

Ayodeji Isaac Shittu

‘Third Worlding’ the Colonial Metropolis: Post-colonial Travelogue, Identity and a Tale of Two Cities in Odia Ofeimun’s *London Letter and Other Poems*

Abstract

The essay demonstrates that the travel writing, as an auto/biographical text, is not merely to gratify the authorial self but is a critique of the understanding of that self and the socio-historic moments and realities that define it. London Letter is a self-narration of the experiences of the poet as a Nigerian traveler. It is also an eye witness account about the experiences of Nigerian migrants in London. This makes it a meta-narrative. Through this meta-narrative mode and the preoccupation with socio-historical contexts of the migrants’ experiences, the auto/ethnographic essence of the text is underscored. Therefore, by decentering the former colonial metropolis and peripheralising it as the new ‘Other’, there is a re/writing of history and a reconstruction of the ‘Self’ in opposition to the colonial representation of the post-colony.

Key words: Autobiography, Diaspora, Travel Writing, Narration, Africa.

Introduction

The temper and preoccupations of contemporary travel writing are succinctly described by Lopez Roper (2003) when she distinguishes what has been described as colonialist travelogue and contemporary or post-colonial travelogue. She explains that while the former celebrates the colonial empire, the latter “decenters” it. According to her, “after two world Wars and the collapse of European empires, the eurocentrism that characterised eighteenth and nineteenth century travel accounts has given way to decentering of Western culture and a feeling of guilt over Europe’s colonial past” (53). She argues that there has been a shift in the role of travel writing from the former use as vehicle of cultural prejudice to “instrument of cultural critique” (53).

Some critics have noted that contemporary travel writings and the act of traveling spring from a personal need for change and more. They argue that the most important motivation is self-enhancement while the travel destination and world often serve as “backdrop for the traveler’s very personal concern” (Barbara Korte, 2000: 144). According to Holland and Huggan (1998), contemporary travel writing is often a quest for self-understanding and apprehension which reveals “a conflicted sense of belonging and allegiance” (14). However, despite this seemingly solely personal or subject-orientation of travel writings, it is equally true to say that it has a social awareness dimension to it. It shows a combination of both self-understanding and social and historical engagements. As Lopez Roper (2003) explains, this combination

CONTEXT: Journal of Social & Cultural Studies.

Volume 14, Number 1, March 2011, Pp 25 - 38 .

ISSN 1119 – 9229. <http://contextjournal.wordpress.com/articles/shittu/>

...becomes more cohesive if we bear in mind that the personal urge to travel may respond, as we will see, to an attempt to solve some inner conflict whose examination entails delving into broader socio-historical issues. The foregrounding of the traveler's subjectivity, together with the awakening of social consciousness, are therefore, the two most prominent features of contemporary travel writing (53).

In contrast to the colonial metropolitan travelogues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary travel writers can be described as counter-travelers, a term we have derived from Lopez Roper (2003) who asserts that rather than gratifying or delighting the reader "with the exotic or national identity" the aim of 'countertravel writing' is to shake "the reader's complacency through the 'unmapping' of 'mapped' world views" (54). Edwards and Graulund (2003) also observe that recent travel writings are used to generate and present alternative representations of cultures in direct opposite to Eurocentric understanding and exploration of the genre.

There are also new forms of the travel writing made possible by the new information technologies. These are defined by a shift from "the culture of 'Book' to that of the 'Screen'" (Oha, 2000). Described as "Cyber-narrative", Oha notes that this mode of travel writing has a tendency to make "European knowledge of Africa appear more legitimized" (2000). This form of travelogue includes Blogging. There are also photo narrative and video recording which are documentaries of travel experiences and explorations in fixed and motion pictures respectively. Examples of the latter form of travelogue are shown on cable television channels such as the Discovery Channels. An example of Cyber narrative is Mark Davies' *Africa Odyssey 99*, a narrative of his tour of five African countries, which, according to him, is meant "to connect Africa with Europe".

Although this media may increase access to travel writings for global readers and prevent the monopoly of knowledge, it raises serious questions (Oguibe, 1999; Oha, 2000). There is the question of access to the internet unlike what obtains with the book version. On this issue, Oha (2000) asks pertinent questions:

How does the European traveller, through the website, connect Africa with Europe? What are the presuppositions that underlie this connection of Africa with Europe? Whose medium is the Internet? Or, who is culturally and economically capable of visiting this connective, this new site of global interaction? Who spins the Web? How would this cyber-narrative benefit Africa? How would it benefit the relationship between Africa and Europe?

Critics like Inderpal Grewal (1996), Abu-Lughod (1989) and Avatar Brah (1996) have, however, noted that the peculiarity of contemporary and post-colonial travelogues, whatever the medium employed, is their counter-narrative and critical nature. For instance, Grewal (1996: 3) observes that post-colonial travel writing is capable of unsettling assumptions about the "consolidation of stable unitary identities of nation, class, sexuality or gender, and suggests forms of Selfhood that evade such consolidations." According to Brah (1996), post-colonial travel writing provides possibilities for the exploration of transnational activities and movements like the Atlantic triangle and the Diaspora and

other forms of enforced migration. Post-colonial travel texts, Edwards (1996:2) notes, resists “the gravitational pull of metropolitan centrality and cosmopolitanism by articulating experiences and ontologies that are often removed from dominant European or North American productions of knowledge.” Oha (2009) describes this as subversive and transgressive kind of writing. While discussing the engagement of cultural ordering in the migrant poetry of Femi Oyebode, a Nigerian Birmingham-based poet and professor of psychiatry, Oha observes:

More than exposing the attitude to difference as the main obstacle to intercultural understanding in relationship between the migrant Self and the European host, the poet uses his narration of his African values as a means of undermining the perceived isolation and silencing of the migrant African Other. In celebrating Africa where he is located in Britain, Oyebode actualizes the notion of the ‘Third Worlding’ of Europe – the transformative presencing of the Third World in the European space – within the domain of literature (181).

Post-colonial travelogue is a potent instrument for decentering the colonial metropole and redefining both the post-colonial ‘Self’ and the post-colony, thereby enabling a new self-understanding.

This kind of writing is similar in function and perhaps in form, to the genre of auto/ethnography in that it does more than merely narrating the personal experience; it also narrates and critiques the geographies of those experiences. Auto/ethnography has been described both as a research method and a text, a genre of writing and research that connects the self to a cultural and social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 9). As a genre of self-reflexive writing, auto/ethnography combines the qualities of both the auto/biography and ethnography so that it is characterised by the narration of the self and the representation of the socio-cultural contexts experienced by the self. As such Reed-Danahay describes auto/ethnography as a self-reflexive writing which combines the features of two genres of writing and synthesizes their best qualities:

[It]...synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question. The term has a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest. Thus, either a self (auto) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto) ethnography can be signaled by “Autoethnography” (1997: 2).

Reed-Danahay notes further that the dual nature of the meaning of auto/ethnography suitably positions it to address the “binary convention of self / society split” and the boundary between “the objective and the subjective” (1997: 2). Essentially, postmodern and post-colonial conditions are characterised by cultural displacement, deconstruction of power axes and multiplicity of identities, which underscore contemporary conception of

self and society. Mary Louise Pratt (1992; 1994), a literary critic, relates the concept of auto/ethnography to the relationships between the colonised and the coloniser, and to modes of resistance to dominant discourses offered by native account. According to her, auto/ethnography is:

... a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them Autoethnographic texts ... involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding (1994:28).

In other words, auto/ethnography is a postcolonial and postmodern approach to viewing life and culture. It interrogates the master narrative and inserts in cultural domain the viewing of the 'Other' and articulates their own understanding of their experience. This disposition to cultural understanding and of life corresponds with Tami Spry's (2001) description of what she describes as "performing autoethnography", which involves an active engagement and interrogation of a subject's relationship with the dynamics of geo-space. According to her, "performing autoethnography" is:

the convergence of the 'autobiographic impulse' and the 'ethnographic moment' represented through movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the innersanctions of the always migratory identity... (706).

These qualities adequately describe the preoccupations of Nigerian post-colonial travel poetry. This poetry is written by Nigerian poets who are temporary migrants or visitors to other countries and thus document their encounters and experiences. Usually, the themes of this form of writing include identity issues, marginalization and a deconstructive viewing of the space of "Other" among others. There is always an interrogation of the relationship between the travel writer; and this is determined by the status and relationship they maintain, and the geo-space of the encounter. While this may not necessarily be protective of the writer's homeland, it nevertheless presents an independent viewing of the geo-space and thus a counter-narration that demystifies the over-blown image of the colonial metropolis and at the same time counters misrepresentations of the post-colony and stereotypes entrenched by colonialist narrative. Essentially, travelogues are auto/biographical as they are narrations of the travel writer's personal experiences and encounters with the space they visited. As such travel writings thrive on recollection. As autobiographical writings, they are usually concerned with self-apprehension and representation, which usually appeals to memory. As Oha (2003) notes:

Literary explorations of the Other play on memory, identity, and representation, sometimes introducing the strategy of witnessing for authenticity. A traveler becomes a witness to what is seen, heard, touched, felt, and constructing the identity of witness is partly one of the commitments of the travel writing. Often this is revealed in the narrative point of view, especially the narrator-involved technique (of

the first-person narration). But even beyond the challenge of constructing the identity of the authentic witness, the travel writer also positions his/her cultural identity against the one(s) s/he encounters (137).

As post-colonial subjects and writers, this fresh viewing of the colonial metropolis provides opportunity for reflection on the consequences of the historic encounter between the ex-centre and the post-colonies. Also as counter-narratives, travel writings about the colonial "Other" uncover the hypocrisy and double standards of the centre. There is thus an engagement of the geo-space of this encounter, which is characteristic of travel writings. This view is underscored by Rahbek (2002) in his observation that travelogue writes both self and the geography of experience: "[t]ravel literature (...) typically tells us much about the place the traveler is leaving as the one he or she is journeying towards, just as it often discloses more of the traveler's personality than was perhaps intended by the author" (22).

Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems* (2000) is a Nigerian post-colonial poetic travelogue. Like Remi Raji-Oyelade's *Shuttlesongs America: A Poetic Guided Tour* (2003), another Nigerian poetic travelogue, it addresses the post-colonial relationship between Africa and Euro-America. *London Letter* addresses problems of identity and the dynamics of history and culture in post-colonial encounters between Africa and Euro-America. It also addresses how this is problematised by the challenges posed of globalization.

London Letter and Other Poems and the Tale of Two Cities

In *London Letter and Other Poems*, Odia Ofeimun takes up issues of self-apprehension, and re-identification as defined by the dynamics of contemporary transnational and trans-cultural relations. He addresses these as represented in and occasioned by past and current relationships between his homeland, Nigeria and the former colonial master, Britain, here represented by Lagos and London. By juxtaposing these cities, Odia Ofeimun dialogues, as a postcolonial subject, with the essence of his historical and cultural connections to the two spaces and interrogates these relationships as they affect or define his identity. This provides for him the opportunity to address the important themes of home, exile, belonging, identity and the challenges of neo-colonialism. For this purpose, he represents Britain and Nigeria with two important cities in these countries: London and Lagos respectively. These cities serve as his dialogic tropes on the historic encounters between Nigeria and Britain and the consequences of these encounters.

The relationship between these cities and how they define the consciousness of the poet is expressed in the following juxtaposition of the social-political landscapes of the geo-spaces:

Na London we dey pooling vast memories
Across the Atlantic, we witness
The red bus careering towards Marbel Arch

So free from the swarm and crush of Lagos
The sweated journey turned to a fiasco
Fiercer than war of democracy.

We de for London, spooling our best wishes
in strands of rueful remembrance—the god
Of bolekaejas packing bins upon human cattle
To redress crowded bus-stop
(“London Letter I,” lines 1-10).

The poet expresses the ubiquitous memory of the socio-political realities of Lagos and how this memory is provoked by his sighting of London. He also addresses the condition of migrants’ existence within the cosmopolitan space of London. The sight of London brings back the memory of the colonial encounter and how that encounter influenced the post-colonial condition of Nigeria. As Niyi Okunoye (2006) observes, Lagos and London, which function superficially in the work as opposing spatial designations of the homeland and the colonial mother country respectively, consequently emerge as collaborators in shaping a unique identity that the poet-persona, as a postcolonial writer shares with others in the in-between space (107).

According to the poet, Nigerian migrants to London deliberately ignore the history of colonial encounter between London and Lagos and the fact that the London of the twentieth century is not a paradise: “...so consummately,” the migrants “forget/unadjusted lives in Thatcher’s clockwork orange –the peace of vagrants as truly homeless/as compatriots in my city by the lagoon –” (‘London Letter II’, p. 15). The London of today is as challenging as the Lagos of the former British colony, “my city by the lagoon”. There are also “unadjusted lives”/ “vagrants” and the “homeless” who are native born of London, /“hopeless as truth at Hyde Park” in Britain’s London just as there are in Nigeria’s Lagos. As such, London is no longer the capital of an empire but an ordinary city like Lagos with its burdens and human and economic challenges. These migrants chose not to see the ugly landscapes of the twentieth century London. Because of what they hope to achieve or get from London, they decide to “self-assuredly” pool

... scraps of ancient ditties
To ward off reality.
...fellow countrymen interpreting Jim Crow
Saving London from London’s filth, sick city falling
Artlessly begging my city by the lagoon

(‘London Letter III’ p. 15)

These migrant country men of the poet persona live in London in manners that they will never dare to live at home. Like at Mushin and Aguda in Lagos, these countrymen pretend

to be enjoying in London. As Fela Anikulapo sang, they are "...shuffering and shmiling [in] Jungle city/ Abandoned to muck, nightsoil and cadavers/ Abandoned to Generals and tycoons of loots/Sinking unseeing eyeball into reckless eyeballing/Where countryman proves the beaded dignity of labour/ Is not like charity that must begin at home" ('London Letter III', p. 16).

In a demystifying sarcasm, the poet persona describes London's ironic splendor that his migrant countrymen are dying to share. Comparing London's landscapes with that of Lagos, the poet wonders why anyone should leave Lagos for London. To him, London is not better than Lagos:

Ah! For this London, we pay as we peel
The gloss and rhythm in a tale of two cities
Coalescing in the snakes and ladders of the mind
Where broken lifts in undergrounds, clockwork trains
Playing battering rams in head-collisions
Emulate the dry taps and blackouts of my city by the lagoon
(‘London Letter VI’ p. 19)

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet-narrator confesses that life in London is far from being rosy. The migrants only deceive themselves by thinking that living in London is a symbol of high life or a sign of affluence. In actual fact, living in London is traumatic:

Like them who sang ‘Lagos na so so enjoyment’
We dey for London like we no dey at all
Dreading the winter like the old woman the nights
Without firewood to hold harmattan at bay
We dey for London like we no dey at all
Chewing cud in the birth of freedom as tragedy
A used up hope mocking the human condition
On the sides of the Atlantic: Na so so enjoyment.

(‘London Letter VII’ p. 20)

This poem is a historical and cultural representation of both Lagos and London. It is more of cultural coming to terms with a history that plays a very important role in what the poet is and what his migrant countrymen have become. It is excursion into culture past, the present and a possible future. *London Letter* is auto/biographical because it is an eye witness account. That the poet-narrator is part of these experiences is shown in the use of the collective pronouns “we” and “our”. Apart from narrating his eye witnessing of the experiences of the migrants, the poet also interrogates the history of Nigeria as a former colony of Britain. It explains that the current status of Nigeria and Nigerian migrants is the consequence this historic encounter. This disposition to the colonial experience and London and duality of the narrative demonstrate what Lopez (2003) has described as “countertravel writing” which narrates personal experiences, engages in subjectivity and

delves into “socio-historical issues” (53). He describes this as the “the awakening of social consciousness” (2003: 53). These qualities defined its ethnography.

The ethnographic quality of *London Letter* is equally demonstrated in the poet’s employment of the Nigerian Pidgin English. Okunoye (2006) describes this as the ambivalent appropriation of “the colonial Self and the nativist Other” (113). The complexity of this history and the identity conflict that it provokes is also evident in the attitude of the poet persona to both Lagos (the homeland) and London, which represents the culture of the colonial center. While he criticises the homeland, he does not, however, celebrate the ‘colonial motherland’.

The crisis of identity that is common to migrants who attempt to subsist within a foreign domain is further shown in ‘Giagbone’, in which the poet-narrator adopts a typical oral resource and a surreal atmosphere to portray his journey of self-discovery. This occurs through a gradual coming to grip with his ancestral background and history as represented by his father’s face and eyes. Reminiscence of Femi Oyebo’s *Naked to Your Softness and Other Dreams* (1989), the poet travels spiritually from a state of arrogant self-assurance to a state of true historical and spiritual awareness and self-apprehension which results in his return to dignity and authenticity that his father represents.

‘Giagbone’ is divided into six parts each revealing different levels of awareness. In the first stanza of the first part, the poet-narrator explains:

I meet my father’s face in every mirror,
 Every chrome, and shines in the mall....
 I lounge in the sasswood of his eyes
 Hallowed by black knots and brown shoots
 Ingrowing and willing my heart
 With a thousand trials by ordeal
 To reach out, out to the sun
 Away from lands overtaken by winter
 (p. 21)

In this stanza that the poet-narrator is taken for a stray traveller who left the safety of home, “the sun” and gets stuck in the “lands overtaken by winter”, which here represent Nigeria and London respectively. Though lured away from “the sun” by the “mirror”, “chrome” and the shining “mall” of London, his father’s face haunts him, “willing” his “heart/ with a thousand trials by ordeal/ to reach out” for home, “the sun”. Despite his stubborn resistance to his father’s wishes and ancient wisdom, he continues to encounter his ubiquitous father’s face everywhere he goes. The face reminds him of his cultural history, his people and ancestors:

...everywhere,
 His pupils burning out my pupils
 Smarting with the scalding smoke
 Of the long guns announcing his return

- the return of elders – to a truer home
Beyond Alxheimer's wreckage and prized rags
Beyond unmended fences and brave futures
Stretched from doorstep to street's end
At the end of a man's daylight

(Stanza 5 p. 22)

Since the poet is a traveler whose experience consists in the eye-witnessing of the collective experience of Nigerian migrants, it can be said that his journey of self-discovery is representative and typical of the experience of Nigerian migrants to London.

From part II of the poem to part VI, his father's face grows powerful and steady. It changes from a bland face to eyes. This also may suggest the poet-narrator's gradual awareness of his cultural heritage and wisdom. He becomes more and more attentive to his father as he journeys from one stage of self-apprehension to another. He even begins to understand what the eyes say:

I meet my father's eyes now
-a steady gaze that melted nuts,
Bolts and screws into a healer's art
-a faith, washed in petrol and engine oil
In praise of Ogun, god of iron and roads

(Stanza I, lines 1-6 P. 23)

From this point on, he begins to understand his father's perspective and becomes more sensitive to his concerns. In stanza two of part II, he meets his "father's eyes in dire humour/ of seasons scapped by the clatter of empty tills; / a clatter he rued from days that saw/ his lorries hurtling down ..." (lines 1-4, p. 23). This possibly suggests his father occupation. A driver? In stanza three, he meets his "father's eyes in suspended disbelief/ lapping my childhood knowledge of bad faith/ in adaultworlds and brave futures" (lines 1-3). By the time we get to part III of the poem, the poet-narrator has become deliberate in his probation of his father's eyes. He now accepts his father's knowledge and wisdom and decides to view London through these more ancient eyes; he becomes aware of the true identity and worth of London. In stanza one of this part, he "scours" with his father's eyes

The speed-bled faces of Londoners
Whose skies have lowered their eyelids
In search of a heaven that the hand can grasp
In thrall to a vision that the horizon has tamed
With winds that harden winter masks
And masks that harden wayward winds
In travelling anxieties stocking Europe's season...
And the duel rotting apples
Occluding anomie
In the ravage South of my heart

Scouring here implies a deliberate investigation. The poet's employment of the metaphor of the "the father" and the "father's eyes" is actually very instructive. This perhaps underscores Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. The idea of the "father" and "father's eyes" may represent what Paul Durbin has described as the "memory passed on by our heritage", the history of the ancestors, which "include their experiences and emotions". When the migrant is pressed by unsavoury situations they are forced to pay attention to culture and consciousness of the homeland which were initially occluded by the delusion of a paradisaical life in the foreign land. According to Durbin, this disposition is explained by the man's "innate tendency" to respond in certain ways, especially when our experiences "stimulate an inherited predisposition toward action" (Par. 12). As such the "father" and "the father's eyes" are metaphors of the migrant's latent memory of his cultural heritage and the nationalistic direction that the history of this culture points, especially as it concerns the relationships between Nigeria and Britain. In actual situation, this is problematic in its nativist and essentialist tendency. An uncritical acceptance of this historical perspective and cultural essentialism is problematic, especially when the ancestors are as guilty as the coloniser in the exploitation and abuse of the homeland? This condition encourages migration in the first place and surely complicate migrants' disposition to the homeland.

In the part IV of 'Giagbone', the poet-narrator achieves a clearer self-understanding and re-connects to his ancestral homeland. From scouring through his father's eyes, he graduates to the point of 'seeing' with his father's eyes as he accepts and embraces fully the culture and history of his people. In stanza one, he writes:

I see with my father's eyes and I am forced
 To embrace the pagan distrust of his silence
 Visions contesting my brow with wrinkles
 Furrowing my forward gaze with questionmarks

This new knowledge of his past halts his blind acceptance the colonial and metropolitan version of history. It makes him to ask questions, "furrowing" his "forward gaze with questionmarks". He sees with his father's eyes and "mourn with him the murky days of rain/ chased by lightning through religions of the till/ harried by sour grapes," when the colonialist exploited his homeland and rejoiced in "the bitter troughs of the Pound/ in the seething hyperreality of Europe's in-gathering..." ('Giagbone' IV, stanza 2, lines 2-4 p.27). This enables him to evaluate his migratory experience and to conclude that it is the colonial metropolis that benefits most from his nomad. The word "nomad" as used here implies the poet's traveler status and that of his countrymen. In the hyper-reality of Europe's harvest from and exploitation of her neo-colonies, her "in-gathering" results in the "regress" of the migrants:

Matching the native's progress to my nomad's regress
 Hoarding apostrophes of home that exile makes
 With fugitive pleasures retrenching

The blindness of choice that goads me
Strict with the discipline of a suicide
(‘Giagbone’ IV, stanza II, lines 7-12)

In lines 6 and 7 of the stanza II of part IV, there is a juxtaposition of the personal and collective experiences of the migrants and their new abode. It also shows that the benefit of the relationship between this migrants and the foreign space is unequal. “Matching my nomads’ regress to the natives’ progress” (line 6) suggests that the natives of London, which represents the host community are the ones that benefit from the relationship. The “nomads” in the plural form represents the Nigerian migrants or the poet’s countrymen in London who “regress” while the “natives”, also in the plural form, “progress”. This shows a collective experience both on the part of the migrants and the host. In line 7, the poet–narrator underscores the individual level of the experience of migration and exile. In this case he matches “the native’s progress” –“native” in the singular form connotes individual Londoners– with his personal regress: “to my nomad’s regress”. The poet thus demonstrates, as earlier noted, that the status of the migrant is the product of a collective history and experience which consist of the colonial and post-colonial encounters between the homeland, Nigeria and Britain. Therefore, the migrant’s identity is only authenticated when there is a meaningful and deliberate interrogation and articulation of these multiple histories and shifting identities. This is expressed in part V and stanza I:

I let my father’s sadness overtake me
On every neo-sign and starboard
I let his laughter lines over-etch my smile
In groundings with homeless natives
Lost to the random commune of charities,
The grudging welfare murking undergrounds
With empathy that knows not
The back street that I walk

In stanza two, the poet persona yields: “I let my father’s sadness become me/.... I let his reason splay shoes/sole-less on the front of Brixton/ where the empires of my heart/ rise to strike for the futures/that other people’s dream overtake” (lines 5-9). In stanza three, he submits: “I let my father’s sadness relieve me/
For the muffled marches of the day
Whose banners, trodden under hooves,
Still rise screaming through winter fog
With the coal-miners’ cry of those
Who did not ask to be colonized:
Those in pits closed to madding hordes
And those who will not blink at the takeover
Of those who took over the world.

There is a clear understanding here of the evil of colonialism and the impoverishment of the people by the power brokers. These ‘colonised’ and underpaid but overused labourers do not mind the collapse of the empire that enslaves them. Finally, in the last part of this poem, ‘Giagbone’, the poet–narrator reconciles with his father and comes to term with the historical memory of his people. He looks his father in the face, and they share a mutual understanding and love, and relief as his “...father’s face” exhales “a hemp of love’s accusation”. What is the accusation? They are the

-distances that keep me voyaging....
 -the loss that dogs me with his shadows...
 And the demands that he never made
 Forever staking closed borders
 To tie the ‘wanderer’ down

As he admits his careless and ignorant dispositions to the homeland, his father tries to rid him of the demons that keeps him wandering endlessly, and has continued to create a chasm between him and true self-apprehension. By this, his father gives him the opportunity “...to be his father’s son” again (Part VI, lines 17). Eventually, the traveler comes to term with their past without which the present and the future can only at best be nebulous.

Conclusion

This reading of *London Letter* shows the socio-political and historical engagements of Nigerian postcolonial travel writings. It demonstrates that, the travel writing, as an auto/biographical text, is not merely to gratify the authorial self but is a critique of the understanding of that self and the socio-historic moments and realities that define it. *London Letter* is a self-narration of the experiences of the poet as a Nigerian traveler. It is also an eye witness account of the experiences of Nigerian migrants in London. This makes it a meta-narrative. Through this meta-narrative mode and the preoccupation with socio-historical contexts of the migrants’ experiences, the auto/ethnographic essence of the text is underscored. Therefore, by decentering the former colonial metropolis and peripheralising it as the new ‘Other’, there is a re/writing of history and a reconstruction of the ‘Self’ in opposition to the colonial representation of the post-colony. As Oha (2009: 181) notes, the act amounts to “the Third Worlding of Europe – a transformative presencing of the Third World in the European space –within the domain of literature”. This involves the critique of Euro-American perceptions of the post-colony by re/writing history, and putting it in as insiders and “I-witness” of those experiences.

References

- Abu-Lughod, J. 1989. *Before european hegemony: the world system AD 1250–1350*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brah, A. 1996. *Cartographies of desire: contesting identities*. London: Routledge.
- Davies, M. African Odyssey99 : <http://www.markspark.com/africa99/> .
- Edwards, J. D. and Graulund, R. 2003. *Introduction: Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing*. ATLANTIS 25.1: 51-62
- Grewal, I. 1996. *Home and harem: nation, gender, empire, and the cultures of travel*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Holland, P. and Graham, H. Eds.1998. *Tourists with typewriters: critical reflections on contemporary travel writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kenneth, P. 1993. Home is where the heart...lies. *Transition*, 59: 65–77. Retrieved March 23, 2007 from <http://www.jstor.org/>
- Korte, B. 2000. *English travel writing from pilgrimages to postcolonial explorations*. Basingtoke: MacMillan.
- Nzegwu, N. 2000. Memory lines: art in the pan-african world. *Ijele: Art journal of the african world*.
- Oguibe, O. 1999. Connectivity, and the fate of the unconnected. *Telepolis*, 07.12. <http://www.heise.de/tp/English/inhalt/CO/6551/1.html>
- Oha, O. 2009. 'Occupying the isolated terminal space and silent': the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion in the poetry of Femi Oyebode. Eds. E. Bekers, S. Helff & D. Merolla. *Matatu*. 36: 181–194.
- Oha, O. 2000. In the web of his sight: European travel through Africa as a virtual encounter. *MotsPluriels*, 16: Retrieved: March 11, 2011 from <http://www.arts.uwa.edu/Motspluriels/MP1600oo.html>
- Oha, O. 'The Rhetoric of Cross-Cultural Engagement and the Tropology of Memory in Remi Raji's America-Travel Poetry'. Wole Ogundele and Gbemisola Adeoti (eds) *IBA: Essay on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba*. Ife: OAU University Press Ltd.; 2003. 137-150.

- Ofeimun, O. 2000. *London letter and other poems*. Lagos: Hornbill House of Arts.
- Okunoye, O. 2006. The margins or the metropole?: the location of home in Odia Ofeimun's *London letter and other poems*. TYDSKRIF VIR LETTERRKUNDE. 43.2: 107–121
- Oyebode, F. 1989. *Naked to your softness and other dreams*. Birmingham: Ijala.
- Pratt, M. L. 1986. *Fieldwork in common places*. *Writing cultures: the poetics of ethnography*. Eds. J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press. 27-50.
- _____. 1992. *Imperia eyes: travel writing and trans-culturation*. New York: Routledge.
- _____. 1994. *Transculturaltion and autoethnography*. *Colonial discourse/postcolonial theory*. Eds. F. Barker, P. Hulme, & M. Iverson. New York: Manschester University Press. 24-46.
- Ramazani, J. 2001. *The hybrid muse: postcolonial poetry in English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Raji-Oyelade, R. 2003. *Shuttlesongs: America, A Poetic Guided Tour*. Ibadan: Bookcraft Ltd.
- Reed–Danahay, E. D. 1997. Introduction. (Ed.) *Auto/ethnography: rewriting the self and the social*. Oxford: Berg. 1-20.
- _____. 1997. Living home: schooling stories and the ethnography of autoethnography in rural france.. *Auto/ethnography: rewriting the self and the social*. Ed. Reed – Danahay, D. Oxford: Berg. 123-143.
- Ropero, L. M. 2003. Travel writing and postcoloniality: Caryl Philips's *The Atlantic sound*. *ATLANTIS* 25.1: 51-62
- Spry, T. 2001. Performing autoethnography: an embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7. 6: 706-732
- Zavalloni, M. 1983. *Ego–Ecology: The study of the interaction between social and personal identities*. *Identity: Personal and Socio-Cultural, A Symposium*. Ed. Anita Jakobson–Widding. Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell.