

The Stimulus of (Postcolonial) Violence: An Interview with Peter Onwudinjo

Gloria M.T. Emezue
Ebonyi State University, Nigeria

Peter Chukwunenye Scholastica Onwudinjo (b. 1950) is a contemporary Nigerian poet whose poetic expression draws from Africa's rich oral sources and is diffused with copious images, proverbs and aphorisms, as well as thematic preoccupations with poverty, exploitation, and corruption as social concerns that affect people individually and collectively. Among Onwudinjo's published works that are inspired by social malaise in post-colonial Nigerian society are *Women of Biafra and Other Poems* (2000), *Songs of the Fireplace* (2006), *Because I'm Woman* (2006), *Songs of Wazobia* (2006), *De Wahala for Wazobia* (2007), *Camp Fire Songs* (2007). He lectures in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria, where this interview was conducted on June 18, 2008. Our conversation delved into a wide range of issues, including the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, Nigerian national literature, poetic language and postcolonial heritage, and womanhood and gender disparity in Nigeria, all of which are major concerns in Onwudinjo's poetry.

GMT: In one of your works you claim: "I write to exorcise my heart of hurts" (*Women* 39). Is this what writing poetry means to you?

PO: When I talked about exorcism there, I actually mean "to ventilate." If you open up the doors and windows, cross ventilation will begin and fresh air will enter the room. So it is with the mind. Sometimes one's mind may be cluttered up with worries, stress and at that point in time, writing can be a way of invigorating the mind, freshening up the mind. Sometimes writing helps one in overcoming stress. When you put it in writing, you write it off your mind.

GMT: Many poems in *Women of Biafra and other Poems*, *Songs of the Fireplace*, *Campfire Songs* and *Songs of Wazobia* vividly describe deprivation and trauma in a landscape riddled with physical and psychological violence. What were you attempting to "write off your mind" here?

PO: I believe that it is to the advantage of a writer, whether it is a poet, novelist or whatever, that there is a conflict. You work from a conflict.

Whether the conflict is resolved or not is secondary because it is better to have a conflict. If you don't have a conflict, it becomes more difficult to work on an idea. That is my own experience. As the Americans would say, "If something ain't broken, why mend it?" But if you have something that is broken, you would be compelled to mend it and that's how conflict contributes to inspiration.

However, the major source of inspiration in most of my works is the violence I witnessed in the 1967-70 Nigeria-Biafra civil war. I fought in the war. I was a commissioned officer in the Biafran army during the war. I had a great deal of experience during those three years of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. I was the best all-round-cadet during my training intake and I received the Head of State's award for my exemplary performance. The war was a direct experience. I saw my friends die in battle. Many people were dismembered. I saw one who was beheaded by a bomb and so many terrible things. I saw someone who was pleading to be killed because he was mortally wounded and could not help himself and anyone who attempted to help him was likely to face death also. So he says, "don't leave me behind!" There was the ceaseless hunger, the constant pain of the wounded and of boys who lost their balls. And one shot himself because he was getting fatter and fatter because he lost his balls. These were terrible things. Terrible things. They are not experiences I will forget easily. They are written in my heart.

GMT: This emotion finds substance in Anezi Okoro's [a popular Nigerian children's writer] reaction to the war experience. He admits that he actually has some works inspired by the Biafran experience but has deliberately delayed their publication. Why do you think there is this hesitancy or silence on the part of the Nigerian government and citizenry regarding Nigeria-Biafra civil war experiences, which if properly understood might help promote a healthier form of unity in the country?

PO: Yes, the situation is quite sad. American writers and historians started writing on the American civil war soon after the war ended and till date, they are still producing works inspired by the war. Even Europeans and Americans continue to write about the two World Wars. But the Nigerian situation is unfortunately the reverse. I believe the problem is fear. I believe that because of the continued military government in Nigeria, writers are rather timorous because the military government might descend their hammer on those who dare to explore the Nigeria-Biafra war extensively. So they don't want to fall victim to soldiers who may not appreciate such a work of art or who may term it incisive. If you remember Obiora Udechukwu's *What the Mad Man Said*, the persona wears a mask to protect himself just like the slave character in one long African-American novel who pretended to be insane and nobody bothered with him. From that state of insanity, he could say things for which nobody could penalize him. But now that the khaki boys have gone back

to the barracks, this is the time for those who are still alive to write about these experiences.

GMT: Would you say that it was only soldiers that were affected by this violence?

PO: Of course no, civilians bore the brunt of this war, which was responsible for the death of over three million people from the Biafran enclave. The poem "Women of Biafra" is a tribute to all the women that suffered as a result of the war. You see, of the many books, novels, poems that have been written on the war (that is by those that dared) not many people have paid tribute to the contribution of women to that war. But I know that women contributed a lot. Soldiers were given what was called "dry pack." That "dry parcel" was fried plantain, fried yam, fried cocoyam and so on. All these things were packed in cellophane bags and distributed to soldiers so that if there was no food at the battlefield, you fell back on your "dry pack." It was women and girls that did that frying and packaging. And in hospitals the women and girls were also very helpful. Trained nurses were constantly in short supply, so the girls who were trained by the Red Cross assisted the nurses. Even these girls were doing as much as nurses were required to do because everything was in short supply. And then in the villages women did what men used to do by going to the stream to plant rice. They did everything they could. They caught fish, they did everything to sustain the men at the battlefield. But nobody remembers them. And they were the people who suffered great losses. Most of them weren't at war front, but they were the people that bore the brunt, the pain of war madness and lots of losses. Those who were fighting at the battlefield hadn't time to weep over someone who had died. But the women were at home and sometimes bodies would be brought back for burial (at least initially). They buried their sons or other people. So they suffered terribly. That's why I dedicated that work to them.

GMT: Historically the Nigeria-Biafra war stands as an index among pioneers of Africa's genocidal violence which has disturbed other global nations. Very troublesome is the issue of child-soldiers as seen in more recent escapades in Liberia, Rwanda, Sudan. Were there children in the Biafran army?

PO: Well, there were children that were used as reconnaissance personnel, but they never carried weapons like the type we see on CNN nowadays. They were not required to carry arms. These children, mostly orphans, were specially trained to pry information about battle plans, enemy location, secrets and information like that. They were very well trained in this regard and sent into the enemy territory where they would go and offer services and do house chores for the soldiers. They usually washed clothes, swept, cleaned and then received meals as form of payment.

GMT: Can you comment on the significance of the peculiar structuring of your first poem in *Women of Biafra*?

PO: It is called arrow-head formation. It is a formation with which the infantry company or platoon goes to battle. So with the point man (lieutenant or sergeant) leading them, the rest follow that way, with those with heavy machine guns and other heavy weapons coming behind. This shows the formation they take as soon as they come under any fire. Then those in the flanks have to come up and come around to the front in a straight line and then they face the enemies squarely. So that's the arrowhead formation. As you can see, this point man is the first target. Often he is hit and the second in command takes over immediately. That's the arrowhead formation.

GMT: In certain poems in *Women of Biafra* we meet names like "Akan Imoh, Ed Braye, Ginigeme" with no definite character sketches. Are we dealing with symbolic names here or are you tuning "drums of memory" to "chant beyond the seven hills/where eagles weave crowns/for subjects of our song" (25), like Ossie Enekwe does in his poems?

PO: Celebration of war heroes like Enekwe did is more the case here. These people were my comrades in arms. Ed Braye is a boy from Bonny and Ginigeme was Igbo. Akan Imoh was Annang and Yellow Skin, Igbo, but we continued to call him Yellow Skin because of his complexion. Nobody remembered his real name. There are others like Thunder Odoju from Rivers. Those names were chosen with a purpose. Some people who don't understand a thing about the Nigeria-Biafra conflict believe that it involved only the Igbo. But that is very, very wrong. It is false. At that time there were people from what is now called Cross River State. One of them is still alive and comes here to visit me. The person who won the best in weapons was from Ogoja. He is now a billionaire in Long Island in United States. So anybody thinking that the war was an all Igbo thing is wrong. It is just that the Igbo were greater in number. But that doesn't mean that the others didn't take part, they did. I still remember one young major who was from Akwa Ibom State. He was betrayed by his own people and killed by the Nigerian soldiers. Akan Imoh was my batsman and my runner. He died in the war.

GMT: The poems in *Songs of Wazobia* (2006) address issues of corruption, bad leadership and bad "followership" in postcolonial Nigerian society. These ideas tend to foreground the notion of national literature. How would you define Nigerian national literature?

PO: Well, there is the existence of a national literature in Nigeria. Nigerian national literature is that which articulates the state of the nation, is aware of the economic, political and psychological problems of the polity. And then, not only the problems, but also the prospects of

nationhood. In fact all these put together form Nigeria's national poetry and Nigeria's national literature. It is similar to what W.B. Yeats did for the Irish people by creating, for the first time, what could be called Irish literature.

GMT: You think that such a literature already exists?

PO: Well, in a way it does, yet it is evolving. It continues to flower into time. The *Songs of Wazobia* collection is an example of such work that reflects the Nigerian national spirit. The title "wazobia" is a tripodal name that reflects the tripodal structure of Nigeria as created by the British. "Wazobia" is a coinage from three major indigenous languages for "come." Yoruba say "wa," Hausa say "zo," while Igbo say "bia"— "Wazobia." This tripod structure accommodates the regions as they were structured out before other subdivisions.

GMT: The overriding pessimism established in many of the poems in *Songs for Wazobia* is disturbing. It appears that nothing good can come out of "Wazobia". In fact in one of the poems "Wazobia" dies. Is this sort of pessimism justifiable for a nation under the throes of countless post-modern-postcolonial seizures?

PO: Well, you may call it what you want but the fact is that there is much attrition of hope in Nigerians. The political scene is full of problems. The economic scene is a squalor that affects the social scene. The politics of our Naira continues to pour in as the polity becomes poorer and poorer. Even just this morning, the VOA or BBC mentions that, between 1963-2007, 400 billion dollars had hemorrhaged from the Nigerian economy because of bribery and corruption. This is a country that is addressed like this. It appears that if nothing is done, nothing good will come out of the country. Nigeria cannot go on with this kind of situation. I see my poetry as a way of urging Nigerians to improve by highlighting the implications of the social malaise we are caught in. Sometimes you talk hard, but you talk hard to show that the bad things will improve. And that is what Nigeria needs now. Sometimes you give a child a spanking "ka omara n'Uguru n'atu oyi (to let him know that the harmattan is cold)."

GMT: Why do you choose the medium of poetry as a way of communicating these experiences?

PO: Because with poetry I find it easier to express these brutal emotions most effectively. Writing them in prose is okay, but poetry puts it in the jagged form that they come.

GMT: In the preface to *De Wahala for Wazobia* you identify a possible creative dilemma for the African poet which stems from the colonial experience: "After dealing with ideas that can be taken across the

cultural/linguistic border, the African poet comes face to face with an array of images, metaphors, idioms, proverbs, witticisms, parallelisms, ideophones, symbols, similes, lyrics and innumerable expressions and nuances that are so delicately and deeply rooted in a particular culture that their meanings disintegrate in foreign expression” (v). Is this the dilemma of the writer in a postcolonial multi-lingual situation?

PO: Well, I speak Igbo, apart from the English language which is our second language [in Nigeria] and I have a working knowledge of Hausa, a little Yoruba and Isoko which I picked up from my mother and my maternal uncle who shared farmlands with Isoko.

First of all, there is the idea. What do I want to say? What do I want to do? Then I write in English. But that writing in English is almost a secondary activity because the idea comes out more effectively if the burden of it is expressed in Igbo. If it is expressed in Igbo, it becomes more powerful, more intense, and more effective. Then the problem is “How do I say this effectively in English?” And that’s why often when you read some poems, expressions in some of them approximate to metaphors and proverbs; because the proverbs actually convey the message in forms that are more lasting. I find them more effective in terms of communication.

GMT: For you “the code-mixing and code-switching that sometimes occur in African poetry are the outcome of the effort to come to terms with words that are wedged across the cultural/semantic divide, like a breach baby” (*De Wahala for Wazobia* v). Don’t you think that copious use of these techniques might render the poems inaccessible?

PO: No. That it robs or does not rob it of meaning is not the issue. When I come across strange words in poetry by English poets I usually go and look up the meaning of the words. And so it should be in African poetry or African literature. These are necessary because some of these expressions cannot be effectively expressed in English. You cannot transport some of these ideas across what I call the linguistic border. In an attempt to do that, the expression becomes such that it loses its effectiveness and so it is necessary to code-mix and code-switch. When you read Okot p’Bitek’s *Songs of Lawino* you encounter that and it doesn’t eventually hamper my understanding or enjoyment of the book.

GMT: You identify pidgin poetry as that which “yields its meaning without undue tasking of the intellectual resources of the reader” and as a creative writer you “find it more workable to settle in the halfway house of pidgin English, a pragmatic language that employs a peculiar version of the English language while at the same time retaining the idioms, grammar and syntax of the original African language and culture from where the work draws its life blood” (*De Wahala for Wazobia* vi). Yet, commenting on discrepancies existing in written pidgin, David Esizimotor

observes that “for over two hundred years since the writing of Nigerian Pidgin, various writers have adopted various models” (250). How correct is this observation in your situation as a writer?

PO: I call Pidgin English a kind of half-way house between indigenous African and English languages. It is a halfway house that brings the capacities of the two languages together and retains its expression. There are different levels of pidgin. What I mean is that if you go into the language you will hear all sorts of pidgin. And people write it in different ways. It is indeed true that the kind of pidgin that I write and Ezenwa Ohaeto writes is what I will call “educated pidgin.” But I don’t see this as a major problem in terms of communication. Well, we have to start somewhere. Pidgin English is one of our colonial heritages and one that allows the African identity to filter through tremendously. Many creative writers started using it as a means of addressing their subject matter to the common illiterate or half-educated Nigerians. In the area of poetry, late Ohaeto was among its pioneers. It is the pain I felt at the death of Ohaeto that nudged me into writing in pidgin. His pidgin poems are immensely popular among my students. Each time I read those poems, I capture poetry and I capture the attention of everybody. They love it. Then all of a sudden he left, and I felt that the tradition should be kept alive. That is how and why I started writing in pidgin. The problem of standard orthography for Nigerian pidgin is being addressed currently. Many suggestions have been made and I believe that with time, a particular model will be adopted.

The issues I discussed in *De Wahala for Wazobia* affect the young people more closely. I decided to use pidgin to treat these issues because outside the lecture halls pidgin is more generally spoken by many Nigerian students and young people. The first time I read the poems from this collection in the class, there was a great reaction. Presenting students with these experiences is like showing them themselves in the mirror. Even the persona’s experience of being pressured to enter into prostitution is one many young girls go through before getting admitted into many Nigerian universities. The students read it and it touched them and they share certain compassion and fellow feeling with the persona.

GMT: What do you suppose is the relationship between target audience and poetry?

PO: The two are intricately connected. Sadly in Nigeria, the reading culture is almost dead. Not many read for enjoyment. A few read newspapers and magazines. Not many read for pleasure. Literature should teach, but Nigerians don’t know this. Nigeria is not a theatre-going or reading society. So when I write I focus attention on what I have to say and meet my imagined audience at certain point. The pleasure in poetry lies in using simple words that are deployed in ways that give surprises and this is what creates joy in poetry. This is similar to what the Italians

discovered during the Renaissance period. It is the quality of expression and not the loudness of words that creates pleasurable poetry. It is the wit, proverbs, exaggeration, hyperbole, etc., that create pleasure.

Also, a writer has to have an ear for rhythm. That is how he will catch the cadences in the sound he explores. I was exposed to that kind of experience during the primary and secondary schools. I was in the choir and if there is any little error in the note, it will show. And the Headmaster was very strict. So we were all careful not to infuriate him. This has helped me in writing my poems.

GMT: Drawing analogies between your character sketches in *Songs of the Fireplace* and real life, how correct is the assumption that “Agbomma Ekiliba eje olu” (2) is actually Justina and you, “Nebolisa” (33)?

PO: (Laughs) No-o. Well there are aspects of beauty of “Agbomma Ekiliba eje olu” that might be likened to Justina. But then there are other characteristics of female beauty that were added to make Agbomma the persona she is. The term “ekiliba-eje-olu” is derived from Igbo folk tales. So all these coalesced into Agbomma of the poem.

GMT: Why was the male character Nebolisa in *Songs of the Fireplace* not given the chance, like Agbomma was, to “state” his own side of the problem?

PO: I believe he was given as fair a chance as Agbonma. For instance he confronts his kinsmen and states that “each time they will give me dregs to drink.” And he gets angry: “Why? Am I a newly married person that you will always give me dregs to drink?” Through him we see the embarrassment a childless man in Igbo society suffers, because his kinsmen feel that he hasn’t accomplished the task. He is still in the process, so they give him dregs of palmwine to drink. The dregs of palm wine are meant to strengthen a newly married man in the job of getting his wife pregnant. So as far as the relatives are concerned, he has left his job incomplete.

GMT: *Because I’m Woman* reads as a sequel to *Songs of the Fireplace*. What is striking in both collections is the “performance mode or structure” that allows the persona to address the reader. Why do you adopt such a mode?

PO: Well, when you create a persona that has clear characteristics that can even be identified clearly, it gives the poet an advantage; the advantage of speaking through the persona. He creates the persona and allows the persona to speak for himself. In that way the persona gives a clearer message than if it were the poet trying to recount the experience from the third position.

GMT: The performance mode adopted in *Songs of the Fireplace*, *Songs for Wazobia* and *De Wahala for Wazobia* reminds me of similar performance structure in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. You were certainly influenced by this great African poet.

PO: Yes, but even before *Song of Lawino*, *Song of Ocol*, there was an American poet from whom I got the idea of what you call "performance structure" for my poems. He wanted to talk about the deed of some dead people in his community. What he did was to "raise" each dead person and allow it to talk about itself and others. And then Okot p'Bitek in 1960 did a similar thing and it was also successful. So I decided to adopt this technique in some of my poems by having the characters talk directly to the reader.

GMT: Another noticeable feature of the poems in the *Songs of the Fireplace*, *De Wahala for Wazobia* and *Songs of Wazobia* collections is the emphasis on orality. This makes the poems more appealing to the auditory medium. You support the choice of this traditional stylistic device in poetry?

PO: Yes the oral mode appeals to me very much because our people, when they talk, resort so much to oral communicative skills. I mean, my primary society is Igbo. The people are exposed to so much of storytelling, singing, and narration. And I picked that up as I was growing, and am glad I'm able to express some of it in writing. That is the mode that appeals to me most. My poems come alive when rendered in performance. Some of them come alive when read with dictatorial voice or plaintive voice. This way, it tasks the reader's imagination to find the suitable "voice medium" for rendering each poem.

GMT: *Because I'm Woman* and *Songs of the Fireplace* address such problems as barrenness and marital pressures from a perspective I will describe as Afrocentric. *Songs* explores the origins of Agbomma's travails who, in *Because I'm Woman*, finally goes through the trauma of childbirth. In all these accounts the narrative-performance structure faithfully details Agbomma's reactions to people and situations around her. How were you able to get such insight into the nucleus of the female psyche and female experience?

PO: The point is that a writer lives a thousand lives. So you can go into the heart of the persona. You explore. That is why it is imaginative writing. Much of it comes from observing and being imaginative. Remember the title is *Because I'm Woman* not *Because I'm All Women*. So what I did was to go into the heart of this protagonist and explore it and express my imagination from my experience of what women go through.

GMT: Your concern for childbirth echoes the traditional African concept of marriage as a union primarily made for production of children. To you is this notion still tenable in present post-agrarian Africa?

PO: Well, having children is often part of marriage. However, the company that the couple give to each other is also part of the joy in marriage. My work is located in Igbo cosmogony and cosmological constructs. In this worldview where a marriage is childless, it is acutely felt and people feel the marriage is a failure. Personally, I believe that childlessness is not a *sine qua non* for the success or failure of any marriage.

GMT: Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" argues that sexual differences is "simultaneously arbitrary and deeply rooted in history and social structure" (157), and not necessarily grounded on the facts of biological differences. Representations of some gender-oriented social functions like child-naming are treated in your poems. In *Because I'm Woman* the heroine, like Beatrice in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, seemingly overthrows the status quo and succeeds in naming her baby girl. She further proffers some arguments in defense of her action. What is the significance of the act of naming here and to what extent does it empower the female gender?

PO: Well, naming a child is actually a method of defining the personality and future of the child. A name has a lot to do with the development of a person's personality. Many Igbo believe that the name that a person bears has a lot of influence on his future. It is like fulfilling his destiny. And if the destiny is poorly defined or not clearly defined, it will affect the person. I remember sometime in my village, a kinsman's child was brought to my father and he asked, "What is his name?" They said, "Ibeadima" (which means "relatives or neighbours are bad"). My father exclaimed "God forbid! Your neighbour does not think well of you? No! You must rename this child, otherwise you are giving him a bad destiny." And the man said, "Alright, please give me an idea what to call him." And my father said, "Call him Ibemezie," that means "my neighbour has done me well." So this woman Agbonma is trying to do just that, because she had looked forward so much to the baby, she wants to be the person to define her destiny by giving her a name. She wants to streamline her future as it were by giving her a name that she will fulfill and which fits her destiny.

GMT: Don't you think the accomplishment of your heroine is too idealistic because in contemporary Igbo (Nigerian) society women don't really give names to children? That might be why Achebe, a core realist, had to make his own woman-naming-ceremony a circumstantial event. But in your work, this woman deliberately sets out to wrestle this cultural practice from men and successfully gives her baby a name.

PO: No, it is not really too idealized because it can be fulfilled. The more women accept some of these functions that were relegated to men, the more they will be recognized, and the more they will be taken seriously. Usually during the naming ceremony the woman that delivered the baby is put behind and the man says, "My kinsmen, here is the baby, eh, I want him to be called this..." And men continue to do this. The woman can only whisper from behind. So in my work, women consciously carry out some of these duties and societal functions because it is about time they began to do so without being apologetic about it or making it a circumstantial act like Achebe does in *Anthills*.

GMT: Does this hard-line position make you a feminist?

PO: Well, I recognize that there are certain rights which women should also possess which they don't currently have in our society. Many of these rights create problems at times. Very often it creates disaffection in society. Women may not talk about these things but inwardly they feel they are being denied some rights. So it is time they began acting like Agbomma.

GMT: Your work suggests that only the female child can be named by a woman, or is this prerogative of feminine decision extended to cases of male children?

PO: A male child is a child delivered by a woman. In that way, he is the same as any other child a woman delivers, so if a woman can name a female child, she can also name a male child. But it all depends on understanding. You remember in one of the poems, I think it is in *Campfire Songs*, the persona says that the name the woman gives her dog is what it bears. And if she calls her dog "gbakalaghidolii one begins to wonder what is wrong" (81). So as far as I am concerned, there is actually nothing wrong with a woman naming a child. I think the women should do it more often.

GMT: What are you working on currently?

PO: Oh, I am doing something on the torments of a Hausa girl. I am exploring the trauma young women go through as a result of early marriage. I feel strongly that such practices should be stopped. In fact practices where girls as early as nine years are betrothed and married off for child rearing should be stopped because it creates several complications like Vesicovaginal Fistula VVF. I am working on the collection and hope it will be out soon.

GMT: Thank you very much for talking with me.

PO: It's been my pleasure.

Works Cited

- Enekwe, Ossie O. *Broken Pots*. New York: Greenfield Review P, 1977.
- Esizimotor, David O. "On the Question of a Standard Orthography for Nigerian Pidgin." *The Domestication of English in Nigeria*. Eds. Segun Awonusi and E.A Babalola. Lagos: Lagos UP, 2004. 248-64.
- Onwudinjo, Peter. *Women of Biafra and Other Poems*. Port Harcourt: Diamond, 2000.
- . *Songs of the Fireplace*. Calabar: U of Calabar P, 2006.
- . *De Wahala for Wazobia*. Calabar: Wusen, 2007.
- . *Camp Fire Songs*. Calabar: Wusen, 2007.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna Rapp Reiter. New York: Routledge, 1975.