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A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF SELECTED NIGERIAN CONFESSIONAL POETS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the poems of four contemporary young Nigerian poets, namely J.K. Anowe, Romeo Oriogun, Logan February and Saddiq Dzukogi. These poets belong to a new school in Nigerian literature that some critics have dubbed 'confessional poets' because of the extreme intimacy and self-revelatory nature of their poetry. The poets and their poems are purposively selected to delineate different aspects of Nigerian confessional poetics, namely the foregrounding of the self, an obsessive quest for individuality amid the peremptory demands of the family and society, the use of autobiography as a way of proposing a poetics of liberation and the explorations of non-normative sexualities in a heteronormative society. The paper employs both critical and explanatory approach within the epistemology of close reading and psychoanalysis to arrive at the conclusion that this group of poets constitutes a radical deviation from Nigeria's existing poetic traditions.

Keywords : *Autobiography, Non-normative, Self-confession, Sexualities, Psychoanalysis*

Introduction

Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.

W.B. Yeats

Since the middle of the 2000s a crop of young and very talented poets has emerged in the Nigerian literary scene, bringing in a new range of experience and attitude that hardly have been textualised in Nigerian poetry. Some of these poets are J.K. Anowe, Gbenga Adesina, Romeo Oriogun, Logan February, D.M. Aderibigbe. Sadiq Dzukogi, Kechi Nomu, Kanyinsola Olorunsola, Hauwa Shefil Nuhu, Dami Ajayi, Rasaq Malik and so many others. All of these

poets are in their twenties and early thirties and came into maturation in an era of social media in which personal perspective and experience, dissidence and difference are valorised. These poets first publish their apprenticeship work on social media spaces such as Facebook and Instagram and on several online literary magazines and journals before they are taken up by some of the conventional publishing outlets. In terms of themes, tone and language their poetry represents an obvious paradigmatic shift from Nigeria's existing poetic traditions.

To begin with, the poets seem to accord the greatest value to individual consciousness, a quality that would have been considered unpardonable in the 1970s and 1980s. They may have wildly admired the works of their predecessors, say those of Okigbo and Soyinka generation and those of Osundare and Ojaide generation but one looks in vain to find obvious influence of these masters in the poetry of these young poets. They appear to have sought their poetic values elsewhere, especially from American confessional verse of the type written by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Otosirieze Obi-Young (2008) describes the poets as a group of poets belonging to:

> …a sub-tradition preoccupied with the visceral, the personal and the psychological – with the digging into the oneself. Pegged in the psyche, its introspection – the focus on speaking into oneself rather than speaking out to the world – an outlet for a confessional generation not afraid to voice its internal struggles and flaws to make art of it.

As Obi-Young suggests above, this group of poets does not constitute a new generation in the strict sense of the term. Their poetry does not in any way represent the whole gamut of contemporary Nigerian poetry. They are just a school of poets among other schools of poets writing at the moment. Older poets from the previous generations are still very much a part of the contemporary Nigerian poetry. There are even some young poets of the same generation as the 'confessional poets' who are still preoccupied with the matters that engaged the attention of the previous generation.

However, there can be no doubt about the fact that the group of 'confessional poets' has the potential to become more and more dominant as years go by because of the psycho-social climate of the prevailing times. Their emergence in the first place is a logical outcome of Africa experiencing a further cultural diffusion with the emergence of online technologies and the continued spread of post-modern culture. This group of poets who privilege extreme private

experience and attitude in an environment that hitherto valued communitarian conception of personhood could not have emerged at any other time in Africa's history but in the present time – a postcolonial African modernity whose epistemic infrastructure continues to be determined by Western postmodern thought and ways of life.

Our sensibilities have changed; our moral perspectives have shifted; we have inherited some of the pathologies of western industrialised societies so much so that themes that are central to western civilisation have become part and parcel of African contemporary literature. Peter Takov and Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo (2021) in their critique against how postmodernism has made radical shifts and transformation within the fabric of African traditional culture in such areas as ethics, religion, sexuality, education and politics, condemn postmodernism for "its emphasis on individual autonomy, act, its advocacy for constancy in difference, its destruction of static identities, its romance with shifting meanings". All the above tenets seem to have shaped the confessional poets' thematic preoccupations. They write about personal traumas, mental illnesses and suicidal pulls; they write about bodily indulgences and sexuality. It is for these themes they have been designated as "confessional poets" by critics.

To appreciate fully the deviations of these new poets from Nigerian literary traditions, we must situate them in the historical context of the evolution of Nigerian poetry since the country's independence. There have been two definitive poetic traditions in Nigerian literature: the one of private, reflective and racionative posturing for which the first generation of poets are esteemed and sometimes pilloried, and the other of the public square political commitment for which the second generation are valorised. Whether private or public oriented most Nigerian poetry have never tended far away from certain ideological formations that can be regarded as nationalist.

The Socio-Historical Context

Right from the advent of African literature, literature has been conceived as having a socio-political role. This was not unconnected to the struggle for independence from the colonialists and the efforts to liberate the continent from the subsequent neo-colonialism and military dictatorship. Some writers and critics even traced the social role of literature to the African oral traditions in African traditional societies when bards and griots deployed their art for the projection of societal values and edification of the society. Chidi Amuta (1989) points out how:

> Politics and issues of a fundamentally political nature have always occupied a central position in African literature. The griots and

> bards of ancient Africa who used their art to uphold or subvert the feudal status quo: Olaudah Equiano and his fellow freed slaves who deployed their nascent literary skills in the service of the anti-slavery cause; anti-colonial writers like Casely Hayford, David Drop, Leopold Senghor and Chinua Achebe who used literature to challenge the supremacist mythology of colonialism; postcolonial writers like Armah, Serumaga, Aidoo and Ba using their art to pierce the hypocrisy and flatulence of the black elite or the black and coloured South African writer, using his skill to explore one of the world's most inhuman systems: all these varied practitioners of African literature are united by the basic political sensibility which has nurtured their creativity (56).

From Amuta's postulation above it can be inferred that African literature has often been defined through the political and the postcolonial. The emergence of the second generation of African writers and critics led even to a greater radicalisation of consciousness among African intellectuals, caused by the worsening socio-economic conditions and the decay of public infrastructure. The African writer assumed a public role and turned his writing toward explicit politics and concerns. Literature became the pulpit for the dissemination of advocacy and social concerns. Poets such as Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Funso Aiyejina, Odia Ofeimun and others were lauded for their concern with the condition of the masses and for their insistence on a revolutionary change of the society.

The late 1980s saw the gradual emergence of a new group of poets at the height of the military dictatorship. This group of poets, comprising Akeem Lasisi, Remi Raji, Uche Nduka, Toyin Adewale, Promise Okekwe, Afem Akeh, Esiaba Irobi and so many others constitute what has been described by some scholars, most especially Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton as the third generation of Nigerian poets. Even though these poets were conscious of themselves as a generation different in temperament and outlook from their immediate predecessors, in terms of style, diction and subject matter, little or nothing differentiates their poetry from that of the generation that preceded them. Perhaps the reason for this was because both generations were confronted with the same conundrum of the country's unending bad leadership, corruption, tribal and religious bigotry and so forth, and so thematized the same issues and participated in the same social semiology of the period. Sule E. Egya (2019) rationalises the new poets'

seeming lack of total deviation from the existing literary tradition of the second generation thus:

> The new poets (were) already inclined to the ideological persuasion of the Alter-Native sub-tradition not only because most of the Alter-Native poets taught them or because the carnivalesque aesthetics of the sub-tradition attracts them but mainly because like the Alter-Native poets, the political condition of the society over determines their artistic expression (23).

However, at the turn of the century that marked Nigeria's eventual return to democratic dispensation, the political stridency and advocacy mellowed somewhat, if for a while. The country despite its intractable socio-political problems, has witnessed an unprecedented economic growth. Its GDP, according to the World Bank has quadrupled since 1999. There has been a tremendous change in the society. Telecommunication companies and online technologies popularly called social media have revolutionised the way we communicate and socialise. They have empowered the society with unrestricted flow of information, ideas, concepts and knowledge about the world, and caused deep-seated shifts in sensibilities and world perspectives.

Nonetheless despite all these changes and developments, Nigeria is still riven with so many problems. It is still grappling with the exigencies of its postcolonial modernity, characterised with so many contradictions. Here, we have all the postmodern indices of a rapidly developing nation intersecting with all the persistent signs of Africa's primordial past. How can Africa be postmodern before being modern? It is this contradiction that has created a dilemma in which the enlightened Nigerian subject struggles to reconcile his/her sense of 'collective identity' with that of his/her autonomous self that nevertheless always information amid overwhelming injustices of power, social imbalances, loss of confidence in global and local norms, dislocations and uncertainties. It is in this psycho-social context that the group of poets called "confessional poets" has emerged.

The American Confessional Poets as Catalysts and Foundations

William Harman and C. Hugh Holman (1995) define confession in literature as:

> …a form of autobiography that deals with customarily hidden or highly private matters. The confession usually has a theoretical or

> intellectual emphasis in which religion, politics, art or some such ideological interest is important. One distinctive aspect of the confession is the way in which it gives an outward intellectualised account of intensely personal inward experience (115).

Historically the practice of confession in literature began with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* written between AD 397 and 400 in which the father of the church sought to document his experiences and struggles with his Christian faith. In the late 17th century Jean-Jacques Rousseau continued the tradition in his autobiographical book, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau'* that tells the story of his struggle and search for his authentic and autonomous self in the midst of what he believed to be the corrupting influences of western civilisation. It was Rousseau who succeeded in establishing the practice of confession as a specific literary genre which profoundly influenced the Romantic Period where in poets began almost for the first time to express their personal feelings and experiences through poetry. In the 20th century Anglo-American poetry moved away from the confessional mode toward poetic forms and subject matters that reflected the attitude and culture of the time. This departure was much influenced by the New Formalist Movement called New Criticism which emphasised impersonality in literature and focus on the text. T.S. Eliot, the principal theorist for the movement declared that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality". Eliot emphasised that the artist must acquire greater objectivity like a scientist, adding that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (P.16).

However, the poets that emerged in the 1950s in America such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman and others rejected Eliot's prescription and turned poetry into an overtly individualised space which revealed extremely personal and uncensored details of the poets' lives. M.L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert's Lowell's "Life Studies" called this type of poetry "confessional poetry", an inherently religious term which he had borrowed from Catholic Christianity.

Confessional poetry emerged at a time when America was confronted with moral and intellectual dilemmas as a result of the aftermath of the Second World War – loss of faith, less cohesive family, the conflict between traditional and authentic notions of the self, mental

breakdowns, etc. and the emergence of popular psychology which encouraged self-expression as a form of therapy. Helen Lynne Sugarman (2000) in delineating some of the factors that led to the emergence of confessional poets in America, writes thus:

> …the cold wars as well as the American obsession with the evils of communism. The revelations of Nazi atrocities, the Nuremberg Trials, and the McCarthy hearings had shaken the foundations of the American people's collective faith in human decency, forcing us to find new ways to confront our insecurities. Two of the most important ways were making psychoanalytic confessions and watching or listening to public confessions. In the light of the flourishing market for 'True confessions" and other popular tabloids of the time, it is not surprising that the intimacy of confessional poetry encouraged critics and readers to draw parallels between it and the intimacy of a therapeutic confession. Simultaneously, the public aspect of confessional poetry – the poet's willingness to share intimate details in such a public way – often allowed readers to find their own lives reflected in poetry. (27).

The Emergence of Nigerian Confessional Poets

As I have hinted above the emergence of Nigerian confessional poets could not have taken place at any other time in our country's history but at the present moment when grounds had for decades been prepared for their emergence. The American confessional poets could not exert any influence on our early African poets as the modernist poets did in the 1950s and 1960s because of several factors: first, the kind of poetry they wrote – an intimate and highly individualistic verse that thematized many subjects that were considered taboos even in the country of their origin. Besides, America had not become a full-fledged world power as to make the influence of its crafts and arts on the cultures of non-western societies inevitable. Second, Africa was still in the throes of transition from a traditional society to a modern one but whose modernity however was being determined by the modern paradigms of its erstwhile coloniser – Europe. Third, there were certain qualities in the modernist poets' ideology that agreed at the superficial level with certain aspects of African traditional culture that enlightened Africans were trying to preserve – the need for order and stability, the need to preserve certain

aspects of their respective inherited traditions, a certain concern for the society as a whole and a certain predilection for inventive language because in both African traditional society and in modernist poetics verbal oratory was highly esteemed. All these factors must have influenced the gravitation of early African poets toward the modernist poets' techniques even though the impact of the revolutions that the latter poets had wrought in English literature was already on the wane in 1950s.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginning of the breakdown of the old family, and a gradual shift from the communal to the individual. The rise of capitalism in Africa wrought transformations in all aspects of life – ethics, religion, culture and politics. The Pentecostal movement that emphasised personal relationship with God with its discourse on self-help, prosperity and the uniqueness of the individual. This turn towards the individual became further exacerbated at the turn of the century with the invention of social media which encouraged self-projection and cultivation of identity based on appearance and wealth. All these factors prepared the grounds for the emergence of confessional poets in Nigerian literature that has always prided itself for its nationalist/ communitarian spirit. Is it a matter for wonder then that this kind of poets should emerge at this time when the individual is gradually becoming the central concept in terms of which society is explained? The poets are gaining a lot of traction because there is something about them that agrees with the spirit of the moment.

However, some critics such as Oris Aigbokhaevboto and Michael Chiedoziem Chukwudera have decried the undue influence of American poetics on contemporary Nigerian verse. Chukwudera for instance in his essay, *Americanisation of Nigerian Poets* (2023) writes:

> Mainstream Nigerian poetry soon became a correspondent to the American literary magazine culture. This resulted in a situation where many poets began to write similar poems about similar issues, and worse with similar diction. Words like 'body', 'room', 'water', 'mouth' and 'boy' became recurrent in poems. It did not stop there. Some poets also adopted the American style of writing poems in the structure of prose or using double slashes as punctuations, which is a mark of the new school of American poetry.

Chukwudera's criticism is to some extent valid. But what he delineated as weaknesses are in the hands of the best of the poets' strengths which more often than not contribute to the rhetorical richness of their poetry.

The most confessional of these young poets and arguably the most gifted is J.K. Anowe. He has published two volumes of poetry, *The Ikemefuna Tributaries: A Parable for Paranoia* (2016) and *Sky Raining Fists* (2019). Anowe is the most confessional among the poets in that in his poetry he directly references some of the American confessional poets and their techniques that have inspired him. In his "An Outpatient's Night at the Psyche Ward" he writes:

> Body, they call you parish.
> I call you parishioner who
> encouraged to approach the priest,
> is excommunicated for its confessions.
> Let's say I check in & for small talk
> Anne Sexton, this time a night nurse,
> greets me in all three languages
> I'm fluent in… (Anowe, lines 1-8)

The excerpt above encapsulates almost all the themes and techniques that American confessional poets are celebrated for – the interior turmoil, mental illness, the inscription and valorisation of the body in verse, self-disclosure, the pared down, colloquial quality of the language and the emotional charge. These are things we have scarcely seen in Nigerian verse.

In an earlier essay written on the poet, this researcher opines thus in relation to his poetry:

> The questions that arise when we engage with Anowe's poetry include: what does it mean to be a person, an individual? How does an individual define his place, what he is and may become amid the pressures and constraints of family and society in twenty-first century Africa? (358)

Anowe seems by nature an incredibly individualistic being, and he textualises in disconcerting details this individuality. There is little or no boundaries between 'the self' that the poet has created in his poetry and the poet himself. This elimination of the persona is a common feature in all confessional poetry. In the poetry of the, first generation of Nigerian poets that some critics had labelled 'privatist' and 'individualistic', the poets spoke through different personae, creating a distance between the poet and the narrator of the poem. For instance, the persona that speaks in Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* is quite different from the one that speaks in

Abiku or in *Idanre*. The same thing can also be said of J.P. Clark's poetry. For instance, the persona that speaks in *Agbo Dancer* is quite different from the one that speaks in *Abiku* and both of these personae are quite different from the ones that engage in a short dialogue in *Streamside Exchange*. Though the poets were individualistic in their posturing, the personae they projected in their poetry were more or less manifestations of commonly shared feelings with the generality of Nigerian readers. But with the second generation of Nigerian poets, the persona was completely eliminated in most of their poetry; the poets spoke directly in their own voices but put the masses at the centre of their poems. However, with the confessional poets, they have not only eliminated the persona, but they have also placed themselves at the centre of their poems, so that there is little distance between the man that suffers and the poet that writes.

No poetry of the present generation shows in starker and more troubling particulars the struggles to maintain one's individual personhood amid the demands of family and society than Anowe's poetry. In "Aubade with Purgatory", the poet textualises his internal struggles as he tries to grapple with the contradiction's endemic in the society's institutions as represented by the family and the church. He cries to the priest:

> Bless me father (if you'd not blind me) for I've
> seen – a woman drag her son
> from womb to water to save him
> from the fire seen him
> thrash in search of light
> Like a book midfall from a ledge (Anowe, lines 1-6)

The poet seeks some kind of spiritual renewal, but his efforts seem doomed to failure. He feels the anguish of his overwhelming doubts about the meaning of life and the efficacy of prayers in a world retrograding day by day in honesty and human decency. It seems man in the 21st century is totally denuded.

> Since we reduced our knees to prayers
> Or howled our names into
> the waste of confessionals hoping
> they send them back our way
> may be the city burns because
> god only swoops in when we are reduced

to complete nudity… (Anowe, 7-13)

Anowe dramatises the ambivalence and tension he feels toward his family.

I do not know love other than the need
to be powerless & be punished for it.
I do not know home other than what
I've been trying lately – run towards her open
mouth
A lonely house below a stone hill
but fall steadfast into forgetting before reaching

Anowe furnishes us with bits of his autobiography. He mentions his mother, his sister and his grandfather. He tells us how his sister had once caused him an accident while they were growing up. She had tripped him. He writes:

I pulled my first set of teeth
Falling to the floor – a kiss to the Devil's scalp
My sister between my mother's knees
had tripped me.

The death of his grandfather, his mother's ambivalence and other incidents in his childhood seem to have created in the poet feelings of confusion and alienation and have caused him to embark on a restless quest for his own identity amid the surrounding uncertainties and chaos in order to arrive at an understanding of his own place in the universe.

But this is a very difficult task. It is clear the poet wishes to have as little commerce as possible with the externals of human relationships. He struggles to hold onto his own individuality in an environment that is trying to negate him, and yet suffers bouts of conscience because he probably realises that he can only derive his meaning by virtue of his relation to the society of which is a miniscule part. In other words, the society is a component of him. Carl Jung (1976) considers one's individuality as a persona, an arbitrary segment of the collective psyche. Hear him.

> The term persona is really a very appropriate expression for this, for originally it meant the mask once worn by actors to indicate the role they played… It is as its name implies, only a mask of the collective psyche, a mask that feigns individuality, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role

> through which the collective psyche speaks… fundamentally the persona is nothing real; it is a compromise between the individual and society as to what a man should appear to be. (105-106)

What a man should appear to be when all is disintegrating around him as the society continues to display gross incompetence at organising some sort of social orderliness out of the surrounding chaos, is a question that continues to agitate the poet's mind.

Tender Craw's Feet is a poem whose lines are set down unprettily on the page – a shapeless but organic replica of the poet's seething inner world, comprising of space breaks in mid sentences, ellipses, reported phrases in italics and so forth. It is a poem pervaded by anxiety and even distress in a world that is totally denuded of all "residues of god, family & love". It depicts the meaningless relationship between two people who are a little damaged, thrown into each other's arms by some inexplicable circumstance, torn apart by contradictory feelings and emotions toward each other, seeking release in a one-night stand.

> …barefeet we circumvent
> the collar bone of the night like slow dance
> without holding hands
> stopping now and then to adjust our shadows
> like loincloths
> i – with a bottle of valium she – the corkscrew
> until we arrive inside ourselves
> & trigger the trip wire – a new artform
> showing how quick
> we willingly default to self-destruct… (Anowe, 9-18)

The poet provides us perhaps unsuspectingly, with uneasy insights into love in the 21st century, the nature of the woman and the self – the insights seemingly surging to the surface as spontaneous products of the poet's unconscious. Anowe's poetry is best understood as deriving from the impulse to free himself from conventional moralities and ordered patterns in order to reach deeply into his soul in quest for a personal salvation for himself, amid all the uncertainties and chaos in the world. Anowe's confessions in his poems should be taken in a purgative sense. There is a sense in which Anowe's poems can be read as the efforts of the poet's ego to confront its instinctual drives and textualise them in the crucibles of poetry. Otosirieze Obi-Young (2012) has this to say concerning Anowe's poetry:

> J.K. Anowe's poetry is an interrogation of mental make-up, delivered in a voice grounded in vulnerability and deep existential pain. He has taken subjects usually overlooked and turned them into a statement on the fragility of humanity, so accurately that his work has become an entry point to an emerging sub-tradition in the poetry of Nigeria's new generation.

Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun and Logan February are not only two of the best confessional poets at the moment, but they are also queer poets who in their poetry textualise the ache of loneliness and the pain of being of different sexual orientations in a world that it still largely heterosexual. Oriogun's poetry has none of the intensities and verbal inventiveness of Anowe but it is no less distinguished. His poetry won Brune University African Poetry Prize in 2017 and the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2022. Like with the other confessional poets, Oriogun's personal conflicts provide the material for the greater part of his poetry. Being an orphan, he constantly mines his childhood for memories about his parents, especially his mother as a way of exorcising the demons within him. In *Genesis* he writes:

> Within the first light of my birth
> I was named after a war.
> My mother placed a pinch of sugar on my tongue
> To sweeten every darkness I will walk through
> Then she rubbed Hibiscus flower on my palms,
> Which means 'son be tender even after the collapse of my walls.
> (Oriogun, lines 1-6)

It is a tenderness the poet maintains in his life, a tenderness that does not conform to the society's notions of masculinity. But still "the war" inside him rages on. He realises the demons within him can never be exorcised precisely because they are effects of the society's continued refusal to shift grounds and embrace people like him.

> I have wished death on my shadow
> From behind the career of bushes
> & saw it die & still the earth keeps building
> Did they know when they named me that
> What is named through the blood

Can never be free? (Oriogun, 11-16)

In the face of the society's continued hostility, the poets find solace in the memories of the complicated but invariably affectionate relationship between his parents. He writes:

A hymn begins from a Gramophone as my father
picks her up and begins to dance, the air
filled with sweet shell of incense
& mangoes. I stood by the side of a broken table
& watched them go on and on
A truce fashioned out of hope in God & dance. (Oriogun, 24-29)

But things did not always end on this lovey-dovey note. In *Sacrifice* things appear to have gone awry between the poet's parents. The poet seems resentful towards his father. A domestic abuse appears to have taken place but not committed by the father. The poet writes:

I was thinking of how light breaks through darkness
When he showed me a picture of my mother
In the arms of a strange man.
Every memory contains a void and I seek
for the beginning of things.
I sat in the middle of what is not complete
and heard her body hit the ground
As his hands stripped her back of the beauty of wings. (Oriogun, 1-8)

The poet is resentful toward the father for his in action; / What I cannot replace is the silence in a man/; for walking away and leaving the family, especially at a time when the boy seems to need his direction and protection. This desertion seems to have affected the boy profoundly, conflicting him permanently.

I do not judge the man walking away from a memory
Splitting his son into an animal wriggling on the floor.
I only held the fire
What I know, I know alone
The city that births you can also kill you. (Oriogun, 19-23)

This poem seems significant in Oriogun's oeuvre. It is characterised by all the conventional themes we have come to associate with confessional poetry: family life, humiliation, mental anguish and psychological breakdown. There are lines in the poem that are not that clear due to of the poet's stylistic and metaphorical obfuscations, perhaps because of the delicate nature of the subject. Nonetheless, whatever had happened in the poet's childhood, it has created certain repressions in the poet's personality and had turned him into a highly sensitive being, "a body begging for her scars to be touched tenderly."

The memories of the poet's childhood continue to haunt him because they play an important part in his self-knowledge necessary for the identity-formation. But these memories are complicated. The poet admits there are "voids" in his memories. His memories in relation to his father oscillate between those of resentment and those of affection. This oscillation can only be explained in terms of the poet's constantly changing perception of his father because of one or the other previously unrealised memory of his relations with his father. S. Alexievch (2021) in writing about the nature of memories, opines thus: "memories are neither history nor literature. They are mental representations with their own peculiarities to which simple binary notions "true" or "false" do not apply. Also, the psychologist, Janice Haaken (1998) in writing about what she calls "transformative remembrance, avers thus:

> New understanding is attached to a previously remembered experience in such a way that it may feel like a new memory. Other forms of transformative remembering take on the character of a conversion experience, with the subjective sense of a radical disjuncture between prior and present knowledge of one's personal history. Phenomenologically, this new memory feels like the forceful return of prior knowledge – like a bolt of lightning. It is as though the 'truth' were there all along, hidden behind a screen or disguise, breaking through into consciousness with the forcefulness of its immanent power (qtd in Helen Lynne - Sugarman, 2000:213).

Logan February alongside with Romeo Oriogun belongs to the increasing number of queer writers that populate contemporary Nigerian literary space, a group that includes Arinze Ifeakandu, Unoma Azuah, Jude Dibia, Chinelo Okparanta, Akweke Emezi, Ani Kayode Somtochukwu and so many others. These writers have now sufficiently queered contemporary Nigerian literature and can no longer be ignored. They have in one way, or another managed

to incorporate their queer identities into their works as though to tell us that alternate sexualities are now everywhere in evidence in Nigeria. The emergence of queer identities in our literature as I have suggested earlier can be attributable to the effects of globalisation and postmodern culture, enabled by the advance in online technologies. Many of our contemporary writers emigrated abroad where they became beneficiaries of creative writing MFA programmes across the universities in the US, Canada and the UK. These institutions have a way on asserting their influence on African narratives.

Logan February is a non-binary poet and a beneficiary of Purdue University's MFA program in creative writing. They have published three poetry chapbooks and a full-length collection of poems, entitled, *In the Nude* (2019). That poignant tenderness we find in Oriogun's poetry also characterises February's poetry. Their consciousness of their non-binary gender shapes to some extent the thematic preoccupation and the textual configuration of their text. They feel keenly the anxiety and the anguish of living in a heteronormative society that is hostile to the people of their sexual orientations. In the poem, *Made of Stone* they write:

> You are eating an apple or
> drinking gin at a terrible party
> You remember the softness of your throat.
> Sometimes you are dressed in nothing
> but your heavy emotion, kept warm instead
> by something shifting in the abyss of your belly. (February, lines 1-6)

February writes frequently about erotic queer relationships and explores their feelings of alienation through them.

> Anyone can think of a sculpted boy
> as gorgeous, but who looks close enough to see it,
> the fresh sheen over the figure's eyes? Who asks if
> that is perhaps not sweet juice of soft fruit
> upon your lips, stretches upward to taste it?
> That is rare. That is tenderness, like marble teeth
> breaking the apple's delicate skin that is love;
> When he pulls his mouth from the salt of your grief
> and comes away crying too. (February, lines 8-16)

February's poetry troubles the notion of sexual stability. There is a complexity and an ambivalence around the poet's depiction of sexuality that owes something to the poet's non-

binary gender. The poet wants to be understood outside the binary understandings of gender. They write:

> In my language there is no translation
> for mismatch and no word for membrane
> Skin translates to flesh translates to body
> A person is bound so they are heavier. (February, lines 1-4)

The poet is hinting above at the problems and complexities that arise when gender and sexuality are conflated. A person is 'bound', and their body becomes 'heavier' when one feels one's gender is different from the one was assigned at birth. It creates all sorts of complications for the person. The poet believes they are being swept out of their depths by the socially determined and normative expectations of the binary gender – male and female. But the poet disrupts these expectations by the fragmentary and unstable nature of their non-binary gender.

> I spill myself and come unstuck
> Whole makes parts. Parts do not make whole
> Whole is missing something
> The cohesion does not know one –
> The kind of man who wants to be
> The kind of woman who bears children. (February, lines 7-12)

February disrupts and revises the society's motions of masculinity as a way of widening the concepts of gender and sexuality.

Saddiq Dzukogi is a poet from the northern part of the country, Niger State to be precise. He has won several literary prizes, two of which are Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry and the Julie Suk award. Dzukogi's poetry shows the influence of his northern, Islamic background. His poetry has an unaffected loftiness that owes something to the Quran. He intersperses his verse with fragments of Islamic concepts and registers. Dzukogi is also a confessional poet in that there are personal elements in almost everything he has written. Though he writes about general ideas – politics, bad leadership, death, exile, love, etc, it is nevertheless always in relation to himself. In his poem, *The Mihrab* the poet writes about his despairing faith.

The Mihrab is the niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca which Muslims face when praying. The poet deploys this image as a symbol of his faith. He writes:

The Mihrab is the closest you can get to God
When I was young, I was in the habit
of rolling up pages from the Quran
and pushing them into my back pocket
believing if I trapped the voice long enough
It'd become mine and speak to me. (Dzukogi, lines 1-6)

The poet talks about the Quranic education he received in his childhood; those grand things he was compelled to memorise. However, the part the poet's childhood spirituality may have played in his development into an adult, everything now seems to him to have been futile. The poet is disturbed because he is now beset with doubts and uncertainties, symbolised by the bird's meaningless struggles.

After Maghrib prayer, a bird whacks its head
Over a lantern, until it becomes dizzy
From seeing its own shadow loom
Over a wall. Playing with light
It's made a home of that sanctuary. (Dzukogi, lines 8-12)

It seems the advance of science and postmodern culture has eroded much of the poet's faith. He is baffled by God's seeming indifference to his interests and goals. It was Carl Jung that described religion as an externalisation of the collective psyche by which all the yearnings and hopes of the soul are adequately expressed. So long as all goes well and our psychic energies find an outlet in adequate and well-regulated ways that religion provides, we are disturbed by nothing from within. However as soon as we outgrow whatever form of religion we were born into – as soon as this religion no longer embrace our lives in all their fullness, we become disturbed and inwardly divided against ourselves (Jung, 104).

The poet is further disturbed by the implications of all the patriarchal ideas and norms that he had been forced to internalise in his childhood.

In the Madrasa where kid memorized
the things God said to their fathers,
I memorized the things He should have
said to my mother…
Our bodies were built from dirt,

I wish I could crawl back to my mother
and grow a new world at her feel. (Dzukogi, lines 18-24)

The poet wishes things were different; he wishes he had grown up in a world where his mother counted. Though the poet has outgrown the simple and uncomplicated faith he had in God during his childhood, he is still desperate to make something out of his experience. The prayers he offers to the wounded bird are in fact prayers for his despairing self, groping for light amid the darkness that fill the world. George Santayana (1900) describes this kind of situation as typical of the modern man's dilemma living in a world in which faith is receding day by day, but one must nonetheless make the best of things. Hear him:

> When we consider the situation of the human mind in Nature, its limited plasticity and few channels of communication with the outer world, we need not wonder that we grope for light or that we find incoherence and instability in human system of ideas. The wonder rather is that we have done so well, that in the chaos of sensations and passions that fills the mind, we have found any leisure for self-concentration and reflection and have succeeded in gathering even a light of harvest of experience from our distracted labours (7).

Conclusion

Attempt has been made in this paper to study to some extent some of the contemporary young Nigerian poets, belonging to a new school that critics have dubbed "confessional poets" because of the extreme intimacy and self-revelatory nature of their poetry. Four poets were purposively selected from both the southern and the northern parts of the country, not only for geographical inclusiveness but also to delineate different aspects of Nigerian confessional poetics. In J.K. Anowe's poetry, the researcher studied the poet's obsessive quest for his own individuality amid the surrounding chaos and his refusal to seek easy refuge in society's traditional institutions such as the church and the family. In Romeo Oriogun's poetry, the researcher examined how the poet's family and some incidents in his childhood shaped his poetry as well as his queer personhood. In Logan February's poetry, the researcher studied how the poet's confessions about his non-binary sexuality disrupts traditional notions of gender and sexuality. And lastly, in Saddiq Dzukogi's poetry, the researcher explored how the poet's Islamic upbringing impacted his poetry and shaped his impressions of the world. The four poets studied have different styles and temperaments, yet they are connected on several levels: first,

they are confessional poets in that their private material form the large part of their poetry; two, there is a recurrent image of the mother-figure in their poems through which they textualise their empathy for the emotional states of the woman and her plight in a patriarchal world; and lastly there is the centring of the body in all its sensory and sexual dimensions in the poets' constructions of their poetry, often metaphorising it as the centre of all perceptions and reality. All these qualities are what make the poetry of these young poets deviate radically from Nigeria's existing poetic traditions.

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