

**SOCIAL AWARENESS AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN JOE USHIE'S *HILLSONGS*  
AND *AREIGN OF LOCUST***

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the social awareness created by the poet personae in *Hill Songs* and *Reign of Locust*. The collections condemn the ills in society such as failure of leadership, bribery and corruption. Through the use of imagery and some satirical devices, the reader is reawakened into looking deeper at some of the negative issues taken for granted which hinder the progress of a given society. This study examines the influence of poetry in satirizing vices visible in societies using a sociological approach.

**Keywords:** Poetry, Social awareness, Corruption, Disillusionment, Sociological Approach

**Introduction**

In the poem "Pendulum", the poet looks at a democratic state without democrats whereby the electorates which was used by the image 'sheep' are courted by the leopard and the hyena, an imagery for the ruling class, makes frivolous promises that can never be fulfilled. This is what is obtainable in the society we find ourselves. During campaign, the ruling class makes promises, promising heaven on earth for the poor masses but when they ascend into power, they pushed down the ladder from which they have climbed to the top.

The next poem, "First October", is a significant date in the history of Nigeria getting their independence. This freedom is seen to be in the hands of the strong. However, before independence, Nigerians believed that they can rule themselves without any prejudice and anchor without knowing that the corruption they are fighting against is within the ruling class. They saw the colonial masters as the perpetrators of evil through indirect rule system, when they finally got their independence with the hope that their freedom is at hand, it was then done on them that "we are the killers of ourselves" which is what is happening in the post-colonial era of recess, tyranny, social disorder and disillusionment. The peasants work to bring up the country's glory with their blood and are paid back by death. They die only for the rich to ride in pleasant and flamboyant cars. The poor, lonely and lofty are sent to war while the rich travel and tour different continents of the world seeking where to dump whatever they have looted from the society in foreign banks. Moreover, with the look of things happening in the society, the poor masses are in search of food to live while the president, senators, governors and high placed individuals tour different countries with stolen money. According to the poet, it is their day of boom. While on the side of the poor masses, it is their day of doom, their day of birth (rejoicing) and the masses day of death (pain and anguish) respectively.

"The African Mosquito" by Joe Ushie is divided into eight stanzas that concern the Niger Delta area where the oil explorers drill oil from their land, leaving every night with wells of

their oil without minding the underdeveloped state of these areas, thus:

Every night you drill on my land  
You pike in my peasant's earth  
And you leave with wells of my peasants blood  
Indifferent to the wails and weals you plant

Every night you sound your horn  
In the hollow of my ear  
Demanding a graft  
Well or weary, pay I must (Ushie, 12)

The poet persona continues to lament on the way the oil explorers came at night disturbing the sleep of the citizens. Even at their expense, they must pay, the oil companies have to drill the oil with or without their consent but most times without their consent thereby showing the rate of dictatorship we have in our country. These oil companies came initially in a friendly and subtle manner but evil is locked in their minds. The poet calls them 'African Mosquito', 'African tyrant of the dark', though they oppress them now, there is that optimistic believe in the poet's faith that his sun will beam again.

In yet another poem, "The Lion" which is a poem of lamentation on the freedom of the masses, their green grass turn yellow due to lack of maintenance or the right nutrients. As the adage goes that where two elephants fight, the grasses suffer. The lion is an image representing the ruling class of the colonial masters that have trampled upon the innocent masses, making their lives miserable and sickly:

... Your eyeballs are glowing coal  
Staring at the green grass  
Yellowed by your imperial breath.  
Hunters-surrounded at dawn,  
Dusk meets you unsundering (Ushie, 17)

The poet analyses how a warrior's dread has been used for food in a coward's (cripple) pot thereby making mockery of the warrior. Those warriors that fought for the war are used to build the nation while those that have nothing about the war have taken the glory. In an optimistic mood, it is only time that will tell.

"Encounter" is concerned with law enforcement agencies in the society and how bribery and corruption have eaten up the society in which we live in:

In fright, I breathed deep  
Into my left pocket  
And then breathed out

And he left  
Taking the law from my hands  
Into his right pocket (Ushie, 19)

"The Spiv's Recipe" also deals on corruption. It looks at how to build up your status with the training into falsehood and theft in order to rule the people. If you are honest, you cannot be a politician because there are sweet coated words that you need to master before addressing the public for you to win. The poet writes thus:

Remove the still small voice  
Construct a scheme  
Drop in a flame a drop of thought

Add a measure of double – talk  
Blend with a dose of bravado  
Garnish with a radiant garment  
Spice it all with thieftaincy titles  
Season with Mercedes Benz

And you have arrived!  
Serve hot in public office  
Sound sweet to every ear  
Ah, we are ready for export! (Ushie, 20)

Moreover, in the poem “Hill Song”, Ushie uses the modal “must” four times. It recurs in the last four stanzas of the poem, one of such instances can be seen in:

If I must sing  
Let my song not be on  
Those gourmands whose  
Gourd has dried up  
The springs of my blood. (Ushie, 9)

For Ushie, poetry is a potent form of rebuke and purification. He therefore, draws a distinction between those who use poetry to support the excesses of government and those who use poetry to reflect and refract the ills in society. Unlike other poets, the poet rejects supporting visionless ruler, and he will not be blind to their excesses. The poet sees hope only when his fellow poets, whom he regards as embodying the conscience of the society squarely face their task of reprimanding bad governance in order to confront the screaming metaphor of pain experienced by Nigerians. The recurrence of “must” in the poem, supported by the “if” conditional adverbial clause brings to light the poet’s collectivist orientation. The strategic position given to the adverbial in the subjective shows the link between cause and effect: that the poet’s creation cannot be severed from the on-goings of his society. Invariably, the poet activates the deontic modal system and makes a clarion call (a duty, it expresses the poet’s attitude to the degree of obligation that he attaches to the performance of the required action) to Nigerians to rise to the occasion of rescuing the dying nation from corruption, sycophancy, hypocrisy and bad leadership. The call, which has an obligatory undertone, urges the masses to rise against the gourmands whose gourd/ has dried up/ the springs of my bloom.

In the poem “The hills will rise again”, “will” appears four times. As used here, will in the first instance can be equated with “must”. It carries the tone of certainty and surety as in:

The hills will rise again  
The hills will march again  
The hills will howl again (Ushie, 50)

Besides its assertive undertone, “will” reveals a humanist, who has a strong conviction as well as fate in mankind. This is also evident in Ogbonnaya’s ‘...and Pigs shall be House Cleaners’ where the modal of certainty and surety (will) occurs four times. Unlike Ushie, who deploys “will” to assure the masses of better days ahead, Ogbonnaya uses his to predict doom for Nigerians. Most probably, the poet is of the view that since the masses have failed to revolt against the morally decadent rulers, pigs, a metaphor that describes the filth of Nigeria politics will certainly hold sway. Ogbonnaya seems to believe that social change could come if the marginalized resists the domineering group. Moreover, Ushie’s use of “shall” in:

If I must sing today  
Let my song be on  
These hills of my birth  
These silent hills whose  
Sun shall rise again. (Ushie, 50)

performs similar pragmatic function with “will”. It carries the illocutionary force of assurance and possibility. The poet assures his people of good things to come. It appears the poet believes that in spite of the odds one encounters in one's daily endeavour, one can get better.

Shall your fall to the hunter's sling  
Shut the mouth of the forest forever?

But “shall” in the above lines works up a different meaning entirely of which Ushie invokes epistemically, as it depicts uncertainty, bewilderment and alienation. There is a general reluctance to interpret events and actions. This poem that captures the political tension that enveloped the Nigerian nation owing to the annulment of June 1993 presidential election, and the subsequent imprisonment of MKO Abiola and the assassination of his wife, Kudirat Abiola, seems too atrophied a situation for the poet to explicate. It explains a person lost in the socio-political quagmire of his country. It describes a citizen, who is unsure of what will happen next, owing to the political disturbance in his country. Moreover, the consistent repetition of “will” critically echoes the poet's consistent effort to make things better and also fulfils the pragmatic function of establishing an implicit comparison and builds a contrast between two apparently conflicting decisions. Furthermore, the use of “will” does not refer to a type of modal auxiliary verb; rather it refers to the “Will” of the people. The deontic modal employed here functions to reveal the people's desire to lead a meaningful life, just as the way other people do. Apparently, Ushie's *Hill Songs* is sandwiched between the eclipse of military rule and the emergence of democratic rule. This is seen in “Pendulum”:

Sandwiched between  
the blood -sucking boots  
and the sugar -tongued chameleons  
we know not where to go (Ushie, 14)

The blood-sucking boots metaphorically refers to the military and the Sugar-tongued chameleon a linguistic innovation with associative as well as evaluative connotations that describes the antics of the political class. He uses a narrative procedure that illustrates his humility, warmth and compassion for fellow Nigerians, to depict a period that uncalculated socio-political and socio-economic policies and programmes threatened the unity of the Nigerian nation.

The poet describes an era where “boots” (a metaphor for military tyranny) menacingly “crushed” Nigerians. In a similar way, (BeteBesong, 13) in Weka stresses:

The power of the writer is not always strong enough to change the political and social situation of his time but his art can become a fighting literature. He can write works that are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be. (13-18)

In Ushie's poem, he directs his contempt at the military forces, their collaborators and agents

of destruction. The poet does this by implying the agent less passive those gods. This has an impersonal and indefinite characteristic, as the poet does not specify who had threatened Nigerians to death (dust). The agent -the military forces is recoverable by exophoric reference from the historical context of military dictatorship in Nigeria, which lasted for over thirty years. So the poet hinges hope on the emerging democracy. Ironically, the politicians like their military counterpart are failing. The recurrent strategizing of “will” creates an argumentative texture, which is achieved by associative moves and the situation of the Nigerian people is reinforced by means of reflecting the struggle of the entire nation as can be seen in:

From north to south  
and east to west  
the hills will rise again  
each waving a tree as spear  
each hurling rocks like sling  
each tracing the streak of stench. (Ushie, 50)

The poet activates his ideological position by activating linguistic items such as the -ing verbs in waving, hurling and tracing, showing a society that is progressing from passivity to the tendentious questioning of the rulers' excesses. The poet's extensive and recurrent allusion to the metaphor of “hill” and intonation derived from the use of “will” succeeds in creating a discourse that is effusive and emotional.

*A Reign of Locusts* by Joe Ushie is divided into four uneven parts containing fifty-two poems as a whole. Unlike his previous books, which stridently make their name and boldly confirmed Ushie's growing reputation based on his eco poetry and nature-dominated concerns, the present collection seeks to explore and explain the recent happenings in Nigerian polity through ceaseless allusions and references to such happenings using the overriding metaphor of the locust. But this is not to suggest that the usual obsessive metaphor of a place of origin, of attachment to geography, of the symbolism of the earth, or of the imagery of the homeland is absent in *A Reign of Locusts*. Most of the time these metaphors and references to Nigerian political scene are powerfully substituted with that of vulture, hyena, hawk, tiger, lion, fox, or dragon in order to capture the precise, pervasive image (and indeed the reality) of injustice, extra judicial murder, corruption and all other vices associated with the long reign of military dictatorship in Nigeria, and to some extent with the present crop of “civilian dictators”. In the light of this, then, the first part of the collection, “Toward Canaan” is the most successful. And the first poem in that section, the political “beauty” titled “The African Bermuda” represents all these concerns in a miniature way. For it does seek to compare, even contrast, the real Bermuda Triangle with an imaginary, yet real Nigerian/African Bermuda. The similarity between the two Bermudas is that whatever crosses them banishes without a trace. Yet while the real Bermuda (in the Caribbean) is a geographic/natural phenomenon, that of Nigeria is man made because it came into existence through the evil conspiracies, (what Ushie calls “triangle”) of the soldier, the politician and the technocrat.

The next poem, “Night, still” uses the quasi-surreal imagery of night and time (with capital N) to sustain the exploration of Nigeria's recent political happenings. Here, the poet looks at the ruling class as Dogs, Crocodiles that feast on human (hewrnan), Ushie's fresh neologisms coining come through with such words as “Hewrnan” (human), he like Jonathan Swift's “Modest Proposal” call these ruling class the vultures feasting on their child's carrion, seeking “Softstitutes” (substitutes), which means the substitutes are weak in opinion

and decision making of their society. They must be subtle and humble to any call. The hyena, hawk, tiger, lion, fox and dragon are afraid of their prisoners' freedom which will amount to their emptiness of their praises. See also the term "Compatriots" (Compatriots), who are there to take from the masses rather than working for the nation. The nation does not care about the masses, though the masses complain bitterly with wounds on their body and pains in their heart. This is a nation where the blind leads the sighted and the bondsman celebrates his bond - age. The ruling class do not care about the decomposing streets meant for the low lives and poor masses while they (politicians and technocrats) ply the highways leaving the streets to decompose. Despite the gloom occasioned by the unnatural night of "eight-long tyrants", the poet sees hope only when his fellow poets, whom he regards as embodying the conscience of the society, squarely face their task of "growing a flower of phrases" with their "swords of words" in order to confront the screaming "metaphors of pain".

The next poem, the historical/allusive "Musa's Legacy" traces the root causes of the phenomenon of "African dictatorship" precisely in the supposedly dictatorial reign of Mansa Musa, the king of the former Empire of Mali (in the present Republic of Mali in West Africa). While the title poem's inclination is to foreground the plethora of troubles and turmoil, there is still no respite even when we turn to the proverbial prayer as the last resort, for, as the poet says:

Our spade filled with curses  
We laid to rest last dusk ...  
Darkens the infant rays  
Of our rising sun.

Now is a rain of locusts  
In a chewing race,  
An endless eclipse for the wingless  
Blister your knees  
At your Faith's prayer ground  
Or they munch down our fences  
These locusts. (Ushie, 13)

The poem "Ladder" portrays the stairs at which the ruling class used to climb. The masses are the ladder the ruling class use to climb on top but when they climb to the utmost top, they forgot the ladder that helped them to the top. They look down on these masses even when everything is going wrong, "erosion breaks away a universe of the toiling ants below" (human labourers):

You look down, oblivious as  
Into a previous incarnation,  
At the dis-laddered clamberers  
Whose bare backs of skeleton bore  
The ladder of your ascent

You leisure, still, even  
If the erosion breaks away  
A universe of the toiling ants below,  
If the floods steal away the earth.  
If the eskers raid off the clan,  
If epidemics swallow the homesteads,

If the blades of famine mince the race. (Ushie, 18)

That is not their business of the day but they should remember as the poet states that it is the same earth that harbours the rich and the poor man:

But the entrails of the earthworm  
Bear the dung-mix of tallest trees  
And shortest ones, says silent ant. (Ushie, 18)

“A Reign of Locust” typifies the devastating state of destruction of those that believe that they are meant to rule the society but they end up being “a rain of locust”: Now is a rain of locust/ In a chewing race/ An endless eclipse for the wingless.

The powerless masses are nothing in their hands destroying their houses and fences as what is happening in most states of the federation where houses are demolished in the bid of reconstructing roads. Though we need to sacrifice a little today to enjoy more tomorrow but not when jealousy and greed become the order of the day and overrides the government.

In another poem in this section titled “The termitarium” which talks about the workers that build empires, palace, shields the majesty but get nothing in return for their labour. Their tale (stories) stains the ears and their labourers song saddens the termites, hills, winds, seas and as much saddens itself. The poor citizens (labourers) labour for democracy which is supposed to be a government of the people, for the people and by the people but what did these democrats, politicians and technocrats do - Nothing, while the electorates (the labourers) fight for the good of the society, forming groups like ABN (Association for a Better Nigeria) to bring in “termitarium” (democracy) from the hands of the military regime, the bourgeoisies on the other hand, gain a lot from the military rule through the MAMSER (Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reconstruction) programme of General Ibrahim Babangida’s military regime. Notwithstanding that these labourers labour to build empires, sow seed, the military regime are the ones reaping the fruits. The labourers will hunt the game while the military government eats the meal. It is like “Monkey dey work, Baboo dey chop”.

Calling the politicians dragon by the poet is not a mistake as he had earlier on stated in his poem “Night Still”. “Homage to the Dragon” envisages the hurt and torture the poor masses passed through in the hands of their dictator:

Now that you feign for us  
A benign state of your boot prints  
Of your boots’ scars on our brows;  
Now that your bands grope again  
For the dagger of our yester- death;  
For the dagger of our second death;  
Now I must scream Spokesman for the wordless.(Ushie, 25)

The poet continues to lament on the torture and pain they were undergoing in the hands of the dictators’ reign with their rivers of blood in the school child’s every sleight of hand.

Moreover, their smiles are more deadly than the pandemic new death. “fixed like love at life’s keyhole” “And our pillory in every foreign land”. Meanwhile, Dele Giwa is linked to this dragon without the slightest idea nor thought that he will fall in their hands, bringing the battered soldiers, anguished civilians, famished farmers, starving traders, castrated

politicians and others of their kind into prison (ant's chambers). The poet's use of oxymoron depicts the frustration and depression that engulf the entire society. In this, the poet creates awareness to the society of what will befall them if they should continue to support the dictators. Though they pretend to be innocent of their crimes, their names will never be remembered for good.

And though you seek to rhyme  
Your steps with the lambs  
Your name will hang upside down  
On tongues of tomorrow. (Ushie, 23)

The poem "Homo Sappers" is haters of human beings, it is a society devoid of love where human hate fellow human instead of living in harmony with one another, and bestiality becomes the order of the day. The poet uses rhetorical questions in this poem to converge and drive home his meaning. He calls for Hewmanity (humanity) fending for the good of the society analyzing that bestiality is inhuman while unbestiality is human.

"The Exchange" bemoans the less privileged in the society, the pains they have to go through in their lives. The torture from the bonesmith's hands to mend the shattered leg bone, collapsed shoulder joint and twisted ankle rings a bell of pain in the mind of the wounded. The groaning and cries of the wounded are even heard and felt by nature itself. There is the old and young, fair and dark complexioned, tall and short, male and female waiting in line for mending hands of the bonesmith. While they await their turn, their purse get lean making the bonesmith's purse to fatten up, while the scrapyard doctor's purse swell in foreign land far away in Europe, the bone mechanic's patients swell, all these caused by one accident or the other.

The same tenor and terse words mark another of the short poems, which takes its title from a cannibal called Clifford Orji (who was arrested for cannibalism in Lagos in 1999). The poem is not a celebration of what Orji did or indeed of cannibalism. It is, rather, an indictment of all those who are at the forefront of condemning vices like that of Orji while being guilty of even more heinous crimes. Another poem in this section, which is similar in tone and style with the previous one, is the aptly titled "The Uniform". It captures the tragedy of Nigeria with brevity as it is with absolute certainty about who the real culprits are: they are the devils in whatever kind of uniform, whether bluish or darkish; and they seem to be united by one aim, despite the different colours of their uniform. For all have:

The cowed pregnant palms  
Delivering into wolfish trays  
Cobwebbing the land's path. (Ushie, 37)

The poems in Section Two, "Back to the Hill and Vales, are no more than transmutations - linguistic and lyrical adaptation/adoption -of popular songs by singers from the Obudu region of Cross River State, such as the late Umali Alikpong, (popularly known as Angbeb-ishang, of Bebuagbong, Obudu), AtsuAkpegah of Okambi, Obudu, and other poems (at least going by their titles) are derived from oral literature of the region. Section Three, "Voices and Moods of the Silent Wild and Other Deep Matters..." contain the inevitable rain song, "Rain Season", the nature-dominated "Particle" which highlights the human domestication of nature. There is also the semi-concrete/graphological poem, "Tongues", and the beautifully wrought "Sleep" which lyrically foregrounds not only the inevitability of sleep, but its varied, disparate manifestations in our lives; a superb, but brief treatise on the Congo music of the same name; and the romantic "Season of Flower". Section Three, "Returns"



contains mostly tributes poems.

In the end, *A Reign of Locusts* establishes further the place of Joe Ushie in the new Nigerian poetry. With varied voices and style the book shows that even when there is a central theme with which a poet like Ushie is usually identified, that theme could be realized without an explicit recourse to it. Like in his previous collections, Joe Ushie has demonstrated that a concern for the degradation of the environment is closely linked with the assumption that poets, like all other creative artists, are physically, culturally and metaphorically rooted in specific geographies, and that they strive towards the well-being of those physical and cultural geographies. In this remarkable collection, Ushie has shown that when it comes to what (Bodunde, 202) calls “the appropriation of the physical environment” -as both subject and object, Ushie is a master in portraying the decay in the people’s lives.

### Conclusion

The poet examined in this paper is unapologetic about his dealings with the political class and the situation of their society. Therefore, these situations and the political class need to be addressed with no measure of indirectness. These are easy poems to read, the poet presents historical facts about the eleven years of democracy in our country, which have been used by the political class to widen the gap between the ruled and the rulers and between the rich and the poor. Evidently, in terms of thematic exploration, there is no clear-cut dichotomy among the three generations of Nigerian poets, but with the new Nigerian poet, there is a crystal difference in stylistic rendition and an artistic presentation that resonates with the socio-political complications and difficult situations of their time. This paper stresses the need for more studies on the awareness that the poet tries to create as well as the dislocation and disillusionment faced by the ruled. This is achieved through the use of language and imagery used in Nigerian poetry given the fact that language remains an indispensable instrument which individuals depend upon for the expression of their thoughts. The fact is that every writer engages themselves in the act of furthering the cause of the society through their creative utilization of the resource of language. Ifejirika notes as Ezenwa - Ohaeto rightly declares that it is the duty of the poet to enlighten the society without fear or favour through their writings. Meanwhile, Okon states that Ushie in the same vogue motivates poets from all nations to rise and save the ruled and poor masses from the hands of their dictators.

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