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Visions and Reflections on War

by Syl Cheyney-Coker

John Pepper Clark's latest book of poems is in profound contrast to his previous works. Whereas his earlier poems were punctuated with humor and irony, a polarity of visions that were at times real and imaginary, his *Casualties* is a somber lament, at once sad, yet hopeful -- hopeful for a dawn that will erase from the brows of his countrymen the signs of division and hatred.

*Casualties* was written between 1966 and 1968, the first half of the Nigerian drama which shocked the world, as brother turned against brother in a mad and useless war which took the lives of millions of peasants and gentry.

Although the book opens with a sad dirge about the many dead and gone whose faces the poet dares not look at, it is with a different note that we should proceed.

The poet in traditional African society has always served as a cultural repository, a bastion of learning, the advisor of court princes and governors, but above all, a voice whose premonitions about both the present and future were never born lightly by ruler or ruled.

Nigeria, like most of Africa, has its traditional poets; but unlike the rest of the English-speaking states, it can boast of a group of excellent modern poets whose visions, real and imaginary, about their times are no less dramatic than those of the traditional poets.

It is the past that makes the present; it is the seed, well-watered and tendered, which will produce a rice crop. Similarly, the present will determine the future.

If the vicissitudes of the present could be extinguished with wisdom and understanding, a true justice that is readily accepted by those who demand it, the turmoil of tomorrow would be taken care of. But poets, with some rare exceptions, e.g. Senghor, Paul Claudel, and Keita Todeba, are not politicians. Their job is to carve out the furniture and leave the polishing to the expert craftsman, offering advice as they go along.

The craftsman is well aware that his services are employed by others who are watching and waiting for the finished product. Such is the role of the poet to the politician. The former is watching both the governor and the governed, warning the master from time to time about the cries of his subjects until perhaps that warning becomes too late.

The third poem in Clark's book is a warning of sorts. Through bird imagery he recalls with irony the feeling of impatience of the people which only the politicians in their opulence could have failed to see.

The warning was clear enough in "Vulture's Choice":

*The Vulture wanted a child  
Six years was a long time  
To be married and no child  
What if the foetus should drop?  
Then I shall eat it for breakfast.  
What if the wife should die?  
Then I shall eat her for lunch.  
What if mother and child should die?  
Then I shall eat both for the night.  
The vulture wanted a child  
Six years is a long time  
To be married and no child!*

Six years of unproductive role, six years of barrenness; what should we expect to follow? Passion, which becomes an impulse to freedom, a passion that is not only contemptuous of checks, but is also a sweeping tornado, at the end of which we can only count the bodies in the carnage.

*Boxes were brought by night  
Boxes were left at crossroads  
As gifts for the people  
Without distinction  
With no key to the locks  
No bearer at hand to take back  
Baskets, take back platters with rabbit ears.*

*Open the boxes was the clamour  
Of monkeys above tides. Open them all!  
Cows in the plains moped over grass. But  
Into cold storage the high priest  
Of crocodiles moved the boxes,  
Draping them in sacks muzzled at  
The neck, into cold storage  
He stowed them of unknown number.*

*Bring us the bearers of the gifts,  
The gifts left us in boxes at*

*The crossroads, bring them out, we say,  
So we may see them in the market place.  
But in cold storage he left the lot,  
The high priest of crocodiles who skipped  
Over hedge in the dark, then leapt back,  
Into sharp sunlight, hearing the cheer  
Given voice by sea and desert,  
Into cold storage he carted the boxes,  
All making ominous music on the way. (Burden in Boxes)*

Such passion, which can only be examined by its own music, does not lack fuel, though at times that fuel becomes extinguishable because of its highly flammable quality. If we agree that the first fire ignited by a fuel is one of destruction, we are also saying that the fire should be stifled without much delay to prevent its dissemination across already hot frontiers, frontiers which are waiting for the torch to light them.

In the wake of the first Nigerian outburst, which took the form of a *coup d'etat*, and between periods during which there were attempts to contain the fire, more outbursts were to follow with the blood of condemned and innocent watering the already bloodstained Nigerian landscape.

*Show me a house where nobody has died  
Death is what you cannot undo  
Yet a son is killed and a daughter is given  
Out of one seed springs the tree  
A tree in a mad act is cut down  
Must the forest fall with it?  
Earth will turn a desert  
A place of stone and bones  
Tears are founts from the heart  
Tears do not water a land  
Fear too is a child of the heart  
Fear piles up stones, piles up bones  
Fear builds a place of ruin  
O let us light the funeral pile  
But let us not become its faggot  
O let us charcoal the mad cutters of teak  
But let us not cut down the clan! (Dirge)*

The coups did not only touch off the suppressed heat and leave the state headless (as the rulers had been beheaded as a punishment for their "crimes"), they also exposed Nigeria for what it was: a fragile bamboo structure hurriedly put together by the British strawmaker over a period of sixty years. Nigeria had always been "the best example of how Westminster can be transplanted to Africa". Even at the very height of the drama, there were those lovers and grass-

hoppers alike of the Nigerian soil who had great hopes for Africans exercising the Westerners' concept of rule of law.

The killings and reprisals were enough to make Nigeria an example of the rule by partition, as each section thereafter began carving out pieces for themselves from the fallen "democracy". It was during this period that writer turned against writer. It was during this time that brothers assaulted brothers, wives poisoned husbands, and leopards ate goats.

No writer suffered more from the war than John Pepper Clark. The war was to end in death, stifling forever the friendship between Clark and Christopher Okigbo, a poet and Clark's mentor, who was chopped into pieces by the rule of the gun.

The war also altered the strong bond between Clark and another friend, Chinua Achebe, the novelist. Clark has recorded his debt to Okigbo and his feeling of loss in "Death of a Weaverbird":

*Shot,  
At Akwebe,  
A place not even on the map  
Made available by Shell-BP,  
A weaverbird,  
Whose inverted house  
Had a straw from every soil.  
Clear was his voice as the siren's  
Chirp with no fixed hour  
Of ditty or discourse...  
When plucked,  
In his throat was a note  
With a bullet for another:  
I am in contact with the black-kite,  
At the head of a flock I have led  
To this pass.  
How can I return to sing another song?  
To help start a counter surge?*

The anguish and tragedy of these lines are heightened by the fact that not only did Okigbo disappear ingloriously, but among the recovered skulls, Clark and others could not make out Okigbo's.

*'Look, JP,  
How do you tell a skull  
From another?' asked Obi.  
'That this, could you find where he fell,  
Was Chris, that Sam, and*

*This there in the sand  
Of course Emman. Oh yes,  
How does one tell a cup on the floor  
From another, when the spirit is emptied?  
And the goblets are legion,  
Broken upon the fields after Nsukka. (Skulls and Cups)*

Clark does not exonerate himself and others of the blame for the Nigerian drama. Should the writer? Isn't he just as responsible for lighting the fire with his warnings, although he is powerless to control it? Are the dead the guilty ones alone? Surely not. Those who tacitly agreed to or watched the drama being staged were just as guilty, if not more so, than the actors themselves. Clark and Achebe were not to be saved by any poetic lavabo from the blame incurred.

*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 instalment.  
The casualties are not only those who have lost  
Persons or property, hard as it is  
To grope for a touch that some  
May not know is not there.  
The casualties are not only those led away by night;  
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven,  
Nowhere as absolute as the grave.  
The casualties are not only 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 scenes of ravage and wreck;  
They are the emissaries of rift,  
So smug in smoke-rooms they haunt abroad,  
They do not see the funeral piles  
At home eating up the forests.  
They are the wandering minstrels who, beating on  
The drums of the 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,  
All casualties of the war,  
Because we cannot hear each 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 rumours, the looters for office  
And wares, fearful everyday the owners may return,  
We are all casualties,  
All sagging as are  
The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor,  
The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war.  
(The Casualties [to Chinua Achebe])*

A similar theme runs through "The Cockerel in the Tale" and the "Reign of the Crocodile", poems satirizing the inability of the soldiers who masterminded the coups and the generals who took over the realm of government, to control the fire.

Clark has no patience with soldiers and does not waste metaphors on them, but presents them in large, cruel images of inertness and destruction.

But "Casualties" isn't just a mourning for the dead, a posthumous award for the gallant and the innocent who were slaughtered. It's also a paean, a manifestation of the belief that *men* can be internecine but at the same time mutually productive. We have seen the Nigerian drama played before on other stages out of Africa. We have seen writers forging visions and hope out of a poetic vacuum, writers who have, through the exigencies made on their intellect, given hope to other men. Clark has done just that in poems such as "Night Song" and "Friends".

I regret that Clark at one time accused Dennis Brutus, South African poet, of writing like an "obscene albino". I say this because the physical and psychological bestiality of the whites in southern Africa which has produced some angry stuff out of Brutus is not too far removed from the sufferings which produced the songs in Clark. Brutus is kicked by white savagery and lashes back, and Clark is pushed into solitude by Black intransigencies and shouts out. That Clark can create a song without first sinking down into a poetic vacuum is testimony of his humanity and his susceptibility to human passion.

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