Consequences of War and Sequences of Human Social Experiences in Selected Poems of Ihechukwu Madubuike’s Sequences

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Abstract
It has become traditional for writers to create and recreate well-known historical events in their works. This is not unconnected with the fact that literature not only mirrors the society but also keeps track of historical facts. Social issues such as war constitutes one of the land-marks historical events in any society where it ever occurs. The horrendous nature of war makes writers to use their expressive and imaginative power of literary craftsmanship to unveil its obscenities. The general concern of writers is to highlight the various forms of immoralities that war characterizes. Poetry remains the abridged literary discourse that conveys more of the social, emotional and psychological experiences of the individual or group very vividly using powerful expressive form of life experiences shrouded in deep imagination and drawn from the traditional cultural matrix resources of language that advance meaning. Ihechukwu Madubuike’s Sequences is a collection of poems of personal social experiences and a recreation of historical events in the life of a people. A number of selected poems were critically analysed to capture the setting and the expressive feelings. The following poems were selected for analysis based on the subject for which this paper is crafted; “Nightmare”, “The Plague”, “From now”, “Dibia”, “Exit”, “December 1968”, “Ada-aku”, “Epilogue to sequence 1”, and “Love in Winter”. These selected poems are analysed and adapted to the prevailing social environment that still subsists within the society.

Key Words: Traumatized, Oxymoronic, Marginalization, Modernism, Social Experiences
Introduction

The uniqueness of poetry as a literary genre cannot be overemphasized in view of its roles in dealing with significant social issues in few words. It has become a formidable tool beside its aesthetics nature as asserted on the opening page of *Sequences* that, “poetry is a tool that must be used not adored”. Madubuike actually harnesses the ready tool that poetry is to deal with certain social issues imaginatively. The society is inundated with issues begging for attention but which are hardly heard or attended to by those charged with such responsibility. Historically, every society had gone through one memorable event or the other and this has helped in educating and informing the people about the very essence of their existence. Literature plays key role in preserving the people’s history and also proffer solutions to certain social issues. Poetry as a genre rooted in the cultural and traditional life of the people, is used to recall and project imaginatively the cultural pathos of the people. The experiences of life are very concentrated here, and meanings emerge quickly. Poetry the voice of our feelings even when our minds are speechless with grief or joy. As a traditional genre of literature, it is considered the most superior because it transcends the ordinary language of men bringing not just crafts but also unit into language usage.

Consequences of War

“Nightmare”, gives vivid image of what it is to be in a war ravage area. “The thunders thundering annoy” is metaphorically used here to express the fire power of military invasion especially if it happens in the night when the lightening missiles are fired:

Slim lightening twining through the thick coat of darkness

Horrible image of fear that pivots around me (21)

The image of death is definitely associated with such life – threatening situation. These death images are further sequentially described and captured in “The Plague”. It gives a vivid picture of human suffering during the time of war. The mostly affected are usually the children and the women who are easily prone to malnutrition diseases especially kwashiorkor:

Swollen arms
Broken heads
Feeble we fled
Before the enemies (22).

Obviously, there is nowhere to run to when the battle is fought on two fronts: starvation and missiles, so “No man escaped its /vicious skis”. Those who are not killed by the missiles died from hunger and disease:

Babies died in their sleep
Mothers, died by the long march.
Fell and died too.

But those who are alive keep trudging on knowing it would not be long, they too would die. Their escape from hunger and disease does not guarantee safety asthe cannibals came brandishing their daggers sparing no man intoxicated with the wine of hatred.

They wounded us
There was no man to plead to
There was no God to save us (22)
The evil of war is beyond human description. When the bitter bile of hatred is secreted, God at such a time seems to be far away. “From now”, is a foreknowledge of the coming calamity which requires caution on the part of the vulnerable:

I warn you
The lightening will flash
The rains will come
Thunders will roar
There is havoc
Strolling in the street
Waiting for the rains and lightening (23)

Stylistically, this poem is self-explanatory. The graphic manner at which it is structured symbolizes confusion that war characterizes. The premonition of the consuming calamity finally arrived:

I see them come
In one rush of fire
And thunder
From all corners of the world
They come
In a bellowing speed
Looting
Burning
Destroying

Destruction of varying dimension becomes the order of the day when anarchy is loosed upon the world; looting, burning and destruction. In this state of helplessness and disorder, the world becomes “a heap of dung / a colourless heap of / incongruous neutrality.

In “Dibia”, the persona bemoans the terrible human calamity that has befallen the people. Every problem must have a solution hence the need to know the minds of the gods through divination. When God seems to be far away, the smaller gods should be consulted. The items for sacrifice and consultation are stated:

The neck of a toad
The entrails of a spider
The tongue of a vulture
Fume in a liquid collation
Of life and death (39).

African gods take delight in flesh and blood of animals. The dibia is the medium through which the mortals can know and learn the ways and minds of the gods. Unfortunately, the gods are sometimes quite unpredictable and difficult to appease.

The dibia sits by cross-legged
Before the gods
Seeing but not saying
Not daring to ordain…
Where have we gone wrong?
Sometimes the gods are difficult to please (39).
The rhetorical question remains what it is as even the *dibia* does not know nor understand the cause of the calamity. Where the mortals went wrong remains the exclusive of the gods because even the *dibia* is forbidden from saying what he sees.

“Exit” gives a vivid description of the end result of the agonies associated with war which is ultimately death”. A flat world sprawls…” is a metaphorical expression of a high level of destruction possibly from bombing and artillery fire. When an entity sprawls, it connotes death or powerlessness. That world was once a source of life for the living but now in shamble even the element of nature – the star-feels the pang of pain that mortals encountered in this circumstance and therefore;

Hangs disjointed like the solitary stem of a broken thread”.

The persona goes on to give a scary description of human and material destruction and that the living are as good as dead:

And some men like a herd of sheep
Move aimlessly listlessly
Afraid of tomorrow unsure of today
Among the destruction they wrought (40)

The “aimless” and “listless” movements of the living shows that they are already traumatized. In that trauma comes the fear of the unknown, “afraid of tomorrow unsure of today”. The dead are better off as they have escaped the pain and agonies but from their death abode, they chant the reality about life:

They chant:

Dust to dust
As flesh to flesh
In the humid manure
That gives life and blood
Men must die for
New branches to grow
Like mushrooms
On the body of dead leaves and plants (40-41).

It is only therefore natural that we must die to give life in different dimensions. Just like the dead leaves and plants, man must die in order to contribute to the cycle of life process. By so doing, the other elements of life will feed to give a new life. This does not happen without the knowledge and approval of the creator. Though he has been far away in “The Plague”, he receives the souls of:

The dead
The shadow
The worms
That gives new life
My song (41)

The song is not a song of victory but a dirge for the departed and perhaps for those that would soon follow to feed the worms and thereby give life to an element of creation. A song for the walking corpses awaiting interment, only a matter of time.
“December 1968” is an account of the human and material loses experienced in the war in spite of attempts by individual and groups to broker a truce to end the crisis. It reflects the failure of the various world organizations and countries to come to the rescue of the defenceless:

Nobody can feel the pleasure
Of those pains that devour me inside (56)

There is an oxymoronic description of what the situation really reflects – pleasure and pains of which nobody can measure its depth. But while men, preachers and civil organizations are making peace moves, “Guns borrowed from Moscow, Washington, Spain and London” continue to be used in decimating the populace. This is expressed in Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*, “If I had had the opportunity to meet with those delegates, I would have advised them to go home and ask their home government to stop backing genocide (136)

For men do not care for what does not touch their race.
Until the blood in the sun dries
I do not care
For nobody can feel the pleasure of the pains in my bones (57)

The song of a reggae music crooner Jimmy Cliff, summarizes it all that “He who feels it knows it”. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970 is nothing bit a meaningless carnage and destruction of property. Its aftermath is nothing but untimely deaths, wanton destruction of lives and property, political upheaval, economic instability and ethnic marginalization. December 1968, which also doubled as a poem title, witnessed spirited efforts from international organizations to broker a truce but no serious commitment to end the conflict because “… men do not care for what does not touch their race”

This conference has failed again.
Whoever can stop this carriage
Let him resurrect me at the month
Of Imo River (58).

Imo River here symbolizes a place of refuge and perhaps could also be a cemetery for the burial of the dead since resurrection comes after death. Therefore, whether the war ends or continues, the mouth of Imo River is a place of solace.

Achebe describes the inability of the United Nation to broker the truce as; “a calculated strategy from the Nigerians, who now had the international cloak of the United Nations under which to commit a series of human rights violations” (212).

The Nigerian civil war was the genesis of most of the political upheavals that have lingered to date. But it also provided great opportunity for the Nigerian poets to tell their stories in an imaginative and emotion – laden manners manifesting through art the nature of their feelings about life and human values”. The war period – a period of death – which eventually turned into a period of poetic harvest” (104).

**Human Social and Emotional Experiences**

A critical review of Madubuike’s *Sequences* reveals that he deals not only with human trauma and the social experiences as aftermaths of war but also seeks to play down on the pains by expressing his emotional feelings as human.
“Ada-aku” portrays the amorous upsurge that pervades the minds of the young. It is characterized by the much-protected damsels from the prying eyes of young men, usually at the village level:

Spurious movements in the night  
strong feet turned into a pad of fur.  
The old man must not see me tonight… (64).

Obviously, such movements must be of great care and vigilance in order not to arouse the suspicion of the guard. Serious enough, the guard is an old man with all the sagacity to discern a false intention especially a suspecting movement around his cherished damsel. The difficulty in communication without the modern communication gadgets becomes obvious. And so;

A knock on the Udala tree made the contact.  
And her answer came back in the night breeze.  
The soft whistle of my love… (64).

The means and modes of communication have never been a problem at the traditional setting. A knock on the hollow part of Udala tree in the night would give a resonating echo far and wide in the quiet breezy night. The poet tries to portray the simple lifestyle in a traditional setting in terms of communication at the same time re-echoing the high moral standard that was the people’s philosophy of life which has eluded the modern generation. “Can she beat the vigilance – of the old man sitting by the door?

She must be protected, surveyed, watched over like a baby. At 21”

The persona asks some rhetorical questions that agitate the mind but morals remain the watchword in spite of the age, “At 21”. And because of the moral implication on the part of the damsel, his waiting becomes longer than expected because she is under a watch. The waiting translates perhaps much longer than Niyi Osindare’s Waiting Laughter into fear and nervousness. While in this state of nervousness and the heart ‘pounding’, he asks again, “Will she ever come…?” His high expectation having been submerged in his amorous delusion; he is caught off guard.

A rattle in the bush…  
The crumbling of dried leaves.  
Ah, she comes…  
But wait. Wait…  
Oh my God. I am caught. (64)

“Tina” has a sharp contrast with “Ada-aku” in terms of epochal expression. There is a clear show of modernism in “Tina” which contrasts with the traditional “Ada-Aku”. The persona is captured in all ramifications of modernism:

A fragrant aroma of lightness charmed the night into a delightful stillness…

But one thing is central to the theme:  
Soft murmurs of muted desires  
Oozed through  
The gap in her teeth and reached me spell bound… (63).

There is an overwhelming desire from both parties but none is able to express the feeling.

Confused
We stood
Heart to heart
Searching each other… (63).

The search has no end and it is emotion laden that can only find expression in the emotion consuming them.

“Epilogue to sequences 1”, brings back the bitter memories of those who died in the cause of a struggle and urges us, the living, not to forget them, but should continually communicate with them through the pouring of libations. And in doing so we should not forget the reason for which they died and how they died:

Let us each
Pour libations to the dead
Let us all
Remember why they died (68).

Traditionally and naturally, the dead are visually well attended to in African culture. But when those who died are unwept for, unburied and unkempt, then there must be circumstances surrounding their deaths which may be unnatural and abominable.

“Love in Winter”, is a metaphor of the bitter experience during the “Cold Season” in the Sub-Saharan Africa. The 4-stanza poem gives a graphic description of what the cold of winter entails:

Come,
Winter is here
Cold, inhuman
Careless to our pursuits. (81)

Ironically however, even the plants are affected by this harsh cold and snow. The landscape is aptly described as ‘sick’ and ‘dead’ killed by the ‘cold knife’ of winter and buried in a cold casket: the landscape.

Is sick, death-like;
Butchered by a cold knife;
Interred in a frozen bier

Winter is here personified. The intensity of its coldness is described as a knife that can butcher every living element and the “casket” that would bear the dead is equally frozen. Everyone is expected to, “Gather kerosene and woods / make fire / to keep them warm”. The calls of a reminder in stanzas 1 and 2 require patience. A long wait for the sun, the rejuvenator, to come, but for the moment “Winter is here”. A statement of reality, undisputable. This is further explained in “Eguru” which means harmattan in one of the more than four hundred languages in Nigeria. Africans are not accustomed to extremely cold weather and therefore two strangers forced to be together by nature

We are two strangers
That cling together
From custom and habit
Our words are broken into two
And hang open like the shells
Hanging loose
Between the trembling air (85).
The poem deals with the environment which cannot be changed but accepted as it were, “two strangers/That cling together”.

Conclusion

Poetry as a genre has great impact on the reader because of its great expressive power. In poems, ideas and feelings are packed tightly into just a few lines. To this end, “poetry is part and parcel of our cultural life. It dominates every facet of our lives especially in entertainment”. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply for its intellectual benefit and amusement but as something having unique value to the fully realized life, something worth having for a better life or spiritually impoverished without it. It ultimately enriches our lives by helping us to become more articulate and more sensitive to both ideas and feelings. Poetry takes all life as its province, it primary concern is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion but with experience, beauty, philosophical truth and persuasion are aspects of experience. These are what Madubuike’s Sequences has encapsulated portraying the very challenges man faces in his environment, both and man-made and natural.

Works Cited


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