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## Let the City Breathe: Re-imagining Lagos as City of the Muses in Nigerian Poetry

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### Abstract

For many Nigerian poets, Lagos is not just their abode but also the City where the Muses can be invoked for literary creativity. In this sense, the city represents the meeting point of all networks of intellectual and creative interactions. The symbolic representation of life in the city is depicted in Odia Ofeimun's *Lagos of the Poets* (2010). This paper examines and analyses selected poems from the empirical experiences of the poets who have invoked the muse to capture their imagination of different appellations of the city. This is an attempt to underscore the environmental influences, the metropolis, private dwelling, interiors, and self-awareness in the chaotic and ever busy city. Apparently, many of the poems traverse the realm of the manipulating words to initiating and revealing the journey of self-discovery. The paper deployed some methodological insights of Betrad Westphal's *geocriticism* to explicate the textual and literary representations of the spaces in the city as shown by the various poets. It concludes that Lagos is the sky where every writer with poetic wings can fly. It is a city of the muses for many Nigerian creative writers.

**Key words:** Creative Writers, Geocriticism, Lagos, Muse, Nigerian Poetry, Space.

### Introduction

Creative writers have exposed their ideological orientations on city literature, or stories about Lagos, if you like. Many of them vividly set out to convey a sense of the division between the wealthy and the poor; the educated and the not-so-educated; the producers and the consumers; the strong and the weak, the hopeless and the hopeful with spatial interactions. It was Geoffrey Chaucer, who in *The Canterbury Tales* (1394) tells the story of twenty-nine pilgrims who gathered at the Tabard Inn, a Tavern in the Southwark near London to embark on a

journey to the shrine of the Martyr, Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. These twenty-nine pilgrims represented the different categories or class of people in their society at that point in history. By making them tell their individual stories, Chaucer granted them the privilege of what they could make of their society. This approach made them to reveal their personality, reactions, and perception of reality. Canterbury, the meeting point for these travellers, therefore, stood as a centre of attraction, the land of the blessed.

In like manner, Nigerian creative writers have used their literary works as cartographies, in a way, to reveal the inspiration the muses grant on account of their city experiences. For example, in *Every Day is for the Thief* (2014), Teju Cole tells the story of a young character who decides to return to Lagos after his fifteen years abroad. This unnamed character is confronted by memories of the past and the challenges of living in an unchanged city filled with risks and exploitations. Likewise, in *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osisì* (2018), Nnedi Okorafor tells the story of Sunny, the albino girl with magical powers. She must journey to Osisì to defeat the evil masquerade, Ekwensu. Together with her three friends, they make a stopover in Lagos to celebrate the New Year where they met Uhide, the great spider and storyteller. In *Easy Motion Tourist* (2016), Leye Adenle's Crime Thriller, readers encountered the seedy, underworld of Lagos ghettos through the activities of the extremely prosperous people with their armies of labourers to supply them with everything they need to maintain their lavish lifestyle, including human body parts. Lagos is presented as a city where survival only goes to the fittest to borrow the Darwinian term. In *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Sefi Atta reveals the character of Lagos, its social environment and how it affects women generally. In fact, through the eyes of her two young female characters, she portrays how they live and battle to survive in a post-civil war Lagos.

In this study, I have selected from the collection, *Lagos of the Poets* (2010) only those poems that bear the title 'Lagos'. In more senses than one, these poems convey the worries of a spirited group whose fascination wallow in the validation of alternative city life. The proposopoeic interchange in them is a thoughtful formula for giving life and other human attributes to

the city's geographical experience. By the action, also, I have tried to eliminate other poems whose discourses are on the objectification rather than subjectification of the city. The romantic sensation and emotions with which these poems were written have also allowed for the application of Betrad Westphal's *geocriticism* which interrogates the role of spatiality in literary studies. Westphal's thought lends insight into the philosophical implications of spatial structures which facilitate the vast social network that exists beyond the past, the present and the future. In practice, therefore, *geocriticism* is multifocal: it examines a variety of topics at once and differentiates itself from practices that focus on the singular point of view of the traveller, city dweller or protagonist on the move. This is what Ofeimun has done in *Lagos of the Poets* as he wants his readers to engage with the geographical, geo-social, geo-cultural and geo-political imperatives of the city of Lagos from diverse perspectives. By this approach, he wants them to assume a literary referentiality between the world (Lagos) and the text (the poems), or, between the referent (space) and its representations (literature).

### **Lagos: Poets' Centre of Attraction and City of the Muses**

In classical times, humans by themselves were considered incapable of creating anything. and so must rely on the muses for inspiration. Thus, *Zeus* (the highest God in Greek Pantheon) with his wife *Mnemosyne* (Memory) are believed to have fathered nine daughters, each presiding over different domains of human activities: *Calliope* (epic poetry), *Clio* (history), *Erato* (lyric poetry), *Euterpe* (music), *Melpomene* (tragedy), *Polymnia* (sacred poetry), *Terpsichore* (dance), *Thalia* (comedy) and *Urania* (astronomy). Each muse was believed to provide a guiding spirit or source of inspiration to the human agent, mortal creator. In their numbers, the muses inspire

poets by connecting their minds to their reality. Put differently, they signify the power of creativity, which they do not have themselves. They merely convey the power to the poets who invoke them for inspiration. Thus, whenever there is the mention of the invocation of the muses, it is usually the poet and his creativity or poetry that is in question.

Many Nigerian poets have equally submitted themselves to the Muses in different experiments writing about their environment. Granted, the study of space in literature has been a major issue of discussion. What we see in Lagos of today is a gradual system of growth that is tied to the transformation that allows the intrusion of people on several grounds: trade, political-cum-economic expansion and missionary activities. Lagos, like many other cities, has its own fair share of these existential issues. A major characteristic of its urban sprawl is the highly uncoordinated manner of its growth. Sadly, more and more people continue to migrate to Lagos in a random and unplanned manner (Adebayo, Opelola and Baddru 15).

### **Invoking the Muses in Lagos, Nigeria's Canterbury**

Odia Ofeimun stands out among Nigerian poets for the intellectual force and erudition of his writing about Lagos. In his book *Imagination and the City* (2016), he avers, "Let the City breathe with parks, open spaces, amphitheatres, and sculptures both popular and elitist in appeal" (4). This testimony is his strong recommendation of what he considers a befitting status for Lagos. Lagos, "our city by the Lagoon" is the only city in Nigeria confronted with large-scale migration of people from different parts of the world and a common destination for tourists in Nigeria. Right from pre-colonial times to the present, it has remained Africa's melting pot. It

accommodates all manner of people thereby fronting a cultural interaction with an intermesh of identities. Of course, coming or living in Lagos means a lot for an average Nigeria who must be "Lagosed" to be right with the geographical space of the city.

To be *Lagosed* implies being part and parcel of the city by knowing its ways, consumed by it, and the "willingness to accept this particular city as a primary definition of identity" (Ofeimun, "Preface" to *Lagos of the Poets*, xxiv). Apparently, being "Lagosed" also implicates a consciousness which speaks of existing in a space that grants some measure of freedom to select from possible options: "recognizing limits but learning how to thrive beyond them" (Ofeimun xxxiv). Ofeimun puts it in another sense which provokes daily dissonances that beg for no alienation: "Quintessentially, Lagos provides just that medium of anonymity to enable every stranger [to] function as indigene and every indigene labour as a stranger (xxiii). In a broad sense, Lagos has a magic of its own, a magnetic force that drags people from all walks of life and from different parts of the world to it.

As hinted above, many other writers have explored the different sides of Lagos from dissimilar angles which cover the different historical periods of the development of the city. (See *Carnivorous City* (2016) by Toni Kan; *This is Lagos and Other Stories* (1971) by Flora Nwapa; *Graceland* (2004) by Chris Abani; *Jagua Nana* (1961) by Cyprian Ekwensi; and *Welcome to Lagos* (2016) by Chibundu Onuzo among many others written by those who had once lived or are living or dream to live in the city). In fact, Lagos remains Nigeria's giant, the writers' Canterbury where the Muses hold their meetings with mortals. Like Chaucer, Ofeimun, in *Lagos of the Poet* (2010) dedicated the entire collection to Lagos, "our archetypical busy body city." What we

see is a representation of this great city as Nigeria's Canterbury, not for the worship of any saintly figure, but as the literary consummation of all poetic engagements. However, unlike Chaucer who used only twenty-nine travelers to engage one another, Ofeimun employs a total of one hundred and thirteen poets, "a generation of busy bodies" who unknowingly took on one another to discuss their individual relationships with Lagos. More broadly, their connections with Lagos reflect a journey of self-rediscovery as many of them agree that Lagos "exudes verve that literally coerces the lethargy of mind and emotions to rise above parochial moorings" (Ofeimun xxxiv).

### **Geocriticism: A Key to Understanding Ofeimun's *Lagos of the Poets***

The concept of *geocriticism* emerged from the outcome of a symposia organized by Betrad Westphal at the University of Limoges. It was further elaborated in his book *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Westphal bases his theory on three theoretical concepts: spatio-temporality, transgressivity, and referentiality. It is important to note that in the field of literary theory, *geocriticism* is an interdisciplinary method of literary analysis that focuses not only on such temporal data as relations between the life and times of the author (as in biographical criticism), the history of the text (as in textual criticism), or the story (as in narratological studies), but also on spatial data. Beyond this, *geocriticism* has affinities with other disciplines such as geography, architecture, urban studies, and of course, it correlates to philosophical concepts such as deterritorialization.

As an approach to literature, *geocriticism* recognizes that the representations of space are often transgressive, crossing the boundaries of established norms while also re-establishing new relations among people, places and things. In a way, it derives some

of its practices from precursors whose theoretical work helped establish space as a valid topic for literary analysis. For example, Bachelard studied literary works to develop a typology of places according to their connotations. By the same token, Blanchot's writings have legitimized the idea of literary space, an imaginary place for literary creativity. In postcolonial studies, writers such as William in *The Country and the City* and Said's *Culture and Imperialism* employed a geographical inquiry into historical experience. Likewise, Moretti deployed the concept of literary geography to examine the diffusion of literary spaces in Europe, focusing on the complex relationship between the text and space. Moretti's theory uses maps to portray new connections between texts and their social spaces, while Melville's literary cartography offered a *geocritical* approach to the study of texts. For Marss, it provides a revolutionary account to the history of American literary ecocriticism and post-humanism (1). Thus, by questioning the relations between a given space's nature and its existing condition, the *geocritical* approach allows for a study of fiction that points also to the theory of possible worlds which exist in the minds, thoughts, or imaginations of the writers.

Over the years, scholars have discerned patterns based on recurrent juxtaposition which point to evidence that are viewable in creative or critical writing. Space or spatiality is the author's way of modelling his world on the worlds of his creative works. In recent times, however, *geocritical* approaches have taken a heterogenous intersection between literature and socio-political structures and become interdisciplinary, while displaying the creative interaction between geography and humanity. With respect to this study, the historical connections of the city and its dwellers have been brought to bear. An

attempt has also been made to critically explore the city's culture, architecture, social network and interaction as they interface with humans and non-human elements. This scope of study has been situated within three historical moments: the pre-colonial period Lagos (before 1854); the colonial period Lagos (1854-1960); and the post-colonial period of Lagos (from 1960 to the present). These demarcations reflect the past, the present and the future of the city.

### **The Good Lagos**

The status of Lagos makes it the centre of attraction to many people. As a result, there has always been considerable urban overspill in all directions. The city houses virtually all social classes that reflect the truest sense of human existence at every point in time. As a city, it has gone through good and bad times in the hands of foreign overlords, the military and elected civilians and labour masters. Lagos continues to hold the position of a city whose energy rewards as much as it destroys. Regardless, it is instructive to emphasize that Lagos today is the industrial and commercial hub of Nigeria and thus "attracts a good number of migrant and immigrant settlers" (Adepoju 95). If Lagos is to be celebrated for various reasons, it would include the harvesting of talents from virtually all other cities in Nigeria. It is a home to many.

The city takes credit for giving everyone a sense of self-worth that is visible. Lasisi's 'A Song for Lagos' captures this. It celebrates Lagos as a unique city. Richly allusive, the poems are finely wrought out through the poet's authorial voice which remains audible to the readers. Stunning with romantic images drawn from its flora, fauna, night culture, landscape and aquatic life, the persona re-imagines the beauty and timelessness of Lagos. He depicts the characteristic features of various places in Lagos, like in 'Iga Idunganran,' where he

observes that "In a festival of water chants/we pay our homage to our godlike king / summon river-birds, / invoke the Eyo / A multitude of masks and galaxy of whips" (stanza 2, lines 1-5, LOP, p.1). Notedly, festivals in Lagos also add to the vibration of the cultural heritages of the city. For example, many of the festivals like the *Eyo*, *Gelede*, *Kayo-Kayo*, *Ebi*, *Kori* and the *Black heritage festivals* serve as platforms to showcase the rich history, art and lifestyle of the people. To be concrete, the *Eyo* festival which Lasisi references its features such as the white-cap masquerade wielding long staff. Its origin dates back to 1854. It is held to guide the soul of a departed Lagos king or Chief to the other world, while ushering in a new monarch, Lasisi's poem is a celebration of the beautiful colours, the spiritual ceremonial activities of the dance and songs which are symbolic to the peace and freedom, unity, and cultural values of the city.

Central to the overarching significance of the gorgeous sites of architectural splendour of the city is Lasisi's description of some spots such as Tinubu Square; The National Theatre, Ajegunle, Lagos Bar Beach and Badagry. These places matter so much to him especially when we consider their relevance and contribution to the city's beauty and history. For instance, Tinubu Square is named after the great Madam Tinubu whom he calls "A daughter of fate," who has the voice of "iron" and a heart of "steel". Madam Tinubu is praised for the way she resisted 'Europe's Sacrilege'; that is, the slave trade. She was the first woman to play a proactive part in the resistance of British rule during the colonial period. She dies in 1887" (*The Guardian*, January 26, 2020).

Another location is the National Theatre which he celebrates for being a place where intercultural activities were connected especially during the FESTAC (Festival of

Arts of Culture) in Nigeria. It is important to note at this point that the Festival of Arts and Culture, also known as the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture took place in 1977. It celebrated African culture in the world of music, fine arts, drama, dance and religious performances. It was the largest pan-African festival to ever take place. Of course, Lagos hosted the magnificent gathering.

The beauty of any city can be its gifts of nature which it must take advantage of; that is, water fronts, space for music and dancing, night life, cinemas, theatres, civic centres, and numerous jobs for the various classes of people and businesses. Lagos can boast of these. In 'Lagos Welcome You,' Ahmed Maiwada sees Lagos as a faithful bridge which would never abandon her lover no matter what. People who realise that they would live permanently, or for a long time do not treat Lagos shabbily or with disrespect. Maiwada encourages all who have been estranged from her to return to their holy matrimony. The poet-persona, while relying on the imagery of nature, says: "Lagos welcomes you the sagged/Ex-sweetheart, waving sweaty palms/Swarming you with salty smiles/of unwashed teeth, charming you/into the slaying squeeze/of her sticky streets" (Stanza 1, lines 1-6, LOP, p. 111). Knowing the importance of this city grants people the desire not to twaddle, maul, or destroy it even though many of its centres still groan under a host of challenges such as incessant power outages, irregular water supply, and a chaotic transport system.

Maiwada's poetic voice reveals that Lagos will always welcome any lover that strays. In the second stanza, he uses the image of thirty women to paint the picture of one who is loved in spite of her filthy rags. For this reason, he wishes that her ex-lovers should be willing to relate with her since "Today, brooms of rains/search her rooms for her

lust, /Her rusts and rats that mate/In her corridors and dare/The watching moon to tell his God" (Stanza 4, lines 1-5, LOP, p.111). Everyone should be made to answer for the destruction they cause the city, especially those who build their houses, shops, workshops and markets against town-planning rules and regulations. In other words, the transformation of the city is all that is needed to expose all, who by their acts tarnish the beauty of the city: drivers who do not obey traffic rules, strangers who dump refuse whenever their whims carry them; and slothful people who keep streets and public places forever unswept until the rainy seasons show the invidious mercy of the flood. This femininity of the city is the strongest sense of a love affairs which the poet uses to establish his connection with the city.

Dennis Osadebay, one of the pioneers of Nigerian poetry, also sees Lagos as a queen with many adornments from both local and international collaborations. Sounding like an appeal to a deity, Osadebay sees Lagos as the Queen of all cities in West Africa. No doubt, cities can be judged by how much they have overcome the founts of their origins, or identity through accession to a form, civic code, an aesthetics, that can accommodate all-comers without losing its salt. Apparently, cities are created. It is the culture of people who live in the city that should constitute the basis for which the city is depicted in any work of art. For Akande, "most often writers hold a negative view of the city which often results in persistent negative depictions of the city life in their works (7). The poet submits in the last stanza that "... I would rather by the Niger be /And hold converse with birds and flow'rs". This sort of romance with nature grants him spiritual peace. That which at the end of the day does change the negative vibes of *citiness*, and the culture that it acquires or designs. To appreciate *citiness*,

therefore, Osadebay come to grips with what Lagos makes of his existence in it. The persona, nonetheless, accepts *citiness* of Lagos as the basis of his response to the character of the city to which he must always return. Osadebay's submission is a testament that many Nigerian writers tend to view the city or urban space as a centre that eats up the dreams and aspiration of people thereby rendering their living condition to perpetually remain in a constant state of endless struggles.

Like Osadebay, Odia Ofeimun, in 'Eko-my city by the Lagoon' uses the image of a woman to describe the love he has for this city. Thus, making the city to lie in the absorption of its many parts in abstraction and anonymity, he calls Lagos 'A woman to love.' This woman-like figure also bears the strength of a man, however. In this sense, Lagos is a city whose harmonies of form appear to be overwhelmed by the sheerness of its incongruities. Having the strength of a man, the city repels or resists any form of oppressive tendency in whatever form it might occur by invoking a coming together of diverse and disparate navels. Odia Ofeimun describes the beauty of his lover thus: 'Under hooves of marching skyscrapers / she stands to fullness, full of bounce / in medinas forgotten by greenness and mystery, / performed by nightsoil, cadavers and cattle fodder' (Stanza 2, LOP, p. 185). As a matter of fact, the city extends consciousness of not being alone by asserting the pleasures of aloneness. The sense of familiarity and taste of admiration for the city is further expressed in a personified thought. In a highly descriptive nuanced style, Ofeimun presents Lagos, the city beside the Lagoon, as a strong woman who alone can protect her children by resisting external forces from causing pain or destruction of any pretext. The critical force of the poem lies in the poet's insistence on a love consciousness which

projects the persona a lover boy who depends on the city's love for survival. This is a condition of humanity that is enough to consul the poet persona.

### The Bad Lagos

In contradiction to the above, the city is not as good as another category of poets has presented it. Technically, the city is always challenged, along several lines. Reduced to mendicants, the city dwellers are always putting up the fight of survival, "suffering and smiling." To this group, therefore, being *citified*, or *Lagosed* is an act that is constantly under construction, a matter of abrasion and siege. 'Darkening City: Lagos '83' by Ben Okri-the 1991 Booker Prize Winner dramatically describes Lagos as "the mad city;" a place "where politicians disgorge our lives / in vomitoriums of power, a darkening city", a 'meal storm.' The disorganization, lawlessness, carelessness, wickedness that has destroyed the city in its fight and struggle for survival are graphic. Lagos is, thus, a city that truly captures the Darwinian dictum "survival of the fittest" or the Mafian thought "eat or be eaten" as culture of survival. The poet lets us in on how Lagos has become a place of discomfort; a land suffering from fallowness because of its being constantly used or stressed. Ahmad wonders how this can be put to an end. For him, Lagos '.... is an echo of Hell in not /... the last shop of eternity' (Ahmad, LOP P.55).

Poets in Nigeria, especially, Lagos, are usually worried by human suffering brought about by both human and environmental factors. In many ways, the city contributes to the dislocation of people from their original home. These people, after being deracinated from their homes go through several stages of alienation, violence and discriminatory experiences ranging from emotional torture to shocks and disappointment. 'Look at Lagos' Ezenwa

Ohaeto's declarative notion about Lagos reveals the pain that characterized living in this city. Sounding rather confrontational and accusatory, the poet links the character of Lagos with the anti-societal behaviour of Lagosians:

We have known you raped  
We have known you submit  
To fangs of prancing parasites  
(stanza 1, lines 1-3, p 88)

The metaphoric rape calls to mind a forceful nature of the love affairs between Lagos and her inhabitants. Granted, the position puts Lagos on the upper hand in the equation for which those who depend on the city must be ready to tolerate its violent behaviour. The poem, nonetheless, bespeaks of the poet's intent to define a personal destiny which is shaped by his consciousness and wellbeing. Ohaeto accuses Lagos of charming her emigrants with qualities that are inviting but, in the end, this city destroys her inhabitants. The interventionist meddlesomeness of the poet recognizes several reasons people have for coming to Lagos. These range from employment opportunities, provision of social securities by the government, lifestyle in Lagos, exposure to the search for quality education and medical facilities, among others. Like migrants of other larger cities across the world, people coming to Lagos believe it is easy to get employment in big cities. Even though many of these migrants reside in relatively environmentally poor areas, they still believe Lagos has better offers to give them than many other cities in Nigeria. Hence, the uncoordinated migration of people from all over Nigeria to Lagos is responsible for the challenges the city faces over time. Ohaeto blames Lagos for pulling people from the 'comforts of villages/men that flounder in pillaged dreams' and 'Quaking in kaleidoscopic house of dreams' (stanza 2, lines 1-3). What this suggests is that if these men were allowed to live in their villages, perhaps their lives may have

been more meaningful. However, their enticement to Lagos destroyed their dreams and rendered them homeless even as they remain hopeful that things will get better some day for them. All this points to the idea that Lagos is a city which charms to destroy more than it builds people.

Reacting to the ever-changing practices in Lagos which is a function of its population and cross pollination of ideas, Femi Fatoba projects Lagos as the epicenter of all manner of creative output. The poet's narrative employment of the persona's encountering with Lagos is a graphic revelation of the synthesis between what is real from what is imaginary or ideal. As in a story-telling mode, he says: "if you live in the countryside / And you dress differently/People would say of it / "it is the new thing from Lagos."/ If you come from anywhere at all /And your dress is weird/People would say/ "that's what Lagos does to one". (LOP, p.154). For the poet, Lagos inspires in diverse forms. This is why the persona concludes: "And when you get to Lagos / You meet with all kinds of weirdness / Being exhibited by the oddest people / You pick and choose / Lagos is "all-comers" (LOP, p.154). By this reasoning, Lagos is seen as a no-man's-land, an all-comers affair. By calling Lagos a land that "welcome both the laggard and the thief, 'house for the thief', "the crank and the odd ball," a place where "all sorts of weird things happen", Fatoba wishes to only give his reactions to the stories he had heard long before he came to live in Lagos. In other words, Lagos accommodates all kinds of behavioural dispositions that come from her inhabitants. Fatoba makes a strong statement in the form of advice to his listeners: 'whoever gets an itch in the tongue and does not talk / Let him swallow the tongue and become dumb / That is the way Lagos is'. Put differently, Lagos has a way



of making people talk even when they do not wish to.

### **The Ugly Lagos**

On the surface, Lagos appears to be a promising location for everyone. However, those who have come unprepared for the city usually grapple with the paradoxes of life. On and on, for many decades, the accelerated migration of people to the city has been unprecedented. According to Oshey Sanya, “Lagos seems to surpass the imagination of the best Nigeria writers” (8). Perhaps, the city does not command only an epistemological response to transformation and growth. It also presents paradoxical realities in terms of population explosion and chaotic presence of street urchins also known as “agberos.” This is the concern in Austyn Njoku’s ‘Lagos’, a poem which also romanticizes Lagos in a feminine posture. The poet likens the sight of Lagos to that of a woman whose radiation is a function of solar power. He calls Lagos ‘mother’, ‘she’, ‘her’ and ‘dear’ to describe the emotional attachment and love that exist between them. He writes: “Mother’s radiance / Like the General’s on Maroko / Bidding bull dozers to rampage, / Glows, seeing the smears and / Dots denting her dear domain” (LOP, p. 67). Maroko was one of the slums in Lagos Island which harbours those who do not have shelter. No thanks to the rapidly growing population of the city. The generals were believed to have destroyed this settlement because they wanted it for themselves. By drawing a connection of the beauty of Lagos with the inhuman treatment these people get, the persona shows that Lagos is not all about pleasantness or goodies but a veritable centre of broken promises, after all.

Indeed, the rapidly growing population of Lagos does not cater for all. It is an issue that has been ascribed to the culture of the people who may not care about the quality

of life they live. As a matter of fact, many of those who live in such swampy grounds without social amenities are poor. These people also do not have access to the provisions of the government who sometimes threatens them with relocation, demolition and, or forceful ejection. Lagos exhibits all the characteristics of a “village city” accommodating a large number of people (Emordi and Osiki 101). Rather than celebrate this outer beauty of Lagos, the persona recalls the incidence that accompanied the destruction of Maroko. The unfortunate incidents lead to the death of a friend who was ‘plucked in [his] prime’. Therefore, for Njoku, Lagos brings back memory of the dead like sour grapes on the edges of one’s teeth. By the reasoning of the poet, the memory of the abandoned or the destroyed home space impinges upon his imagination to provide the necessary effect needed in the poem. In it, the poets undertake almost a quasi-historical account of his authorial situatedness wherein critical concerns pertaining to the military actions were exposed to his readers. Revealing that Lagos’s beauty is merely cosmetic and shallow, he concludes: ‘No one gazing rapturously / No one flying in clouds above / would decipher the painful sorrow / Lurking in your dense undergrowth (stanza 4, lines 1 – 4 p. 88). This simply suggests that Lagos is a flash in the pan; a city whose beauty is deceptive and misleading. In short, it is a city which thrives on the contradictions in human existence.

Jumoke Verissimo’s ‘Lagos, The City of Babes’ in trying to give reason for the ever-growing population, does ignore the effect of migration to Lagos, but concentrates on the birth-rate of the residents in Lagos. Hear her: “Every morning, in Lagos / Every morning, a child’s born. / Every morning, the air stands / to welcome a new birth” (stanza 1, lines 1-4, p.37, LOP). Verissimo’s constant repetition of the word ‘every

morning' emphasizes how far the population explosion of Lagos has continued to grow unchecked. She wonders how the birth control would not affect the city especially in situation whereby the resources are not enough to make the city breathe. Her poem becomes a sensitive portraiture of not just the spatial planning of the city but on how this also affects the population's growth and the inhabitant's lifestyle. The poet makes us to understand that Lagos is always under excoriation and siege which account for its rapid but uncoordinated growth. The result of this has had its toll on other climatic conditions such as the temperature of the city, housing congestions, traffic, heat stress and other human activities. Ironically, Verrisimo does not think Lagos has already-made resources and comfort for all these births if they go unrestricted.

Ashiedu Ogboli's 'Echo from Eko' showcases Lagos as a place of deceptive intent, a giant village. Ogboli indicts Lagos for misleading many young people who leave their 'ancestral groves' to the uncertainties that characterize city life. Although mega cities across the world are constantly growing and developing, the poet likens Lagos to a harlot who beckons to her customers for a free show. Minding the ugliness in this city, Ogboli believes that living in Lagos is pain personified. The unhealthy competition for survival is the very reason there is so much *echo* (noise, pain, discomfort) in Lagos. For the poet, Lagos is not as beautiful as it appears. In fact, the ugliness of the city is graphic: "It is extremely difficult to rhapsodize about a city built around a jigsaw of Lagoons and Islands that never sleeps and where everyone has a short fuse because every available space has been taken" (Sanya 256). The poet puts it this way: "Alas! Your streets are not paved with gold/For I see those who have searched/Those who have sold their souls

/For nought" (stanza 8, lines 1-6, p. 120. LOP).

Contrarily, the survival of the fittest instinct has made so many people wicked since they no longer have any conscience to think. Lagos is not different from other cities of the world where there is much doubt about their livability and viability. The city, too, has had its own good and bad times in the hands of those who watch over it. Indeed, the city has a character of its own which it expresses. Its livability and viability are dependent on several factors such as maintenance and security of the environment. This is what the poet captured in the second to the last stanza: "You creep out of your sleek cars / With tinted shields / Your curve into yourself in mortal fright / And barricade yourself in your fragile fortresses / Lest not a thief come knocking / And dragging your entrails in the street" (stanza 8, lines 1-6, p. 120. LOP). As a matter of fact, the city is blessed with a unique night life culture, civic centre, art theatres, cinemas, waterfronts, industrial estates, and several business districts. It is only important that it should be turned into a giant sport where human agency in their numerous socio-economic and socio-cultural manifestations fleshes out these perceived abstractions. For Ofeimun, the city "should be turned into a school where knowledge about the city works is shared by those who truly know to have scores are allowed to lead the class" (Ofeimun *Imagination and City* 4-5).

Some writers focus on the social function of their works on Lagos as echoes of compelling experiences. For example, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* talks about having bigger thieves in the city; his *The Swamp Dwellers* (1973) deals with the harshness of living in the city. For Festus Iyayi, the city in his novel *Violence* (1976) forced victims to sell their own blood to hospitals in order to survive hunger.

Notedly, the destructive tendency of the city is felt in a micro experience. Rashidah Ismaili's proposopoic reference to Lagos reminds one of a quarrel between a husband and his beautiful wife. This romantic exploit and affiliation with Lagos go to show that Lagos is being treated as another part of her inhabitant's life. Thus, Lagos which should epitomize a perfect love that exists between a man and her wife is portrayed as "jaga jaga"- disorderly and unhappy. The poetic persona in presenting herself as one who has an upper hand in the relationship, she says: "Lagos you are dirty / Your sand is soiled / Your fruits pithy" (LOP, p.132). Akande summarizes this contradiction in the most lucid manner. For the sake of emphasis, let us quote her extensively:

People of diverse background come to together in the city creating problem of corrupting influence on one another, although they almost impact positively on one another. The social infrastructures in the city such as energy, water supply, housing, transportation, waste disposal system and other social amenities are grossly inadequate. Employment opportunities and other avenues for generating wealth which most of them desperately seek are not easily available. Consequently, city dwellers engage in unhealthy competition and rat race that lead to nowhere. All of these problems and more constitute the crisis of

urbanization because the means of solving the problem are not there or because they are inchoate or not effective" (12).

Lagos thus represents a wasteland to her. Ismaili reveals the untidy environment thus: 'O Lagos, your streets / are packed and pollute / the air while here in / a smug smogged city / I choke" (LOP, p. 132). She calls Lagos "a strong Land", "my dirty city", "the sound of seductive songs", "sights that blind us." Like Okimba Launko, Ismaili thinks he can never be separated from Lagos as his outdistanced love is a nostalgia for a tendency towards a human course: 'I am tied to you / in a strange land. This also means that he still connects his spirit with Lagos even in the event of being physically absent.

### Conclusion

Lagos happens to be the cornerstone or place of literary engagement for many Nigerian poets as it represents different things to them. Having lived in Lagos for about three decades, Ofeimun has continued to provide a broad-based perspective of envisioning the realities of city life. In his words, "A city is like a poem. You enter into it, and you are into a world of concentrated time. Different ages are brought together. Different histories are brought together" (23). What I have done in this study is to show how Nigerian poets, over the years, have entered the city and have allowed the city to enter their poems both individually and collectively. I have considered the different names each of these poets has given to Lagos in their naming ceremonies of the city as influenced by the muses. I have also argued that the perception and connection of Lagos to these poets is a function of a relationship that is conceived in concrete forms. Although some of them sang songs which praise the virtue of Lagos

as very central to their existence, others feel that the city is not as good a city since it accommodates negativity that destroy her inhabitants or make their lives difficult as hell.

Indeed, the city has continued to remain a rich symbolic site for literary creativity. Informed by diverse inspiration, many writers have also had the nudge to bring their experiences of the city to life. In this sense, the city can not only be “read as a poem”, but it should also be tendered as a beautiful garden. In all the evaluations done on *Lagos of the Poets*, we may therefore agree with Ofeimun, who upon his visit and eventual dwelling in this great city, argues, “in general, the city is an ever-ready challenge, continually suggesting the necessity to find a common morality that has proved to be humankind’s most permanent experience in living together” (xxi). If Lagos is allowed to breathe, it would be a mega city that shares her uniqueness within the space of global culture. It would also represent a global sublimation and muse to Nigerian poets of all traditions.

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