

## **A Socio-Political Portrait Of Nigeria In Maria Ajima's The Thrill**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the representation of the society in Maria Ajima's The Thrill. It uncovers the socio-political image of Nigeria in the poetry collection using realism as the theoretical framework. The study reveals that issues of insecurity, bad governance, corruption, unemployment and other ills dominate and affect the psyches of the masses while the leadership class continues to live in affluence. The poet, frustrated by these ills and the lacklustre attitudes of the leaders to the plight of the masses, calls for a revolution, the study concludes that, to reclaim the country from the firm grip of corrupt and nonchalant leaders, there should be increased participation in politics by all and sundry.*

### **Introduction**

There are varying conceptions of the term literature, but in a specific sense literature refers to any imaginative and creative writing which reflects the human society. The reflection of society in literature affirms the mutual relationship between literature and society. Society is well represented in literature as it is the primary raw materials of literary creations. In most cases, literary texts either allegorically or symbolically attempt to portray the exact events in human society. This portrayal of society makes the idea of the representation of reality in literature paramount. Commenting on the notion of literary representation of reality, Georg Lukacs, submits that “literature might even distort reality in order to represent truth about society” (63). Lukacs' submission shows that literature may exaggerate at other levels because it is an imaginative work, but it chiefly reflects events inherent in the society. Consequently, every writer is a product of his or her socio-cultural and historical milieu because the representation of the society is the primary concern of literature. The relationship between literature and society can best be understood by this phrase by De Bonald that “literature is an expression of society” (23). Similarly, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren advocate a holistic representation of a given time in literature (76). It is based on this prevailing fact that this study analyses Maria Ajima's *The Thrill* to uncover the socio-political image of Nigeria depicted in the collection.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study has adopted realism as theoretical framework. This is because of the indisputable notion that literature originates from the society and, therefore, primarily depicts the events in the real world through characters created by the writer. Literature, it is believed, represents reality in words through literary creations conventionally referred to as characters. The researcher is convinced that Maria Ajima was motivated by real life events to write the poems; and the poetry collection centres on subjects that

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dominated the political, socio-cultural and religious milieu of the poet.

The primary aim of realism is to offer a truthful, accurate and objective representation of the real world, both the external world and the human self. To achieve this aim, realists resort to a number of strategies including: adherence to the requirements of probability; inclusion of characters and incidents from all social strata, dealing not merely with rulers and nobility; focusing on contemporary life rather than longing for some idealised past. Underlying all these is an emphasis on direct observation, factuality and experience. From its inception, realism was and is still considered as a broad reaction against the idealisation, historical retrospection, and imaginary worlds of romanticism.

As a literary theory, realism holds that the literary text is a representation of reality. This form of literature believes in fidelity to actuality in its representation. Realism is about recreating life in literature. That is, it is a replication of the true nature of reality. Realism arose as an opposing idea to Idealism and Romanticism. Realism focuses on the truthful treatment of the common, average, everyday life. It also focuses on the immediate, the here and now, the specific actions and their verifiable consequences (Dobie 358). Realism seeks a one-to-one relationship between representation and the subject. This form is also known as mimesis. Realists are concerned with the effect of the work on the reader and the reader's life, a pragmatic view. Pragmatism requires the reading of a work to have some verifiable outcome for the reader that will lead to a better life for the reader. This lends an ethical tendency to Realism while focusing on common actions and minor catastrophes of the society.

### **A Socio-Political Portrait of Nigeria in Maria Ajima's *The Thrill***

Maria Ajima's *The Thrill* is a collection of 198 poems focusing on different subjects such as bad governance, insecurity, the plight of women, Christianity and a general appreciation of nature. But more prominent are the poems portraying the socio-political challenges affecting the Nigerian society. For instance, the poems portray that Nigerians have experienced hardship due to the abysmal failure of successive governments at the state and national levels. This bad governance is seen in the insensitivity of the political class to the yearnings of the people who voted them into such offices and the total abandonment of the bogus promises made during electioneering campaigns.

In her collection *The Thrill*, Ajima explicitly captures these in “The Rocks of Aso” and “Jungle Manifestoes” (56 and 64). In the former poem, Ajima decries the absoluteness of the leaders' nonchalance to the cries of the masses, surmising that the seat of power, figuratively called the Rocks of Aso, might have been built with “granite” so impenetrable that the people's cries cannot be heard by the leaders. She puts it:

It seems,  
The Rocks of Aso,  
Are gilded with cold granite  
From public noises and all,  
Granite immunity  
From our pains and cries (lines 1-6).

It is a common reality within the Nigerian political space that most political leaders are betrayers of their own people, completely dissociating themselves from the power givers and their needs which the leaders hitherto promised to provide if given the mandate to rule. This shocking insensitivity of the political leaders in Nigeria propels the masses to rhetorically question the rationale behind it. Similarly, Ajima concludes that “There must be something, /In those seats, /That turn men crazy and deaf” towards the needs of the people who put them there (lines 8-9). This is because the logic of the Nigerian political leadership class has been that of self-service and personal goals (12).

Similarly, the poet, in “Jungle Manifestoes”, laments the state of corruption, poor infrastructure, environmental decay, unemployment, and other socio-political vices that have bedeviled the country and have perpetuated since independence in 1960. She dubs the suffering Nigerian masses “children of the jungle”; this jungle is a forsaken one that has been “recolonised” by indigenous colonisers whose maladministration has birthed numerous socio-economic and political challenges that have strangled the national objectives set by our industrious nationalists. Ajima decries that due to the erratic power supply occasioned by years of monumental

corruption in the oil and gas sector, “the generator merchants are back” just as water vendors are littering our compounds because the potable water promised by the government is unavailable (lines 4 & 5). Besides the bad governance by the indigenous leaders, the poet attributes the poor state of the country to the return of the erstwhile colonisers when she states that “the colonisers of the recolonisers are back” and “the vultures are back”, with the recolonizers being the indigenous political leaders who have held the country to ransom since independence (lines 8 & 25). The disguised return of the former colonisers is what is termed imperialism by political scientists. This is why the independence of African states has been described by Neil Lazarus as “flag independence” as the West continues to exert influence on and manipulate Africa till date. Imperialism has stripped Africa of its wealth.

Similarly, Ajima lampoons the past leaders for poor performance. This is captured thus:

What has been the score card  
Of the forefathers  
Who gobbled the infants' feeding  
Whole, with milk, bottle  
Growing white hair on the stage  
Refusing to get off (lines 13-18)

It is an incontestable fact that a greater percentage of Nigerian political leaders, especially those of the present political dispensation, have no tangible achievements despite the huge resources earmarked for such development purposes. It is disheartening that the few completed projects are usually substandard as huge percent of the funds is diverted to personal purses. This is why the poet puts it that: “contracts for roads / that develop potholes within twenty-four months” (lines 48 & 49). Ajima rhetorically asks “do roads stop being used after two years and so” (line 52). She questions the disappearance of the road commission which hitherto supervised road construction projects and ensured that only quality projects were executed. She, thus, calls on subsequent governments to sustain any exceptional policies of preceding governments since governance and nation building are a continuum.

Ajima concludes the poem “Jungle Manifestoes” with a call on the uniformed men (the armed forces) to seize power from civilians who are power drunk and insensitive to the glaring needs of the people. She says thus: “o commanders /do not be deaf to your people ... /you must lift a finger to help your children” (65). The poem is a true representation of bad governance that has predominated in Nigeria at the expense of the masses and for the benefit of the miniature percentage roaming the corridors of power.

Another ugly political phenomenon in Nigeria is perpetuity in power despite unpardonably poor performance. Ajima tears into African leaders over this negative trend in her poem “Chiefs of Africa (1).” Instead of brainstorming on the solutions towards the numerous daunting challenges affecting the economic, political and human growth of African states, African leaders, Ajima posits, celebrate one another for eternizing in power. Adding that:

Chiefs of Africa  
What do you say  
One to another  
When you gather like that  
Backslapping and wine tipping  
Congratulating one another  
For gumming to rulership seats (lines 1-7).

These meetings are usually in regular routine, and the leaders, in their lackluster attitudes to their nation building duties, obviously gloat at the masses as they celebrate amongst themselves for immortalizing in government. The poet criticizes the Nigerian political elite for holding the people to ransom but is consoled by the fact none of the dictators would end anywhere other than the deep pit into which both “... paupers and Princes /Are thrown” (lines 19 & 20). The importance of good governance to the development of a state can

never be stressed enough because governance is a sine-qua-none to nation building. This corroborates Chester A. Crocker's view when he argues that it is the quality and characteristics of governance that shape the level of peace and stability and the prospects for economic development. In fact there is no more critical variable than governance, for it is governance that determines whether there are durable links between the state and the society it purports to govern (1).

Bad governance has multifaceted consequences in Nigeria. In *The Thrill*, Ajima depicts how this political trend has caused different social challenges that have tremendously crippled development plans. Insecurity, Nigeria's ubiquitous and stubborn challenge which now roars in diverse forms, is a consequence of continual self-centered leadership. This is also Omede's John's view when he holds that, the reason why unrest, violence and other forms of social vices in which youth are the vanguard is as a result of bad governance, poverty and unemployment among the youth (314). In many other poems in the collection, Ajima depicts the appalling security image of Nigeria. For instance, in "Rains of blood," the poet vividly paints pictures of the brutality of terrorism in different parts of the country. When other nations are intensifying efforts for national development, some groups of people in Nigeria are "Swirling, swishing, swords / Bombs, one on one ... / All types of cultists and terrorists / Simmering, festering like scorpions" (lines 14-17). In recent years, Nigeria has become like a jungle where "Men hunt each other down / Like wild animals of the jungle / Slaughtering, killing" (lines 19-21).

Usually, security is regarded as the prime objective of all societies. It is also an integral component of good governance and sustainable development. But Nigeria has been experiencing decline in the security of lives and property over the years (Radda and Dumbulum 11). Two decades ago, Nigeria's military was seen as a force for stability across West Africa. Now it is struggling to restore security within its own borders because of the Islamist radical youth in the northeast kills thousands and changing the region into a terror zone. In November 2013, the Nigerian groups *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* were classified by the United States as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" and as "Specially Designated Global Terrorists" (20).

Besides the two, terrorists disguised as herdsmen have declared war on rural communities in many states of the federation. This informed Adonis A. Udele's view when he states that "a group of terrorists, mildly called herdsmen, daily bathes defenceless people with the blood of their relatives while maiming them preparatory for their murder. But the lords of the land exonerate them because in the jungle you can either kill or be killed" (208 quoted in ANA Review 2021). It is not hyperbolic that Ajima laments that "Our rivers and streams are filled with blood... / Blood of men like us" (our slain relatives) (lines 32-35 parenthesis mine). Kidnapping, banditry and killings of different degrees have sprung up in more than countable parts of the country due largely to the long unacceptable governance by the leadership class. This insecurity has prematurely orphaned many children why others' throats have been slit by the merciless bloodthirsty terrorists as portrayed in "Children crying, why?"

In "Children crying, why?" Ajima portrays terrifying images of defenceless children stranded in the battle field. Insecurity affects everyone and everything in the society, with children, women and the aged being the worst affected. In Ajima's poem, "defenceless children / Innocent children / (are) Running in fear ... / With nowhere to go" (lines 3-5 parenthesis mine). Boko Haram and the now rampaging killer herdsmen have turned some rural settlements to slaughter houses where innocent Nigerians are maimed, murdered and some conscripted into the terrorist groups to perpetrate all kinds of atrocities against humanity. This terrorism bequeaths tragedy to the lives of children as most are "Killed by war / Brutalized by war / dehumanized by war," with an end yet in sight (lines 15-17). The result of the unending insecurity in the country is that children are

Made to carry guns  
Made to kill children  
Children are mortared  
Children are bombed  
Children are maimed  
Children are raped (lines 31-37).

In a country where insecurity climaxes like this, development is shelved aside. Rural communities in states like Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, Yobe, Adamawa, Borno and others have experienced and are still facing this level of security challenge as demonstrated by Maria Ajima in the poem. This makes the poet a writer of her own time;

she represents, without distortion, exactly what is prevalent in her society. While the poet makes a clarion call on all Nigerians to “Turn on the taps ... / and let flow / The rains of peace,” the number of insurgent groups springing up makes this target highly improbable at least in the near future (lines 58-61 ellipsis mine).

It is also the brutality of the terrorists that the poet depicts in “The visioned sculpture.” Like the head bowed bleeding persona who can only weakly raise his left hand to ward “off the sharp cuts / Off the glittering sword / From the misty man,” Nigerians, due to the inexplicable level of insecurity, have been prematurely forced into the great beyond by men of the sword, men who feel the country is only theirs and they have the right to the occupation of every part which they desire anytime. This poem represents the herdsmen menace that has reigned for a few years shy of two decades, with farmers daily murdered and their crops harvested by cattle. Amidst this insecurity and other ugly situations that make up the socio-political image of Nigeria, Ajima, in “Insist”, charges Nigerians to press on the government to always do the right things. She advises the people to insist on their rights and compel the government “to safeguard / The collective interest” of the people and not the self-service and personal goals currently being pursued by the ruling class (lines 10 & 11).

Similarly, Ajima invokes revolutionary spirit in the people against the poor performing and negligent government. This is the crux of “Aluta! speak out.” In the first stanza of the revolutionary poem, the persona is applauding his fellow countrymen and women for being clearly outspoken against the injustices of the government and other ills prevalent in the country. The persona observes that being critical of the government has become the best and only option after years of being kicked “like asses” (line 8). It is the second stanza that is clearly inciting:

Very soon we'll put on  
Our berets, marching boots  
And raising our fists  
Crying out – Aluta! Aluta! Aluta!  
We'll march on all oppressors  
We'll chase them out of our midst (lines 10 -15).

This is undoubtedly a case of revolution (or rebellion) spelt out on paper. However, it is a topic for debate amongst political scientists if or not revolution is the only solution to our problems. While Ajima strongly maintains and believes that, with a revolution, “There shall be freedom / There shall be justice / There shall be progress”, a deeper understanding of the nature and outcomes of previous revolutions in other countries shows our heterogeneity is an insurmountable obstacle against any revolutionary attempt in the country (Ajima, lines 20-22). Responding to this, Debo Onifade, in an editorial in Vanguard Newspaper of May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, argues objectively that different religions and ethnic groups will be suspicious of one another in the planning process of a revolution and questions like “is this a north vs south revolution”, “is this a Christian vs Islam revolution”, and “who will become the leader if we succeed” will be asked. This means that the masses are only united in suffering the socio-political and economic consequences of bad governance; however, they have conflicting interests when it comes to power sharing. This scenario makes Ajima's call for a revolution counterproductive because the fire of the revolution will burn beyond the boundaries of the scope of the rebellion. However, when civil attempts cannot liberate the people from the chains of oppression and bad governance, a violent method becomes the preferable choice.

## Conclusion

The socio-political image of Nigeria, as depicted in Maria Ajima's *The Thrill*, is one characterized by high level of insecurity, unemployment, corruption and other which are directly or indirectly linked to bad governance. It is indeed true that, with the present ugly socio-political image of the country, the future of the country obviously looks bleak, but a revolution is not the effective option to take us out of this conundrum. Rather, there should be increased participation in politics by all and sundry, so that best leaders shall be elected into public offices for a swift rebirth of Nigeria. *The Thrill* is, therefore, a true representation of the socio-political atmosphere in the country.

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