



Unveiling Corruption in Kola Eke's Poetry: A New Historicist Approach

IJEOMA SUSAN ILECHUKWU
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract. This paper critically examines Kola Eke's poetic exploration of corruption within Nigeria's historical scene. Positioned as a Third-Generation Nigerian poet, Eke follows in the tradition of prominent Second Generation poets like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun etc. who have used their poetic works to highlight the socio-political and economic challenges that have plagued Nigeria since its independence in 1960. The study emphasises Eke's significant contributions to the discourse on corruption, particularly within Nigeria's civil service, electoral commission, and broader political leaderships. By employing a New Historicist approach, the paper analyses Eke's imaginative representation of corruption to uncover its various forms and historical roots, while also considering the poet's suggestions for mitigating these issues. The findings reveal that Eke's work powerfully critiques the pervasive corruption in Nigeria, shedding light on its destructive and debilitating impacts on the nation.

Keywords: Corruption, New Historicism, Political, Democracy, Contemporary, Civil Service

1. Introduction

Corruption in Nigeria has a long and pervasive history that has deeply affected its economy, international reputation and overall status. Corruption in Nigeria can be notably traced back to the period after independence. At that time, Nigeria struggled with nation building and managing its diverse ethnic groups. Corruption became endemic as political leaders sought to consolidate power and control resources. Nigeria experienced several military coups between 1966 and 1999; democratic republics during which corruption became institutionalised. Studies such as Ogundiya (2009), Nguwube & Okoli (2013) and Oghuvbu (2021) have described the causes and effects of political corruption in Nigeria. The lack of transparency and accountability under the military and civilian governments allowed corruption flourish, further entrenching it in the political and public systems. Nigeria is a country rich in natural resources,

particularly oil. However, the mismanagement and embezzlement of oil revenues have led to economic instability and underdevelopment. Also, high levels of corruption have deterred foreign investors due to concerns over the security of their investments and the lack of predictable business environment. In recent times, measures have been taken to curb incessant cases of corruption. This was done by the creation of institutions such as The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and The Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). Despite their efforts, both agencies have faced significant challenges in curbing political corruption. Some of these challenges include political interferences, weak judicial system, lack of political will, corruption within the agencies etc. Substantive literary studies have been carried out on political corruption, its causes and effects on the Nigerian state. However, most studies have focused on the works of older poets, dramatists and novelists who belong to the first and second and third generation of Nigerian writers. Hence, there is the need to focus on other emerging poets in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Kola Eke as an emerging Third generation poet of the twenty-first century needs rapt attention as a result of his distinctive, reformatory stance and style in representing Nigeria's history. The study exposes Eke's depiction of corruption at all levels in the Nigerian state. It also helps to close the gap left by rigid empirical analyses by expressing the complex nature of corruption through artistic language. Through the historical portrayal of selected contemporary military and civilian governments from 1966 till date, the study depicts the multifaceted vagaries of corruption in Nigeria.

The poetry collections to be used for this study are *October 1960 and Other Poems* (2018), *June 12 and Other Poems* (2018), *May 29 and Other Poems* (2019), *February 1976 and Other Poems* (2020), *May 27 and Other Poems* (2022).

Critical Reception on Eke's Poetry

Among the available reviews of Eke's collections of poems, some critics focused on the ecological, religious, feminist, legislative and linguistics aspects of his poetry. Clement Eloghosa Odia as a critic has done so much with regard to the interpretation of Eke's poetry collections. Odia (2018), in his study of *June 12 and Other Poems* and *October 1960 and Other Poems*, focuses on the function of the legislation which projects great national significance. In his analysis, Odia exposes legislation against human trafficking, unfair treatment of women and political insubordination in Nigerian society.

Odia (2019a) examines women's oppression from the perspective of historiography. He does this by comparing Ezeigbo's and Eke's collections of poems, *Heart Songs* and *October 1960 and Other Poems*. Odia adopts a feminist approach in his interpretation of the selected collections and, through these collections, depicts the predicament of women in Nigeria by "providing the socio-political contexts which have entrenched patriarchal hegemony over women" (p. 52). He also distinguishes Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminist approach from Eke's outright rejection of marginalisation and violence against women. Odia's study is a comparative study which borders on women's oppression. Although the issue of women's oppression is notable in Eke's collection, the focus of this study goes beyond feminism and does not state comparison as an objective.

Odia (2019b), in his study of *June 12 and Other Poems* and *October 1960 and Other Poems*, has similar objectives to this research as it portrays Eke's figurative use of images and allusions to explore the concept of leadership in Africa. Odia re-affirms that "Eke denounces corrupt and oppressive leaders through the use of imagery, allusion and invoking traditional African morality as a means of attaining social change" (p. 134). Despite the similarity of Odia's study with this study, Odia's study adopts the postcolonial Utopian theory, which relies on the "dream of an ideal state which has no tangible reality in the human world" (p. 125). This study adopts the New Historicist theory. In the case of this study, the focus is to depict socio-political events of the past and relate them to present sociological issues without proffering a utopist stance. Also, *May 29 and Other Poems*, *May 27 and other poems* and *February 1976 and Other Poems*, which are collections for this study, will adequately suffice for the analysis in addition to the collections explored by Odia.

Mukoro (2018) adopts an ecological stance in reading Eke's *October 1960 and Other Poems* and *June 12 and Other Poems*. Mukoro submits, "A close reading of

Eke's eco-poetry reveals that he subtly laced eco-challenges such as flooding, environmental pollution and deforestation with their attendant eco-solutions." (p. 110). By adopting the Marxist ideology, Mukoro (2020) pays apt attention to the lives of the ruling class in *October 1960 poems*, *June 12*, *May 29*, and *February 1976*. He "espouses the ruling class as tyrants, looters, and snail-style leaders through the critical identification of biological, hunting, dental, accounting, geographical, grazing, and sexual images in the poems of Eke" (p. 284). Eke's collection of poems tackle a wide range of issues ranging from political to ecological issues. Mukoro in his study has been able to establish Eke's interest in the environment; however, ecology is not the main focus of his major collections. Mukoro's paper further reveals the versatility of Eke as regards the creation of his poems. This research does not focus solely on ecology rather; it tackles the issue of corruption in Nigeria and re-enactment of history.

Using the Morality theory, Jamgbadi and Mukoro (2019) examine Eke's confrontations with religious violence among Christians and Muslims. They submit that Eke's poetry evokes pictures of religious violence through the infusion of dramatic extremism that proffers solutions to the "unpleasurable phenomenon" (p. 19). Jamgbadi and Mukoro's adoption of the morality theory derails from the choice of the theory chosen for this study. They view Eke's poetry as a means to condemn religious wars between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. However, this issue depicts national history as several religious riots have occurred in Nigeria.

A linguist, Legemah (2020), posits that Eke's collections of poems, namely *October 1960* and *June 12 and May 29*, "focus on the societal ills bedeviling present-day Nigeria and x-rays the electoral irregularities associated with Nigerian elections" (p. 54). Legemah, in his study of the first two poems in the *June 12* collection, analyses the poems from a linguistic point of view by studying the poet's use of transitivity, mood, and theme. By adopting M.A.K Halliday's Systematic Functional Grammar in his study, Legemah analyses the choice of Eke's deliberate use of material processes, declarative mood systems and major themes which depict the unpalatable experiences common with Nigerian elections. Legemah's study employs a linguistic stance, contributes to the linguistic study of Eke's collections of poems and helps in determining and interpreting the mood of the poems in the selected collections. This study does not adopt a linguistic approach but a literary one.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on New Historicism, a literary theory which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a response against formalism and structuralism as approaches to literature. It emphasises the interconnectedness of literature and history, arguing that literary works should be understood within the historical contexts in which they are produced. The theory was pioneered by Stephen Jay Greenblatt (Lyu, 2021). The core principles of New Historicism involve the combination of insights from history, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies to interpret literary texts. James (2012) posits that “new historicism is a modern theory that concentrates on how events, places and culture within a society affect a written work” (p. 3). This theory is particularly relevant for analysing Nigerian poetry as it situates the narratives within the broader socio-political and socio-economic canvas of post-independence Nigeria. By applying new historicism, the study analyses how Eke incorporates historical events into his poetic imagination. The theoretical lens will also explore the reciprocal influence between literature and history, investigating how poetry not only portrays historical realities but shape public perceptions and discourses relating to political corruption in contemporary Nigerian society.

3. Aspects of Corruption in Eke’s Poetry

In this discourse, “aspects” means typologies of corruption especially in the public and political sectors. Eke in his poetry collections pays rapt attention to the alarming rates of corruption by the politicians themselves, civil servants, the masses and electoral commission. In his collections of poems entitled; *June 12 and Other Poems*, Eke brings to the fore the high indices of corruption that is prevalent in Nigeria’s civil service. Ikelegbe (2005) reveals that:

The Nigerian civil services are so strategically located in roles, functions, activities, resources that their performance determines the state, pace and level of development. For some time now, the service has been riddled with inefficiency, corruption, ineffectiveness, mismanagement, shoddiness, inertia, routine, poor responsiveness, conflicts, sectionalism, incompetence and low productivity. (p. 66)

In the poem, “The Search”, the poet reveals an episode in Nigeria’s history involving a case of unbelievable theft in the following lines:

Search for money-swallowing
Snake
Takes us to
Lithosphere
Embodiment

Of all human
Settlement
All activities

At lithosphere
Search cripples
One cannot locate
Any money-swallowing snake (*June*, p. 45)

The aspect of corruption Eke exposes and frowns at here is the situation where public servants embezzle large sums of monies with impunity and create fictional and ridiculous lies to cover-up reckless financial fraud. In most government agencies in Nigeria, cases of gross embezzlement of funds abound and in most cases, lies that involve mysterious are forged. The poet recounts an instance of historical event where money was embezzled. Eke makes reference to the historical incident in Nigeria where a Joint Admissions and Matriculation (JAMB) official, Philomena Chieshe in Makurdi, Benue state alleged that a mysterious snake snuck into the account office of the board and made away with thirty-six million Naira cash a number of times. This shows the level of aggrandizement that prevails in the Nigerian agencies and the level of corruption has eaten deep into the country. Through the image of a lithosphere which is the solid, upper part of the earth, the poet equates the physical appearance of the lithosphere to depict the highest level of ridiculous corruption. The disbelief and shock in the money swallowing allegation is expressed in Imohe (2005) that corruption in Nigeria has become so blatant and widespread that it appears as if it has been legalised. Hence, corruption in Nigeria is indisputably systematic and worrisome.

In another poem, “Super-rich civil servants”, Eke lays bare the gross and unchecked embezzlement of funds that goes on in the civil service. Bashir (2021) describes a civil servant as “a person employed by the civil service commission and paid by government of the money voted for that purpose by the national assembly” (p. 188). From Bashir’s description, being super-rich as a civil servant is almost impossible except through illegal and corrupt means. In the poem, Eke refers to the civil servants as “super-rich” which is ironical in a true sense. Eke reveals the source of their wealth, thus:

Investigation reveals
Pollination of the
Treasury
Super-rich civil servants

Investigation reveals
Transfer of pollen grains
From banks to

Banks

Investigation reveals
 Cross-pollination of funds
 Transfer to pollen grains
 Into foreign banks (*June*, p. 65)

The lines above foreground the concealment of the stolen funds by moving them from banks to banks to avoid discovery. The poet's deliberate adoption of the image of reproduction through a pollen grain being transferred from one flower to another depicts the level of calculated theft inherent in the Nigerian civil service. The theft is carried out at the national and international level.

Another aspect of corruption that manifests in Nigeria in Eke poetry is the nature of corruption that abounds in Nigeria's democratic process. This aspect involves the roles played by the masses, politicians and electoral commission during elections held in Nigeria. The poem, "No Breach of Contract", reveals the despicable deeds of the electoral commission in Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The poet describes the political parties as "Engines of democratic / Depression /" (p. 46) which are symbols of incompetence, failure and harbingers of pain to the citizens of Nigeria.

Eke exposes further the negativity in the electoral processes in Nigeria in the poem "Lest I Forget" (*May 29*, p. 43) where he reveals the major vices in the Nigerian Electoral Commission as thus:

Lest I forget
 Sole candidature
 Diesel to
 Power democratic engine

Lest I forget
 Independent candidature
 Offers wider choice
 To the people

Lest I forget
 Sole candidature
 Reduces party chairman's
 Influence on candidates (*May 29*, p. 43)

The foregoing lines highlights the problems of the electoral processes in Nigeria which involve the problems of sole candidature, interference in the democratic process by godfathers from political parties that on the long-run influence the outcomes of electoral results. The poet exposes the positive effects of electoral procedures devoid of sole candidature and further reveals the opportunities for "wider choice / to

the people" (*May 29*, p. 43) and political influences by party chieftains. Eke as a reformist, strives to restore true democracy to Nigeria by advocating for a chance to select more deserving political leaders. A good number of Eke's poems resonate with the motif of decay prevalent in the Nigerian electoral commission.

Another poem that captures the historical failures in the electoral system in Nigeria is "Leeches". The title of the poem is symbolic as it represents the corrupt politicians and electoral officers who exploit the resources available to them by polluting the process by "sucking the blood of genuine elections" (p. 85). Through the image of a Leech which is an aquatic or terrestrial annelid worm with suckers at both ends, the poet describes the dangerous behaviours of the corrupt politicians who are rigged into power by the electoral officers. The poet describes them in the expressions below:

They have
 Posterior suckers
 With which they direct
 Fishes as to how to vote

Leeches are blessed
 With anterior suckers
 Which are used to
 Misdirect fishes during election

With their suckers
 They can inflate
 Counted ballot papers at
 Counting centers (*May 29*, p. 85)

In the lines above, the poet uses the image of a fish as a representation of the Nigerian electorates. The choice of a fish to represent the electorate may stem from the gullibility of the Nigerian electorates whom have in the past and present day sold their votes to the highest bidders therefore exposing further the rot in Nigeria's electoral system. In Nigeria's historical realities, many electorates are deceived with little stipends as bribes. These electoral offences are reiterated by the poet's revelation which includes inflating of ballot paper at counting centres, pre-stamping of ballot papers, impersonation of voters and deflation of counted ballot papers. This revelation presents the realities of Nigeria's political experiences. Most, if not all elections held in Nigeria from the First Republic to the Fourth have been plagued with electoral irregularities. This reiterates further the endemic nature of political corruption in Nigeria and the impossibility in eradicating it. Aliyu, Oluwoyin & Bamidele (2000) validate the endemic rates of political corruption thus:

Even when the 2011, 2015, 2019 general elections in Nigeria have been perceived to be ‘somehow’ better compared to that of 1999, 2003 and 2007 general elections, yet elections and electoral processes in Nigeria cannot be said to be credible as to determine Nigeria’s transition of power (p. 15).

To describe the dismal situation of perception and actual reality in the selection process in leadership, Eke’s poem, “The New Leader”, vividly captures the disillusionment and disappointment of the electorate after placing their hopes in a young and vibrant leader who ultimately fails to deliver on his promises. The poem bemoans the plight of the electorate thus:

Six months ago
Scenes of jubilation
As the voters
Had voted for
A young vibrant
Leader

Now
Scenes of sadness
No infrastructure
No performance
The young leader has
Failed to manufacture
Spermatozoa
Disappointment everywhere
Genital organs immature

Electorate disappointed
Unable to deliver promises
Voters disappointed
Unable to ejaculate

Manifestoes (*October*, p. 63)

From the lines above, the juxtaposition of “Scenes of jubilation” at the beginning and “scenes of sadness” (p. 63) later on highlights the sharp contrast between initial optimism and subsequent despair. The imagery of “Failed to manufacture / Spermatozoa” and “Genital organs immature” (p. 63) metaphorically represents the leader’s inability to fulfill his duties and produce tangible results, much like a promise of fertility that remains unfulfilled. This failure is likened to an inability to create life or generate something substantial, symbolising the impotence of leadership and sterile outcome of political promises in Nigeria. The poet’s use of biological and reproductive images foregrounds the leader’s failures directly to the body’s natural processes, suggesting that the inability to perform politically is as fundamental and disappointing as a failure of the body itself. The voters who are hopeful and energised by the leader’s promises, are left with nothing but disappointment, as

the anticipated “manifestoes” symbols of hope and future progress never materialises. In the Nigerian historical context, the poem captures the heartrending experiences that has trailed Nigeria’s political scene which involves a recurring cycle of hope and disappointment surrounding elections. It also exposes the repeated experiences of electing leaders who present well-crafted manifestoes but fail to implement them effectively once in office. The disappointment expressed in the poem echoes the sentiments of many Nigerians who, time and again, find themselves trapped in a cycle where new leaders are elected with great expectations.

The corrupt practices of Nigerian politicians are manifested in the poem, “Decomposing Democracy”. Democracy in the poem is personified to describe its ailing state in Nigeria. The poet reveals:

Democracy now on her
Death throes
Decaying standard of
Political morality

Smell of death and
Decay hang over our
Nascent democracy
Degenerative moral behaviour (*May 27*, p. 111)

The foregoing lines above constitute the description of the worst form of political corruption that has destroyed democracy in Nigeria. Democracy is seen as a person who goes through intense and violent pain and struggle. From all indication, the pain worsens as the years go by without any lasting remedy. The poet proceeds to describe the symptoms and causes of democracy’s “throes” as: / Monetisation of the / political process / Degenerative democratic process” (*May 27*, p. 111)

The lines also present a stark critique of the socio-political realities in Nigeria, particularly focusing on the failure of democracy. The poem serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing challenges of achieving true democracy and good governance in Nigeria. The lines “A group of deconsecrated / Political gladiators /” (p. 111) conjure the image of politicians who are more concerned with power struggles than good governance. The poet’s adoption of the term ‘gladiators’ suggests a combative, survival of the fittest mentality, where politicians engage in ruthless competition, often at the expense of the citizens. It also reflects the reality of Nigerian politics, where power struggles among the elite overshadow the needs and welfare of the general populace. The term ‘national cake’ as commonly used in Nigeria to refer to the nation’s wealth and resources, which are meant

to be distributed to all have been taken over by acts of “deep-rooted debauchery” (p. 111) which suggests a case of massive squandering and misuse of funds by those in power. It also points to the entrenched corruption that has plagued Nigeria. This reflects a historical pattern of exploitation and mismanagement of Nigeria’s wealth by its leaders. The poet also implies in the poem that the political class is made up of “fraudsters and rogues” who further denote criminality and dishonesty thereby, suggesting that Nigeria’s political system is riddled with individuals who engage in fraudulent activities for personal gain. The last stanza of the poem depicts the effects of poor electoral processes and consequent selection of bad leaders thus:

Death rattle there
And here
From the throats of
Ordinary citizens (*May 27*, p. 111)

The lines above foreshadow the disastrous experience awaiting the ordinary electorate in Nigeria. They also depict the harsh economic situations of the ordinary citizens who are always at the receiving end of bad leadership. It further exposes the level of squalor resulting from lack and tormentuous hunger the poor in the society experience amidst the plenty compared to the corrupt politicians whose tables are full with perpetual provision. The continuous perpetuation of corrupt activities in Nigeria has left negative impacts on the nation and its citizens. In the poem, “Baptised Thieves”, the poet describes the deep-rooted level of political corruption that abounds in the executive and judiciary which are arms of government that should work independently as the rule of law states. The poet expresses disgust in the following lines below:

The leader himself
Unbaptised
Surrounded with baptized
Thieves
Those waiting for confirmation

Diverse assemblage of
Rogues
Found them guiltless
Of wrongdoing (*February*, p. 65)

The poetic lines powerfully capture the corruption and moral decay within Nigeria’s political leadership, utilising religious imagery to underscore the severity of the situation. The metaphor of baptism and confirmation, essential rites in the Catholic and Anglican traditions, is used to contrast the supposed purity and moral integrity of leaders with their actual corruption. The “unbaptised” leader surrounded by “baptised thieves” suggests a figure who is not even

pretending to be righteous, yet is supported by those who are ostensibly confirmed in their roles and responsibilities, but who are corrupt. The use of religious imagery serves to heighten the irony and tragedy of the Nigerian political situation. Furthermore, the phrase “Diverse assemblage of / Rogues” (p. 65) highlights the variety of corrupt individuals within the system, while the judiciary’s complicity is also evident in the line “Found them guiltless / Of wrongdoing” (p. 65). This reflects a deeply entrenched system of corruption where both the executive and judiciary are implicated, making it difficult for justice and good governance to prevail. In a historical context, the Nigerian judiciary since independence has been nothing short of biased and ruthless towards its administration of justice in matters that concern politics.

In another poem, “Relief Funds”, Eke addresses the issue of corruption in Nigeria, particularly in the context of funds and resources meant for internally Displaced Persons (I.D.Ps) affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. He bemoans:

Mites buried themselves
Under the skin of
Relief funds
Allocated to displaced persons

Mites sucked the blood
Of relief funds
Donated by United Nations
Foreign donors

Some camps looking
Malnourished
Some camps looking
Sick (*May 27*, p. 30)

The “Mites” in the poem metaphorically represent corrupt officials and entities who exploit the relief funds, diverting them for personal gain rather than using them for the intended purpose of aiding refugees. This exploitation leads to a dire situation in the refugee camps, where the lack of proper resources results in malnutrition, illness and overall suffering among the displaced persons. The depiction of the imagery of “Mites sucking the blood / Of relief funds” (P. 30) highlights the parasitic nature of corruption in Nigeria which not only drains resources but also perpetuates the suffering of vulnerable populations. In the context of Nigerian history, especially in the wake of the Boko Haram insurgency, many regions in the North have been ravaged by violence, leading to a large population of IDPs. The Nigerian government, along with international organizations like the United Nations and foreign donors, has allocated substantial

funds and resources to provide relief. However, these efforts have been undermined by corrupt officials who divert these funds for personal gain, leaving the intended beneficiaries—those in refugee camps suffering from neglect. In the last stanza, the poet calls for reformation in the Nigerian system in order to dispel corruption as a vice in the Nigerian society. He suggests: “All regulatory authorities / Must swing into action / By spraying these Mites / With insecticides / (p. 30). In the preceding lines, the call for a reformation serves as a metaphor for the need for stringent measures against corruption. It also suggests that only decisive action can rid the Nigerian system of the deep-seated corruption that hampers the welfare of the IDPs. The poem resonates deeply with the ongoing challenges Nigeria faces in governance, where corruption continues to be a significant barrier to development and social justice.

4. Conclusion

It has been established that New Historicism seeks to explore the relationship between literary texts and the cultural system in which they emerge. With this in mind, the paper has analysed how corruption is artistically depicted in Kola Eke’s poetry. The poems chosen for this study have been examined in direct correlation with specific political and historical events, as well as critical commentary on these occurrences and the pervasive issue of corruption. The study reveals that contemporary poets, such as Eke, skillfully use language to depict various facets of corruption in Nigeria. Through his poetry, Eke vividly captures the stark and damaging impact of corruption on Nigerian society and its historical roots. His work serves as a significant artistic chronicle, highlighting the pervasive presence of corruption and its profound consequences on the Nigerian state as a whole.

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