

Chike Okoye (ed.)

When Four Are Gathered:  
The Crucial Poets of Nigerian Modernity

With a Foreword by Professor Obi Maduakor

Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

Anglistik – Amerikanistik – Anglophonie

Band 31

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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Edited by Chike Okoye. -

Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2025

(Anglistik – Amerikanistik – Anglophonie; Bd. 31)

ISBN 978-3-98940-057-3

Cover Illustration: “Four Poets”

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Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-98940-057-3

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, D-54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, D-54230 Trier

Tel.: 0651 41503

Internet: <https://www.wvttrier.de>

E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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*Chike Okoye*

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## FOREWORD

### Poet Undiscovered

This is a great book on the second generation of modern poets in Nigeria. The contributors are young scholars who write with grace and beauty and clarity in their deployment of critical language and terminology. The book is attractive even by the sheer force of the contributors' word-power. The personality of the editor, his scholarship, his literary style is noticeable everywhere within the book. The principal motive behind the project is to rehabilitate a hitherto neglected poet, Chimalum Nwankwo, as a major poetic voice among the titans of the second-generation poets. Nwankwo is an intellectual, a critic, and a fine poet. The editor, the moving spirit behind the project, makes a passionate plea for the revision of the canon of the trio of Nigerian poetry, where Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odi Ofeimun hold sway, into a quartet that includes Chimalum Nwankwo as the fourth bard. But the book contains fresh and provocative readings on Osundare, Ojaide, and Ofeimun.

The Introduction, Chapter One ("Trajectories and Tender Currents: Setting the Stage for the Quartet") written by the editor, Chike Okoye, argues that Chimalum Nwankwo deserves this recognition by the high quality of his poetry, by his gifts and talents as a poet, and by the ovations that greeted the reading of his poems at numerous international audiences. The Introduction is an ambitious undertaking. It offers a sweeping overview of (thematic) trends and currents in Nigerian poetry from the pre-independence era up to the millennium, alongside the political, social, and historical events that gave it birth, and contains critical punches on the work of each poet in the quartet. From this opening shot, as it were, the contributors took their cue.

And so, we come to Niyi Osundare, the first poet of the quartet, addressed in Chapter Two, with its seductive and poetic caption: "I Sing of a World Reshaped": Activism, Proselytism, and Niyi Osundare's Poetic Legacy," and written by Reuben Kehinde Akano and Nneoma Otuegbe.

Niyi Osundare was at the head of the literary revolution that brought the language of modern Nigerian poetry down to earth, from the verbal jugglery, esoteric mysticisms and mythic incantations of the poets of the first

generation. Osundare has earned respect as the most prolific poet of his generation and the most researched and written about among the quartet. His poetics from his famous manifesto “Poetry Is” and his other utterances on social relevance of art are evoked to foreground the authors’ discourse on political and social “activism” in Osundare’s poetry. We find in Osundare’s poems that everyday vocabulary, when embedded with mockery and sarcasm, has the potential to trigger social action. As for Osundare’s legacy, the authors assert boldly that Osundare is firmly entrenched within the canon. He is already well known both locally and internationally and will continue to be read and studied.

Tanure Ojaide, a fellow-crusader with Niyi Osundare in championing the cause of the down-trodden, is the subject of Chapter Three. Commentators on his poetry have observed that the essence of his theme is “the single-minded detestation of tyrants, combined with an obsessive commitment to social justice,” but this particular strand in Ojaide’s poetry has been over-studied. Stephen Ese Kekeghe and Chike Okoye, the authors of the third chapter, offer a new perspective: they focus on two areas where the poet has been ignored, namely, his consistent quest to promote human and environmental health in the homeland, and the largely autobiographical tone of his poems. Ojaide is applauded for capitalizing on the understandable relationship between the wellness of the ecology and the health of the human community that inhabits it. If the land is pure, the people living in it will have pure air to breathe. Puzzling out how this dynamic is played out in a literary text is “ecocriticism.” In the collection *Songs of Myself* particularly, the poet images himself in some of the threnodic poems of that collection as the land that is plundered, the vegetation that is denuded of its foliage, and the body of water darkened with poisonous chemicals. This is what is characterized as Ojaide’s “autobiographical tenor.” There is near-inseparability between the voice of the poet-persona and the voice of the poet himself. The speaker in Ojaide’s Niger Delta poems shares his concern for the environmental pollution of the homeland and the displacement visited on the people by capitalist exploitation of their environment, with its nefarious effect on their health. This concern is articulated in the title of Chapter Three: “Poetic (Auto)biography: Imaging Eco-Human Health in Tanure Ojaide’s Poetry.” Several poems are analyzed to demonstrate how this fresh reading of the poet is staged in Ojaide’s poetry. I should mention that a new romance between



literature and medicine is proposed in this chapter; it is called “pathotextualism,” interpreted as “representations of disease and medical themes in literature.” “Ecocriticism” and “pathotextualism” open new vistas for literary criticism and the way these concepts are interrogated in Ojaide’s poetry will certainly minister to the needs of scholars who want to develop expertise in that area of critical endeavor.

Chimalum Nwankwo is studied by two great scholars, Ikechukwu Asika and Mathias Orhero, in the fourth chapter. This chapter is perhaps the most poetic and to some extent the most challenging from the perspective of the language of critical theory and postcolonial discourse in which it is framed. The chapter is captioned “Postcolonial Nostalgia: Pathos and Memory in the Poetry of Chimalum Nwankwo.” The authors explore “the poetics of the postcolonial pathetic” in Chimalum Nwankwo’s poetry. This terminology is one of the gems of the book. “Poetics of the postcolonial pathetic” is another way of affirming that the poet’s memory of the events of the past or present (postcolonial past/present with all of its baggage) evokes pity and sorrow in the consciousness of both the poet and the reader. To put it in that banal phraseology steals the magic; after all, criticism (literary criticism) is also the art of performing manoeuvres in the game of verbal gymnastics. The terminology the authors have used is “new”; it captivates by its poetic and scholarly tonality. It gives Chimalum Nwankwo’s poetry a boost, and scholars and ambitious students may want to pursue this concept further in Chimalum Nwankwo’s poetry. Still puzzled by that mesmerizing phraseology? Go to the end of the study (p. 124), where the authors threw off the mask:

What we have done in this chapter is to explore Nwankwo as a poet who deploys the poetics of the postcolonial pathetic in recreating the situation of the postcolony. In doing this, we contribute to the conversations about postcolonial nostalgia as a paradigm through which writers can reflect on the past and the present in order to foreground the structures that produce the condition of the postcolony.

Odia Ofeimun is the last poet discussed in the book (Chapter Five), but not the least. Ofeimun is a significant figure in the history of modern Nigerian poetry. He inaugurated the tradition of “committed art” with his first poetry collection, *The Poet Lied* (1980), but that is not where the contributors to

Chapter Five are going. Onyebuchi Ile and Chike Mgbeadichie unravel the intricate nuances of style and craftsmanship in Ofeimun's poetry, with special emphasis on tone and mood, hence the chapter is titled "Tonality and Mood as Drivers of Craft in Odia Ofeimun's Poetry." The delicate distinction between tone and mood as articulated by the authors will be appreciated by students of poetry. Tone is "the writer's attitude, emotions and feelings toward a particular subject matter," while "mood is the feeling or atmosphere created by the literary work, that is, the feeling or emotion readers derive from engaging with the literary work." This delimitation will certainly help to facilitate the reader's understanding of how a poem means, particularly as the distinction between "tone" and "mood" is often misunderstood.

The contributors to this book have done a marvellous job showcasing Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, and Chimalum Nwankwo as the crucial quartet in the historicity of modern Nigerian poetry. It is researched with academic rigour and written with erudition and poetry. It is after all a book on poetry. It is a great contribution to the criticism of modern Nigerian poetry and promises great reward to all those who read it.

*Obi Maduakor*

Professor of English  
Seneca College Toronto  
25 June, 2024

## PREFACE

The whole point of this academic and intellectual exercise is to review the subsisting literary canon of an era in Nigeria's literary historicity— that of the poetic trio by drawing attention to what has not been recognized and studied enough. The idea is that it should be a quartet, being the worthy but delayed inclusion of Chimalum Nwankwo to the erstwhile trio of Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, and Odia Ofeimun. These three poets have remained easily recognisable and important as the major poets on the Nigerian literary scene. They are multiple award-winning poets who, more importantly, took over from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s and beyond from the pioneering first generation poets (and writers) of the Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark(-Bekederemo) era of the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in Nigeria. Their break-away and subsequent take-over from the influence and tradition of the preceding era of poets was stark enough in style, content, and general disposition towards the Nigerian peculiarity that they became seen and regarded as a separate and unique poetic movement, fitting the long military rulership spell. Chimalum Nwankwo, while deservedly known too has not been often enough in my opinion, grouped amongst his three peers in this regard despite his commensurate poetic reach, stature, mettle, and achievement. This text attempts to address the situation by among other things, bringing more to the fore Nwankwo's contributions for limelight.

This edited volume opens with a treatise on relevant history, context, and justification, followed by four other chapters on the quartet which take on perspectives freely chosen by the contributors. With the set prescriptions largely met, no attempt has been made to change structure, direction, or content. They are designed to foreground, review and/or pack fresh punches from the quartet's individual oeuvres. A conclusion in the form of a post-script completes the offering.

Knowing this book's potential to tremble veils or rattle complacencies or even threaten long-held convictions, it will be most fulfilling to add to the possible reactions, a kindling or rekindling of interest complete with an actual evaluative reading of Nwankwo's corpus. That is the aim which will prove a holistic and complete communication path— action and reaction. Or

the reactionary responses could come in the “traditional” manner often the lot of canon reviews or paradigm births: in stages, starting with complacency/marginalization, then ridicule, through criticism and finally, acceptance (Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*, 1996). Or at worst (or best?) it would progress and create progress in a manner echoed by the late self-effacing professor and scholar of Igbo Literature, Nolue Emenanjo where he expressed contentment that the “shortcomings” of some of his pioneering research has been prompting reviews, rebuttals, and outcrops, which in turn produced PhDs and professors— guaranteeing all-round good for all in the long run. In this spirit of intellectual growth, all reactions are warmly welcome.

Welcome, *again*, to the crucial quartet of bards at the watershed of Nigeria’s modernity, gathered here.

*Chike Okoye, PhD, FAvH*  
Awka / Bujumbura / Münster