Imagery and Symbolism in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo

By

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Abstract

Literature generally extends to the novel, drama and poetry and these are referred to as the *genres* of literature. Each of these genres has its peculiar features or unique characteristics. They reflect, and sometimes refract life in the society. This is because they are all about the truth, the plausible, and the imaginary in the society. This paper “Imagery and Symbolism in Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry” examined the use of imagery and symbolism in Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*. In doing this, the framework of Formalism (also called New Criticism) was adopted. Formalism as an approach to the study of literature centres on careful, word for word perusal of a text to decipher its meaning and meanings. The Formalists seek to place the study of literature on a scientific basis. Through a close study of Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*, it was discovered that the poet made use of images and symbols in the collection. The images and symbols refer mainly to the landscape of Ojoto, the poet’s hometown, his disgust of the Christian religion and his advocating for the return to the African traditional religion.

Keywords: Imagery, Symbolism, Poetry, Religion
Introduction

Emerson, talking about the poet, notes that “the man is only half himself; the other half is his expression” (545). He notes indeed that only very few men can even report the conversation they have had with their nature but he sees the poet as different from the other men who cannot report the conversation they have had with their nature. He says: “the poet does not wait for the hero or the sage, but, as he sets and thinks primarily, so he writes primarily what will and must be spoken...(546). In the same vein, Julie Agbasiere on “African Literature and Social Commitment”, and on special Vision and Activism, in particular, sees the writer as a chronicler of the permutations occurring in the society (73). This is in confirmation of Ngugi’s opinion that a writer, being a kind of sensitive needle, registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. These descriptions and expressions here describe that poet of class from the Eastern Nigeria, Ojoto in particular, who died in 1967 during the civil war and that is Christopher Okigbo.

Literary writers in general – novelists, dramatists, and poets in their works of art keep their readers alive of the societal happenings and developments. They reflect and refract the happenings in the society. The concern of this paper is to examine the poetry of Christopher Okigbo with particular reference to his use of imagery and symbolism in his collection - Labyrinths. In approaching this paper, the age of Christopher Okigbo, his poetic ingenuity, imagery and symbolism as poetic tools, will first be examined and finally underscore his use of imagery and symbolism in the Labyrinths

The Age of Christopher Okigbo

The first generation of poets, the likes of Denis Osadebe, Nnamdi Azikiwe, were so called because they represent the first group of poets in Africa and in Nigeria in particular. They are also called the pioneer poets. After the first generation, came the second generation and one distinguishing fact about the second generation of poets is that they are university trained poets. Christopher Okigbo is one of them. Okigbo graduated from University of Ibadan in 1956; he studied Classics and this helped him greatly in his poetry. J.P. Clark also studied in University College, Ibadan where he met Okigbo in 1956 and that was when the college was an off-campus of University of London, just like University of Calabar was an off-campus of University of Nigeria from 1973 – 1976. Poetry drew Okigbo and J.P. Clark together and they became very close friends. As one who studied classics, Christopher Okigbo’s poetry is informed by the classical ideals of the Greeks and Roman cultures. According to Onwudinjo, in an unpublished lecture note, “the sensibilities that informed Christopher Okigbo’s poetry are akin to the sensibilities that informed the ancient Greco-Roman mythology”. Okigbo kept that high sense of myths and respect to cultural values in his poems contained in the Labyrinth and the Path of Thunder which came after his demise in 1967. Christopher Okigbo was born in 1932 in Ojoto in Eastern Nigeria (cover page of Labyrinths).

A diachronic examination of the periods between the 50s and 60s reveals that this time was marked by an increase in political consciousness in the European colonies in Africa, especially the British colonies. During this period, African politicians and writers etc advocated or clamoured for resurgence of the African philosophy and the assertion of the integrity of the African
cultures, African landscape and of course, the true African person. This however appears to be a kind of continuation, in a different mould, of the thrust of the pioneer poets who, through their poetry, asserted that Africa has a valid culture, integrity, people and past. The Nigerian second generation of poets therefore used their poetry to portray or evoke what is valuable in the African culture, history and religion.

For Okigbo in Nigeria, Awoonor in Ghana, Okot Bitek in Gambia etc, every alien religion, especially Christianity and Islam should be rejected. To Christopher Okigbo, the foreign religion falsifies and relegates the African belief and spirituality. This was the age, philosophy and situation under which Christopher Okigbo composed his poems in the Labyrinths and following this background, it is easy to interpret or appreciate Okigbo’s poetry.

**Imagery and Symbolism as Poetic Tools**

According to Merriam Webster’s Encyclopaedia of Literature, imagery is the “representation of objects, feelings or ideas, either literally or through the use of figurative language, especially, the often peculiar individual concrete or figurative diction used by a writer in those portions of text where a particular effect (such as a special emotional appeal or a train of intellectual associations) is desired” (581). Poets welcome the connotation of words so that through the use of associated meaning of a word, they can evoke the imagination of their readers. This suggests therefore that the language of poetry is suggestive, evocative and vivid and the effect of this is that words appeal to the readers’ senses. This appeal to our senses, through the use of words is known as imagery (Ogunyemi, 19). On the other hand, Cuddon sees symbolism as an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else (699). Another literary writer notes that symbol is anything which signifies something else (Abrams, 167). It is pertinent here to reconcile both imagery and symbolism as literary terms that serve as representations of ideas from the conscious minds of the users. The use of imagery and symbolism by Christopher Okigbo in his poetry is therefore apt. He uses these poetic devices to stamp into the consciousness of his readers the ideas or feelings he wants them to imbibe. Symbols like water maid, oil bean tree etc as evident in his poems are glaring cases of his apt uses of these terms.

**Imagery and Symbolism in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo**

Atukwei Okai, a Ghanaian poet, writing in the memory of the departed Okigbo in the poem “For Christopher Okigbo”, notes that ‘the dance was stopped at mid throb’. He is obviously referring to the early death of the great poet – Okigbo, whom the vagaries of the Nigerian civil war never allowed to blossom or fully demonstrate his poetic prowess. However, the little time he stayed, he demonstrated himself as a poet of class, such that can be equalled to the likes of Wole Soyinka. It is the concern of this paper to examine Christopher Okigbo and his poetry, who Azuonye says, is ‘little understood’ (30).

Just like most writers, especially poets, Christopher Okigbo wrote, in his days, for self fulfilment. Confirming this statement, Azuonye notes:

I demonstrate(d) the feasibility of approaching what Okigbo himself sees as the central theme of his work- “the fable of man’s perennial quest for fulfilment” – in terms of the Jungian concept of individuation, the process through which an individual attains self - realization through
the maximal development and harmonization of the disparate, often conflicting, components of his personality (30).

No doubt, Okigbo and other second generation of poets were actually not in tune with the political and religious conditions of some African countries especially as perpetuated by the British Colonial Masters of the time. Many of the poets wrote to challenge this condition. Kofi Awoonor talked of “the senseless cathedral of doom”, for instance,

Okigbo, in writing for this self-actualization and fulfilment, brought his many experiences in life into poetry either by mentioning some of these experiences in parts, or in full or even through allegory, hence he uses a lot of imageries and symbols. Okigbo himself contends that his poems depict situations or experiences he has had; he says:

Both parts of ‘Silences’ were inspired by the events of the day: ‘Laments of the Silent Sisters’, by the Western Nigeria crises of 1962, and the death of Patrice Lumumba; ‘Lament of the Drums’, by the imprisonment of Obafemi Awolowo, and the tragic death of his son (xii).

There is no doubt that events necessitate actions and such are usually chronicled by writers in general and poets in particular. Okigbo’s Labyrinth has these headings: Heavensgate, Limits, Silences, Distances, and Path of Thunder and each of these have titles of poems under it. The reference to the poems will be holistic – referring to each poem as the need may arise to illustrate a point.

In ‘The Passage’, Okigbo’s persona (who of course is a male) supplicates with a water deity called Idoto. The persona is actually soliciting for re-admission into the spirituality and worship of the river goddess – Idoto, from whom he became alienated when he was initiated into the Christian fold through baptism. The persona, like the prodigal, returns to Idoto whom he calls mother, and pleads for forgiveness and a reunion (acceptance). The poet’s reference to ‘Idoto’ is symbolic of Okigbo’s early days when he used to pass through the great ‘oil bean tree’ (known by the natives of the town as ‘Ukpaka-oto’ Ojoto), which stands by the way to the stream in the town. This use of the term is symbolic as it stands for not only ‘the spiritual homecoming’ of the poet but also is reminiscent of his early days, when of course he was physically a child and spiritually not yet contaminated with the Western religion. The poet says:

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand; before your watery presence, a prodigal.
Learning on an oil bean
Lost in your legend
Under your power wait I
On barefoot,
Watchmen for the watchword
At Heavens gate (Labyrinth, 3)

Okigbo’s diction and evocation of return, in the words: ‘naked’, ‘prodigal’, ‘barefooted’, ‘watch word’, ‘my cry’ etc, however, indicate the sense of humility, obeisance and self-submission with which his protagonist returned to the deity, the water-goddess. How these terms lead to the understanding of Okigbo’s poetry demonstrates how the literary terms he uses lead to the understanding of his poetry hence according to Rice and Waugh, the Formalists interest in literary texts tended “to centre on the functioning of literary devices rather than on content” (43). Again these marks of humility and repentance
shown by the protagonist can be seen as symbolising the personae’s sexual implication as far as his relationship with the mother Idoto is concerned. This can be understood when we realise that ‘nakedness’ is a symbol of total submission and the oil bean tree is Idoto’s consort. Idoto is a female goddess therefore her consort is male and the symbol of this consort is living in an oil bean tree.

The protagonist having started his process (Initiations) of returning to the traditional religion (as in the ‘Passage’), realises the apparent impossibility of returning without doing away with all he has got from the Christian religion. The poet persona in the poem ‘Initiations’ accepts that the mystery of religion is like enduring a red hot sheet used to mark an initiate, and this symbolizes the scar of the crucifix.

The poet says:

Scar of the crucifix  
Over the breast  
By red blade inflicted  
By red-hot blade,  
On right breast witnesseth’  
(Initiations, Stanza 1)

The ‘Waters of Genesis’ symbolize the promise of God to save mankind. The poet says:

Mystery which I, initiate  
Received newly naked  
Upon waters of the genesis  
From Kepkanly (Initiations, stanza II).

Okigbo himself notes that Kepkanly is the name of a school teacher in the late thirties who usually helped the priest during baptism, which the poet sees as a mystery.

In ‘Initiations’ the poet’s persona makes a caricature of the ministers of God. He says that in the Squares – are the maroons – the pope, organising secretary etc and the Rombus are the Rev. brothers and deacons and the self-seekers while the quadrangles contains the rest of mankind:

Square yields the moron fanatics and priests and popes, organising secretaries and party managers; better still the rhombus – brothers and deacons, liberal politicians, Selfish self-seekers – all who are good doing nothing at all the quadrangle, the rest, me and you (‘Initiations,’ 7).

This caricature is as a result of the poet’s abandonment of the Christian religion for the old traditional African life style which he was born into, later abandoned but now returns to it.

In the ‘Limits’ (Siren Limits), the poet’s protagonist had finished the purification exercises or rites at the hill top and is new ready to meet with the water-maid. This symbolises the poet’s new poetic frenzy, having his tongues liberated with the appropriate words for the water-maid, “suddenly been talkative, … have had my cleansing”. In the limits, the poet expresses the difficulties he had in establishing himself as a poet; getting a foothold in poetry. He sees himself as a shrub among poplars…..

For he was a shrub among the poplars  
Needing more roots  
More sap to grow to sunlight,  
Thirsting for sunlight  
(‘Limits,’ 24).
No doubt, like that of Soyinka, the poetry of Okigbo has so many dimensions to its interpretation. The poet actually expresses the difficulties; ‘being a shrub among the poplars’ symbolizes the poets seeing himself as a fresh and inexperienced new-corner (in poetry) in a gathering of experienced ones. In the poem, there are some cells which extend their branches in souls in search of audience which will listen to them. These cells may represent different kinds of writers – poets, novelists etc; the soul may stand for individual struggling for survival and who eventually triumphs and produces foliage that becomes very productive.

The ‘Fragments Out of the Deluge’ starts with reference to the body of the old Egyptian Pharoahs – ‘sarcophagus, an image of emptiness. From this ‘emptiness, a branch is hewed out –

On an empty sarcophagus
Hewn out of alabaster
A branch of female on an
Empty sarcophagus…..
Nothing suggests accident
Where the beast
Is finishing her rest …
(‘Fragments out of Deluge,’ 28).

Okigbo’s distrust in the white men’s religion and return to the African traditional religion in the ‘Initiations’ has given rise to his rejection of these white intruders. This leads to his use of image of ‘beast’ to refer to them in ‘Fragments Out of Deluge’. He sees them as ‘empty sarcophagus’. Here the image of deceit is suggested since they can change from human to plant as implied by the use of ‘sarcophagus’ a reference to the body of an Egyptian pharaoh which is said to have metamorphosed into a fennel branch.

In ‘Fragments Out of Deluge X’, the poet does not see the coming of the whites as good for the Africans. He laments of the destruction of the African life style.

The poet notes:

And to us they came –
Melisons, melisons, mair than ten –
And climbed the bombax
And killed the sunbird.
And they scanned the forest of oilbeam
Its approach; surveyed its high branches…. And they entered into the forest,
And they passed through the forest of oilbean
And found them, the twin gods of the fores t …
(Fragments out of Deluge X’, 33).

This resurrects in us the white man’s invasion and destruction of the gods of the Africans, their destruction of the sacred forests in Africa and erection of their churches on the areas. The reference to “the twin gods of the forest” in the above excerpt stands for the tortoise and the python that are the totems of the goddess. The image of total annihilation is invoked here.

But the poet’s happiness is that the sun-bird reappears as it never dies, but sings again:

The sunbird sings again, from the LIMITS of the dream the sunbird sings again where the caress does not reach

(‘Fragments out of Deluge XII,’ 35).
This carries in it, the import of continuity; the refusal to die carries the image of strength and continuity. Okigbo is essentially pursuing cultural naturalism. We see the efforts of his persona to return to the traditional religion in many of his poems. Okigbo’s ‘Limit II’ actually demonstrates the theme of the poet’s struggle for recognition by the spirit of the fathers, through his return to his cultural belief, having gone astray before. Okigbo himself had noted that he was reincarnated by the spirit of his maternal grandfather, (who was a priest to the deity – the “Ukpaka-oto”), the fact that his own father was a devout Christian and who had taught in the Catholic Mission Schools and had moved from station to station in his capacity as a teacher, notwithstanding. We are therefore not surprised why Okigbo, like Ngugi, wanted to return to the root, his root..

The ‘Limits II’ is full of images of growth, struggles for light and desire for expression. We have a whole picture of a tender child in a midst of giants or an equatorial forest where gigantic trees prevent low undergrowth from survival. In the poem, there are some cells which extend their branches in souls in search of audience which will listen to them. The cells may represent different kinds of writers – poets, novelists etc; the soul may stand for individual struggling for survival that eventually triumphs and produces foliage that becomes very productive.

In ‘Limit III’, Okigbo continues with the same expression of difficulties. He describes his difficulties as “Banks of reed/Mountains of broken bottles” (stanza 1). We see here images of great difficulty which Okigbo is into, as a poet trying to be recognised in the poetic world. Note that Okigbo’s method of poetic composition presents his readers with flashes of images which are not full sentences. Out of these two images of difficulty, he says that “the mortar is not yet dry…” This suggests that he has not given up in writing, despite the difficulties. This underscores the Formalists’ focus of their analysis on literariness – that which makes a given text literary (Rice and Waugh 43).

The anger of the poet on the Christian religion is manifest in ‘Silences’. Here, he pours his venom on the convent sisters whom he sees as redundant in the Catholic church. Okigbo therefore paints a pitiable and sorrowful picture of the convent sisters in ‘Silences’. The ‘Silences’ constitutes an angle of the poet’s satirical jab on the Catholic church. The poem opens with the sisters showing self-pity and moves through fear and complaint to resignation. The ‘sisters’ are presented as ‘dumb bells’ even though their worlds flourish. Thus:

Dumb-bells outside the gates
In hollow seas capes without memory, we carry
Each of us an urn of native Earth, a double handful
anciently gathered.

(Lament of the Silent Sisters III).

The poet notes that the sisters do not marry as the institution keeps them, like the fathers. The poet condemns this institution of the church and does so effectively by making the sisters sing the futility of themselves in their life – /When is there for us an anchorage;/A shank for a sheet, a double arch – / (Lament of the Silent Sisters 1).

One sees on the whole, the image of hopelessness for the sisters of the convent in Okigbo’s ‘Silences’. A central image of doom is painted in the entire collection since what the Africans do is to destroy all that is
theirs because of the white religion. At this, the image of things falling apart is evoked, as Obierika told Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart – ‘they have put a knife on the rope that held us together and things are now falling apart’, referring to the destruction of the culture of Umuofia by the white men.

**Conclusion**

Christopher Okigbo’s poetry provokes so many symbols and images which only a careful perusal of his poems will ensure. I cannot conclude without noting that Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Mmabuire and Onwuchekwa Jemie see the likes of Okigbo and Soyinka (both of Mbari Club Members) as sounding Euro modernist in their works. This notwithstanding, Okigbo, as an African poet, discusses African belief to the rejection of the western life style in his poems. In doing these, he uses symbols and imageries to create pictures of the mind. Okigbo’s poetry take its traditional imagery from the Igbo traditional landscape especially Ojoto religious landscape. Even the title of this collection *Labyrinths* is symbolic of “the long and tortuous passage to the shrine of the ‘long juju’ of the Aro Ibos’ (Introduction to *Labyrinths*). Okigbo himself summed up the *Labyrinths* as: “a fable of man’s perennial quest / for fulfilment” (Introduction to *Labyrinths*). The title may however suggest Mino’s Legendary Palace at Cnossus, but the double headed axe is as much a symbol of sovereignty in traditional Igbo society, as in Crete.

**Works Cited**


