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THE WRITER, THE MUSE AND REVOLUTIONARY INCITEMENT IN JOE USHIE'S POETRY

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Abstract

In this paper we use select poems from three of Joe Ushie's collections namely: Eclipse in Rwanda (1998/2004), A Reign of Locust (2004) and Yawns and Belches (2018) as primary sources for examining the revolutionary contexts of the poet-scholar-critic's social vision in his creative corpus, and to probe into the informing socio-political, socio-economic and environmental colorations that are prominent in his artistic pursuit. The strain of the divergent, despairing thematic issues that characterize the three texts, in the final analysis, dovetails into an ecotype of the poet-persona's revolutionary sloganeering and incitement for radical shift in the world that has remained obdurately impervious to the unpleasant condition of the marginalized majority. This study is situated on the persona's Marxist ideological orientation, in which reading and interpretation of a text goes beyond the aesthetics to the concerns of class struggles in a given socio-political ferment of the time. The analysis therefore focuses on the poet's unhidden attachment to the condition of the teeming downtrodden of the earth, whose wailing voices he seeks to amplify in his poetry. The proclivity, intensity and persistence of Ushie's artistic vision in the three titles, centralize the despairing undulation of contemporary socio-political landscape. The paper thus concludes that Joe Ushie's poetic oeuvre constitutes a potent weapon for the overthrow of the unfeeling, inept and repressive social systems that define postmodern socio-political order.

Keywords: Poetry, Despair, artistic ideology, revolutionary sloganeering, Joe Ushie.

Introduction

The efforts at navigating African postcolonial societies out of the miasma of primordial ethno-conscious doldrums, socio-political corruption, moral atrophy, religious and gender violence and related environmentally induced calamities, culminating in what David Udoinwang and Chinenye Amonyeze (2021) describe as "a strain of negativity and appalling paradoxes"which have caused prolonged state of anomie, perennial upheavals and other complications, remains an important thematic aspect of modern African literature since the formation days till the present. The throwbacks of postcolonial encounters continue to haunt contemporary experience. This is the situation that informs the bulk of artistic works emanating from postcolonial spheres. In the assertion of Kufre Akpan, the above development

is "an agonizing indexes of deformities that characterize the socio-political space of the postcolonial African nation states" (28).

Nathaniel and Akung (3), while looking back to the backdrops of African literary experience, echo this sentiment where they assert that it remains obvious that "the mental torture of slavery brought about dehumanization, alienation, dislocation and existential homelessness, which culminated in the negative narratives about Africans and their literary compositions". The situation against which the poetry of Joe Ushie could be thematically located remains dire, and this informs the temperament that runs through the lines of his poetry in most of the volumes. As James Okpiliya and Kufre Akpan point out, the socio-political situation of contemporary African experience "recreate spectacles of bloodletting footage and their repercussions on the citizenry" (52). By this understanding, African writers consistently use their creative works as channels to expose the misdemeanors that characterize societies and put the citizenry on unnecessary flights and turn them to unwanted refugees elsewhere. In their study of the causes of migration in Nigeria, Kufre Akpan and Monica Udoette assert that "Nigeria, in particular, has been plagued with insurgent wars that have decimated a significant percentage of its citizens" (64). David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan rightly point out thus: "Worsened by the existing phenomenon of socio-economic disparities in society, with the ever-widening gap between the "haves" and the have-nots", there arises a gnawing atmosphere of panic and fears for the present and succeeding generation" (187).

It is in this context therefore, that African poetry has often been critiqued as potent weapon for intensifying intellectual awakening (Tsaaior 2005), opposing oppressive, inept regimes (Oripeloye 66) and of transmitting 21st century postmodern, postcolonial Africa's socio-political experience to the globalization arena (Egya 2005). Joe Ushie's poetic oeuvre does not depart from the almost established patriotic concern andthis shared appellation. Ushie's creative fecundity, spanning almost three decades- flowering since 1992 with the release of *Popular Stand and Other Poems* till the recent winning of *Shehu Sani/ANA 2019* award-winning anthology, titled *Yawn and Belches* (2018), has remained sustained, creatively luxuriant, intellectually inspiring, and ideologically revolutionary.

Ushie's years in career as teacher, scholar-critic, public intellectual, mentor, revolutionary sloganeer, inter-generational coach and bearer of social conscience, reflects in the oeuvre of his poetic work. Ushie's poetic pedigree include**:** *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995), *Hill Songs* (2000), *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998/2004), *A Reign of Locust* (2004), *Tsunami Blues and Other Poems – Nigerians' Tears in Verse* (2007), and recently *Yawns and Belches* (2018). The thematic issues central to Ushie's artistic offerings zeroes into the poet's abiding concern for a humane, inclusive and progressive world. Not only does Ushie's poetry centralize the perfidy of global capitalism with its socio-ecological recklessness, but Ushie's poetry in its thematic diversities (Aboh 2017) reaches out to pester humanity and indeed persistently gnaw at the conscience of a world that is so fragmented, where the well-fed and powerful have remained impervious to the cruel and abject condition of the starving and excluded mammoth that litter the streets of industrial capitals of the world or are rotting at the remote locations of the world.

The titles of his collections, without compromising the aspects of aesthetic ingenuity, deal on a wide range of socio-political, economic, moral and environmental issues that hinder human

progress. Almost traditionally, the 21st century Nigerian literary ferment has witnessed a deluge of poetic outpouring like in no other genre of literary expression, and the older, younger, youthful and energetic scholars and academics have found in poetry writing a window to diffuse the symptomatically stifling socio-political milieu. Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu assert rhetorically that "It is now incontestable that poetry is the genre in which 21st century Nigerian writers have demonstrated their famed prolificacy and productivity the most…" (137). This indeed, has made the Nigerian literary landscape a fountain of flourishing poetic streams. Gboyega Kolawole and Sule Egya affirm that the Nigerian literary scene, in recent times, has witnessed a prolific output of poetry and most of it is political" (105). Furthermore, Romanus Aboh comments on the innovativeness and thematic thrust of Ushie's creativity by stating that: "Since his poetic expedition in the early 1990s, Ushie's poetry has continued to lament the systemic corruption and abuse of power which causes the gap between the rich and the poor to widen even wider" (153).

It is important to note that, like much of African writers in the genre of poetry, Ushie has consistently relied on the cultural traditions of the subalterns and indigenous epistemology as "invaluable resource" material to sharpen his voice as well as tune the temperament of his muse as "the expressive weapon of poetry for the creation of political awareness and conscientization" (Tsaaior 116 &17).This adds to the aesthetic colouration, spectacles and excitement in his literary creativity. Ushie's poetry largely explores the tiringmilestones of leadership ineptitude, prolonged misrule, authoritarian power rule, and visionless political economies, the ceaseless trampling of the weak by the corrupt and powerful elites, who continue to drag their people into the miasma of prolonged. In this regard, Samuel Ukeme and Mathias Orhero assert that "Joe Ushie's poetry generally interrogates power and corruption in Africa" (137). In this essay, three of Ushie's anthologies of poems are specifically placed in the critical focus, namely: *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998/2004), *A Reign of Locust* (2004) and *Yawns and Belches* (2018).

A Chronicle of Turbulence and Agonizing Despair

The poem 'Song of the orphan' in the collection *Eclipse in Rwanda* in the first place, reverberates the echoing undertone that bellows through Ushie's poetry in its entire corpus of creativity. This verse connects the angst that gives pep to the socio-psychological ambience of his poetry. An extract in the first stanza from the poem illuminates the world that reverberates in the persona's persistent and strident lament, thus:

> Stung by life's wasps
> in the morning of my
> sojourn, I have rolled
> from sorrow to sorrow
> in this weird version of
> the world that hangs
> upside down like a bat… (*Eclipse* 53).

To begin with, it is important to point out that Ushie's creative canvas reflects the widespread turbulence and permeating psychological anguish in the universe envisioned in his creativity. Take for instance, the images that are creatively flagged on the world which the poems in the collection *Yawns and Belches* try to navigate. This undertone finds vivid illustration in the poem 'Letters on the Streets' (pp.9-10). Here the persona conducts his imagined audience to witness

awful scenes of terrifying visages of human banality as magnified in his poetic lenses. These pictures draw home the root causes of despair that conditions the mind and sharpens the vision of the poet-persona. The gloomy imagery takes the imagined audience around the prognoses of the pains and agony that adumbrate the cadence of the bard's symphonies. Here in the 'streets' of the universe that the persona bears witness to, the terrifying images metaphorically encountered in the streets unveil spaces "where paternoster of African rulers" reek with sorry tales. The persona witnesses "images of awe"; encounters "bizarre dancers"; gets entranced by "the weird looking streets"; where "goats and lions" cohabit in "a single cage". It is in this same world that the persona draws energy and voice against the ugly moral situations "where fathers plough beneath the navel of their daughters" and "…the poverty-weakened throng justify their thralldom frenetically" (p.10), in what Fela Kuti of memory would dramatize as "suffering and smiling" experience in his Afro Beat performance.

Ushie's vision probes into a world that sits on the proverbial 'keg of gun powder'; it is full of anxiety and gloom, with possibilities of eventual revolutionary 'volcano', which the poet seems to persistently 'prophecy' in his verses. In the poems 'Africa Today' in the same collection, the revolutionary rhetoric is sustained just as the harsh situation induced by avoidable poverty, deplorable human calamitiesand socio-economic deprivation prevail. He 'sees' the sorry state of the mass of African people. This echoes in the lines below:

> She is the blind bowl-carrying beggars
> Sitting on a roadside mound of gold
> Yawning all day, yawning all night… (*Yawns*…25).

Africa in the creative configuration on the above lines is personified as beggarly, mendicant, or impoverished ironically in the midst of 'roadside mound of gold'. But there is a lot of paradoxes occasioned by the pervasion of elite's ineptness and nearly 'customized' label of arrested development. The present fragmentation is symbolized by the metaphor of the 'Belching' class on one hand, and the 'Yawning' class. In the poem 'In vitro fertilization', the persona chronicles the state of the universe that has become stained with senseless bloodletting and misery and laments the present dilemma of vicious circle of inequality which indeed, is an instigation of revolutionary action by the oppressed against their oppressors. This is captured in the following extract:

> Now everywhere in our world, whether belching or yawning,
> The fire burns same, ignited by famine and myrmidons of faiths
>
> Procreating refugee camps of pains and sorrow beyond consolation,
> And angst that brackets burning women, children, trees and beasts…
> (*Yawns* …24).

The titles of his poetry collection remain instructive as they give some window of insight into the texts selected for review in this paper namely: *Eclipse in Rwanda*, *A Reign of Locust* and *Yawns and Belches*. The titles add some tinge of stylistic garlanding to his poetic craftsmanship. Thus, the poem title *Eclipse in Rwanda*, as one of his earlier works that embody the sour reality of postcolonial Africa connects memory to the nightmarish, lamentable and tragic circumstances of contemporary. *Eclipse…* which was first published in 1998, came out after *Popular Stand* (1992) and *Lamps at the Shrine* (1995) but was later reviewed and reprinted in 2004.

Eclipse in Rwanda amplifies the breathtaking anxieties and sense of despondency that arise from recurrent phenomenon of leadership conspiracies and betrayals by the political class that have made life for the teeming mass of the citizenry depreciate, where life remains unspeakably harsh in most parts of postcolonial Africa. In his Foreword to the collection, the late renowned African literary scholar-critic, Ime Ikiddeh eulogizes the work by stating that: "This is where the young poet's experience of the social world finds an outlet in songs that sometimes trail into near despondency and then rise to seize the moral gauntlet on behalf of those he pleads for" (*Eclipse…* 6). In his critical exploration of what he describes as "…the "Civan" metaphor in Joe Ushie's *Eclipse in Rwanda*', James Tsaaior rightly adjudges the Rwandan genocide with the unutterable horror, captured by the poet in this volume as a "… tragic foreground of the imperial process through its indulgent, artificial fixing of boundaries to accomplish its empire-building project in Africa" (28). Tsaaior argues in this critical purview that such situation birthed by colonial conquest and European expansionist ambitions in Black continent birthed war mongering across the postcolonial Africa "which manifests itself in private and especially in public domain", such that would "only entrench intolerance, ethnocentrism, communal wars and violent death on the continent" (28). In his poetry, Ushie reconfigures the colonial landscape as the specter that continues to swing its pendulum on his creative foundry. Similar situation informs Mary Kolawole's description of postcolonial literature as "the persistence of colonial preferentiality in Third World literature" (16) where the past and the present intertwine, in the bids to bring relevance to bear on African literary idioms.

The poem 'Eclipse in Rwanda' in the collection narrates the cataclysmic explosion that marked the Rwanda genocide, where in a paroxysm of internecine attrition, about 800,000 Rwandans were said to have been massacred within a space of 100days (BBC News, 17 May 2011). An extract from the second stanza of the poem magnifies the sorry song of Rwanda's fratricidal genocide that took humanity to the edge of frustration in 1994:

> Rwanda, listen and you will hear
> your dead weeping for the living.
> O gods, where did you go when all this began?
> And why did the shrines shrink from their duties?
> Hear, hear the sins of war ships
> echoing at scenes of worship… (*Eclipse* 23).

The poem re-lives the bitter agonies that marked that dark moment just as the collection smacks of despairing echoes of bloody upheavals that brought anguish to humanity around the world. But in the poem 'Volcano' in this same collection, the poet-persona envisions his world beyond the present tortuous moment and foresees a budding ember of revolutionary fire being fanned by the continued oppression of the vast majority of the suffering mass of African people by those that rule over them: "The fiery flood, its tensed,/ill-tempered muscles, will push past/palaces of princes, kings and…" (*Eclipse*…28) in the manner of "volcano" irruption that would eventually and arguably put an end to the present state of depravity and despondency in African postcolonial experience.

In the collection: *A Reign of Locusts*, the entries in the various subtitles explore the metaphor of melancholic sweep of 'locusts' phenomenon that gives the text its socio-political thematic

anchorage. The symbolic linguistic, semiotic elements commonly used by the poet in his works, accord with what David Udoinwag and Vero-Ekpris Gladstone point out when they assert that "literary semiotics could be utilized to illuminate the inglorious history of the colonial encounter with the attendant destructive legacies manifesting with neo-colonial tendencies as re-created in literary texts" (1). In similar purview, Chinenye Amonyeze contend that "We live in a society that has consistently over a long time, in the chequered history of its nationhood, been governed by a corrupt, brutish establishment that preaches fairness and equity that is never put into practice" (81). The symbolic use of specific metaphorical elements, anecdotes and innuendos adds to intensify the propaganda against the seething tension that prepares the ground for revolutionary ruptures. The poems 'The African bermuda', 'Clifford Orji', 'Mobile Caskets', 'Shackles', 'Our laugh will change', 'Circles' among others, thus bear the symbolic labels that transmit deeper meanings and give penetrating insight into the incriminating socio-cultural reality of the persona's revolutionary vision. The poem 'Circle' in the same collection which is a cogent metaphor for the vicious circle of 'man's inhumanity to man' reflects at the persona's disapproval of the present (dis)order. Furthermore, the poem: 'Our laugh will change' holds the ace of hope in the midst of the present state of near despondency. But the hope, in the perception of the persona, would only comefirm resistance by those that are held captives by retrogressive power hegemonies:

…
Ours is a smile of the roast goat head,
The flashed teeth of the drowning;
From hill to hill this weird season
Our smile zooms and booms in bonds.
…
But as spring wilts winter
And the grass goes green,
As evening breeze tails noon flame,
Or as day peels off night
Our laughter will change one day (*A Reign…* 44).

This very verse is vintage Ushie's medley voice of despair and hope. This stylistic modulation attests to the humanistic mien of Ushie's personality and artistry. Sunday Okune and Alexander Timothy present an interesting statement that seems to support Ushie's revolutionary insinuation in his poetry as follows:

> Hope and aspiration are the dynamics of the human species. When a people are devoid of hope and aspiration, they sink into the abyss of developmental atrophy. It is often the case that when a people are under oppression, they usually dream about an ideal situation that may or may not materialize someday. They hope for and sing about a glowing future time when freedom shall be realized (1).

The statement in the extract is apt for a better illumination of the Ushie's poetic vision. The poems 'The African Bermuda' and 'Shackles' (*A Reign…* 43), when read together further cast an image of fright and hopelessness, anyway. The former particularly reminds of J.P. Clarke-Bekederemo's 'Here nothing works' in the volume *State of the Union* (1985), that creatively chronicles the appalling failure of postcolonial African sphere, using Nigeria as the microcosm

of this banal picture. The intensification of 'Bermuda' aura recreates the momentum of mysteriousness that also manifests in a different way in the poem 'Mobile Caskets', which dramatizes the contradiction of social exclusion, perpetual state of lack and deprivation that the 'have-nots' experience. The poem 'Mobile Casket' attests further:

> Passing, they giggle at us in scornful silence…
>
> Brother,
> You bear not the scars of the sun's fury
> You know not the colours of hunger
> You know not the idiolect of joblessness… (*A Reign…* 30).

Being conscious of the anger that oozes out from such paradoxes and the perversity that reigns in his envisioned universe, the poet-persona reasons that for there to be a shift in such ungodly paradigm, something drastic and extraordinary would have to be done by the victims of the present hardship. Thus, the persona insinuates in the poem 'Toward Canaan…' that the huddle to cross is long but hope of realizing the dream is yet alive as the journey to that dream is progressing:

> Canaan,
> for how long
> will you remain
> a tantalizing mirage,
> a will-o-the wisp? (*A Reign…* 9).

The rendition in each of the anthologies in this analysis is activated and animated through the poet's copious deployment of symbolism such as 'eclipse', 'volcano', and particularly in the poem titled 'Shackles' in which the poet-persona, standing on an elevated podium of vision, as an organizer and being activism-persuaded, states his perception of the situation in the following extract:

> Yet if we but stir as one
> These chains our bleat will break (*A Reign…* 43).

This should be considered as the persona's necessary prescription of revolutionary option as solution to the endless despair of a people who look 'Towards Canaan'.

In *Yawns and Belches* again, being the latest of the poet's published anthology as at the time of writing this paper, Ushie adopts an eponymous motif in the words 'yawns' and 'belches'- that is, the use of one thing or name to transmit the interpretation of the meaning that the name or phenomenon symbolizes in real life situation, as literary device and as stylistic instrument for the versification of a world artificially and greedily fragmented and segregated in a way that sometimes baffles rational imagination. The 'yawns' or 'belches' are mutual opposites. Let it be taken for granted that 'yawns' represents the hungry, the famished or the deprived, whereas the 'belches' accord with the opposite experience- the overfed. In the first three lines in the title poem in *Yawn and Belches*, the poet foregrounds the defining thematic agenda of the collection as follows:

> Subjects of the furious tropical noon sun are we all,
> But the belching few in shelter of the iroko or silk tree
> Feel not the yawning's writhing in the open furnace of sun. (*Yawns…* 15).

This simply alludes to the reality of the prevalent wide gap of inequality in the universe of Ushie's poetry. Thus, while belches define the condition of the powerful and selfishly privileged, who are protected under the 'iroko' or 'silk tree', yawns characterize the condition of the famished and daily "writhing in the open furnace of sun" (*Yawns…* 16). This is further intensified in the poem 'One with the beast' (*Yawns*…20-21)in which the persona uses animal kingdom's 'Survival of the Fittest' to highlight the yawning gap between the powerful and the weak.

In 'Africa today' again, the persona takes the poetic drama of 'yawns' and 'belches' to the socio-historical cleavages of human experience and mulls a dialogue between Africa on the side of yawns and Sino-Euro-America on the oppositional side where belches reign. In the poem Africa sits there by the roadside "yawning all day yawning night" pauperized, while America, Asia, Australia, Europe and other powerful entities pass by; each of these powerful entities cleaving a chunk of the gold taken or stolen from the soil of the same beggarly Africa and drops a coin in exchange for it. Africa remains the 'blind bowel-bearing' beggar sitting on the broad path of penury, ignorant of the gold under her armpit, while others take as much as they can and in exchange drop a coin with deceptive smiles:

> She is the blind bowl-bearing beggar
> Sitting on a roadside mound of gold
> Yawning all day, yawning all night
> America arrives, cleaves a chunk of the gold, drops a coin
> and some affronts, and passes… (*Yawns* 25).

Coming to terms with this humiliating imagery, especially as the entire poem is read, it is noted that African states, even when found in the midst of resources that are everywhere, ironically sit wretched and beggarly, bowl in hand, yawning in hunger, begging for the very things that are more than enough before it, wallowing under the "white savior complex" which "continues to haunt the psyche of the postcolonial African leadership" as Udoinwang and Amonyeze(372) would put it. Ushie's lines seek a revolutionary redemption from this malady.

Conclusion

The contention of this work is that Joe Ushie's poetry, as particularly examined in the three of his collection of poems, namely *Eclipse in Rwanda*, *A Reign of Locusts* and *Yawns and Belches* bear a revolutionary voice. The study reveals the cultural, ideological and intellectual pull of Ushie's poetry in the firmament of African literary experience that are found to be significant and utilitarian to the idea and processes of human development. The analysis also establishes the fact that since the early stages of his artistic induction till the present endeavor, the commitment of his creativity has remained sustained, inspiring and remarkable worthy of reference. The enabling verve of his ideological persuasion, serves not only to inspire younger generation of visionary writers, but also to awaken humanity to the repercussions of misrule, injustice and oppression. The critical pursuit of the paper also revealed that Ushie's poetry is not only concerned with internal socio-political issues that bedevil his immediate society, but appropriates poetic license in defense of humanity, as well as give hope to the downtrodden everywhere in the world.

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