” to express shock that the people lack in the midst of plenty.

It must be then that something is wrong with the system or the hands that run it. In his bemused state, the poet wonders:

What is it in ourselves or in our soil

That things which connect so well elsewhere,

Like the telephone, the motorway, the airways,

Dislocate our lives so much that we all

Begin to doubt our own intelligence?

The poet’s rumination in the lines above is so poignant that one could imagine the level of his disappointment in the system and his longing for that which obtains elsewhere. In this regard, his choice of an interrogative clause as opposed to a declarative clause to express his bewilderment and agitation is striking. Apart from the interrogative thrust of the discourse, the poet’s consideration for certain variables in the system that could possibly hamper efficiency is noteworthy. The poet uses the plural emphatic pronoun “ourselves” and the nominal group “our soil” to point in the direction of the possible causes of the failings in the system.

That the poet uses the inclusive first person plural possessive “our” first as a prefix in “ourselves” and second as a possessive adjective in “our soil” clearly shows that the problem with the system is internal rather than being external. Further, the poet uses the argumentation technique of exemplification to drive home his point by mentioning in particular some services: “the telephone”, “the motorway”, “the airways” as semiotic indexicals for measuring the departure of the workings of the Nigerian system from the acceptable and best practices around the world. In order to clearly emphasise the divergence between the Nigerian system and the globally acceptable best practices, the poet uses the antonymous words “connect” and “dislocate”. While the former paints a positive picture of what obtains “elsewhere”, the latter portends negativity of the situation “here” in Nigeria. In a final state of despondence, the poet concludes:

*So something there must be in ourselves
Or in our times that all things working
For good elsewhere do not work in our expert hands,
When introduced to our soil that is
No different from other lands.*

We see the poet raising very serious national questions in the above lines that call for deep introspection. In fact, his opting for the modal “must” which suggests insistence emphasises his sense of conviction that that the problem lies within, as he touches on a crucial variable “ourselves” and the temporal frame within which the agents operate “our times” and the instrumentation ‘our expert hands’. In this regard, the impression is given that it is the present generation of the people that does not seem to get things right. So, the poet uses ironic sarcasm when he qualifies the agents’ hands with the adjective “expert”. For if indeed the hands were “expert”, then “something” or “everything” “should” be working “here” the way “(all) things” work “elsewhere”.

The views expressed by Clark-Bekederemo thus far on the failings in the system are almost always explained away, using the cliché ‘Nigerian factor’. What indeed is it about this question of ‘Nigerian factor’? Ngwodo (2005: 1) writes:

[...] it is a phenomenon that is at once social, psychic and psychological which embodies the potential failure of any enterprise in Nigeria simply because it may be Nigerian in origin, conception or execution. Our encounters with the various manifestations of this syndrome have become so commonplace and unremarkable. Its malignant presence in our nation is now very much politically correct and socially and morally acceptable.

In this regard, every laxity in the system is almost always trivialised with the cliché without giving serious thoughts to how it could be addressed. From whichever perspective we consider the issue, it is incontrovertible that certainly “something is rotten in the (Nigerian) state” for which there have to be drastic measures taken to redress the situation.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have re-assessed some grave national issues and emphasised the literary writer's role in raising awareness and national consciousness in this regard with a view to addressing them. We have equally drawn attention to the poet's ingenious use of language evidenced in his preponderant use of metaphor and imagery to convey his message. We hold the strong view that the poems we have analysed would go a long way to shed light on Clark-Bekederemo's commitment to burning national issues in a country faced with challenges of development. In this light, we align with Ojo-Ade's (1991: 8) view that:

The artist serves the community and mirrors the life of the people. The essentials of his art are commitment to the culture and responsibility within the society. From his vantage point, the writer chooses to depict reality as he would like it to be or to paint a picture of present pollution, thus challenging the public to seek solutions to the problem.

Arguing along the same line, Egudu (1975: 421) posits that "the socially conscious artists" have some primary functions in society: "namely, to arouse, to persuade, and to reproach where and when necessary".

To provide an insightful analysis and discussion in relation to the poet's role and the literary weapon he/she wields in a debased society, the literary-stylistic approach we have applied further validates the conciliatory claim made in literary and linguistic circles that a marriage of literary and linguistic methods would be the most rewarding engagement for the appreciation of literary texts. For, according to Gerbig and Muller-Wood (2006: 86), "[l]inguistics helps us to 'trust the text' [...] to interpret the text, rather than impose interpretations upon it".

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