

A THEMATIC AND STYLISTIC EXPLORATION OF THE 'KIDNAP EXPERIENCE POEMS' OF A POET-KING

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Abstract

This essay is a thematic and stylistic exploration of Otobotekere's new collection of poems antithetically entitled *17-Day Paradisal Tourist Picnic (Kidnap Experience Poems)*. This collection has not been subjected to critical intellectual discourse or analysis and therefore, needs such critical attention. The study expectedly draws data from the primary text and adopts the qualitative text analytic methodology. The study is steeped towards thematic analysis with some spattering of linguistic and literary stylistic analysis the content of a text is usually couched in the language and stylistic scrutiny is productive in revealing the meaning of the content of the text. The author is an acclaimed nature poet of the renaissance inclination. However, the study reveals that instead of the traditional romanticism that eulogizes nature, freedom of the mind and relationship with ordinary things of nature and the environment, there is a palpable shift of interest to such psychological phenomena as insecurity, fear, anxiety, pain, prayers and thankfulness to God the creator who is given, more or less, the epicenter of his consciousness. Apart from the linguistic and literary stylistic devices found in the poems, the author also seems to have unconsciously adopted the psychotherapeutic expressive writing therapy technique as a tool for achieving post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study concludes with a suggestion of an appropriate title: "*Half of a Month in Captivity*" in which the poet seeks to redeem and restore his sanity and humanity by dwelling in the psychotherapeutic poetic narrative.

Keywords: Poetry, Otobotekere, *Kidnap Experience*, *Writing Therapy*

1.0. Introduction

Chief Christian Otobotekere's new collection is entitled "17-Day Paradisal (sic) Tourist Picnic" but sub-titled 'Kidnap Experience Poems'. Reading the poems

gives a natural expectation to see and hear (speaking onomatopoeically) familiar themes of the symbiotic nexus of nature and man, a foreboding to smell the exotic fragrance of nature's flora and to feel the refreshment of nature's waters, air, and its aquatic splendour. There was the hope to read about traditional cultural songs and values, for these are the signature themes of this Poet-King. Otobotekere is a nature poet in the tradition of romanticism that eulogizes nature, freedom of the mind and relationship with ordinary things of nature and of the environment (see Kwokwo 2015).

However, the present yet to be published collection of poems seems to defer from his usual romanticism; these themes were largely absent in the current poems. Although there is a terse mention of the elements of nature namely 'the sun at day', 'the moon and the starry galaxy at night' as well as 'the rains', there is no glee in their mention. Instead, the author dwells on bountiful splash of thankfulness to a 'gracious and mighty deliverer – the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth'; what I read also was a poetic entreaty to the 'crusaders of darkness', 'the marauders' to 'repent (and) recant', and 'desist, and approach Mercy Seat for Providential Grace Now, Now'.

The revered traditional ruler¹, a nature poet who has series of collections to his credit had been kidnapped on 23rd July, 2015 and when he was released on the 8th of August, 2015, he had spent seventeen horrendous days and nights in the kidnappers' dingy den in some distant, dark, swampy jungle without visible compass away from the warmth of his royal palace. He suffered the harsh torment of the elements of nature similar to the experience of King Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

This collection contains prosaic poems and poetic prose pieces which overtly betrayed the psychological trauma and physical debilitation Chief Otobotekere suffered in the dingy forest of no compass, so much so that the poet could not gleefully absorb the beauty and the fragrance of nature; the wonders of God's creations were lost on his consciousness. What the poet saw and felt was anxiety, pain and sometimes depression, and in order to keep his mental

¹ Chief Christian Okpofaa Otoboteke was the Amananaowei (Traditional Ruler) of Tombia Community of Ekpetiama Clan in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. He is popularly referred to as a Poet-King, which is also the title of a biographical book in his honour. At the time of this essay, the Poet-King had died and been buried on Saturday, 24th June, 2023. He was a nature poet in the tradition of romanticism.

sanity, he laboured spiritually to see God and his celestial attendants – the angels - for help and comfort. What follows from here is a review of the poems.

2.0. Objectives of the Study

Otobotekere's series of poetic collections have not benefited from much scholarly discussion and analysis. This is particularly truer of the present collection, *Half of a Month in Captivity*. This is therefore, a review article and is intended to accord some intellectual attention to the poems in order to reveal and explain the themes and style of the poems in the current collection. It is, essentially, a thematic analysis that will attempt to project the psychological and physical impact as well as themental state of being as a result of the captivity experiences of the poet in the poems.

3.0. A Brief Bio-data of Okpofaa Otobotekere

Okpofaa Otobotekere was born on 1925, in the Tombia community of the then southern colonial Nigeria, present-day Bayelsa State of Nigeria. Christian AtaniOkpofaaOtobotekere came into the world as a member of the family of the late Chief Okpofaa. He was educated at Junior Infant School in Tombia from 1933 to 1935. Proctor Memorial Primary School in Kaiama, Okrika Grammar School (OGS) In 1945, he further distinguished himself by successfully passing the London Cambridge School Certificate Examination with an impressive grade I. This achievement opened the doors to higher education at the university level.

After a period of service in the colonial public sector, he gained admission to the Fourah Bay University College in Sierra Leone in 1954, where he pursued studies in Economics. His academic journey culminated in 1957 when he graduated from Durham University in England with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics. From 1946 to 1954, Christian Otobotekere served as a public servant in the colonial government of Eastern Nigeria. After his graduation in 1957, he briefly taught at the Baptist High School in Port Harcourt but later joined Shell British Petroleum (BP) as an Accountant. Over a span of nineteen years (1958-1978), he held various significant positions within the company, including Treasurer and later Assistant Controller Finance for the Eastern Division of Shell BP.

After retiring from the Shell BP company, he was elected as the Amananaowei or paramount ruler of his community, Tonbia situated on the banks of the River Nun in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. He remained on this seat until his death. Chief Otobotekere is the author of many poetry collections by reason of which he has always been described as a Poet-King (Olali, 2008, Kwokwo, 2017) and ruler-poet (Ojade, 2017).

4.0. Discussion of the Poems

In this section, our activity is to pick the poems one after the other and analyse them thematically and discuss the experiential meanings the poet is passing across to his audience.

4.1. Freedom Regained - Singing, Singing, Singing

The opening poem is entitled “Singing, Singing, Singing- More Days Are Added”. Now free from captivity of the kidnappers, the poet literally sings of his eventual freedom from the captives’ den. He turns griot and sings the praises of the God Almighty, whom he addresses as ‘Omni-All Lord of Lords, singing:

Once again I’m lifted, lifted
From that bottled hole of
Darkest limbo, unknown, unseen
Overly camouflaged
Why will I not sing and proclaim
Alpha and Omega is his name

Man is a free being; he cherishes his freedom and abhors any form of confinement. The poem reveals palpable anxiety as reflected in his choice of imagery such as ‘bottled hole’ and ‘darkest limbo’ both of which are couched in a single sentence. This sentence is followed by an interrogative mood asking himself ‘why shouldn’t he glory God? So, having now breathed the air of freedom, and remembering the ordeal of his captivity and confinement in the ‘bottled hole’, the poet could not suppress his gratitude to Almighty God to whom he attributes the miracle of his deliverance. He calls him the generic deictic, “He” who possesses all powers to bring about all kinds of miraculous things. Hear him sing again:

He is the He in whose creative hand
(is) substance and shadow, reality and fantasy.

He is:

The very He in whose byplay mathematics

Water is wine, which multiplied by

2 or 5 feeds thousands

He is the He. The very One who

Firesmiths tragedy to comedy...

The very He on the MERCY SEAT

Who punishes, forgives and chastises

He, the EXELLENCY OF Excellencies

This entire poem is in praise and extolment of God in diverse words and phraseologies. The underlying significance of the poem is the fact that freedom is the most cherished attributes of life, because when freedom is denied and lost and man is caged and rendered immobile, life itself seems to have been deprived – the essence and vibrancy of life is lost. In that circumstance, the being is alive only because he can breathe and think; he can neither move nor act. Obviously, the poet went through much psychological torment and anguish in captivity, yet, in freedom, he opens up his heart by not raining curses on his captors whom he calls “terrorist of terrorists” but merely appeals to them to repent from the criminal activity of kidnapping. This is what he says in the poem:

What rationale have you ...

To blow off harmless soul?

(Or)To quench holy flame

Don't you realize that it's

An infamous crime

To interfere with holy flame?...

You are offending your creator

Desist, repent, recant, consider.

The pre-eminence of God in the circumstance is made quite clear. The deictic referring to God is esoteric. 2He is the He”, the very He. The author uses the intensifier ‘very’ to establish the unequalled authority of God and by further

referring to God as the EXCELLENCY of Excellencies. There is a graphological foregrounding of the word 'excellency' being in capital letters. The sentences are a combination of complex and interrogatives in the last stanza where the poet goes into a direct interrogation of the not-present kidnapers: 'what rational do you have ... to blow off harmless soul?' The interrogation ends and the poet declares with a tone of finality that 'you are offending your creator' needed to 'desist, repent, recant and consider'. Talking directly to the people who had kidnapped him in either declarative or interrogative sentences tends to serve a psychotherapeutic function. It enables the poet to reclaim his lost authority and rebukes misbehaviour. And using lexical, he uses related diction to make religious allusion of man as a creation of God, diction such as 'harmless soul', 'holy flame', and uses a barrage of related diction such as 'Desist, repent, recant' to reprimand the criminals.

4.2. Divine (Angelic Intervention) - Jubilation

Jubilation is the title of another poem. The poet and royal father spent seventeen awful, dreadful days in the kidnapers "bottled hole of darkest limbo" The poet-captive must have hallucinated much during the days of captivity in the kidnapers' awry den. It does appear that in that idle state of limbo, the poet's only pastime was silent communion with heaven and the celestial beings. But there is 'jubilation' in this poem. Yes. On regaining freedom, his kingdom went into a frenzy, and ecstasy of jubilation. However, although, this poem expresses joy with the attendant jubilation and fanfare of the people of his earthly kingdom who "nearly missed him", it also demonstrates or recreates his psychic interaction with celestial beings. While now at home and in communion with his people whom he makes a prosaic declaration:

I have humbly served, helped and
Contributed the best part of my life
To the ordinary citizen,
My people, my people

But his mind often wanders to his experience in captivity and the celestial beings with whom he communed and who gave him inner strength to keep being alive.

He heard angels “singing, singing, and singing”; he saw, “the Seraphs singing, singing and singing”; he saw “Cherubs gleeful with emergency alert and heavenly Marshals flinging swords”. And he believed that God marshaled the Angelic forces to rescue him from the kidnappers’, for he writes:

All hemispheres and all outlets
The Translucent transparent rainbowed wings
Gently, downloading the overflows of
Heavenly Glory
Gently, gently palpitating translucent
Golden beams
Earthwards

Again, close to the day of his rescue or release, the heavenly Marshalls are all around him and he was enveloped with Angelic songs of “hallelujah, hosanna”. Nevertheless, this poem celebrates his freedom and reunion with his subjects, for he is a king. Stylistically, Otobotekere employs linguistic code-mixing in this poem as he thanks and glorifies God by chanting his name in different languages such as Izon, Yoruba, Igbo, Urhobo, Ibibio, Hausa, and Latin. Here him: Glory, glory, glory, Dada Nyingi (Izon), OlorunNla (Yoruba), Chukwu Ebube (Igbo), OgheneRigbunu (Urhobo), Abasi Ibom (Ibibio/Efik), Danaan Di Hii, Allah Sariki (Hausa), Grand Dieu (Latin). On the grammatical level, the poet’s syntax does not flow smoothly; The sentences are decapitated to appear like a poem. This is a style that has been condemned by the troika of Chinwezu, Jemie and Madubuike in their (1980:173) seminary publication, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* Hopkins’s syntactic jugglery and word play.

4.3. Call to Repentance - Approach to Mercy Seat

Another poem, in Part C of the collection is entitled “Approach to Mercy Seat”. This poem is an entreaty to the crusaders of darkness to repent and desist from their evil ways. The poem paints a picture of heavenly journey humans will eventually make and to qualify for the “celestial aura”, people should update their passports by purging themselves of evil. This lot is reminiscent of John

Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress with some mooted biblical allusions. The poet writes:

Enrich your life-profile, while others are
 Carrying blank sheets *en-route*
 MERCY SEAT.
 Gleeefully update your clean passport.
 Present your endorsed visa smiling,
 while others, with
 Both hands and feet badly soiled
 with red spill, are
 In dark anguish as they go. They go
 Irretrievably down doom's soul-shocking valley

In three imperative and one declarative sentence, the poet presents the ultimate journey the biblical heaven and hell. The journey to the great beyond is one many, including devout believers in Christ, have made. Some have made it through chariot of fire (remember Elijah?)², some have been spirited across (remember Enoch who did not see death), some tasted the Gethsemane crucible (remember Jesus Christ); but it a journey all mortals will undertake. Whether Angels will be singing your welcome or not is a solemn decision each person must make. Sinners will go to hell, "down doom's soul-shocking valley". The poem admonishes the misled sinners, that is, the kidnappers who he calls butchers to bow to "Providential Grace" and abandon the "forbidding badge of Lucifer". He pleads with them like an evangelist of God to depart Lucifer's camp and save their souls.

Young man, young lady, please, please,
 Throw these things away:
 Flee from entrapping shrines!
 From boomerang daggars,
 From deceptive amulets and
 Waist-ropes with untenable provisos
 Save your soul, brother, sister, save your soul!

The poet does not only admonish the kidnappers but also “the sponsors behind the surrogate butcher” that:

the calculus of D-Day may not spare you
Relent, desist, repent, brother, from evil

Each time he admonishes the evil-doers and entreats them to approach the MERCY SEAT of God, he turns to singing of Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah as it were he himself was an Angel in celestial space and in communion with “the Omnipotent on High”.

Again, stylistically, the author relies on imperative sentences, talking directly to the kidnappers as if they were right before him. Therefore, a textual micro-communication channel is established between him the ‘captive’ author and the kidnap ‘captors’. Evil is represented by his lexical choices of ‘shrines’, ‘daggars’ and amulets’.

4.4. Spiritual Cleansing - As at Tabor Calm

This is a frightening poem in which life seems to be drifting out of the poet’s physical body and his consciousness seems to have slid to the spiritual world either in a dream or in an intense vision which was of course the psychological effect of kidnapped isolation, a situation in which the mind could not fathom what next was going to happen. He was in another world. The poet absorbs the wonder of heavenly sky and the brightness of the sun and “I bow ... and ... worship” amidst a fascinating evidence to have faith in the creator. He more or less resigns to fate when he writes:

I bow, bow and again worship
This daylight wonder –
This fascinating sea of faith,
Of sun-faced glow, intense, from
Heavens high –
Of white-impregnated sheen
Upon white-sheeted plain:

But the vision also leads to a spiritual cleansing through forgiveness of sins. In the excerpt above, the discourse returns to the poet who is now the first participant with the personal pronoun 'I'. The other participants are not human beings but elements in the celestial environment, namely, the sun and the glowing sky. All of these are expressed in one simple sentence with a number of phrasal modifiers. And later, a third participant, a heavenly voice is introduced, a voice which speaks to him and calls him "Beloved". This occurs after cleansing of sins.

The vision continued:

Vision aglow, sin-flushing flow
Whitening sheen!
As at TABOR calm. **Sins fly**
Then a voice, voice!
Imperial voice intoned,
 Beloved, b-e-l-o-v-e-d! ...
I translate into a new being

4.5. Celebrating a 'Tombia Dancer' - Rhythm Upon Rhythm, Breezy

This poem is a pleasant deviation from the previous ones which dwelt on the misery and agony of the kidnap experience. "Rhythm Upon Rhythm" provides a comic relief celebrating a superb female Izon dancer, most probably a Tombia Dancer. Here is the 'Tombia Dancer':

She smiling and jiving
Jiving and waving, is practiced
In moving the hearts of men
 Iyei, yei, yei, Iyei
 Iyei, yei, yei, Iyei
Around and about she goes, breezy
Tickling her audience with
Fabulous display

It is in this poem that Otobotekere returns to his usual pleasure of appreciating nature and the traditions of his people amongst which are folklores, drums, songs and dance. These are the hallmark of his previous poetry collections, and now that he is back home a free man in the warmth of his people, he immerses

himself once again in the traditions of the people. Let me quote copiously from this beautiful poem:

The arena is full of the soul and sound of all
 Drum and voices spill/ in rhythm and tremor
 In a climax of climaxes
 Pounding feet/ Drum beats
 And splitting cowries/ Synchronise / In rocking deep tone
 The rumbling ground around:
 Rhythm after rhythm
 Rhythm upon rhythm
 Rhythm within rhythm
 Is the soul of all... Heritage of our fathers.

5.0. Language and Style

The language of the poems is prosaic. Otobotekere always draws poetic style from orature. People who are close to the monarch would easily observe the linguistic affinity between his oral speech and the language of his poetry drawing from folklores, wrestling songs and masquerade songs. But also quite prominent is that the poetic style is familiar patterns of the old generation of Nigerian (or African) poets such as Okigbo, J.P. Clark (-Bekederemo), Echeruo, Soyinka and Nwonodi whom Chinwezu et al (1980) accuse of being infected and infested by Hopkins disease. Hopkins poetic style, according to these critics, was to write normal sentences and decapitate and juggle them in such a way that the sentences would not have the canonical grammatical flow. It was dubbed syntactic jugglery. Of course, at age ninety (in 2015), Otobotekere is a contemporary of these poets and so may be more attuned to the then prevailing poetic style of their time which he has not been able to purge and divest himself of. The fervent imitation or mimesis of the poetic style of Hopkin and other English poets of that generation is what is called Hopkinsian syntactic jugglery or Hopkin's disease.

As mentioned earlier, Otobotekere employs linguistic code-mixing in this poem as he thanks and glorifies God by chanting his name in different languages such as Izon, Yoruba, Igbo, Urhobo, Ibibio, Hausa, and Latin. Here him: Glory, glory, glory, Dada Nyngi, OlorunNla, Chukwu Ebube, OgheneRigbunu, Abasi Ibom, Danaan Di Hii, Allah Sariki, Grand Dieu. The

author also profusely utilizes Christian religious imagery and symbolism in talking about evil, sinner, repentance, heaven and hell. Phrases such as *Translucent rainbowed wings*, *Heavenly Glory*, *worship*, *fascinating sea of faith*, *Heavens high*, as well as the lexical choice of ‘entrapping shrines’, ‘boomerang daggars’ and ‘deceptive amulets’ attest to this submission.

There is also a large dose of code-mixing

Generally, the poet enters into the gab of psychotherapeutic narrative or narrative therapy. This is style of writing, also called expressive writing works on the premise that “inhibition or suppression of emotions or traumatic events constitutes long-term stressor” (THC Editorial Team, 2021). This style of writing is defined by Wright & Chung (2001) as the process in which a client (writer) uses writing to express and reflect on oneself voluntarily or involuntarily. Therefore, narrative therapy is a form of written emotional expression which is capable of removing the stressors and trauma. In the words of Ruini and Mortara (2021), writing therapy plays an important role in the healing process. Essentially, therefore, Otobotekerere contextualises his traumatic experience by adopting this style of (self) expressive writing which may have helped him to overcome or largely reduce his post-traumatic stress.

5.0. Conclusion

In Otobotekere’s collection of poems entitled “17-Day Paradisal Tourist Picnic” which we have reviewed, the reader would not fail to observe the dissonance and antithesis between the author’s description of the poems as encapsulated in the title, and the poet’s tortuous experience in dingy cheerless swamps where he was holed up away from the warmth and vivacity of society. This experience is everything but paradisiacal, anything but tourism, nor can it ever be a picnic. This is most antithetical to the experiences constructed in the poems in which he is hovelled up in a kidnappers’ den in an uncharted, unknown forest lost in fear and anxiety. In a general sense, these are ‘Kidnap Poems’ but could be given more creative titles such as “Half of a Month in Captivity”, “Seventeen Days in Captivity”, etc. Otherwise, the title will be in direct contrast to his kidnap experiences as constructed in the content.

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