THIRD-GENERATION NIGERIAN POETRY AND REVOLTING IMAGERY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OGAGA IFOWODO'S *HOMELAND AND OTHER POEMS*

Kazeem Adebiyi-Adelabu
Department of English
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria
aka.adebiyi@gmail.com/ak.adebiyi@ui.edu.ng

Abstract

The third-generation poetry has been the most socio-politically conscious in modern Nigerian poetry, a fact that underscores the symbiotic nature of the relationship between art and society. The poetry had attained efflorescence during one of the most socially challenging and politically turbulent times in the history of the country, specifically, the despotic years of military rule. As a poet and a social activist, Ogaga Ifowodo's poetry evinces concerns with the realities of this milieu. In this article, using selected poems from his debut poetry collection, *Homeland and Other Poems*, I admit that Ifowodo shares the vision of gloom which characterises the poetry of this period and his generational group of poets. However, I go on to argue that his versification in the collection is different from others' versification in terms of his deployment of imagery to project the vision. Relying on postcolonial insights on the critical concept of otherness, complemented by literariness of formalism, I show how his imagery drips with revulsion in what appears intended as a damning commentary on the social standing of Nigerians, especially of leaders who lived in the era of military dictatorship.

***Keywords*:** *Third Generation Nigerian poetry, Ogaga Ifowodo, Socio-political realities, Homeland and Other Poems*

Introduction

Modern Nigerian poetry has been a witness to and archive of the socio-political realities of the country since its emergence in the twilight of colonial rule. Following Adesanmi and Dunton's (2005) delineation of Nigerian literature into three generations, a close look at the poetry of the third generation shows that this poetic era is clearly the most public-oriented and politically conscious of the three generations. This is particularly so among the poets who bestrode the literary space in the 1980s and 1990s, which heavily underscores the narrative of the military dictatorship years. Ogaga Ifowodo is a prominent member of the generation, whose ideological reflections replicate the poetic consciousness of the third-generation Nigerian poetry.

Literature, particularly referencing the modern African milieu, usually syncs with society. Akinsete (2023, p.101) underscores this notion, averring that "the society foregrounds its reality through literary works". Largely writing within the tradition of committed literature, and with four collections to his credit, Ifowodo is an established name on the Nigerian literary landscape. In addition to *Homeland and Other Poems*, his collections include *Madiba*, *The Oil Lamp*, and *A Good Mourning*. As a poet, he has won numerous awards and recognitions, including the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Prize for Poetry (1996), the ANA/Cadbury poetry prize (2003), the ANA/Gabriel Okara Poetry Prize (2005), and the PEN Barbara Goldsmith Freedom-to-Write Award, USA. While his poetry obviously takes on subjects of diverse thematic interests, there is a perceived stylistic enamour with a particular kind of imagery running through his versification, one that is apprehended elsewhere as gloomy (Adebiyi, 2015).

Other prominent members of the generation, according to Adebiyi (2009) and Egya (2019) have include Femi Oyebode, Olu Oguibe, Afam Akeh, Onookome Okome, Akin Adesokan, Chiedu Ezeanah, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Remi Raji, Nnimmo Bassey, Sesan Ajayi, Joe Ushie, and so on. These poets generally privilege engagements with socio-political subjects such as leadership

challenge, human and metaphorical concepts, rights abuse, corruption in high places, abuse of power, repression of opposition, denial of freedom of expression, class oppression, and the like. It is interesting to note that these subjects are often discursively versified in the works of these poets from national, rather than universal perspective, which easily lends credence to the motif of national consciousness in their poetry (Adebiyi-Adelabu & Aguele, 2018). In other words, the "Nigerianness" of their verses is limned by their thematic engagement.

Although Ifowodo very well partakes in the foregoing style of versification, particularly in his debut collection, *Homeland and Other Poems*, his poetry is often studied from ecocritical perspectives. Therefore, in this article, attention is focused on the socio-political aspect of his poems well outside of the ecological matrix. Specifically, seven socio-political poems, drawn from *Homeland and Other Poems,* are brought under critical examination in this article, with a view to showing how the poet depicts his subjects in imagery that is repulsive. Based on such a depiction, the Nigeria under reference in the poems is metaphorised as socially-revolting. The selected poems are "She lay dying at Oshodi", "Our eyes are born again", "Red rain", "Greed will kill the beast", "Driftwood", "Songs from underground" and "Sanitation day dream".

In his article, "New Trends in Modern African Poetry", Ojaide (1995) cites Shaka as capturing the characteristics of contemporary African Poetry, which also refers to the third generation, when the latter comments on the anthology *The Fate of Vulture* by noting that there is *"*the employment of images that grant little room for optimism in the ever-increasing voices of lettered men... The unusual longing for a surfeit of gloomy imagery, and the bloodied language was ... noticed in a recent collection of young Nigerian poets (1995,p. 8). Not only does Ojaide acknowledge and share this view, he dates the trend to the mid-1960s. According to him, the tendency for gloomy imagery started with Okigbo in one of his "Laments". However, if Okigbo pioneered the tendency towards

gloom and unpleasantness in modern Nigerian poetry, the socio-economic and political realities that followed the Nigerian Civil War, especially from the 1980s upward seem to have fostered it. The representation of the realities we encounter in Nigerian writers' works are hardly made-up, they are a reflection of the society. Yet, a writer's peculiar insight and interpretation of these realities distinguish his art from those of others. This article probes Ifowodo's peculiar imagistic articulation of his thoughts in relation to the realities of his society.

Modern Nigerian Poetry and the Issue of Generations

Among Nigerians, like among other peoples across the world, the existence of poetry as an artistic form dates back to antiquity. Then, poetry existed in the oral mode, more or less in the form of songs or chants rendered or performed on special occasions or as routine entertainment. In many parts of ancient Africa, verbal artists such as griots, court poets, bards, praise-singers, chanters, and drummers among others were the equivalent of modern literary poets. While these categories of oral poets are still practising their arts, they now coexist with literary poets who hardly perform their own poetry. Nonetheless, Akinsete (2016, p.687) notes that "the exploration of the concept of literature, especially in the contemporary times, is inescapably tied to writing, even though its oral form far predates and is purportedly more dynamic than its written counterpart."

The advent of Arabic and Western forms of education in Nigeria birthed the written mode of poetic composition. Interestingly, these forms of education have conferred privilege on written poetry at the expense of oral form. Western education in particular has produced a crop of elites who dominate political, social, educational and different sectors of Nigerian life. It is from among these elites that have emerged a class of intellectuals which include creative writers of all genres of literature. The early members of this class included Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebay, nationalist politicians of anticolonial era; Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper-Clark, and post-

independence university elites, among others. The emergence of these writers marked the beginning of what is now considered modern Nigerian poetry, a tradition of national literature that has evolved over the years and clearly distinguished by certain thematic and stylistic features.

As noted earlier, Adesanmi and Dunton were the first to come up with the idea of generational delineation in Nigerian literary history, categorising the country's writers into three generations. Although before then, Nigerian literary scholarship generally recognised Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo, J. P. Clark and their contemporaries who had been producing literary works before and shortly after independence, as belonging to the class of pioneers of modern Nigerian literature, while the post-independence writers who came into literary limelight in the 1970s and 1980s constituted another class of writers, but no formal generational name was attached to either of the two groups or their writings. All of them were simply known as Nigerian writers. Of those writers who emerged in the post-independence era of the 1970s and 1980s, Festus Iyayi, Buchi Emecheta, Femi Osofisan, and Tess Onwueme, held sway in the genres of prose and drama. In the genre of poetry, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun and Tanure Ojaide were the dominant names. By the late 1980s and the 1990s, a crop of younger writers were progressively supplanting previously dominant names, surprisingly with more voices in the genre of poetry. However, with the addition of more voices in the genre of fiction, especially internationally acclaimed names, such as Seffi Atta, Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, and others, Adesanmi and Dunton (2005; 2008), felt the need for what they then described as provisional notes on Nigeria's literary historiography. Although they formally delineated the literary history of the country into three generations, they admitted that the delineation has limitations such as elements of arbitrariness in the historical separations of its stages, but nevertheless insist that it is vital as a way to limn the link between "temporal coevality and ideological/thematic coherence" (Adesanmi and Dunton, 2005: 13) in the country's literature.

Not surprisingly, Adesanmi and Dunton's literary historiography was not received without reservations. Harry Garuba, a critic whose earlier speculation can be described as anticipatory of Adesanmi and Dunton's intervention, was one of the early voices in this regard. While Garuba (2005) also recognises the usefulness of the intervention, he argues that "literary periodisation remains a messy business" (p. 51). According to him, no sooner had the framings and timelines drawn, and writings or writers placed within them than the challenge of border blurring surfaces. In other words, some of the works that supposedly belong to a certain period may be thematically or aesthetically out of sync with the rest, while those considered outside may be discovered to have shared thematic and ideological attributes with those from which they have not been identified. The consequence is often the need and calls for revision by scholars.

On his part, Dalley (2013) challenges the national-generational framework deployed in grouping the writings, noting its rather simplified nature. For him, not all works categorised as belonging to the third generation writing can be so proven, when attention is shifted from national-generational paradigm to a consideration of "the spatio-temporal imaginaries produced" (p. 16) by some of the works. Using Adaobi Tricia *Nwaubani's I Do Not Come to You by Chance* and Teju Cole's *Open City*, Dalley shows how these novels, and similar ones, "complicate their insertion into critical narratives predicated on concepts like 'nation' and 'generation'" (p. 16). Like Garuba, Dalley does not provide an alternative name or features of what qualify for "third generation". However, unlike Garuba, he offers "an alternative perspective on its dominant historicising frameworks" by calling attention to the spatio-temporal constituents of some of the works. Notably, despite these and other critical views, Adesanmi and Dunton's intervention has steadily gained wide acceptance.

As hinted earlier, Adesanmi and Dunton's formal delineation of a third generation in the genre of poetry had been anticipated in the editor's note to a 1988 anthology entitled *Voices*

from the Fringe: *An ANA Anthology of New Nigerian Poetry*. In the note, the editor, Garuba, observes that the poems anthologised in the book point to a "significant literary renaissance" and represent "new Nigerian poetry". The poets, inaugurated into public consciousness through the anthology, had not published any collection or personal volume of poetry before then. Interestingly, some of them would turn out to make the list often now referred to as third generation Nigerian poets, as noted earlier. In addition to *Voices from the Fringe*, the Association of Nigerian Authors, the brain behind the publication, was also instrumental to the publication of six individual poetry collections by the emergent poets.

As this article examines Ifowodo's *Homeland and Other Poems* as an exemplar of the third generation poetry, it is useful to reflect on the features that have defined this particular generation of poetry. Perhaps the most contentious and central issue with regard to the generational discourse in modern Nigerian poetry are the ideas of continuity and discontinuity. In other words, does a particular generation continue or break with the generation that precedes it? To be certain, critics' positions on this differ. For instance, Eze (2005) holds that the third generation writing breaks with the trajectory of the previous writing in terms of shifting from "the monocultural idiom" (p. 104) of the old and focusing its concern on humanity in general. Similarly, Adesanmi and Dunton see the third generation as more preoccupied with "nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination" (p. 16) instead of the cultural rehabilitation preoccupation of early writers. On the contrary, Adeeko (2008) considers the third generation writing's engagement with Nigeria's politics, history and ways of life as elements of continuity with the past.

In my view, each of the above positions is correct as far as it goes. In fact, while the scholars' view may individually but broadly apply to the novel and the dramatic genres of Nigerian literature respectively, a close attention to the genre of poetry shows that both views are quite correct with regard to the genre. Poets of the third

generation are as preoccupied with Nigeria's politics and history, as they are concerned with human rights and human dignity. On the contrary, while they do away with the modernist aesthetics that define the poetry of the first generation, they cultivate the accessible language of the second generation. They are also public-oriented in thematic preferences like the second-generation writers, while mostly avoiding private themes and symbolism that saturate the writings of first generation poets.

In my interaction with the third generation poetry over the years, the most thematically privileged subject in this body of writing is political consciousness. Just like the poets were politically conscious individuals, so are their writings. This is probably because most of them lived their formative and growing years during periods of political turbulence and dictatorship of the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria. In fact, some of them were victims of human rights abuse and political oppression under different military regimes, just as they were human rights or students' activists who chose to resist social injustice and political oppression in the country. The poet under study, Ifowodo, was a Students' Union leader and later, a human rights activist. For resisting General Sani Abacha's draconian laws and calling for sanctions against the General's dictatorial regime, he was jailed between November, 1997 and April, 1998.

Generally speaking, third generation Nigerian poets, especially Ifowodo contemporaries, are highly politically-conscious, socially realistic, and ideologically aligned with the less-privileged members of the society. As observed by Diala (2017), in their art, the poets of the generation mostly cultivate adversarial relations with most of the past military leaders of Nigeria. Egya (2019), also reading their poetry from a political lens, describes their works as dissident in orientation. Writing within the convention of social realism, poets of the generation always try to illuminate the social realities of Nigeria, as they constantly get provoked by social malaise. They create social awareness, and are critical of social injustice, exploitation, and other societal ills in the

country. In these regards, as well as in championing the cause of the less-privileged, the third generation poets maintain elements of continuity with the previous generation.

Review of Critical Engagements with Ogaga Ifowodo's Poetry

As noted earlier, most of the scholarly engagements with Ifowodo's poetry have been from ecocritical perspectives. Chukwueloka and Adoromike (2020), for instance, examine the representation of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, using the poet's *The Oil Lamp*. They trace the etiology of ecocide in the region to greed and selfishness, incriminating not only oil multinationals and the government, as is quite common, but also the people of the Niger Delta, in the destruction. However, in the distribution of blame for such a state of affairs, the multinationals and the government are considered more culpable because the greed of the people, especially those who try to illegally obtain oil from the pipelines crisscrossing the Delta, is traced to the marginalisation and poverty unleashed on them by the other two entities. Although this argument appears specious, the fact remains that people involved in bunkering and pipeline vandalisation, for whatever reason, contribute greatly to the despoliation of the environment on a large scale. However, in terms of the nature, extent, and implications of the despoliation, Chukwueloka and Adoromike offer nothing new about Niger Delta poetry or Ifowodo's poetry. Perhaps their most important contribution to the scholarship on Ifowodo's poetry is a reiteration of the committed and advocacy nature of his poetry.

Ecocritical perspective is also deployed by Oghonu et al. (2025) to unpack environmental degradation and resistance motifs in *The Oil Lamp*. These critics are of the view that conflicts over the control of land and the minerals therein are responsible for the despoliation of the Niger Delta environment. They equally contend that this development inexorably invites resistance from the indigenous people who consider the land and its minerals not only theirs, but feel victimised and cheated out of their inheritance by the more powerful Federal Government of Nigeria. A particularly

interesting dimension to the engagement with resistance motif in the study is the view that it is not only the human subject that tries to resist the ongoing degradation and subjugation, but also the non-human subject as well. Despite this claim, little is actually demonstrated in the same regard. Yet, the critics admirably and skillfully foreground the enormity of the ecological disaster in the Niger Delta by juxtaposing the Edenic ambience of the pre-oil era with the dystopic realities of the current era of oil exploration.

Similarly, Adebiyi-Adelabu and Adebusoye (2023) in reading Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*, engage with the collection from an ecocritical paradigm. While they examine the representation of violent devastation of the Niger Delta environment, the key argument of their study is that neoliberal and imperialistic strategies are appropriated by oil multinationals and the Nigerian state to subjugate the Niger Delta people in their resistance against environmental abjection and socio-economic exploitation. While the oil companies are implicated in subtle manouevres in the form of divide and rule, the Nigerian government is repeatedly accused of using military might to bring the Niger Delta people into surrender.

In one of the few non-ecocritical studies of Ifowodo's poetry, Eyang (2018) examines the depiction of social injustice in Nigeria, as it particularly affects the people of the Niger Delta, using Joe Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* and Ifowodo's *The Oil lamp*. He examines the issue of injustice in Ifowodo's collection as bordering on oil exploration, which is at the core of ecological degradation in the region. Eyang's study also focuses on economic exploitation and political oppression of the people of Niger Delta by the Nigerian state. This reading resonates with Inyabri's (2014) "The Idea of a Colony in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*". In his article, Inyabri diachronically traces the economic and political subjugation of the Niger Delta to the 16th century when Europeans were exploring the region for slaves, to the post-slavery era of palm oil trade during British colonialism prior to and during what later came to be known as Nigeria. For him, what is currently taking place in the Niger Delta is another form of colonialism. In other words, Inyabri reads the

representation of ongoing realities in the Niger Delta in Ifowodo's collection as a political project of subjugation and economic exploitation. In addition, Inyabri contends that both human and non-human subjects in the Niger Delta are victims of powerful and vested interests in Nigeria.

The foregoing shows that ecological concern is more privileged in scholarly engagements with Ifowodo's poetry, with *The Oil Lamp* accounting for the bulk of attention his poetry has enjoyed. Although socio-political concerns are often woven into most of such eco-critical uptakes too, the organising thought and ideological underpinning in his poetry often border on resistance against on-going ecological despoliations in the region. It is also observable that *Homeland and Other Poems*, his debut collection, which won the poet his first literary laurel in 1996, has been understudied, just as his stylistic exploits remain largely unattended. Thus, the intervention by this article addresses multiple lacunae, viz.: inadequate attention to his non-ecological concerns, critical understudy of his award-winning debut collection, and relative muteness on his stylistic exploits.

Theoretical Framework: Formalism and Postcolonial Thoughts on Otherness

Postcolonial theory serves as the principal framework for this study, primarily engaging how the history of colonialism continues to determine the cultural practices and power relations between Nigerian neocolonial leaders and the ordinary citizens of the country. This theory revolves round narratives of postcolonial literature and philosophy, critiquing how literature of previously colonised states reacts, responds to and resists the cultural domination of the Western world. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989). In short, while postcolonial literature contests the Eurocentric creed of language and cultural authority, it also recognises and uncovers the stylistic and thematic import of de-colonial writings, which appropriates the hitherto condemned cultural practices of former colonial societies.

Postcolonial critical thinkers such as Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Bhabha (1994) drive the inclusive tenets of the theory forward, foregrounding the concept of colonialism as a clandestine continuum of socio-political and economic hegemony that must continually be uncovered, assessed and, if needs be, challenged. Said, in his renowned work *Orientalism* (1978), argues on the representations of colonial power which constructs the colonies as inferior, lower and substandard, as conveyed in the deployment of texts, images and other forms of artistic engagements. But the Palestine-born American scholar was not alone in the substantiation of colonist hegemonic agenda against the rest of the world.

Spivak, the Indian scholar and theorist, equally unveils one of the core concerns of postcolonial thought – otherness. In her renowned article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), she aligns with the exposure of the colonial process of power construction and dominance, which delineates the colonised people as 'different' and 'inferior', effectively coining the term "otherness". Said had signified towards this ideology in his description of the dichotomy of power, eclipsed in imperial narratives of the West against Orient societies in the Middle East and Asian states. Additionally, Spivak argues that the disregarded colonial subjects, described as the subaltern, are often silenced by both colonial power and the privileged self. Hence, the term 'otherness' is not just a representation of the colonised people by the empire, rather, it embodies the recognition of the knowledge systems that oppresses the people at the periphery.

In a further exposition, Bhabha complements the binary view of self/other in his work entitled *The Location of Culture* (1994), where he presents other postcolonial concepts such as mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity as philosophical signifiers of the "Other". He claims that the identity of the colonized "Other" is constantly altered and challenged under the casting shadow of the coloniser. Hence, identity becomes unpredictable, if not impossible. Fanon (1952/2008) brings a psychological and embodied dimension to otherness. While referencing his work *Black Skin, White Masks*,

he focuses on colonial racism and its aggressive subjugation of colonised subject, who eventually falls under colonial potency of internalisation. Therefore, the notion of "Other" is practised through strong social constructs of language, color, and other racial institutions that lead to cultural estrangement.

Therefore, within the ambience of postcolonial theory, as expounded by the like of Said, Spivak, Fanon, otherness is indeed an active process of cultural reduction through which the Western world exalts itself and, by implication, dominates the world, denying the other so-called 'lesser' societies the possibility of equality, and even humanity, in the larger scheme of things. Postcolonial theory unveils "the continuous heartbeat of Western civilisation, still pumping irreversible and consequential negative blood through the vein of traditional African societies" (Akinsete, 2016,p. 504). Given the colonial history of Nigeria, and the neocolonial inclinations of post-independence Nigerian leaders, some of the assumptions of postcolonial theory aptly become applicable in reading Ifowodo's poetry, which is essentially a resistance art.

While exploring the interpretations of postcolonial leanings in the poetry, this study is equally complemented by the basic concept of formalism, which underscores form in the apprehension literary texts. Formalist theory, which began with the emergence of Russian Formalism school of thought in 1915, focuses firmly on the literariness of text (Akinsete, 2016). Dobie (2012) states that formalism focuses on "the work's recurrences, repetitions, relationships, motifs - all the organisational devices that create the total effect." In this study, the specific choice of words of Ifowodo is vividly showcased in the use of imagery, an effective device in meaning-making in his poetry.

Ifowodo's Revolting Imagery

That we are likely to encounter blood-chilling images in Ifowodo's *Homeland and Other Poems*, as we find in "She lay dying at Oshodi" (p. 19), is already foreshadowed in the epigraph to the

collection, which is drawn from a poem by Pablo Neruda. Nerudahad written:

> Would you know why his poems never mention
> the soil or the leaves the gigantic volcanoes of
> the country that bore him?
> Come see the blood in the streets.
> Come see The blood in the streets (p. 10).

In "She lay dying at Oshodi", the persona attempts to understand the callous, insensitive and indifferent attitude of Lagos city dwellers to the plight of their neighbours. Using emotive language and gripping description, the poet presents the tragedy of an epilepsy patient who is unlucky to have had some fits on the rail tracks at Oshodi, a Lagos suburb, and was eventually crushed to death by an on-coming train. In a powerfully evocative imagery, the poet presents disturbing details of how the girl had struggled with convulsive fits, while the people around look on:

> A mere girl of twelve! She clutched the earth,
> begging Life in fistful of mud, foaming in her
> feverish plea for a healing hand (p. 19).

But, instead of lending a hand to help, they are only "watching death roll to her on rail tracks!" (19). Although a rail track is not a place for anyone to take unnecessary risks, the nonchalance of the onlookers is clearly not borne of fear associated with physical danger, but one incited by a perception of the nature of the disease the girl suffers from, which is epilepsy. In some African belief systems and culture, illness conditions such as epilepsy and mental health challenges are often considered spiritual in terms of etiology and shaped by superstitions. As a form of *othering*, sufferers of such diseases are stigmatised. This is the case in the Yoruba culture that serves as a backdrop to the social life of the majority of people in Lagos city, the poem's setting.

Apparently pricked by his conscience after recovering from his mentality of *othering*, the poetic persona who witnessed the event does not exonerate himself from the inhumanity of his people. Thus, employing a plural poetic voice, he admits that "We filed past,

casting half-glances / Pleading in turn, impotent worlds of sorrow / Where love, lacking muscle, weeps in little graves" (p. 19). This characterisation of witnesses of the event is clearly a negative commentary on the social values of Lagos city dwellers. Even more poignant is the image of the girl as captured by the poet's diction in her struggle to survive. While the girl's clutching at the earth and her "feverish plea" for help show her strong desire to live, the notion of "half glances" on the part of passers-by and onlookers underscores their grossly unkind disposition. Although the disposition appears faithful to the earlier observation about stigmatisation borne of ignorance or superstition, which holds the disease as infectious, a consideration of the level of modernity, sophistication and cosmopolitan assumptions that residents of Lagos subscribe to challenges this cultural pretext. Residents of the city usually see themselves as more sophisticated than fellow Nigerians from other parts of the country, having largely severed links to the traditional ways of life. By implication, they relate with other Nigerians, conscious of the dualism of *self* and *other*. This consciousness may well be transposed unto the treatment denied the epilepsy patient who comes across as the *other* to the on-looking and indifferent healthy *selves* referred to in the poem.

As the above lines generally speak of the hard-heartedness and hypocrisy of the passers-by, the choice of words like "battle", "clutched" and "waged" (p. 19), not only underscores the titanic struggle of the girl for survival, it also points to the ubiquity of violence in Lagos, the cosmopolitan Nigerian city. With these words, the poet vividly evokes a picture of the ugly and desperate sight of the girl, as well as tries to etch it on our mind. By the way he describes the attitude of the on-lookers; the reader is plunged into a flux of emotions – sympathy, sadness, shock and horror. One sympathises with the dying girl who is "hoping to pluck a ministering hand /from a crowd, deader than her dying self" (p. 19). One is saddened and shocked by the indifference of the on-lookers. The metaphoric significance of the coinage "deader" is particularly poignant, as the poet uses it to call attention to the height of passers-

by's insensitivity. The spectacle of the violence is also horrifying. In an instance of outrage and frustration, the poet-persona asks rhetorically, "What sympathy can come / from the raw-peppered heart of such a horde? (19).The shock, horror, and revulsion are further emphasised by another blood-curdling imagery connected with the event, as the persona confesses:

> ... twined afresh by guilt I plead breathing corpses
> of your mourner I plead flesh that fell with yours,
> leaving only rattling bones that toll your silent cry
> forever (p. 20)

Here, the employment of both visual and auditory imagery in presenting the tragic end of the young girl is sharp and penetrating. With horror and shock, one cannot help but see human flesh litter the rail tracks as one's mind's eyes sees and one's ears perceive "the rattling bones" of the girl from a train's crushing wheels. This description, which suggests a dismemberment of the girl's body, also reveals the worth of a human life in the society in question. The imagery clearly speaks of the level of social and moral irresponsibility among Lagos residents, questioning their humanity in the context of shared citizenship and brotherhood. This kind of cold indifference is satirically censured in Niyi Osundare's poem "Not My Business". In the poem, Osundare's denunciation of the idea that other people's suffering is of no concern to us is skillfully versified in a manner that ensures that the persona who repeatedly exhibits indifference to others' adversity is made to experience poetic justice, as he eventually suffers the painful fate of those whose plight he once ignored.

Similarly, the poems "Driftwood" (p. 15) and "Sanitation day dream" (p. 14) in *Homeland and Other Poems* reflect on some terrible aspects of Nigerian life in imagery that recalls Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* racist stereotype of Africans as savages. Sharing a thematic concern with one of the poems earlier discussed, "Driftwood" presents the treatment given to a drowning victim by his neighbours; and tries to understand what has brought people to the level of being emotionally and psychologically indifferent to

things happening or affecting people around them. Instead of making efforts to save the drowning man, they simply watch him die. Ironically, the same indifferent people later consider it wise:

> to pay last respects to one who like them
> was once flesh and blood now sailing to a
> vulture's feast (p. 15)

Obviously, the respects here are a mockery, with the victim becoming carrion to be preyed on by vultures. The poet-persona wonders: "Perhaps we have lived too long on / dunghills to know dignity worthier than / dog's and dung beetles" (p. 15). In frustration, he mockingly suggests that instead of the dubious "pilgrimage of tears and flowers" (p. 16) which people are wont to offer, we should let corpses rot in our neighbourhoods like slain dogs. It is important to note that while the idea of "dunghill" here is a metaphorical reference to the shame and evil of military rule, which virtually militarised the psyche of Nigerians before the return to civil rule in 1999, saying that we should allow the corpses to live with us is a mockery designed to excoriate people's hypocrisy and shamelessness.

"Sanitation day dream" depicts the Nigerian state and its employees, especially those employed to carry out government draconian policies, as very cold, callous, and with violent proclivity. The poem depicts how, with bulldozers, some government agencies destroy the house of a woman, not only leaving her children crying and devastated, but eventually killing her in cold blood, as the earth-moving machine "cut off her breasts/ with glistening iron teeth" (p. 14). This imagery of barbarism recalls the fate of about three hundred thousand residents of Maroko, an urban slum in Lagos, Nigeria, who were forcefully evicted from their community homes in 1990 by the then military government of Lagos State in cahoots with the then military president of the country. Recalling the enormity of Maroko destruction, Akhigbe (2015) writes of the eviction tragedy in the following words:

> They were treated like sub-humans; dishonored and disgraced. Unfortunately, the evictees had no armor

> to shield them against the fierce rulers of the Dark Age Nigeria (DAN)… The armed government men that demolished Maroko came with many caskets to bury dead or alive anyone who dares say a word… No government official came to collect corpses of those who died while they were still stranded in open Maroko. The corpses were left to decompose on their own and not given proper burial. (par. 16)

Given Akhigbe's account above, the imagery employed by the poet easily suggests that Ifowodo uses the woman's tragedy as emblematic of the fate of hundreds of thousands of Maroko residents who were subjected to barbaric treatment by the state that was supposed to protect them. The manner in which the bulldozer operators ignore the wailing of the woman before she and her shack were cut down shows the extent of the beastly attributes Nigerians had appropriated under the dictatorship of the era. The other details provided by Akhigbe find parallel in the poet's observation that only the woman's children bother to attend to her while in the throes of death. Again, the resonance with Osundare's "Not My Business" (pp. 267-268) is unmistakable. Nigerians, particularly of dictatorship years, seem to have embraced social and moral irresponsibility towards others to the point of inhumanity. Perhaps, this is one of the legacies of brutal dictatorship where helping others can easily be misconstrued as defying "constituted" authorities. Yet, whether this is the case or not, one cannot but be revolted by the imagery built into the verse by the poet.

From the common people to the political elites, especially the military leaders of the 1980s and 1990s, Ifowodo's representation of the dispositions, actions and inactions of Nigerians in revolting imagery continues in "Our eyes are born again" (p. 24), a poem with its setting also in Lagos. The poet begins the verse by invoking a religious atmosphere, with the allusive expression "born again" (p. 24) occurring in the title and the first line of the poem. The idea of being "born again" is a Christian doctrinal practice, which means to forsake sinfulness for belief in Jesus Christ as the

lord and saviour of man, which in turn implies living a Christ-like life. If this strategy is designed to arrest the reader's attention, as it does appear, the poet certainly succeeds, for no sooner than we progress to line 2 of the poem do we realise a lack of correlation between the poet's message and the Christian virtue so invoked. The poet soon catches the reader unawares as he immediately confronts him with unsettling pictures, doing so in a very strong language. The reader soon finds out that, on a daily basis, "our eyes are born again/ to sorrows wider than the world" (p. 24). The detailed manifestations of the sorrows are unsurprisingly couched in images and expressions that speak of hunger, starvation and a fierce struggle for survival. For instance, instead of a home with a reasonable amount of comfort, what we have is a situation where "the cooking pot is home of spiders / and lizards are landlords of the kitchen / affirming the death of fire in countless nods" (p. 24).Whereas these images depict the gravity of lack and poverty among Nigerians in the dictatorship years, its depiction becomes offensive not because of its honesty but because the reality happened at a time when the country had the benefit of oil windfall, which resulted from an astounding surge in oil prices during the Gulf War between1990 and 1991. For a people endowed with abundance paradoxically pining in lack and abjection, the imagery becomes perceptibly chilling

In another poem that is barely veneered in its engagement with the state political apparatus of Nigeria, "Song from underground" (p. 27), we are told that "street questions asked loudly/invited the bloodrain of gunmen/ rusty without war..." (p. 27), leaving in their wake the destruction of lives and property. Here, the poet-persona is speaking of the dictatorial and despotic leadership of the land, whose stock in trade was the suppression of opposition, the gagging of the press and the arrest and detention of outspoken individuals, relying on draconian decrees like Decree 4 of 1984 or Decree 22 of 1995. Prominent Nigerians who fell victims of these decrees included Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, Professor Omotoye Olorode, Professor Idowu Awopetu, and a host of other social and human rights activists. From the use of such

words as "bloodrain", "gunmen" and "war", the employment of violence in subduing others when intimidation fails is betrayed.

The ensuing culture of resort to violence in state craft in Nigeria's dictatorship years now seems to have been appropriated by individuals and non-state actors, birthing oil militancy in the South-South region, violent agitation for secession in the SouthEast region, religion-motivated insurgency in the North-East, banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and farmer-herder violence in the North- Central and ritual killings in the South-West. Thus, the images of violence inscribed in the excerpted lines above and elsewhere in the poem, while physically revolting, pales in comparison to the socially and sensorially repulsive images entwined in the depiction of ivory towers which the poet seems closely familiar with as a student unionist and leader. In the third stanza of the poem the persona speaks of "vanishing print / of books, professors' roached suits / the leaking roofs of rabbit hostels" (p. 27). In three lines of a dozen words, the persona offers a picture of the degeneration of ivory towers in Nigeria where learning is barely possible due to lack of relevant resources; where the life of university teachers and researchers is synonymous with wretchedness and abjection; and where students live in disgusting conditions. By inscriptions such as these, images that leave a lot to desire and repulsive are successfully evoked in the reader's mind by the poet.

Repelling images of destruction and bloodletting in Nigeria also suffuse the poem entitled "Red rain". Though focusing on recent experiences, the poet traces the origin of organised and large-scale blood-letting in the country to the Civil War of 1967-1970 and the events which immediately preceded it. In a voice that reeks of indignation, the poet-persona portrays the cold and destructive tendencies that characterised the past leadership of the country. Sarcastically referred to as "rainmakers", these leaders, especially military ones, are depicted as rainmakers of blood. We are also informed that after "they could no longer bear their country" (p. 29), they visit untold destruction on the people to keep the thrones of

power. Households, villages and towns swim in blood as they "turned eager abattoirs" (p. 29). In spite of this, the so-called leaders simultaneously hanker after the security of their abused privileges, even as "they killed thirst drinking from their wounds" (p. 29). Here, one perceives bloodcurdling imagery of how leaders live off the sweat and blood of their followers. Indeed, the metaphor here evokes cannibalistic imagery. People suspected of treason "were shot" or "battered to bone" (p. 30) while any attempt to protest by the people was ruthlessly crushed by generals who are "rainmakers" of blood. Unable to contain his rage, the persona tries to prick the conscience of the generals:

> remember, oh rainmakers your blood too has the
> same-manner of flowing easily into sand or sea,
> like the one you rush from hearts
> with the hot barrels of guns (p. 29)

According to the poet-persona, "everything wears a red mark in the land". In this instance, blood and red are used symbolically to refer to lives and property destroyed, and a general sense of danger which pervades everywhere and threatens everybody:

> it glistens in the tears of child and mother flutters
> in wind-chased leaves To flows in street drains
> spreads on heated asphalt and swims in the
> streams (p. 30)

The years of military "misadventure" into the political leadership of the country is revealed in the poem as characterised by violence, oppression as well as inhumanity and insensitivity of leaders, which has apparently rubbed off on ordinary citizens and makes them to, for instance, choose to abandon the girl crushed by a train to her fate in "She lay dying at Oshodi" (p. 9). Generally, the insensitivity, especially of leaders, is depicted in distasteful imagery.

With "Greed will kill the beast", Ifowodo's veiled reference to despotic Nigerian leaders climaxes. The idea of a beast is a veiled reference to the same set of people who Egya also comments on extensively in "Imagining Beast: Images of the Oppressor in Recent Nigerian Poetry in English" (2011, p. 345). By using the metaphor

of beast with reference to some Nigeria leader, the poet effectively exposes the vices of violence, oppression, and predatory attributes of military leadership in the country. While the poet appears to have the former military Head of State, the late General Sani Abacha who had jailed him on account of political activism in mind, the picture presented actually fits the character of most of the military leaders the country had had. Almost all of them exhibited a certain insatiable appetite for power, deploying brutality, violence and crude force to achieve their aims. They were so greedy for power that they did everything they could to perpetuate their hold on it, notwithstanding adverse economic, social and political implications of their actions. If the image of the oppressor or that of a beast is therefore apprehended from the perspective of the oppressed or a prey, then the frightening and revolting imagery deployed to project the leaders under reference becomes obvious.

The poet notes that when "the beast is in the street", "neither street nor home is safe" (p. 37), which is apparently because:

> He paves his way with loaded rifles he needs the cover of wild fires He rides into all homes fouls their waters, ransacks their rafters and seizing a sleeping child feasts on the family bed (p. 37)

These lines underscore the level of insecurity enthroned by leaders who suffer from paranoia. They also bring up images of violence and ruthlessness. Rather than offer protection to their people, the leader under reference is making life miserable for them. Young persons are not spared of the violence too, as we learn that a sleeping child is manhandled by a representative of the state. Earlier, we also learnt that "a child rises from the dust" and releases curses over their leaders' "outriders' madness" (37).These images of how the powerful treat the powerless are not only pointers to the degree of injustice and oppression that take place in Nigeria, they direct our attention to the ugly and revolting predisposition of the leaders. While the metaphorical import of the descriptor, "beast", says so much about the leaders, the idea that they also rape, which is

cryptically inserted in "feasts on the family bed" (p. 37), makes their personality and disposition even more sickening.

Inherent in the relation between the leader and the led in the above representation is a case of insecurity on the part of the led. This issue of insecurity further receives treatment from the poet when he says:

> The refuge of a home proves a child's sand
> house before horns and hoofs before sirens,
> guns and tanks what is housewife's kitchen
> knife? (p. 38)

With the use of imagery embedded in the expression "horns and hoofs" (p. 37), in addition to that in regular "sirens guns and tanks" (p. 37), the beastly tendencies of these leaders are re-emphasised. And, when these lethal weapons of animals combine with those of man and then juxtaposed with "a housewife's kitchen knife" (p. 38), we cannot but appreciate the helplessness of the vulnerable others in the society. How does a housewife defend herself with a kitchen knife against guns and tanks?, the persona seems to ask in the last line of the excerpt. Not surprisingly, images of death and deathliness are foregrounded in the latter part of the poem, as the era of military rule depicted in the poem becomes one during which "grave diggers nurse aching backs/placing adverts for relief workers" (p. 38) and entertaining fears as to whose turn is next to die. All of these clearly show that the leaders cut a picture of not just an oppressor, as Egya (2011) notes, but also one that is frightening and revolting.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Ifowodo, as a prominent member of the third generation Nigerian poets, partakes in the versification of the socio-political realities of the country, especially during the military dictatorship years. As a social and human rights activist, his concern for the social and moral health of society finds expression in his poetry. Although his inclination for creative engagement with subjects of social concerns also resonates in the poetry of his peers in a manner that is also similar to their tendency for pessimism and gloom, Ifowodo's imagery in depicting the gloom is particularly, if

not peculiarly, different from other poets of his generation. The poems in *Homeland and Other Poems* examined in this study swarm with an imagery that is not only gloomy, but also repulsive; a notably sad commentary on the disposition of Nigerians who lived during the era. By focusing attention on Ifowodo's deployment of imagery, this article does not just isolate his distinct use of language, it also foregrounds the centrality of form to his versification in the collection.

References

Adebiyi, K. (2009). Imagining a nation: Visions of National Renewal in Remi Raji's *Lovesong for my Wasteland. Papers in English and Linguistics*, 10, 182-197.

Adebiyi, K. (2015). Textualising the Gloom of Inept Leadership: Images of Military Dictatorship in Nigerian Poetry.*Madonna Journal of English and Literary Studies,* (2)6, 27-43.

Adebiyi-Adelabu, K. and Adebusuyi, A. (2023). Neoliberal Eco-imperialism and in OgagaIfowodo's*The Oil Lamp.Uniuyo Journal of Humanities,* 27(1), *73-92.*

Adebiyi-Adelabu, K. and Aguele, E. O. (2018).National Consciousness across Generations of Modern Nigerian Poetry.*Okike: An African Journal of New Writing,* 58(1), 97-117.

Adeeko, A. (2008). Power Shift: America in the New Nigerian Imagination. *The Global South*, 2 (2), 10-30.

Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. (2005). Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations. *English in Africa*, 32(1), 7-19.

Adesanmi, P. and Dunton, C. (2008). Introduction: Everything Good is Raining: Provisional Notes on the Nigerian Novel of the Third Generation. *Research in African Literatures*, 39(2), vii-xii.

Akhigbe, N. (2015, August 16). How Nigerian elites grabbed Marokoland 25 years ago (Part 1).*BusinessDay*.Available at https://businessday.ng/news/news-features/article/how-nigerian-elites-grabbed-maroko-land-25-years-ago-part-1/ retrieved on November 2, 2025.

Akinsete, C.T. (2016). Symbolic Representations as Archetypal Pulse in Idris Amali's*Efeega: War of Ants*. *Grammar, Applied Linguistics and Society: A Festschrift for Wale Osisanwo*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press. 687 – 697

Akinsete, C.T. (2023). Child Character, Sexual Trauma and Postmodern Realities in Toni Kan's *Nights of the Creaking Bed*.*Jos Journal of the English Language*.5 (1). 501-511

Akinsete, C.T. and Etiwe, D. (2023).Sex, Crime and Urbanism as Motifs of Violence in Selected Thriller Fictions of LeyeAdenle.*Anchor University Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences*, 4.101-113.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H. (1989).*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures.* Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Chukwueloka, C.C, &Adoromike, E., F. (2020). Greed and selfishness as nucleus of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta: A study of Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications,* 10(2), 760-774.

Conrad, J. (2010). *Heart of Darkness.* New York: Tribeca Books.

Dobie, A. B. (2012). *Theory into practice: An introduction to literary criticism* (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.

Egya, S. (2011). Imagining Beast: Images of the Oppressor in Recent Nigerian Poetry in English". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46. (2):345-358.

Egya, S. (2019).*Nation, Power and Dissidence in Third Generation Nigerian Poetry*. Grahamstown: NISC.

Eyang, A.E. (2018). 'Hewmanity' versus Humanity: Tension and social vision in the poetry of Joe Ushie and Ogaga Ifowodo. *GNOSI: AnInterdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, 1(1), 97-109.

Eze, C. (2005). Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Negotiating Transculturality in Contemporary Nigerian Novels. *English in Africa*, 32(1), 99-112.

Fanon, F. (2008).*Black Skin, White Masks.* (R. Philcox Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)

Garuba, H. (2005). The Unbearable lightness of being: Re-figuring trends in recent Nigerian poetry. *English in Africa* 32 (1), 51-72.

Ifowodo, O. (1988). *Homeland and other Poems*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.

Inyabri, T. I. (2014). The idea of a colony in Ifowodo's*The Oil Lamp*." LWATI: *A Journal of Contemporary Research,* 11(4), 72-86.

Oghounu, E.C., Awhefeada, S.I., & Ojaruega, E. (2025). Rupture and resistance in the poetry of OgagaIfowodo: A Postcolonial-ecocritical perspective." *Nexus International University Journal of Humanities* 10(1), 175-183.

Ojaide, T. (1995).New trends in modern Africa poetry.*Research in African Literatures,* 26 (1), 4-19.

Okigbo, C. (2011) *Labyrinths.*London: Heinemann.

Osundare, N. (2024) Not my business.*Exam focus: Literature in English, 2026-2030*. Nwachukwu-Agbada, J.O.J., Omobowale, & Adebiyi-Adelabu, K. Ibadan: University Press Plc.

Said, E. W. (1978).*Orientalism*.Pantheon Books.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.