

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and It's Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

**Mark Ighile, Ph.D.
Eunice Nwodo**

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:4 April 2013**

=====

Abstract

There is no doubt that some scholars have attempted to situate J. P. Clark Bekederemo's poem "The Casualties" within the framework of the Nigerian Civil War. However, very little attention seems to have been given to the prophetic and contemporaneous implications of the creative work. This paper is an effort at bridging the gap, by conceptualizing the visionary content of the poem, and locating it in the present-day socio-political context of Nigeria. While using the critical tool of New Historicism as a basis for the analytical procedure, the paper observes that the various issues that culminated in the national crisis are still prevalent, and concludes that unless urgent and proactive steps are taken towards addressing them, a repeat of the bloody incident of 6th July 1967-15th January 1971 may be inevitable.

Keywords: Literature, Prophecy, Clark-Bekederemo, War, Poems, Nigeria.

Background to the Study

John Pepper Clark- Bekederemo, an internationally acclaimed poet, and one who was actively involved in the dynamics of the Nigerian Civil war, is not just a creative writer; but a prophet to his society. Daniel (2008:147) is right in observing that J. P. Clark-Bekederemo is a strong defender and upholder of his traditional heritage, noting that the history and career of this Nigerian author show an attachment to the essential nature of his people. Surely, J. P. Clark-

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013**

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and It's Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

Bekederemo has given to Nigeria a heritage that closely mirrors the history of his nation. He has also tried to show, in the process, that the polity could be improved. In Abiola Irele's introduction to *Collected Poems and Plays* (1991: xxxix), he observes that Clark-Bekederemo's "career runs parallel to his country's history". However, the most striking aspect of the history of his career is that, at every point, his background and associations have elicited an overflow of powerful feelings, which he feels compelled to express in poetry. Bamikunle (1993) has also gone ahead to observe that while J.P. Clark may be more popular as a dramatist, he is however more profound and striking as a poet. It is possible to observe that J.P. Clark Bekederemo is not just a rounded person but also that his poetic drive is almost as old as himself. Perhaps his strength as a literary person lies in his ability to reflect and write for all seasons. It therefore does not come as a surprise that one of his generic poems, *The Casualties*, though essentially a post mortem of the Nigerian civil war, has implications for contemporary realities and the evolution of a new Nigerian state.

Statement of the Problem

While scholars have beamed search light on the phenomenon of the Nigerian civil war, not much work seems to have been done on the intricate relationship between history, literature and prophecy. Moreover, the prophetic quality of the poetic tradition has not been given the much needed attention. Even where scholars attempt to link creativity with prophecy, they do not contextualize the Nigerian civil war, which the present paper is intended to do.

Literature Review

Before zeroing into the dynamism of prophecy and the literariness of it, it is important to create a basis for the entire discourse by problematising the nature and function of literature.

Adebayo (2010:6) explains "that the primary function of literature derives from its nature".

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and Its Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

Therefore, a discussion of the nature of literature has implication for its functions. Literature is an art made realisable in imaginative expression or a special use of language. Mayhead (1979:8) observes that one of the important values possessed by literature is that it helps to preserve the precision and therefore the vitality of language. Egudu (1976: 14) has argued that whatever may be the analytical tool of literature, deliberate ‘manipulation of language for aesthetic effect’ is its essence. The strategic place of language in literary experience cannot be overemphasised. Oyegoke (2009:2) while locating the literary dynamics within a linguistic framework observes that literature is the second cultural imperative after language. Literature, according to him, is born when language gives creative expression to experience. Literature is a by-product of language and is in many respects similarly characterised. It is a form of expression. It communicates, instructs and entertains. It opens vistas of human life and experience to an audience or reader. It serves to expand the limits of language. The great languages of history, it is important to observe, produced great literature which was an essential basis of their greatness. Literature is far more productive hatchery for new lexicographical, semantic, and grammatical linguistic additions than the conversational medium can afford language for its growth and expression. Wellek and Warren (1970: 22) push the discussion by holding the view that language is the material of literature as stone is of the sculpture, paint is of picture and sound is about music. Hence, according to them, it seems best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant, while we can recognize that there are aesthetic elements such as style and composition in works which have non-aesthetic purpose such as a scientific treatise, philosophical dissertation, political pamphlets and sermons to mention just a few.

While it is crucial to acknowledge that literature has other functions such as educating and correcting through satire, the fact still remains that its primary purpose is to be an aesthetically satisfying organization of words. Olusegun Oladipo (1993:5) observes that there exists a working “relationship between literature and philosophy from the perspective of ‘worldview’ and critical discourse”. He argues that philosophy and literature are both social phenomena and forms of social consciousness. Social, not just in the sense that they are produced by people who are “beings-in-society”, but perhaps more importantly in two respects. First, even when philosophy and literature spring from the experience of an individual or treat very abstract matters, they still constitute a reflection in the phenomena of life (Here it should be noted that personal experience, the experience of the individual, is still human experience and human experience is essentially social – a product of our interaction, not just with nature but also with ourselves). Second, philosophy and literature are products of the intellectual and practical needs of society and the individuals and classes comprising it. Whichever tool of analysis we use in describing or assessing literature, its relevance cannot be a work for its own sake. It either tries to present an experience of human relevance or attempts to repackage or remodel the personality of the individual in society. In performing any of these roles, it is not out of place to note that literature operates within some context of ideas which provide an anchor point for the web of descriptions, facts, constructions and evaluations which it contains. Several literary scholars have written on the Nigerian civil war. For instance Ezeigbo (1991) focuses extensively on the fictional and factual aspects of the war. This she does, by examining the interpretation given to the events of the Nigerian crisis and civil war by creative writers and others who have written about the war. The work also examines the place of propaganda in creative art and the art of governance and the techniques employed to achieve it. Chukwuemeka Ike wrote the famous

Sunset at Dawn in which he presents graphically the impact of the war on the socio-political setting of Nigeria. Though essentially a novel, *Sunset* can also be said to be satire, a love story and a story of war. In the literary piece, Ike draws on his own experience of the Biafran tragedy. Throughout the crisis, the novelist was there and the characters in his novel were drawn from a cross section of those he met under the exigencies of the wartime , The same is true of other notable writers such as Festus Iyayi in *Violence* and Isidore Okpewho in *The Last Duty*. Literary critics like Tony Morrison have done some work on the relationship between literature and prophecy. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *Literature as Prophecy: Toni Morrison as a Prophetic Writer*, Khalilah Tyri Watson, tries to situate the literary prophet within the context of the Holy Books and history. According to him, like Biblical and Quranic Prophets, literary prophet considers the historical events of the past in the context of the present, then provides the critique, the warning, and the challenges to his audience

In the first chapter of the work, “The Writer must Bear Witness: The Literary Prophet Defined”, he provides the reader with the definition, origin, and conceptual analysis of prophets and prophecy and discusses other critics who have delved into the topic of Morrison as a literary prophet. The second chapter “A Slow Walk of Trees: The Moldings of a Literary Prophet” addresses how Morrison’s childhood and her eventual awareness of the role of the writer as a witness bearer affected her writing style. The third chapter discusses two of Morrison’s seminal early works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. Through the vehicle of fiction, in *The Bluest Eye*, she imagines the psychological damage and social psychosis of a young black girl; and in *Song of Solomon*, she provides the story of a young black man on a genealogical quest and in search for truth about his family’s past or history, in hopes that he will inevitably develop a keener sense of self.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark’s “The Casualties” and Its Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

Chapter Four: “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Prophetic Declarations in Toni Morrison’s Historical Trilogy” provides an in-depth, cross-sectional, anachronic analysis of the textual sites within Morrison’s historical trilogy: *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, to show how Morrison consistently evokes painful historical periods in the Black-American experience and uses them as the basis for forewarning the present generation about repeating the past. The writer in the fifth chapter “Accepting Prophetic Responsibility: Toni Morrison’s Messages and Her Measurement of Success” concludes by establishing how each of Morrison’s novels demonstrates the many ways Morrison exemplifies various aspects of literary prophetic role. The work is relevant to the present research because it shows how Morrison’s literary role allows her to function as a seer, as a foreteller, as a visionary, and as one who holds up an abstract mirror for society to critically view itself.

Daniel (2008)’s paper entitled J.P Clark-Bekederemo-The Weeping Poet and published in *African Study Monographs*, is very instructive because it shows the applicability of J.P. Clark’s poems, written in the 1960s, to the situation of Nigeria at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Clark-Bekederemo’s role, she explains, mirrors that of the biblical Jeremiah who warned his nation, even though his warnings were not heeded. She, however, hopes that going back to his text may awake the conscience of his nation, saving it from self annihilation. However, while Omolara sees the Casualties within the context of the biblical warning, this present research explores the prophetic content and its eventual manifestations.

Senanu and Vincent (1976:117) have made useful comments on the J P Clark’s *The Casualties*, particularly as it relates to the Nigerian Civil war. According to them, the work is a reflection of a national tragedy in which all constitute the tragedy. We found all of them relevant

for this work. However, the investigation of the literary text within contemporaneous and prophetic context remains the major focus of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the literary critical tool of New Historicism. The advocates of this theory, like formalists and their critics, acknowledge the importance of the literary text, but they also analyze the text with an eye of history. In this respect, the new historicism is not "new"; the majority of critics between 1920 and 1950 focused on a work's historical content and based their interpretations on the interplay between the text and historical contexts (such as the author's life or intentions in writing the work). However, the new historicism differs from the historical criticism of the 1930s and 1940s. It is informed by the poststructuralist and reader-response theory of the 1970s, as well as by the thinking of feminist, cultural, and Marxist critics whose work was also "new" in the 1980s. They are less fact- and event-oriented than historical critics used to be. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present, and they are also less likely to think of it in terms of specific eras.

New historicist critics also tend to define the discipline of history more broadly than did their predecessors. New historicists remind us that it is treacherous to reconstruct the past as it really was—rather than as we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe that it was. And they know that the job is impossible for those who are unaware of that difficulty, insensitive to the bent or bias of their own historical vantage point. Thus, when new historicist critics describe a historical change, they are highly conscious of (and even likely to discuss) the theory of historical change that informs their account.

The importance of this literary critical tool to this work is that it helps to emphasize the significance of history as a standard of value and a determinant of events. By foregrounding the historicity of the text and relating it to the configurations of power, society and ideology in a given time, the researcher is able to explore, not just the literary and artistic quality of the work, but perhaps more importantly, its prophetic value, as it relates to the civil war period of 6th July 1967-15th January 1971 and contemporary times

ANALYSIS OF TEXT

The Poem

The casualties are not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it.
The casualties are not only those who are wounded,
Though they await burial by installment
The casualties are not only those who have lost
Person or property, hard as it is
To grieve for a touch that some
May not know is not there
The casualties are not those led away by night;
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a heaven,
No where as absolute as the grave
The casualties are not those who started
A fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands
Are burning that had no say in the matter.
The casualties are not only those who escaping
The shattered shell become prisoners in
A fortress of falling walls.

The casualties are many, and a good number well
Outside the scene of ravage and wreck;
They are the emissaries of rift,
So smug in smoke-room they haunt abroad,
They do not see the funeral piles
At home eating up the forests.
They are wandering minstrels who, beating on
The drum of human heart, draw the world
Into a dance with rites it does not know

The drums overwhelm the guns...
Caught in the clash of counter claims and charges
When not in the niche others have left,
We fall.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and Its Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

All casualties of war,
 Because we cannot hear other speak,
 Because eyes have ceased to see the face from the crowd,
 Because whether we know or
 Do not know the extent of wrong on all sides,
 We are characters now other than before
 The war began, the stay- at- home unsettled
 By taxes and rumor, the looter for office
 And wares, fearful everyday the owners may return,
 We are all casualties,
 All sagging as are
 The case celebrated for kwashiorkor,

Some lines of the poem are very strategic to the appreciation of this work of art. They include the following: Line 1: *Casualties*: This refers to a number of people killed or wounded in an accident or a war. Line 4: *Though they await burial by installment*. This refers to people fatally wounded in battle who are given treatment in a determined attempt to save lives. Line 17: *A fortress of falling walls*. This is a place that is strongly protected by fortification. In artistic phraseology, any place that provides or seems to ensure safety is referred to as a fortress. Line 20: *Emissaries of rift*. These are indicative of the messengers of dissension and division. One of the public relations acts of the two sides engaged in the civil war was to send delegations overseas and other African countries to canvass for military and diplomatic support. Line 24: *Wandering minstrel*: Literally, this means a singer who performs from place to place. The poet, in this context, is referring to the writers who were sent out by both sides to plead the cause of their various governments. Line 27: *The drums overwhelm the guns...* The word “overwhelm” is crucial here. It is a continuation of the image of the drum. The poet seems to be saying that the emotional appeals made by both sides trying to win support abroad have become so clamorous that the physical war going on at home seems less important.

The Poem in Historical Context

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and Its Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

The Casualties is a post-mortem of the Nigeria civil war. The operational subject is that we are all casualties of the war and not only those who died while fighting the war. It is the position of the poet that all categories of Nigerians were originators, facilitators and victims of the national tragedy. The creative writer expresses his disgust and disappointment in a rather subtle and subdued tone, thereby heightening the poetic quality of a work referred to by some scholars as predominantly prosaic. The poet creatively begins by eliminating the obvious cases from the list of the casualties, and goes ahead to categorically states those he believes to be victims, taking time to digress on the propagandist role played by agents of both sides using the telling image of people beating on “the drums of the human hearts”. He goes ahead to give reasons why the casualty rate is all-inclusive. The last line of the poem seems to expand the bounds of the poem and make accomplice of non-Nigerians. This is an obvious reference to the global dimensions of the war.

Contextualizing *The Casualties* in Contemporary Nigerian Realities.

This section of the paper shows in graphic terms, not just the contemporary nature of a poem that is more than four decades of existence, but perhaps more importantly, the prophetic nature of the creative work. It establishes the fact that the literary person, in this case the poet, beyond being a language expert, is substantially a seer, who can project into the future and pontificate accurately. To a very large extent, some of the issues raised by the contending forces of the Nigerian civil war episode are still finding expression in the socio-political structure of the country today. A close x-ray of the national terrain in the last five years (2007-2012) would validate this submission.

Jijji (2012) notes that in 1970 when John Pepper Clark - Bekederemo, the Ijaw- born poet wrote the poem, *Casualties*, it was to the many casualties of the Nigerian civil war, adding that a dispassionate watch of the April 2007 elections explains how true the poet was!. According to him, the casualties of these elections were so many and widespread that the families of the policemen and civilians killed in the run-off to, during and after the elections, merit special condolences. It is certainly not out of place to add here that the Nigerian nation and its quest for democratic rule were also casualties. While most Nigerians thought they were making progress in their democratic development, the 2007 April elections were a rude awakening to a somewhat collective delusion

Similarly, within the context of J.P. Clark's *Casualties*, and current tides, it is possible to agree with Dickson (2011) that there is no clear blueprint for addressing the developmental and poverty issues such as security, education, water, agriculture, health-care, desertification, Niger river dredging, jobs, housing, etc in the Northern and Southern Nigeria. While lives are cut short, there is still no form or developed system of injecting some accountability mechanism / process that will make all States and Local Governments answerable on budgetary implementation and on stemming out excessive corruption and abuses. People have continued to do the same thing over and over again and yet still expecting different results. That's absolutely irreconcilable.

It is possible, like some researchers and analysts like Dickson have also done, to agree that a number of Nigerians voted for President Jonathan, but then, it must also be acknowledged that there is a geopolitical map of Nigeria that establishes that the citizens are strange bedfellows, and not by any fault of theirs but essentially, by a substantially selfish political class. It may

have been a miracle for a General Buhari to have won the 2011 general elections for many reasons. While some voted for Jonathan on purely ethnic grounds, others promoted his interest on religious grounds. Those who believed that Goodluck Jonathan keeps making good out of other people's misfortune voted for him on superstitious grounds, while an appreciable number of Nigerians voted for him on sympathy grounds. Unfortunately, only very few voted for him on the grounds of his record or performance chart as Deputy Governor, and Governor of Bayelsa State, Vice President, Acting President, and eventually, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

It has been noted, and rightly too, that the Niger Delta, the poet's home, poses an increasingly troubling problem to the current leadership of Nigeria. The importance of wise and delicate handling of the affairs of the delta to the continued existence of Nigeria is not in doubt. However, it is a historical fact that the peace of the region has been shattered on several occasions. Nevertheless, it is not out of place to hope that the Nigerian nation can be rescued from a series of governmental challenges. To say that tensions have not really ebbed in the Niger Delta region over the years, is to state the obvious. (cf. Daniel, 2008, Mba, 2003; Osakwe, 2005).

It is important to state that the Nigeria of 2012/2013 is in a state of 'war', technically speaking. The war we are confronted with currently is compartmentalized, sectionalized, and departmentalised. There is war in the oil sector, chaos in the creeks, and visible turbulence in the north. The minority groups are crying of marginalization and exploitation and several questions are begging for answers. Posers like: How long shall we continue to live as strange bedfellows in the name of national unity? Are the minorities truly having their say, let alone their way? Who

are actually in control of the country's resources? Where lies the future of the Nigeria in this near state of anarchy?

It is quite clear that those who boasted of making Nigeria ungovernable if the 2011 national elections didn't go as they anticipated are now overwhelmed by the unprecedented political crises presently plaguing Nigeria. Those political gladiators obviously got more than their outburst. They are the contemporary war mongers who, like J P Clark puts it, started the fire they could not extinguish. Those selfish politicians precipitated the violence and then go into hiding. The bold ones among them are now playing the sage instead of leaving the stage.

Today, people are caught up in frenzied drama of hatred. The people of Jos are no longer just. Citizens who once lived together in peace and love have suddenly become bitter and malicious enemies. We are all casualties of the war. For some sections of the country, the night is no longer a time of rest and peace. It has become a season of mass massacre. Statistics of the activities of the Boko Haram in the last two years show that the political arrangement in Nigeria is a very fragile one.

The phenomenon of Boko Haram is becoming, not just a threat to the continued existence of the Nigerian state, but indeed, a time bomb. This semi-mythical group has succeeded, not only in painting the country black in international affairs, but also in making the entire nation a shadow of her former self. In a situation where a religious sect, an ethnic group, or even a political clan, is holding the entire nation to ransom, in a country where those who produce the resources do not have access to them, in a context where families now live in fear, not knowing what might happen next, we have all suddenly become casualties of a kind of war.

Findings

1. Some of the factors that led to the Nigerian civil war of 1966 are still prevalent in the contemporary Nigerian State.
2. Some of the issues bordering on minorities and ethno-religious militia are yet to be addressed till now
3. Nigeria is a complex state with a lot of complicated challenges.
4. There is a lot of discontent in the Nigerian State.
5. Boko Haram, which has been tagged a terrorist group of some sort, has a strong political undertone.
6. The poem published over 40 years ago is as relevant today as it was when it was originally written.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The *Casualties* is not just a poem but indeed a prophetic statement of national interest. While it is true that Nigeria is not currently in a full-blown conventional civil war, the indices are glaring. In other words, the poem is not just a sad reminder of the past; it is a pointer to a possible future. There is therefore, the need for all stakeholders to have a roundtable conference to discuss the future of the Nigerian state and the critical place of the minorities. We cannot shy away from the contending issues and expect peace to reign. This is perhaps the only way to avert a recurrence of the bloody Nigerian civil war.

References

- Adebayo, A. 2010. The nature and functions of literature: the comparatist's perspective. *Inaugural lecture series 2009 of the University of Ibadan* Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Bamikunle, A. (1993). The Poet and His Art: The Evolution of J. P. Clark's Poetic Voice. *World Literature Today*, 67 (2) 315-319
-
- Clark-Bekederemo, J.P. (1970). *Casualties: Poems 1966-68*. Longman, London.

- Daniel, I. (2008). J.P. Clark-Bekederemo-The Weeping Poet. African Study Monographs 29 (4), 147-157
- Dickens, C. (2011). The Casualties, Elections And Disjointed Nigeria. <http://www.gamji.com/dickson/dickson122.htm>. Accessed 30th July, 2012.
- Egudu, R. 1976. What to teach in modern African literature, *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association* 8. 2 :112 – 120.
- Elimimian, I.I. (1989). *The Poetry of J. P. Clark Bekederemo*. Longman, Lagos.
- Ezeigbo, A. (1991). *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War*. Lagos: Unity Publishing & Research Co. Limited
- Ike, C. (1976). *Sunset at Dawn*. Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.
- Irele, A. (1991). *J. P. Clark: Collected Poems and Plays*. Howard University Press, Washington, D.C.
- Jijji, S. (2011). The Casualties Are Many. www.gamji.com. Accessed on 25th July 2011.
- Mayhead, R. 1979. *Understanding literature*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Mba, C. (2003). Towards violent conflict in the Niger Delta area: the role of the mass media. *Journal of Nigerian, Foreign and English Languages and Literature*, 1(3): 94-107.
- Oladipo, S. 1993. *Philosophy, literature and the African novel*. Ibadan: Options Book and Information Services.
- Osakwe, M. (2005). Welcome English...and how long English in west Delta multilingual communities? *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association*, 11(1): 11-23.
- Oyegoke, L.(2009). Language competence, reading culture and national development. Paper presented at the Annual Lecture Series of the English Students Association (ESARUN) Redeemer's University, Mowe.
- Senanu, K. & Vincent, T. (1976). *A Selection of African Poetry*. London: Longman Group Limited
- Stevenson, W.H. (1979). The Horn: what it was and what it did. In (B. Lindfors, ed.) *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, pp. 209-235. Heinemann Educational Books, Ibadan and London.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:4 April 2013

Mark Ighile, Ph.D., Eunice Nwodo

Literature as Prophecy in J. P. Clark's "The Casualties" and Its Implications for Contemporary Nigerian Society

Watson, K, 2009 "Literature as Prophecy: Toni Morrison as Prophetic Writer"
English Dissertations. Paper 50. http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/english_diss/50 .
Accessed 25th July 20012

Wellek, R & Warren, A. 1980. *Theory of literature*. London: Penguin Books.

=====
Mark Ighile, Ph.D.
Redeemer's University
Mowe, Nigeria
mighile@gmail.com

Nwodo, Eunice
Shehu Shagari College of Education,
Sokoto
Nigeria
eunicdo1@yahoo.com