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**Versifying Exile and Belonging in
Selected Poems by Olu Oguibe**

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Abstract

The symbiotic relationship between exile and belonging is most visible in the writer's deployment of his/her art to document experiences of the past and their impact on the feelings and well-being of his/her people in the periods represented in the work(s). This paper explores exile experience and belonging in the African poetry with special reference to Olu Oguibe's selected poems. Upon the publication of his first collection titled *Gathering Fear*, Oguibe registers his presence in the African global and contemporary literature is his unequivocal attachment to his Nigerian Nation. He goes against all assumptions led by the West against Africa and he succeeds at integrating with other cultures to be prominent as his contemporaries like Achebe, Sonika, and Tanure Ojaide. In the light of this, both of Edward Said and Oguibe share the same perspectives about the significance of belonging to homeland and deploy their exile experiences and poetry to defend their national and regional culture against all types of westernization.

Keywords:

Exile- Belonging- Olu Oguibe- Edward Said- World Literature- African poetry- Integrity- national faith

The poet scholar Olu Oguibe (b.1948) is a distinguished Nigerian writer, poet and an artist who establishes his bound to He wrote *Gathering Nigerian land spiritually and physically. Fear*, a collection of poems, through which Oguibe attempts to create a deeply democratic and patriotic spirit unifying and guiding the nation through the Biafra War (1967-70). The Biafra War presents Oguibe with another opportunity to use his poetry to heal and unify the nation. By this war, Oguibe is presented as a popular national figure who has a mission to be fulfilled. He communicates a message to his people that they should have a shared democratic and national faith that could protect their identity and guide them through the conflict.



In his book *The Culture Game*, Olu Oguibe asserts the West is not the center of the world and the land of education while other parts of the East are primitive as they assume. This is to certify that the concept of modernity and culture for the west, and Oguibe the concept of culture or ‘Africanity’ is problematic (28). Oguibe dedicates his life defending his African roots against all aggressive powers in the continent. He maintains that African poetry should offer perspectives that are deeply rooted in the fragrance of the land of their ancestors. In this respect, belonging to African home and land is a medium through which Oguibe attempts to universalize his poetry and culture to be relevant to the global community.

For Oguibe, like many exiled writers, exile is not curable since it hinders the connection between the individual and his origin which grants him/her the real sense of life. This is what Edward Said explores in his book, *Reflections of Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (2000), exile is ‘the unhealable rift forced between a human and native place, between the self and its true home’, and he concludes that ‘its essential sadness can never be surmounted’ (173). In “For You, Nigeria” Oguibe writes:

Every exile is a hornbill;

The Homeland is buried
in his head

She is to him

Like the tortoise’s
carapace:

A hole for retreat,



A house of dreams.

I have wrapped my
dreams

Round that Land.

(Sec.IV: 62-

68)

People who have been exiled from their native land always suffer from a strange sense of nostalgia. Oguibe is always longing for his homeland ‘Nigeria’; its name is buried in his mind; exile carries with him the pain of what is lost. Homeland is always his dream and it is also compared to a tortoise’s shell. The tortoise knows well how to protect itself from its enemies; it lives in its home- shell-safely.

By the reading the poetry of Oguibe, it is clear that he jolts his readers into two important issues; the first one is his accusation of politicians; those who are in power of being aggressive against their people and the second one is his exile to London where he starts to be a voice of all Africans. Yet it is necessary to mention that Oguibe goes against the regime of General Babangida which “witnessed the greatest level of bloodshed both within the military ranks and the civilian population. Indeed, the regime threatened the sense of belonging of the people” (Olaoluwa83). In a “letter to His Mother”, Oguibe states:

It’s raining again today

It always rains



But the blood in the streets

Is dry and brown

May be it'll loosen now

There are men out on the

street

Covered in bin lining

Shoveling blood in barrows

.....

I remember

faces

and

snatches

of what once was.

memory stammers...

(1-8/32-33)

In this mourning mail to his mother, Oguibe laments the death of his people by going against the policy attributed to those who are in power. It is a direct declaration of his commitment to his that is threaten by the military dictatorship under Nigerian nation the administration of General Babangida. This poem congests with pain and sorrow of being alone in London. Oguibe's poetry,



in one way or another, reflects pains of “the unrequited love of homeland and challenges posed by inadequacies of memory with which Oguibe tries to assuage the traumas of alienation (Olaoluwa 103-104). Consequently, the pain of the thought of Nigeria, as a homeland, fired up the layer of belonging for Oguibe. Now his mind and thought are haunted by his love of his homeland. All these issues show to what extreme Oguibe is a nationalist and he does belong to Nigeria. Another interesting poem, in which Oguibe attacks General Babangida and declaims his love for Nigeria is “For You, Nigeria”. Oguibe writes:

I sing of you, Nigeria.

From these shores I sing

your name;

for I am you

as you are me,

and you are the mother

as I am the child,

and nothing can stand

between the offspring

and the womb.

.....

my pride,

my shame,



my love,

my curse,

I sing your name today;

but my song is sparse and
coarse

and it's bitter on my
tongue.

(10-14/61-66)

Oguibe is longing for his homeland and his mind is haunted by No his nation, land...etc. He is a child and Africa is his mother. one can separate a child from his mother. This visual image touches our emotions. Nigeria runs in his veins; it is a part of his heart. He sings its name day after day and hour after hour but his song is sparse. In other words, the speaker compares his nation to a mother, and compares himself to a child; telling us that 'I am yours and you are mine and no one can separate us just like no one can separate the offspring from the mother's womb'.

As an authentic poet and artist, Oguibe starts to think about his root, race and identity in his exile and how to write a global poetry that may preserve his identity all over the world. For him, exile itself is a global problem and this global issue becomes universal precisely through the specifics of his poetry. By reading the poetry of Oguibe, it is obvious that his poetry is colored with bitterness and pain which establish his attachment to Nigeria as a homeland. This is one of the layers of belonging to Nigeria as a homeland. But what is really interesting about Oguibe's poetry and art is his insistence on defending his



national and regional culture against all types of westernization. Saul Ostrow explores that Oguibe is a part of the recent generation of African-born artists who emerged on the international scene in the early 90s (31).

Although, Oguibe is exiled and dislocated through time and space, he announces his attachment to his native land and starts to assert his presence to the whole world. His love for his land exceeds all sorts of pain and morning. Indeed, Oguibe addresses the idea of home ‘Africa’ as a nation. Joseph Mujere in his article ‘Land and the Politics of Belonging in Africa’ points out: ‘belonging is much more fluid and allows people to use all sorts of languages and practices to articulate their claims’ (497).

Belonging is one of the pillars of nationalism.

In this respect, like many African writers, Oguibe shares Edward Said’s definition of exile. Catalin Constantinescu in his article “Perspectives on Identity and Exile” explores that Edward Said’s consciousness is split between two perspectives, which provides for an interesting analysis of the Western in interpretation of the East (Orient). He is deeply read in Western history and literature which undoubtedly imprinted in his western intellectuality, tradition and morality. His Palestinian roots create the dichotomized voice and inner tension, which Said constantly attempts to negotiate (173). Here, Said’s nationalism is exemplified in his writing about his homeland. Both Said and Oguibe trace all their home issues abroad and these issues are at the heart of their works in terms of being a voice of their people.

Martha C. Nussbaum wrote: “exile is Said’s political condition” (“The End of Orthodoxy”, in “The New York Times”, 28 February 2001). Even when nationhood intervenes, Said constantly opposes the idea that all forms of national identity



politics are ever fully at home there. Nussbaum observed that exile may be defined, more deeply and acutely, as a condition of his mind, one that can be shared by all who resist the comfort of parochial loyalties, even when they live in the nation of their birth. Then, exile is also a morally valuable, though painful, condition. At first, he argues, identity politics may be a positive type of resistance, a way of asserting the presence and the necessity to share the world, including those ignored (by the majority) (Qtd in Constantinescu 175).

By reading the poetry of Oguibe, it is clear that he announces his attachment to his homeland. Respectively, one can define belonging as an entitlement to a sense of home. It is a feeling of being secure and safe. For instance, you may live in your own country but you don't feel safe and you seek to live in another place in the world. This means that the individual is enforced to belong out of this undesirable place; he is dislocated to another place. You are enforced because you are objecting to laws issued by those who are in power. In addition, the individual may be exiled to another place where he feels dilemma of the new place he is exiled to, but at the same time he feels safety. He is safe because he lives in a safe place where he flinches away from a war his country urging for it or because his freedom is restricted in his home country. The hosting place or country may restrict and decrease this layer of belonging to the native land; when you feel alone and detached from everything local.

The current study, therefore, is devoted to present to what extreme a poet's sense of belonging is totally a physiological act not a political one. Furthermore, belonging is a controversial issue that jolts the reader into deep and deep thinking. Edward Said, respectively, poses a question to what extreme it is possible for individuals to live with the memory of enormous suffering,



and how it possible for an entire community, on the other hand to forget it so quickly? (89). For Oguibe, for answering this question, he maintains that- in his very first poem, that:

I stand at the gates
 Stranger and outsider
 I have journey a way
 From the sea into the
 desert...

(A Song from Exile 1-4).

Similarly, in exile we find that Oguibe's commitment and attachment to Nigeria increases day by day as his exile and estrangement change the way he thinks of his root, race and identity.

Fenster defines belonging as a sense of attachment to a place and this attachment is powerful because it is experienced through many aspects of one's identity. He adds that constructing a sense of belonging does not necessarily require physical presence in a place; people may develop a sense of belonging to a place they have already left, or even to a place that they have never been to (9). Belonging and a sense of place in the era of globalization, points out that and in terms of a rapid globalized world, Fenster globalization has not diminished a sense of belonging to a place; but it has created it. One can add also that the very discussion of concepts such as belonging to a place and a sense of place is deeply rooted in his writing and art (10).



In 'A Song from Exile', Oguibe's commitment to his home 'Nigeria' gets across clearly this landmark poem. The opening lines of this poem explores this point:

I stand at the gates

Stranger and outsider

I have journeyed away

From the sea into the desert

+The charm has crossed

rivers

The tongue is blunt

The songster has journeyed

Without his voice

(1-8)

Both of Said and Oguibe shares the same perspectives about the significance of belonging to their own lands. Egonu, a remarkable, compassionate and very private artist, has been described as "perhaps Africa's greatest modern painter," one whose work challenges the impoverished Western myth of the naive African artist. The complexity of Egonu's work is firmly located within the tradition of modernism. His works offer a unique contribution to the scarce literature on artists of African, Asian or Latin American origin living in the West (Oguibe 17).

In *The Perlis of Belonging*, Peter Geschiere sheds light on the concept of autochthony and how its fluidity and complexity



affect the negotiation of belonging in Africa and Europe. He traces the origins of autochthony- being born from the soil- and how it has been used in different contexts, especially by politicians a bid to exclude those labelled outsiders (Qtd in Joseph Mujere 497-98). Peter also indicates that belonging in Africa often invokes exclusionary discourses which define who is an insider and who is an outsider.

In 'I am Bound to this Land by Blood', Oguiibe's attachment to home and sense of locale is what transcends the phantoms of mere romanticism for the twin substances of 'land and blood'. So, as his land of birth and belonging by decent, the pains and sorrows, aspirations and yearnings of the people ultimately On the anvil of exile, Oguiibe become his bother (Oulaluwa233). hammered sorrow into verse. He writes about his longing for his home that is considered a reason beyond his sadness:

Once i wrote with the irreverence of youth
 and the fire of a heart burning to ash
 i plucked words like faggots from blazing coal
 and on the anvil of exile i hammered sorrow into
 verse
 the burden of your suffering tore poetry from my
 flesh
 and on the night of your hanging there was dust in
 my lines
 I aimed for song and there was not an eye without
 tears

.....
 and i feel like a wanderer in a city without lights
 passion flees in the fog and words crumble at my
 touch



and my throat feels like a concrete floor
the power of tears has deserted me

i walk through the streets of this forbidding town
searching for faces i used to know
and your memory is like a faded picture in the
pocket
here and there i hear your name like the distant
crack of a whip
and there is a dull pain where the scars remain

.....
.....

now i claw the walls for the naked word
my lines are a hollow sepulchre
ready for the final dust
silence claims us at last.

(All because I Loved you 1-20)

With the simile of a wanderer in a dark and strange city, Oguibe is estranged in a dark place where he doesn't know any one. He is a stranger in a strange place where he carries the pain of his exile. In following lines, Oguibe touches upon the military dictatorship that Nigeria suffers from:

They wrote from home saying
The pumpkins are dying
The cocoyams are dry
The earth is a bowl of dust

I have come to see
The mother of the dead



So let the crying cease
Let this teeth-gnashing end

When I told the council

I saw dead pigeons in my
dream
The elderly shifted in their
seats
The learned with their books
Saw only letters in black

.....
There was blood in their stool
Bones sprouted on the
seashores
Where the rich swam in their
pools

News came from Lagos

They had slaughtered an only
son
Fed his flesh to the Emperor's
Dogs
Soldiers prowled the streets at
dawn
Thrusting bayonets through
each door

I have come to see the slain
That I may put a finger in his
wound



Blood of my blood of my
Land

That I may plant a palm tree in
His breast

(Sketch for a
Eulogy 1-30)

This poem shares Edward Said's definition of exile and how it has an effect on the life of the individual away from his homeland. "Exile is one of the saddest fates. In pre-modern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment since it only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant of being a sort of permanent out cast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future. There has always been an association between the idea of Exile and the terrors of being a leper, a social and moral untouchable" (Said 1994:47).

In his book, *Post -Colonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy presents to what extent race and identity are two faces of the same coin; he asserts 'when race becomes an issue a melancholic tone becomes audible' (114). In this sense, the dispute over immigration was the result of the disruption of an old experience of home, and a loss of enchantment which made home a place of safety and consolation (114). Both race and identity are interchangeable terms. What makes African race audible is the disruption between home and exile. This is why:

I stand at the Gates,

.....



Cold and alone

With the soil of my land

In a leather amulet...

(A Song from Exile 1-4).

As we have mentioned before, Oguibe turned to the problem of his people and he started to depict how their life in Nigeria is. His language is very declamatory including vocabularies and word choice. Such terms and words introduce Oguibe- soil- and a patriotic pioneer of homeland, blood...etc as a chauvinist all Africans. It is important to bear in mind, here, that Oguibe is yearning and longing for his nation that is distracted by all political leaders all over the world. Oguibe expressed a chauvinistic attraction to the landscape of his youth and his love of tradition. London for him a place of exile where he does his best to achieve freedom for his people against all dictatorial practices by Babangida.

In Oguibe's poetry, we find that he uses the 2nd person narration slows the reader no escape from the terror embedded in the scene. It is one of the disturbing scenes and Oguibe, himself, not only portrays violence but also enacts terror and violence on his readers. One of the core experiences of exile, for Oguibe, is the wide range of identification with Nigerian landscape; it is an identification with Nigeria as a place of birth and origin that comes to the front and, along with it, the possible diversity within such an identification. In this respect, one can add that from 1984 to the present moment, Oguibe starts to speak declamatorily and directly and consistently of Nigeria. His use of diction is



amazing; he uses an adopts powerful connotations on his poems.

In this declamatory poem, Oguibe writes:

That moment we all
share

When from the womb of
time

A new being struggles in

And they shall say to
me:

you are a poet or
something

and I shall answer and
say:

yes, a poet of wounds

a man of constant sorrow

driven from his
homeland

severed from his kind

a blade of palm floating

held up against the sky



And they shall open my
breast

And find within, the
barb

The flag, a map of my
country

And a sea of boiling
tears

(Summer Song 40-55)

Basically, the present study begs the question: why does Oguibe publish his works globally? Why does he globalize his poetry? Terhemba Shija answers this question:

Oguibe's philosophy approximates to the concept of globalization which seeks to promote ideas of universal human rights, universal order, free trade controlled by market forces and even the universal concept of liberal democracy. To critics like Griffiths, King and Olanyan, globalization means creating a new hybrid culture and other new identities at the expense of nation state identities and culture. (5)

It can be understood from this quotation that Oguibe publishes his works to be relevant to the global community in defense of universal human rights. He uses poetry as a weapon, a medium, to express his ideas globally and to speak truth to power as well. Thus, one can argue that Oguibe seeks to write a global poetry that can transform his voice from locality to universality. What is



really important about Oguibe's poetry is that it goes beyond his singularity and integrate what we call 'World Literature' into his works; for him, poetry should be a part of the world literature. This is also what Edward Said seeks to achieve in his works; he 'combines deep sensitivity to injustices wrought upon the Arab world with a broad knowledge of the Western Culture. For Said, world literature remained 'autonomous', capable of being evaluated as either good or bad depending on its degree of timelessness' (Timothy 102-20). Both Said and Oguibe succeeded at instilling the national integration among their readers all over the world. To universalize Nigerian poetry, Oguibe and many Nigerian writers, approve to the world that African literature including poetry should be timeless; and this is what a considerable number of Arabian writers adopted in their writings.

Peter N. Stearns defines globalization as a process of transformation of local phenomena into global ones ... a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function together (1). By this definition, Africa finds itself playing catch-up in order to compete with European powers. As a result, many African poets have done their best to go beyond their singularity and integrate what we call 'world literature' into their work.

But how to draw a connection between world literature theory and universality of Oguibe's poetry? Wimal Dissanayake answers this question. He points out that 'globalization has become a defining marker of the twentieth-first century. At the technological level, the increasing impact of new communications, technologies ranging from satellite technologies ranging from satellite communication to the internet and websites, are highly significant' (Dissanayake 26). By all



means of technological progress, a considerable number of critics and poets start to think how to go beyond the local boundaries of both time and space.

Poetry of the African literature captures the exiled poets towards their nation. They did their best to integrate with other cultures to be prominent as their ancestors are. They tightly firm to Nigeria as their land of blood; “I am bound to this land by blood” (1). A sense of sorrow and loss makes its way into the poetry of Oguibe, for instance, and from the early beginning. As a voice of all African poets, Oguibe went against the dictatorial desire of the generals.

African poetry today has been globalized beyond the countries of any single language or territory. Thus, one can argue that Oguibe has both employed both arts and poems in the service of his African community. Shola Adenekan shows in his article entitled ‘New Voices, New Media: Class, Sex and Politics in Online Nigerian and Kenyan Poetry’ that Nigerian poets communicate with their people to speak truth to power. Oguibe himself was one of those Nigerian poets and artists who recognized the privileged nature of African arts in the digital age (3). Therefore, especially its connection to the middle class Oguibe calls for the recognition of the way in which poetry and fiction written in non-African languages intersects with class. The Internet including social media became an essential part of and discourses within ,globalization in the twenty-first century globalization arguably operate to privilege some classes- those at the center of theses discourse- at the expense of others (4).

But even more important, like other intellectuals of his time- Achebe, Soyinka, Uche Okeke - both Oguibe and Egonu succeeded at implanting love in the hearts of Europeans.



Professor Jegede explores that: ‘we owe a debt of gratitude to him for the way he has touched in our lives.’(Qtd in Oguibe 25). Oguibe dedicated both of his art and poetry to bring the human tragedy of Biafra to the attention of the world. Oguibe in his article about Uzo Egonu entitled ‘In Memoriam: Uzo Egonu, 1931-1996’ states that “the outbreak of war in Nigeria, which began with the massacre of several thousand Igbo in Northern Nigeria, affected Egonu tremendously” (17). Thus, one can argue that Oguibe laments the death of his people and annoyed by the death of his relatives and friends. Oguibe started to show the Nigerian is no longer a peaceful place where he can push it towards all sorts of progress and development.

Egonu received the patronage of highly placed individuals in British society such as the Duchess of Albans, and achieved international recognition for his contributions to the plastic arts. Indeed, “Egonu synthesizes his African background with the forms of European modernism and achieves in the process, a mode of expression which, in its commitment to his African roots (specified here as the artist's Igbo origins), and its social vision, defines a modernism different from the nihilistic inclinations of 8). its European variant” (Sylvester

World Literature theory, as a travelling theory, is adopted in the present study. While the researcher has mentioned that some African writers used poetry as a medium through which they can express their ideas and identities globally, it has become clear that Globalization itself may be considered a travelling theory. “An understanding of globalization is connected to the process of transformation of local phenomena into global ones... a process by which the people of the world are united into a single society and function together” (Stearns 1). By this definition of globalization, Oguibe’s poetry reflects exile that is depicted as a



landscape as harsh as the alienating atmosphere of the homeland (Bodunde 237). According to J.Hills Miller, world literature is a concomitant of economic and cultural globalization. Economic globalization has an impact on the development of world literature theory (Miller 252). Consequently, Olu Oguibe creates literary works that are deeply African, nationalistic, and expressive of his own identity and race as an African pioneer of originality.

But why does Oguibe achieve international recognition for his contributions to the plastic arts. In this respect, professors of sociology and arts emphasized that they live in a small world that is characterized by virtual communication, institutional deregulation, and the movement of capital, information, objects and people at great speed across a large distance, social life cannot be seen as firmly located in particular places with clear boundaries (Savage et al 1). This is a point of agreement that communication has changed our lives from locality to universality. Communication has not been confined to particular place and time. this is what 'Giddens drew on Meyrowtiz's 1985 arguments that new media generated 'no sense of place', with people defining their salient relationships not in terms of face to face contacts but in terms of media characters and celebrities'(Savage 2).

To sum up, the present study highlights to what extreme Olu Oguibe achieves an international fame all over the world. Like many Indian writers, Oguibe, they claimed to be portraying a world not confined to India, and African writers seem intent on belonging to the world not to be applicable.

By achieving an international fame all over the world, the poems of Oguibe are read in streets, class rooms and everywhere.



His poems went beyond the boundaries of Nigeria because of his belonging to his native land 'Nigeria'. In this respect, the idea of and universality are clearly depicted in Oguibe's belonging poetry and art. There are such declamatory poems that clarify Oguibe's patriotic attitude towards his home 'Nigeria'. The poems are: 'All because i loved you', 'For You, Nigeria', 'The Voice', 'I'am Bound to this Land by Blood', 'Poems for A Soldier', 'A Triumphal Entry'...etc in addition to other poems traced within this chapter.

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