

## **THE AESTHETICS OF SELF-EXPRESSION IN A.N AKWANYA'S *VISITANT ON TIPTOE AND OTHER POEMS***

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### **Abstract**

The ideological and aesthetic representation of varied experiences with a vague vision of haven is recorded in Akwanya's collection of poems, *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems*. The poems inherent in the poet's collection are wrapped with an undercurrent of dread resulting from harsh facts or irrational human actions that were looming. Akwanya's ideology as perceived in the poems creates an impression which smells of logical and philosophical pessimism—a feeling carved out of a sense of helplessness and sad exploitation. Though the subjects of the poems are carefully chosen to create satiric-comic effects, they in turn give a sustained attention to reflect on the ubiquitous wickedness in human actions and thoughts. This study postulates, that the title of the collection *Visitant on Tiptoe...* is captured as a metaphor of self-expression—that which projects a dreadful symbolic vibrating leitmotif in all the poems of the collection.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Self-expression, Leitmotif, Philosophical pessimism

### **Introduction**

No doubt, poetry is a vehicle for entertainment, education and correction. In fact, poetry “trains us in exercising our emotions in a wholesome manner, taking us through fear, ambition, tension, hatred, love, concern, regret, hope, laughter, or sympathy” (Okoh,8). In a deep search for sanity and self-actualization within retrogressive societal norms; the poet's words come into reality to unlock feelings carved out of emotional turbulence. These penned feelings stress the importance of imaginative works as vehicles of social-consciousness—a literary depiction geared towards social transformation. On a special note, the language of poetry cannot be meaningfully explored and understood outside the social context with phases of problems that beg for a determined solution. In fact, the pitied state of affairs mingled with issues in human actions, politics, economy, and certain anachronistic tendencies inherent in social behaviours have ushered in a new era of societal anarchy contending with self-regulation and self-determination in Nigeria cum Africa as a continent. Thus, the quest for self-awareness and liberation becomes the focal point carved out from the struggles of African indigenes to liberate themselves through real control of emotions and actions with strong creative initiatives within time and space.

A.N Akwanya's poems like other poems are assumed to be poems of literary meditation with the capacity to effect positive change within individuals, caution people with diverse negative tendencies and expose oppressors' inherent evil with metaphoric perceptions—an honest depiction with unifying force of change. This study basically explores unapologetic symbolic use of words to ridicule the dominance of human hostility and silence in the face of anomalies. The self-questioning pattern of expression exhibited in the individual poems smells of philosophical pessimism—the need for reflective and revolutionary break from social deviance. The study employs an interpretative viewpoint to reflect on the poet's standpoint. It is noteworthy that the distinction of this study is based on *Aestheticism*—“a phenomenon built on the view that a work of art is the supreme value among human products precisely because

it is self-sufficient....The end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perception; that is, to be beautiful and to be contemplated as an end in itself” (Abrams & Harpham, 4). Notably, “the German philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten in his Latin treatise entitled *Aesthetica* (1750), applied the term “aesthetica” to arts, of which the aesthetic end is the perfection of sensuous cognition, as such; this is beauty” (Ibid).

**Towards the Aesthetics of Self-Expression: The Poet in His Private Self in *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems***

The imagination is a slippery term, designating a power that penetrates the inner meaning of reality, but also a power that creates substitutes for reality. (Patricia Meyer Spacks, 1976: 6)

The inner cry of a poet truly relies on borrowed reality carved out of passionate imagination that yearns for perception. Whether viewed from his poetic aesthetics or the social-cultural issues inherent in his poems—one must find certain defining elements with distinguishing ingredients of poetic identity. Akwanya’s collection of poems, *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems* consists of a unique metaphoric aesthetics and approach in identifying negative elements in socio-cultural issues. The poems in the collection are replete with “dissatisfaction which often leads to disapproval or reproach” (Akporbaro, 100).

One might be inclined to adopt “Horace’s summary on *dulce et utile* which we can translate as entertainment and edification” in evaluating Akwanya’s poems (Wellek & Warren, 238). The poetry of Akwanya complements the works of other Nigerian poets in discussing the poetics of social transformation. The title of the collection *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems* emerges as a metaphoric subject—the main topic which centers on humans with destabilizing or unpredictable behaviour. The title aptly captures an effective employment of metaphor that invokes implicit meanings—first; all humans are guests or visitors threading cautiously on earth. The second meaning is on the inevitability of constant anxiety that has scraped the thoughts of citizens due to lack of humanity, injustice, poverty, war, greed, evil and exploitative tendencies in society. To actively engage his metaphoric voice, Akwanya patterned the collection of poems into seven parts: *Vision and Mission, The Difference, Seasonal, Passages, Enchanting Music, There Comes a Time* and *Visitant on Tiptoe*.

In *Part One* entitled “Vision and Mission”, the poet adopts a public voice with metaphoric undertone that questions lack of good vision—the one that leaves men without any integrity of human conscience or act of benevolence. The title of the first poem of the collection “Mother Teresa of Calcutta” is used to achieve a symbolic objective — to revere a personality whose soul wholeheartedly gave free service to the poorest of the earth. The poet has used the Nun’s personality to create a contrast between her and other citizens in the present age, who lack the sympathy and love that existed in her soul.

Was Mother Teresa created  
for a cause;  
for this cause given three or four times  
the normal size of soul,  
eyes that light up only for ragged slum-dwellers  
and the helpless sick  
and the will  
kept back  
so that in the face of the assignment  
no decision need be made  
no thought exercised? (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 10)

This concern by the poet addresses an internalized consciousness that radicalizes lack of pity for the underprivileged. Thus, the rhetorical question put across by the poet seeks a self

reflective thought that draws attention to the spirit of charitable kindness. The idea of addressing the audience makes the thematic focus of the poem very relevant. The poet intensifies his orality to satirize the intentions or motives of humanity. The wit inherent in the poet's question in the lines below depicts the poet's awareness of the rarity of such humane qualities among citizens. This no doubt emasculates the poet's feelings about hope for survival.

Was it a joy always  
to give  
or was there a cost to count  
and a pang to be mastered  
just to go on,  
were there fear's poison fangs  
guarding the doorway  
on evil days  
to be dared only with eyes tightly shut? (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 10)

The above poetic address reflects the poet's conscious voice which laments a provocative social reality. The poem provides good opportunity for the poet to ponder on the consequences of moral laxity—a display of decadent sensibility. Let me point out here, that the persona questions a moral wisdom only looked upon to enshrine the modes of interests—an objective mediatory view of life. Apparently, social conscience has become an unconscious act suppressed in wishes that distort the dream of humanity. This idea persistently occurs in human thought and suppressed with symbolic expression: “Could this flame have been passed her/along the way/like any of those ones/already celebrated/and in a sense deserving/the privilege of the Olympic torch?” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 10) Akwanya clearly interrogates the possibility that lends weight to Mother Teresa's civilized conduct. The serious tone of the poet has incorporated logic of admonition borne out of the tradition of strength derived from a journey in ancient time handed down to people with human feelings. Whatever one may think of the poet's private ponderings, there is no doubt of the sense of hopelessness that weighs the poet down. This he justifies in the lines: “And there are few of them/ very few/ who take a star's guidance/ beyond a pit in the path/ the unexpected river rapids;/ but to be tempered by its beam/ and so to shine for others-/ it's a Ghandi here,/ a Mandela there/ or else Aung San Suu Kyi/ and Lumumba of the holocaust/ for fair weather/ and free rein/ to Africa's military/ was taken for just such a flare;/ moreover/ since he didn't corrupt” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 11). The idealistic adoration of great personalities that championed civil rights movement to achieve freedom for their people tends to justify the poet's speculation. History has a list of all these noble human of different cultural background whose huge sacrifices have long-term effects—sacrifices borne out of great devotion. The issue bordering the poet in extremity is the emptiness—the vacuum that the likes of Mother Teresa have created:

But it is the another matter  
that it be granted a Mother Teresa  
on moving on  
to have impassioned another  
with a double share of that unmeasured soul-  
many lifetimes may have to be counted  
and deserts  
and seas crossed. (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 11)

Through a metaphoric conceit built on the image of Mother Teresa, the poet certainly agonizes no trace of souls for humanity. However, the poet is indicating ironically that there is the scarcity of people who are noble and selfless in serving.

Another poem in *Part One*, entitled “Footprints Indelible” presents a thematic perspective that touches on the aspect of environmental degradation and bad governance. The title paints a sordid picture of the unforgettable horrible and corrupt impression some Nigerian cum African leaders have made on the citizens’ mind thus, eliciting a sense of hopelessness. The contemporaneousness in Akwanya’s theme has both social and political relevance. The title of the poem “Footprints Indelible” is metaphoric in every sense of it. It is symbolic of leaders and politicians who exploit our natural resources without safeguarding the natural habitat from oil spillage and environmental pollution. This has thus become trend incapable of being annulled. The poet laments this degeneration in a wailing tone:

O oil-land, where no low  
ever succeeds your High  
pressure  
and your clamour nowadays go  
just like the tree falling silently  
in primeval forest: (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 16)

No doubt, the poet’s lamentation parallels that of the majority of citizens, who have lost their patriotic will because of environmental, leadership and economic problems that have adorned every corner of the country. The poet further elaborates upon the trivial condition of citizens with blunt truth: “though your prayers have been heard/ and ferocious winds unleashed to drive far/ and scatter/ the evil brooding over you/ they have levelled/ whole towns in faraway places/ so that you have watched/ dumbfounded,/ uncomprehending;/the Highs too have wandered/ all over the north/ spreading draught/ and chill/ and misery/and have given new traction to the Sahara’s/ southern surge” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 17). This confession by the poet smells of disillusionment—a sense of hopelessness devoid of human conscience and sympathy. The poet further admonishes that “the sun’s journey south/ so you must be patient,/endure another year/ the withering rains/till those killer winds/ have leave/ to do another try/and perhaps finally dislodge/ your blight” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 17). The poet’s perception of the citizen’s plight is wrapped in ridicule—one that is cyclic in nature; probably without foreseeable end. Apparently, the voiceless people are tongue-tied and incapable of removing the yoke of oppression that weighs them down. Hopelessness has thus become an Albatross hanging heavily on their bare necks. The humour in the poet’s tone lies in the politicization of impossible reality—one that would have ushered in a new dawn.

In Part Two of the collection entitled “The Differences”, the poem “Best Names” features how the poet shifted his focus to a less serious subject of discussion—name. The poet insinuates a new sensibility of expressiveness that borders on African mentality about ‘names’. To the poet, ‘names’ have implicit relevance: “the best names are religious/ distanced,/ neutral to African’s need/ to comment/ emotionally/ upon every birth/ and you can safely/ and noncommittally carry yours to old age/ and the grave (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 20). The reality that the poet tries to codify is that names consciously capture various levels of personality appreciation in stages of human life— from infant to old age. Thus, names become symbols of people’s images based on contemporary ideas. The poet is not surprised that: “your parents’ favourite / was for a delicate bundle/ which served for some months/ as the centre of their world/ a name hardly for growing up/ much less/ getting old in—”(*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 20). The consciousness in names represents various perspectives of human emotions and social

awareness signaling that the “good reason that young men/ and sometimes women/ unfailingly/ nominate themselves anew/once they finished being children/ and then again when they took a title/ and the infant is a doubtful memory: that’s the one to slap/ on either side/ revered forbears’ salutation/ ceremonial fans with” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 20). To most people, titles or names create original images of people within a social or cultural context with strong significance. This notion is amplified by communal conditions of values in most cultural milieu.

Akwanya’s force of sharp wit is dissipated in chattering thematic issues that cut deep into the society. In the poem “Losses Yet to Go”, he projects an appearance of reasoning with a rare satirical jab that smells more of indictment or pretensions. He studiously maintains:

Yes, God is constant;  
Let thankfulness be constant too  
And you may count your blessings  
One by one  
Unless you are young  
And have many losses yet to go  
To experience  
Where the difference is hard to tell: (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, p.21).

In the above lines, Akwanya’s ideology is full of metaphorical apprehensions that powerfully describe Nigerians’ religious fanaticism in the face of looming evil and disillusionment. The lines are created with a conscious attempt to expose daily acceptance of defeat in important aspects of life—to simply be grateful to the Creator for keeping you alive. This is a satire on the incorrect notion of life under wicked leadership. Akwanya’s verse slips so easily into the mind as a poetic logic of plausible nature. Obviously, the citizens are tired and have resigned to fate which only God has control over. Basically, these poems: *Home is a Feeling, Under Rule, The Human Spirit, Wrestler, Back on Track, This World was Made for Us, The Prolific Word and Gold Digging, National Cake, Right to Life, Best Things, I Know at Once, The Trail, Adult Troubles, Conversation with Myself, Sufficient for the Day, and Twenty-First Century Civilization* express areas of total uncertainty where chance and occasion leave the spirit in want and desperation. The poet finds a way of accommodating all his thoughts in other poems listed above in a verse of the poem “Sufficient for the Day”. In his meditation, he laments:

The evil we suffer are many  
and range from rain here  
drought there  
however they work it out  
to clean out next year’s food  
then there are men with a grievance  
who get under arms  
to revenge against those  
who have done them no hurt  
and the day is like a man  
so left-handed  
that the right  
orphaned  
feels like an attachment  
held to by pins and tags-(*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, p.37).

Human activities—rivalry, greed, war, hatred and nonchalant attitude are detrimental to human survival. Natural disaster, oppression and diseases are enough to humble men. In the poem “This World was Made for Us”, the poet’s creative instinct reinforces a much needed rethinking



on the futility of struggle and destruction of earth caused by men's quest for further civilization and scientific ideas. His insistence on the use of satirical tone helps in the interrogation of life:

Storms and earthquakes  
wild uncontrollable fires  
famines and desert creep  
new generation i-diseases  
like to tell us we are deluded miserably  
and in vain build civilizations. (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 27)

Akwanya's argument clearly presents a contemporary predicament that cautions men's involvement in tasks that endanger the existence of men and earth. Equally significant is Akwanya's use of rhetorical oral resources to question men's futile struggle in the midst of natural disaster: "...if they conspire/and wipe us out/who would they be proving their point to?" (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 27) The poet's sense of reasoning is geared towards reshaping the thoughts of men to know the reason for their existence and to appreciate the earth that had been made for them. The above conceived thoughts are clearly delineated in the lines below:

We believe  
God help us;  
believe it firmly  
this world was made for us-  
if you like,  
exists for us. (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 27)

The poet calls for the re-examination of human actions towards themselves; a kind of positive re-assessment with a desired determination to rely on God while living peacefully with one another. To the poet, being at peace with one another heals the earth; but warring ourselves causes more harm in different forms. This makes the earth revolt against us. The fact is that the earth needs us and we need the earth. As occupants of the earth, we need ourselves to be able to enjoy the company we give to each other. The rich should accommodate the poor; the leaders should rule the citizens in humility borne out of love and devoid of wickedness or deceit. For without the poor citizens, who would they rule? The arresting thoughts of the poet are found in the lines below:

Now compare to some of our people with means  
If gainsaid  
To reduce this whole planet to fireball  
And give account of everything  
In three days at most;  
They are surely the living proof! (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 27)

The artistic blend of social issues in the poems makes one to deeply ponder on the polemics of Akwanya's poetry. His thematic preoccupations are diverse but intrinsically unified. In the poem "The Differences", the poet compares the past with the present. The abnormalities of the new era have wider symbolic negative implications devoid of good moral ethics. According to the poet: "when I was young/mbaah still meant your pursuer/ had to withdraw/ even if a parent/ avenging household crime/ the adult whose fortuitous knees/ on your flight/ you clasped for refuge/ had bowed over you/ for the up-raised punishment" (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 45). The above lines are essentially moralistic. The conscious use of the rhetorical resources from the Igbo vocabulary simply denotes the poet's origin. He is of an Igbo extraction where the tradition of shunning evil act is valued. The Igbo word "Mbaah" denotes "No". In the context of the poem, the word stresses the need for people to restrain from actions that are negative and to refrain from condoning any evil mannerisms. In the use of the Igbo words "Mbaah", the poet tries to demonstrate how orality has succeeded in manipulating human actions and emotions in

the past to promote good behaviour. However, a contrast is drawn with the contemporary times where certain moral ethics no longer exist. The poet laments on the high level of human hypocrisy. According to him;

We conceded  
they could curry favour  
with one another  
a thing  
every new Pentecost worth its salt  
will not allow  
but that God corrects. (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 45)

Through the use of familiar Igbo word, the poet tries to satirize social issues that stress the need to uphold unjust actions and misplaced values in human affairs. The implication of the contemporary deviation stresses the fact that “God cannot do for men what men can do for themselves”. In essence, every bad behaviour should be subjected to correctional measures. The absence of correctional ethics endangers the society. In “Terror Anonymous”, Akwanya x-rays the frustration of people in Nigeria. The metaphoric perspective of the title has strong implication associated with a society that is subjected to bad leadership, socio-economic forces and historical violence. The poet’s opinion maintains that: “it’s a bad thing to feel unable/to abide the present/so imperfect/ so demanding of effort/ and struggle...” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 88). The terribleness of the quality of life in Nigeria has no values of tenderness. “It’s just like a collapsed economy to you/ and rage and tears and throwing of stones/ may divert you during some of your day’s heated hours/ from glacial fear/ eating/ and slowly grinding your soul to dust” (88-89). The views presented by the poet cannot be implied. He simply uses a poetic medium to comment on the destructive influences that blind people’s hope to survive. One thing is very clear—the inherent disillusionment that has engulfed the nation re-emerges from time to time due to various actions that cause unrest, hunger and loss.

Furthermore, in the poem “There Comes a Time” the poet explains that the brutality and consequences of social injustice in Nigeria have been generated in our processes of selecting leaders during election. According to him:

Outrage offers no explanation  
if a fraudulent poll turns up  
a winner unsighted at the campaigns  
for he didn’t need your votes; (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 94)

The above lines is a catalogue that displays irresponsible leadership laced with impunity—a leeway to keeping the citizens under oppression. No wonder, epidemic of terror, social injustice brutality and termination of life have become modes of social life in Nigeria. The painful fact is that: “...a church is burned / over the heads of hundreds/ with all doors and windows nailed in,/ a child snatched from a pair of hands/ in the act of hurling it to the hazard/ of a junk pile” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 93). No doubt, the poet’s further explorations of the realities of Nigeria smell of anger. The irritating and destabilizing situation caused by bad leadership is “dreaded more than death/ and Africans are more frank about this than most” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 92). Further interpretation is given in the poem “Amnesty”, where the poet depicts images of inappropriate impressions that convey the thematic issues of terrorism, violence and unnecessary death. With the collages of images, the poet warns that: “you wouldn’t know where to start/ when those who blew up themselves/ together with a random crowd/ or fully loaded passenger aircraft/ or lofty towers in the mid-air/ with the toll of a modest city’s population. Come up with a general amnesty bill/ for all murders done/ to appease you...” (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 98). An interesting dimension is the ample support of our leaders to grant

amnesty to those who eliminate people. These are deceitful actions that militate against human rights and safety. This reference to reputed tyranny in contemporary times has negative connotations sprayed with disillusionment that leaves the poet pondering endlessly in questions. He persistently asks:

An amnesty, should it be?

For Hilter?

For Pol Pot?

Augusto Pinochet?

Rwanda?

Bin Laden?

Nigeria's Boko Haram? (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 99)

In the last Part of the collection, *Visitant on Tiptoe*, the poem entitled "Lost" exposes the frustration, anxiety and lingering despair that materialize in the psyche of citizens. The persona laments: "I've gone back oftentimes/ on tiptoe/ not wanting to be observed/ by our chap there/ my object/ who never thought to prepare/ for such a visitant-/ he might now/ be self-conscious, you see? (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 106)" The Implication is that the permeated consciousness of fear has overwhelmed the citizens and this is detrimental to their survival. As confessed by the persona in the poem "Survival", the most symbolic is that: "the visitant returns on tiptoe-/ nothing of those days/must be shifted/ from under the dust/ settled over them/ to agitate a dear friend/ over the silent terror that there was something missed/ the thing for which he had survived" (*Visitant on Tiptoe...*, 118). The pessimistic tone of the poet arouses sympathy borne out of the realism of human predicament in Nigeria. The prevalent attitude of violence is detrimental to the safety of citizens and the development of Nigeria as a society. In addition, Akwanya's use of a metaphoric title "*Visitant on Tiptoe...*" synthesizes the thematic concepts of his poetry to generate a new vigour. The metaphoric transfer of ideas in the title has also helped to maintain a poetic experiment relevant for depicting the social realities of the poet's cultural milieu.

### **Conclusion**

A.N Akwanya's collection of poems no doubt, emerges from the prevalent tribulation and uninterrupted injustice that torment people in Nigeria. The tension in his tone arises from the exploited frustrating experiences that spurred jerky questions and pauses that run on poetic lines. Akwanya's aesthetics of self-expression consists of inexhaustibly linking his thematic factor on disillusionment from one poem to another poem. The perception of the poet's sensibility projects a radical view with good reasons. From the poet's pessimistic tone, we perceive the fallen nature of Nigeria leading to fearful struggle. Specifically, Akwanya's poems seem to grab the orality of persuasions in dealing with social controversies. His rhetorical inventions are remarkably not borrowed, but are subtly framed in monologue and meditations. Morally, the poem emphasizes the pressing importance to sanitize Nigeria and liberate the suffering citizens. Basically, the satirical undertone of the poems is seized upon by the poet as a wake-up call.



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