

METAPHYSICS OF THE DEAD AND EXISTENCE IN THE POETRY OF JOHN PEPPER CLARK

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Abstract

Critical investigations into the works of John Pepper Clark have always paid attention to the social thrusts of his works and his fidelity to the Nigerian landscape which he has copiously deployed in the heterogeneous corpus of his poetry. However, the social vents of his poetry have become the most controversial on account of an alleged token of attention, inconsistency or disinterestedness with the social traumas that pervade his space. This article conducts a postcolonial study on one of the ardent subjects that pervade the poetry of John Pepper Clark. While agreeing with the fact that responses to social traumas, through an engagement with the political issues of the society is just one of the purposes of poetry, this paper identifies with Clark's philosophy of poetry which is mostly concerned with the subject of life and existence discernible, mostly, in his thoughts on death and dying. After looking at the diverse tentacles of the subject, the paper concludes that Clark's death consciousness has not only validated some Africanised values but that his discussions about death and dying are his moralising agents through which he dispenses mitigating pills on the social ills that have pervaded his postcolonial space.

Keywords: J.P Clark, motifs, heterogeneity, existence, metaphysics

Introduction

Contrasts between the poetry of the progenitors of modern Nigerian poetry- Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark and Wole Soyinka- bring at least three key issues that have since continued to dictate the social responses to their poetry. The first, a common negative judgment, was passed by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie & Ihechukwu Madubuike in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980) where, in their response to their very first sets of poetry, the three poets came under heavy criticism over an alleged overbearing 'European influence' in their poetry. Macebuh (1975), cited in Jeyifo (2001, 32) paraphrases the indictments thus:

Their [poetry]... display 'glaring faults' 'old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery'. Not only is the form of their works objectionable; they suffer also from a failure of sensibility; their thoughts are either confused, or their 'simple' ideas are 'clothed in 'esoteric' idiom'...Okigbo ... [got] the most vitriolic contempt; J.P. Clark is dismissed out of hand as suffering from 'blameless blandness'; Wole Soyinka is indicted for betraying his fertile Yoruba inheritance.

Even though in the succeeding years this criticism has been very much diffused, Okigbo, Soyinka and Clark have not been on the same wavelength in terms of their fidelity to poetry as a means of social intervention. Apart from the unfortunate incident of the Nigerian civil war that cut short the life of Okigbo who was doing quite well in poetry, Soyinka has been most consistent with the theatre just as Clark was with poetry. Jeyifo (2004) aligns with this perspective by stating that although Okigbo “produced a small but very distinguished body of work exclusively in poetry; Clark wrote some plays and produced a work of monumental scholarly research, but achieved fame as a poet” (p. 5). However, despite his seeming edge over Soyinka in terms of poetry output, Soyinka’s poetry has spoken more directly and consistently to the social conditions within and outside his country. This trajectory is exemplified in his robust deployment of Ogun’s mythic figure and credentials under some poems listed in his *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. (1972), *Ogun Abibiman* (1976), *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems* (1989) and *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002). Nkosi (1981, 161-2) attempted to harness this distinction and its implications for Clark when he argues that:

John Pepper Clark...is less ambitious in his programme than either Soyinka or ...Okigbo... [he] employs to good effect imagery strongly evocative of the Delta region of the Niger, imagery depicting the tropical swamps, heavy rainfall, special vignettes of village life. His rhythm can be monotonous, keeping to an unvaried pattern ... [However, he]... is a poet with very little capacity for sustained intellectual thought ...

Although this statement recognizes the heterogeneous nature of Clark’s poetry outpourings, it suggests a reason for the rare attention critics have given to Clark’s poetry. A good example is in *Connecting the Local and the Global Across Literary Genres: Emerging Perspectives on J.P. Clark and His Works* (2022) where the editors noted that ... “[a]lthough a renowned writer both locally and internationally...Clark’s works have not received the critical attention they deserve”. (ix). The cited book evidences the fact that Clark’s poetry outpourings are most neglected, in the fifteen articles in the book, “John Pepper Clark’s *Casualties* and the Nigerian Experience: A Spatio- temporal Perspective”, “A Pragmatic Assessment of Polarity and Modality in J.P. Clark’s *Streamside Exchange*” and “An Eco-linguistic Reading of J.P. Clark’s *Night Rain* and *Home from Hiroshima*” by Isaiah Ayinuola Fortress and Lily Chimuaya, Obinna Iroegbu and Destiny Idegbekwe respectively, relate with Clark’s poetry. Even at that, the titles are concerned with his old compositions and the only title associated with literary study is not a rigorous engagement. However, Femi Osofisan, in *J.P. Clark: A Voyage* (2011, 14- 15), attempts to resolve the issue of heterogeneity of Clark’s poetry concerning his distinction from his contemporaries thus:

Unlike Wole Soyinka, Odia Ofeimun, or Niyi Osundare, JP is one of the writers who prefer to speak through their works rather than through interviews or public speeches. He restricts by instincts from

the public eye, shunning the publicity that most artists cultivate like drug...JP has more or less retreated from the city of Lagos, where he lived for some two decades, to his village of Kiagbodo...This retreat has not however meant a retreat into silence...he seems to have recovered the creative flow of his younger days bringing out ...three collections of poems [*A Lot from Paradise*, 1999; *Once Again A Child*, 2004 and *Of Sleep and Old Age*, 2003... These new works show the poet from a new angle, even though intimations of this fresh direction can be found in some of the previous works...there is a deeper immersion of the poet in the landscape and history of his people and of his birthplace. Furthermore, while many of the poems deal with his growing reflections on death and the fragility of existence, his subject matter has turned overwhelming to recording the biography of the Ijaw/Izon people. However it is not all just celebratory: here and there a tragic note invades the chronicle, at moments when the poet reveals his consciousness of their growing decline and possible decline.

In what appears as an affirmation of the eclecticism and impetus of his poetry, Clark, in “The Playwright and the Colonels”, one of his verses in *Still Full Tide* (SFT: 145- 6), made the point that the pen has the lethal power, over the gun, to intervene in social situations. His philosophy of poetry is made unambiguous in “A Pledge”, one of the poems in *Once Again A Child* (2004), where he states: “I will make a poem/ Of every matter of interest I can/ Salvage from the stream of my life”/(SFT: 251). Appositely, Akporobaro (2005, 439) illuminates those tentacles of Clark’s poetry stating that: Clark’s poetry is the poetry of nature and human experience in their African manifestation. He conceived of these with sensitivity and adroitness of language management not so much within the framework of spiritual, or philosophical analysis as in terms of the socio-political issues of Africanity at a time when this was relevant and crucial to African development. Complexity was never his fault; rather it is the absence of this that constitutes the strength and weakness of his work. Moral idealism, sense of place, and quiet concern for good sociological behaviour combine to give his poetry ...a basis of social relevance and significance in the development of modern African literature.

Therefore, unlike the kind of “consistency” associated with the poetry of Soyinka, what one finds with Clark is an adept loyalty to the entire spectrum of the human experience. In his lifetime, Clark produced not less than eleven (11) book volumes of poetry affirming him as the most prolific modern poet on the Nigerian landscape. Interestingly, in listing Clark’s titles, one finds before going into the contents, his crafting of book titles in alignment with his discussion of the subject of death and dying. Whereas his last book of poetry was *Remains of A Tide* (ROAT, 2018), *Still Full Tide* (SFT, 2013) is an assemblage of all his previous titles, these include: *Selections From Poems* (1962; In SFT, 3- 54), *A Reed in the Tide* (1965), which has a rework of the 1962 collections with very few additions, and *Casualties* (1970; In SFT, 55- 110), which focuses on death caused by the condition of war, have earlier appeared

in a single volume he titled *A Decade of Tongues* (1981). *Still Full Tide* also has *State of the Union* (1985; In *SFT*, 111- 162), *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988; In *SFT*, 163- 199) where the poet lamented the tragedy of human lives truncated by the apartheid regime. In *A Lot From Paradise* (1999; In *SFT*, 201- 241), Clark in contradicting the Judeo-Christian myth, in poems such as “Land of the gods” (*SFT*: 206) and “The court beyond” (*SFT*: 220-1), domesticates the idea of paradise conceiving it, within the African matrix, as an undefiled primordial space that predate the terrestrial and ethereal space. There is also *Afterword* (2002; in *SFT*, 243- 247) and *Once Again A Child* (2004; in *SFT*, 249-314), which focuses on his reminiscences on the “Early cases of death” (*SFT*: 267) the poet witnessed as a child. Like *Remains of A Tide, Of Sleep and Old Age* (2003; In *SFT*, 315- 385), *Overflow* (2008; In *SFT*, 387- 424) and *Cruising Home* (2011; In *SFT*, 425- 491), are the latter musings of the poet on the subject. Therefore, from “For granny” the very first poem of Clark in *Still Full Tide* to “A Passage”, his very last poem in *Remains of A Tide*, Clark’s very robust perspective on this subject of death and dying, more than others, iconizes the essences of morality, virtue and integrity within the Africanized philosophies of life and living which his poetry evince.

This study is contextualised inside the postcolonial framework, especially within confines set by Adeoti (2022, 267) which reads:

Postcolonialism as a theory of literature examines literary texts and their social background from the perspective of their representation of the colonial experience and how they can come up with innovative ways of understanding the march of history and their new roles in it. The term refers to all nations that experienced European domination on account of slavery and colonialism. It, therefore, captures the historical experience of the people of ex-colonies after the lowering of the flag of imperial domination on account of slavery and colonialism....

In the engagement with one of the subjects that pervades Clark’s poetry therefore, this article forges a common ground between the poet’s imagination and personal or collective experience that prevail in his postcolonial space.

Death and Motifs in Clark’s Poetry

Clark’s tacit use of diverse motifs in his musings on death and dying do not only affirm the universal facts in the finality of death but also exposes some basic facts about the temporality and vanity of life, human aspirations in “Note to my Publisher” (*ROAT*: 64), “The Visitor” (*ROAT*: 45), “Address to Kiagbodo” (*SFT*: 210) and “A song of Harlem” (*SFT*: 235). Since most human aspirations consist in the lure for acquisitions he moralizes on the vainness of wealth pointing out they do not insulate from death in “The vault” (*SFT*: 351), “Excess baggage” (*SFT*: 382) and “The collection” (*SFT*: 383). For Clark, in “Easter”, one of the poems he wrote in 1962, death is:

...the harvest of

God when this breath

has blown uncertain above the sod

what seed, cast out in turmoil

to sprout, shall in despair

not beat the air

who fall on rock, swamp or yielding soil (SFT: 23)

This link of death's operation with the permissiveness of the supreme being is also coded in metaphors and euphemisms that see death as "The vagrant guest everybody / Alive entertains one day" (SFT: 195), "Stranger in the house" (SFT: 196), "The Visitor" (ROAT: 45), a "Debt collector" (SFT: 266), an "untamed fungus" that attacks "A tree, bigger than the Iroko" (ROAT: 23) and "a forestguard" that "call [s]" and "picks on limp leaves" (ROAT: 28). The sinister but daring forays of death and man's helplessness are juxtaposed in "A certain guest" in *Once Again a Child* (2004) where the poet explains that death:

...always took its time to ride

Back on the wings of its wind,

Carrying off many merely by touching,

Women held onto their children

Indoors with prayer in their hearts,

For there was nothing in faith

The men could do, except protest,

In a rather low tone, each soul

Comes here on his own journey (SFT: 266)

No doubt, one of the core ingredients in Clark's deployment of the journey or voyage motif is his felicity with spaces of existence that are numinous and tangible. Although there is often a sequence of movement from the numinous to the tangible, in the case of childbirth, the transition from the tangible to the numinous is mostly prominent in his poetry. The pattern is to have the tangible space, (numinous) destination, time of departure from the tangible space and arrival, at a numinous space, in mind. This pattern is demonstrated in "The last wish" where he says:

Now that where I am going

Is nearer than where I began,

May I be like the emerging child,

If the arrival is into light. (SFT: 197)

The reality of Clark's journey's motifs are embedded in the imageries, vocabularies and operations of the voyage systems of the sea, land and air which articulate his ideals of birth and transition. His copious use of the journey motif by sea is understandable because of his riverine background. In "For

granny” one of the poems in *A Decade of Tongues* (1981) which he composed in the wake of anxiety over the recovery of his hospitalized grandmother he asked:

Tell me, before the ferryman’s return,

What was that stirred within you,

One night fifteen floods today,

When upon a dugout

Amid pilgrim water-lettuce of the Niger (SFT: 3)

Also, the journey motif, encapsulated in sea imageries continues in “A language apart” his second poem under *A Lot From Paradise* (1999). In presenting the last hours of his beloved father on earth, when he could no longer communicate with the living even while still breathing, the poet records the following lines:

Was this the language you spoke

On board that boat, which you said you sailed

Into life with your wife and soul mate,

Before others on the banks seeing it

Bound for a great voyage, scrambled abroad,

Some straight stowaways, your curse in later years? (SFT: 204)

Although most of his motifs of death on sea travel are dominant in his compositions as a young poet, Clark switches to other motifs, such as air travel, as he grows old himself, for instance, in “The silent voice” (SFT: 400) but a relevant excerpt can be seen in “Flight alert”, one of his poems in *Overflow* (2008):

Air travelers take on trust the plane

Setting out to be a swallow;

They rarely care to know the breed of the year.

Of all the risks they take between land and air,

First are the men, who with all they know,

On account of sweet gain,

Take her up and down a lane

Only the swallow

Dares in weather, foul or fair.

And for all the soaring fare,

The poor passenger does not know

When being taken on as new plane (*SFT*: 399)

There is also “The tourists at the departure lounge” in *Of Sleep and Old Age* (2003) where the procedure of air travel parallels exit from the earth:

A few I thought to travel with

Some more distance, until we had taken

In some of the spots left us to see

On the way, each by his own ticket,

Took their seats in a place we all

Entered as a group, hailing it

As only a departure lounge

For the flight we all hope would take

Some time to come, but a call,

Received alone on their mobile phones,

Several have taken the flight we feared,

And some still swear, in the fits of doubts,

Was not at all on the schedule (*SFT*: 350)

Even though the anxiety about death is noticeable in the poet’s affinity with the motif of air travel, in exploring the protocols of air travel, Clark naturally connects his readers with the call and response motif in “Visitors from the night” in *A Lot From Paradise* (1999)

But if, by all we shared, you only want to say

The state that links us, when you come to call,

Is but a flare of the one you have known all

Our years adrift on opposite shores, then pray

Let no pageant in the world, however magic,

Distract from this night the eye awake (*SFT*: 233)

However, what ramifies the social impact of grief, occasioned by the death of a loved one and the perpetual sense of loss experienced by the bereaved is enlivened in “Waiting for the Call”, thus:

Yes, calls will come of all kinds in the course

Of the day; some on notice; others

At random, the nice with the nasty; then

Finally, of course, the call, that will be

Recorded missed, the caller, having come

And gone away with the one for whom it rang. (ROAT: 49)

Above all these, Clark's agrarian motif seems to have consolidated all the points he attempted to make hitherto. In "Leaves falling" a poem under the section "Family Rites" in his *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988), there is an example that reads:

Leaves falling in numbers speak of
Themselves for all of us
They speak a language of numbers
That all understand who have roots
In water, land or air.

They speak to us all return
To earth that spring from dust.

Only when leaves are green
Fall in numbers do we say an upset
Of seasons has replaced rust
With ash. And if leaves, falling
In numbers out of season, fall
All in one lot, then men will speak

As oracles there is something in the soil ((SFT: 183)

The poet uses "leaves falling" here to explain the diverse interpretations of the death of the old and the young in Africa. But the agrarian motif receives robust attention in *Remains of A Tide* where under "Of Trees", the first section in that collection, he explores the agrarian space and the anatomy of trees to explain causality and prisms of existence as he unravels the mysteries of death and dying. After using words taken from agrarian space, such as "forest" and "groove" as a microcosm of the human space, Clark draws on the entire process of tree life to objectify life, longevity, death and rebirth. Examples can be seen in "A Tree in a Grove" (ROAT: 18), "The Tree of Life" (ROAT: 19), "A Tree Standing" (ROAT: 20), "The Rings of a Tree" (ROAT: 21) and "A Tree bigger than Iroko" (ROAT: 23). In "Old Trees" he says:

Old Trees
Ourselves, it is of interest,
Personal, when another one
Falls, although, in silence, a million
Shoots up daily in the forest
Around us swaying. (ROAT: 30)

Clark's reference to "Old Trees" here has both exclusive and inclusive interpretations in the sense that

the demise of his old friends are warning bells of his own departure. However, his consolation remains in the cycle of life that is not truncated on account of the scions of the “Old Trees” that remain in the “forest”.

Death, Causality and the Human Condition in the Poetry of John Pepper Clark

Clark’s interventions on the subject of death and the human condition follow two slants that are laid out in the unexplainable, mysterious occurrences of deaths and in avoidable human conditions that have rapidly increased the occurrences of death. The agony, pain and sense of loss that come with unexplainable and premature deaths evoke defiance and anger in “Death of a lady” (SFT: 186), “A passing at New Year” (SFT: 187) and “An old man on trial” (SFT: 191). The emotions expressed in these poems are understandable because the victims are youths or children whose parents have been left to bear the brunt of bereavement. But a peculiar trait that began with “Abiku” (SFT: 4) and is also seen in “The Ferryman’s Story” (ROAT: 69) and “A Passage” (ROAT: 70) is that such bereaved conditions contextualize the mysticism of death and interface between the four existences in the African worldview which Soyinka, in *Myth, Literature and the African world*, expounded as the world of the dead, the living and the unborn, and the “chthonic realm” (10).

The condition of avoidable deaths takes two dimensions of the global stage and the homeland in Clark’s poetry. Clark is unequivocal in his criticism of the unjust disposition of some identified Western nations whose oppressive actions have led to many loss of lives in weaker nations. Specifically, the poet stated his aversion to war and the use of lethal weapons of war in “Home from Hiroshima” (SFT: 48). But in his response to the sufferings of blacks in apartheid South Africa he demonstrated how injustice and hypocrisy of the West has sustained the evils of apartheid. Beyond iconizing Nelson Mandela and his travails, two sections- “Ceremonies for Departure” and “Family Rites”- in *Mandela and Other Poems* give a grim account of avoidable deaths and their implications for humanity. Clark’s caustic lines in “The beast in the South” trace the cause and apportion the blame:

At last the beast that moved south
Is exposed for all his hood.
Mere children, afraid to live
In the concentration camp
He has made of their land,
Stampede barb-wire and bullet.
As the old bury their seeds
In a field of gas, guarded by dogs,
The wailing is across the world.

Only the Witch of Whitehall
And her escort in the White House
Embrace the beast their people
Had hunted down to its den. (SFT: 171)

The poet's use of "beast" in coincidence with "Whitehall" and "White House" directly carpets the hypocritical roles played by Britain and the United States which aggravated the sufferings and consequent killings of blacks while the apartheid minority rule lasted. Clark's protestation climaxed in "The death of Samora Machel" (SFT: 172) and "The news from Ethiopia and the Sudan" where instead of reining in on the situation, those countries fueled the embers of injustice and became prime suspects in high profiled state-sponsored assassinations of voices of dissent as seen in "The death of Samora Machel" (SFT: 172). The conditions of insensitivity are summed up in "The news from Ethiopia and the Sudan" which reads:

In our times, so briefly touched
By the strings of troubadours, the mighty
Of the earth hear and see all right
But only care for their race at arms. (SFT: 174)

No doubt, Clark's use of "troubadour", here, is a veiled reference to the arrogance of those nations and their racist inclinations which have no regard for inhuman suffering that attained an infamous acclaim of condemnation, globally.

Clark's most detailed intervention on the avoidable losses of lives triggered by mismanagement of relationships is presented in *Casualties* (1970), his poetry collection that engages with the issues of the Nigerian civil war that lasted between 1967 and 1970. Unfortunately, poems in this collection have generated the tersest heat against Clark's person and poetry because at its outbreak Clark had refused to join his friends like Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka who had taken sides with the Biafran agitators. With poems such as "Song" (SFT: 57), "Skulls and cups" (SFT: 58), "The burden in boxes" (SFT: 60) and "Casualties" (SFT: 91-2), Clark does not only paint a grim picture of that war, he also presents the hotbeds in the war in "Epilogue to Casualties" (SFT: 95-6) and "The plague" (SFT: 139) to objectify the losses of human lives and property. The war had such a horrendous consequence that left no "house where nobody has [not] died" ("Dirge", SFT: 82). For Clark, the tragedy became national and personal, especially as he lost some of his friends in the battle line. He relays the losses in "Friends":

The friends
That we have lost,
May be carried
Deep in our hearts,
But shallow is the burden
When placed beside
The loss to kin
Though we share with the dead
Club nor cult,
Our loss, large as the fellowship
We kept,
Is by that number
Relieved of the load
Which is square upon love. (SFT: 87)

After that war, Clark's narrative on the situation that made "All casualties of the war"/ Because we cannot hear each other speak (SFT: 92) was sorely criticized by his contemporaries and other critics junior to him such as Odia Ofeimun whose aversion to Clark, in *The Poet Lied* (1989), has become the most visible rebuttal. Clark's perspective about what happened between him and his estranged friends is recorded by Elimimian (1989, 3). His citation of Ogan (1985, p. B1-2), gives the following insight:

...my friends, fellow artists, academics who went away to the East in great grief expected me to come with them and not going with them they felt betrayed... I was suspected...by the security people and I had to explain what I knew about the 1966 coup... [I] was accused of laughing at my friends who are dead [whereas] I was crying about the bodies that have been torn apart.

The derision that was cast on his intervention, notwithstanding, Clark did identify the root cause of the war in "The Sovereign":

It was never a union. It was at best
An amalgamation, so said in fact
The foreign adventurer who forged it:
Four hundred and twenty three disparate
Elements by the latest count, all spread
Between desert and sea, no trace of one
Running into the rest in two thousand
Years of traffic, how can any smith out

Of fable fashion from such a bundle
An alloy known to man? Hammer upon
Anvil may strike like thunder, and the foundry
Fill with lightning, but all is alchemy
Trying to sell as gold in broad daylight
This counterfeit coin called sovereign. (SFT: 142)

Unfortunately, today, the root cause of the national crisis which the poet pointed out above has gone from bad to worse in Clark's country but he never devoted the same strength to the cause of nationalism in his subsequent poetry books after *Casualties*.

Death and its Pedagogies in the Poetry of John Pepper Clark

One of Clark's statements that shows his agreement with the universal belief in the intricate nexus between living and dying and the ephemerality of life is found in his adaptation of "Urhobo saying" that reads: "Just take away the cloth,/ And the masquerade is/ A piece of wood" (SFT: 364). Often, Clark frowns at the attitude that disrespects the dead for instance in "The dead as they lay" (SFT: 360) where he satirizes the poor condition of public mortuaries in his country. Even when he recognizes that the tradition of burying the dead is peculiar and customary in "A room their own" (SFT: 384), as against cremation, in "The order of the dead" he states that:

...But here in a land
Where the dead without blemish
Are buried in their homesteads, if blessed
With children, and in their own bedrooms,
Taken over by their heirs...
...the dead do not sleep
Any more than a mother beside
Her troubled child at dead of night.

They are of an order coming after death,
Though going before birth to that source
Which is the home to all
That inhabit the land. Knowing no fixed day
That all the dead of the world must waken,
They are quick to rise, whenever there is
The slither of a snake in the house,
And all the town has no stick

Long enough to strike it dead.

And while long lines of descendants serve them

The dead of this land, praising God,

May come again into town as children

Down the same line, if at their first coming

They went away with a sign of great of great wrong. (*SFT*: 198- 9)

Clark in his poetry gives ample space to the tradition of burying the dead in the Nigerian community which has been sustained by a long-time folk tradition. The lineal differences from tribe to tribe, as pointed out in "Last rights in Ijebu" where his wife hails from

Here custom requires

The truly ripe are carried

Home by young men, married

To girls of grand descent

From the dead. I had the rite,

A corpse is more dead

Than the wood and the lead

That are its coffin. It is right

They who eat of the luxuriant

Fruits upon a tree, should bear

It fallen in their arms where

All the truly ripe go resplendent

To their grave with choirs (*SFT*: 151)

Overall, the poet makes the point that the ritualized process of burying the old that are dead in Africa is solemn, elaborate and boisterous. In "Waiting for the dead" (*SFT*: 177), "Washing the dead" (*SFT*: 178), "Dressing the dead" (*SFT*: 179) and "Seeing off the dead" (*SFT*: 180), poems under "Ceremonies for Departure" in *Mandela and Other Poems* points at the sacred value of the dead, the palpable sense of loss that accompany the demise of loved ones and man's vulnerability to death. In titles such as "The wreck" (*SFT*: 149) and "Family meeting for the disposal of the wreck" (*SFT*: 150) the poet shows how death brings back into the clan relatives of the dead that are afar and rekindles family ties but moralizes on the absence of similar solidarity and filial absence in life-threatening conditions which result in death. A similar point is made in "If the dead in their state":

If the dead in their state could see

The things relations and friends do
When they are gone, a great many
Would not want to come again as members
Of their families or to their place of birth.
Only a few, hearing the true cry of pain
And loss that they leave behind
When they go, will rise and say
They did not know they were so much loved
And missed by family and friends. (*SFT*: 189)

There are enough parallels of this process in his own Ijaw culture but here the ritual of bringing the dead to the ancestral home as a mark of concealing and conciliating family ties is sacred in "A family procession" (*SFT*: 184) and "A royal welcome" (*SFT*: 185). Although Clark has no aversion to such elaborate ceremonies, his critical evaluation of the rituals nurtures his doubt and uncertainty, cynicism and disillusionment about life, especially while sharing his thoughts on what happens after death in "To be or not to be" (*SFT*: 347), "Song of a Mother Going Mad" (*ROAT*: 42) or "The company of the dead":

I think all those who are gone,
Between relatives and friends
Across the world, at a dead loss
To their own, and none ever
Known to have come back for all
That held them here, and I smile
Somewhat to myself it couldn't
Be greater company than there,
If indeed there is such a state. (*SFT*: 223)

To a large extent, his feeling of uncertainty triggers anxiety about death and dying seen in poems such as "Descent" (*SFT*: 404) and reveals the poet's limitations, especially in questions he could not answer. There is an example in "A prayer for myself", while giving an account of the death of his father (at 66) and mother in their sleep, he asks:
Shall I, when I arrive in the unseen state
Where nobody is refused entry,
Be led away to some place of waiting,

While my parents in their great assembly
Of spirits, perhaps ready again
To have children, look on helpless apart,
Or shall I, when breath leaves cold my body,
Expire with them into that one element
Which, by other accounts, moves the universe?

What will happen to me? (*SFT*: 227)

This feeling of uncertainty turns to defiance and cynicism and forces the poet to query why God allows death in "A call to heaven":

God who has all
Wants the small life
He gave man;
God who is all
Still wants back all
He gave man and wife. (*SFT*: 327)

One would have thought the explanations given by some non-native religions would have sufficed but although in "A personal statement" he attends their "rites ...services"/ [held in] "observance/ Of births, weddings and deaths" Clark disagrees with their philosophy about the afterlife:

Take me further away from the light
They pray will shine on their faces
Above here and under feet
If truly there is life after death,
As both their great faiths proclaim
From their one source, although
No one has come back
For all to see at the same time
In one place, I believe I would
Be more be more at home with my own kind,
When I sleep and wake again,
Than among a band of strangers,
Already chosen for a city, that by
Their own accounts, we all know

Well how it was founded, and is fought
For today before our eyes,
Which cannot believe what they see,
Except, of course, in the context
Of their history, which is all war
And worship over one strip of land. (*SFT*: 355)

Based on the lack of empirical proof, the poet disapproves of his daughter's Judeo-Christian perception about heaven and hell but believes that in the future the brain of the earthly man may resolve the mystery about life after death in "A memo to my daughter" (*SFT*: 420-3). Perhaps, the poet's belief in the possibility of reincarnation in "Heroes at Funama" (*SFT*: 161), "A second coming" (*SFT*: 313- 4), which he likens to the Christian theology of resurrection, remains Clark's consolation about the unresolved mystery of life after death.

For Clark, in "Treatment after" for example, no matter how the living is close to the dead, the separation occurs immediately after death, after the initial emotions and sense of loss, comes the fanfare of burial:

Then we go off to the state to declare
They have gone for good to that place
Nobody knows where; and then we rush
Home to be the first in the family to find
Where precious things lie hidden, after
A life of labour we did not share,
And readily will spill into the street,
If not passed wholesale on to us.

Then he concludes:

But were the dead we celebrate
To turn up then, we will all run away
From the feast, afraid we have seen a ghost
Come to call us home before our time.
So, unless we just want our dead to die
All over again for us to give them
The same treatment, forgetful of
Our own turn, why should we expect,
Seeing how truly we love them, the dead,

Given that one and final prospect,
When we shall all meet to part no more,
Will want to come back into our arms? (*SFT*: 407-8)

It is correct to note that the paradoxical tangent of these lines lies in the professed love for the dead by the living and the unwillingness to physically associate with the dead by the living but the moral burden is placed on the living in terms of proper conduct and consciousness of death which interment of loved ones must always relive.

Ageing, Sleep, Dreams and Death Premonitions in Clark's Poetry

The contrariness of loss for the bereaved and freedom for the dead that is free of the troubles of life in poems such as "The difference" (*SFT*: 418) accentuate the very bad experiences Clark had in his moments of loss. He also expresses the consequences of such loss of his contemporaries or neighbours in "The draught" (*SFT*: 358), "Rights of passage" (*SFT*: 401) and "A necessary man goes to his sleep" (*SFT*: 368). But what appears the most lamentable consequence in "A dying breed" is the death of his contemporaries which makes "Good critics of art .../ To show [his] work/ now have gone to rest" (*SFT*: 352).

Indeed, the loss of his contemporaries are warning bells of his departure but he gets more premonitions about death in his sleep and dreams. Clark, in his old age, calls sleep "A gift of age" (*SFT*: 330) and in his poem of that title, he sees sleep as constant rehearsals of death and a window that enables him to catch glimpses of the world beyond in "A sleep one afternoon" (*SFT*: 245), "The dream of people" (*SFT*: 339), "Again the characters" (*SFT*: 353) and "A dream again" (*SFT*: 379- 80).

But the sleep has been foisted on him by age which is a paradox of blessing and baggage. In "Answered prayer", there is a juxtaposition between the wish for old age and the capacity to handle its liabilities which reads:

We pray for old age,
Often, when it comes
It is on crutches,
With bowl in hand,
Groping in daylight. (*SFT*: 340)

This same thought resonates in "The condition" where the predicament of old age is articulated thus:
Old age,
The state all want;
Though, in truth,
The creeping disease

That cripples most,

And to all,

Always terminal. (*ROAT*: 44)

Unfortunately, the condition of declining health aggravated by loneliness as seen in “The hold of time” (*SFT*: 394), “Climate change the measure of our times” (*SFT*: 396), “A note to my son abroad” (*SFT*: 397- 8) and “Of things past” (*SFT*: 348) drains old age of its benefits. In concrete terms, old age brings with itself a natural failure of body chemistry in “This body not known” (*SFT*: 331) coordination and memory failure in “Time and Tide” (*SFT*: 335), “My loss” (*SFT*: 337), “Diminishing return” (*SFT*: 338), “Disconnection” (*ROAT*: 43) and “Rain” (*SFT*: 354) where the metaphor of rainfall and the inability to scoop the rain become symbolic of the diminishing return that sets- in on account of age.

Clark and His Death Wishes

Clark’s submission to the finality of death comes with his death wishes that give insight into how he wants to die and the kind of burial arrangements to be made for him. In choosing the time of death, Clark makes known his preference to depart in his sleep “Coming out of syncope”

Debt- collector that they call you,

Do not come knocking loud and long

On my door, all set for a sit-in

With pot, stool and mat, knowing I

Cannot go and borrow to pay

A debt nobody can trade off.

My prayer, therefore, if words not sent

To a force out of reach, which man

Everywhere has raised on high to serve

His end, can rise above a plea,

Is that, when you come to collect as

Of right, with compound interest,

A debt I did not, in the first instance,

Incur on my own, being born

Into it, you will at the time,

Manner and place, always as pleases you,

Swiftly take me wholly unaware

Best of all, in sleep... (*SFT*: 405)

He expresses the same wish in "The Visitor", where he says in clear terms:

Again, I shall tell the few,
Still at my side despite the baggage,
Let me, at the signal, rather come to you,
Paying no more than the full wage;
Best of all, while asleep... (ROAT: 45)

His alternative idea of a peaceful death is relayed in "Quest of a fool" (SFT: 369- 70) where, in the dialogic, he expresses his wish not to taste death but just walk out of the earth. The horrifying experiences of tragic deaths such as those mirrored in "In memory of Michael Cooke" (SFT: 232), his friend who was killed in a car crash at 56, must have informed the poet's wish for a peaceful death that leaves no torture and loss of body organs or senses in instalments. The poet, therefore wishes, in "A place to rest", to be buried at home among his people:

My mind swung between fear and cheer
When sick in bed one morning,
News came to me a family
Still had to build a house to bury
A friend, and I long settled
In village and town. (SFT: 365)

In addition, without disrespect for the feelings of all his friends and loved ones, he states that his burial has to be a private affair among very close family members. In "Naked truth" one of the poems in *Overflow* (2008) Clark writes:

Q: Has the lover outside no rights?

A: None; more so, at final rites;
Though alone, before dawn,
The lover too may mourn. (SFT: 392)

In the performance of the burial rites and other post burial issues, Clark does not only criticize prodigal waste of resources on grave sites but gives his family members these specific instructions in "My last testament":

This is to my family:
Do not take me to a mortuary,
Do not take me to a church,

Whether I die in or out of town,
But take me home to my own, and
To lines and tunes, tested on the waves
Of time, let me lie in my place
On the Kiagbodo River.

If Moslems do it in a day
You certainly can do it in three,
Avoiding blood and waste;
And whatever you do after,
My three daughters and my son
By the only wife I have,
Do not fight over anything
I may be pleased to leave behind. (*SFT*: 385)

These lines, beyond the sacred instruction to family members, show the kind of life the poet lived, his beliefs and aversions, his moral chastity and fidelity to relationships he held so dear, his love for peace amongst his family members and the preservation of family ties after his earthly transit.

Conclusion

This article, in looking at the poetry works of John Pepper Clark has demonstrated that the subject of death and dying is one of the most recurrent subjects that pervade his works in lines and verses. This makes the statement that despite the valid claims to heterogeneity, the poet has showed capacity of thought that he has sustained throughout his career as a foremost poet. Indeed, the social kernel of Clark's poetry is not in matters of politics but in issues that deal with the sociology of living and existence. Through this peculiarity, the poet has not only shown that his death consciousness, which is steeped in the philosophy of his African origin, is the modulator of his interventions, conduct and responses to life's challenges, but this also inspire his moral prescriptions and antidotes to the social traumas that have become quotidian in all spaces.

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