

J. M. ETIOWO

Ukam's *Little Cobra*

NIGERIAN WRITTEN poetry, from its inception about six decades ago, has engaged in one protest or the other. It protests against cultural imperialism, political, social, economic and, recently, environmental abuses. John Ukam's first shot at poetry has followed this tradition of interdiction. His collection of poems, *The Little Cobra*, serves as an illustration of the nature and forms of protest and the medium he employs to actualize it.

Nigerian literary history portrays a scenario of intense protest. For more than five decades of the existence of written literature in Nigeria, protest has been one of the dominant themes of her literary landscape. The early writing was a protest against colonial misrepresentation of Africa (Achebe *Morning Yet* 197). By mismanaging the opportunity of self-rule with the attendant consequences the literary background took the form of post-independent protest literature. There is always a tendency to associate the above assessment with only the prose genre; and this itself is a misrepresentation. Nigerian poetry has also followed the

protest footpath in its growth and development.

Early Nigerian poetry, like the novel, is a repudiation of colonial attempts at negating the African culture. And this is done through the exultation of African culture. Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark are examples here. Nigerian poetry of the last two decades has continued this tradition of protest. Chinweizu, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Ossie Enekwe, Nnimmo Bassey, Tony Marinho, Emmanuel Anametemfiok, Francis Archibong, among others, have protested in one way or the other against executive tyranny, official corruption, exploitation of human and natural resources for the benefit of a few, neo-colonialism, among others. John Ukam falls into the category of the poets described above. In his collection of poems, *The Little Cobra*, Ukam is in a fierce war against all agents of oppression, exploitation and neo-colonialism. His poems sing the songs of freedom, liberty from yokes of bondage and celebrates the victory of light over darkness. According to Ukam, poetry:

...is an attempt to charge revolutionaries and other progressive forces in our society to stand up against the agencies of death and imperialism, neo-colonialism and the scourge of backwardness in our society... to fight imperialism and its many surmountable daughters (*Cobra iv*).

The above statement, which may be rightly called his manifesto, demonstrates the guiding principle of Ukam's poetry. "The Razor" is cast in the manner of a moralist and social crusader:

Killers of our brotherhood
Looters of offices, rapists of our sisters

...who eat much more than
their very fair share of the general goods
...razing down morality
culture and decency
(13-14).

These lines, although highly prosaic, refer to those who exploit every aspect of the society for their own selfish interest. The razor (blade) is used for shaving off unwanted hair or removal of physical hurts. But it is also an instrument of pain, and it is in this latter sense that the poet uses it. In "Amandla", the battle cry, presented in lexical parallelism, harks—

Against the suppression and alienation of man
Against greed and misgovernance and pride
Against the humiliation of brothers by brother

In the second stanza of the poem the poet is also crying against those who trade in God's words represented by what he calls "the anti-people governance" that "snuff(s) humans instead of tobacco." And in the last stanza:

It is against the people who turn the might of the people
Against the people (55).

"The Might of the People" refers to their voting power, the right to elect people who will represent them in government. Rather than this process being fulfilled in its right way, it is negated and consequently the type of democratic governance it ushers in equally negates the principles and functions of true democracy. This is the focus of Ukam's "On Democracy". He decries the 'democratic'

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practice:

... that runs in the bush with electoral materials,
the one that does allow the winners to take cover
and to crawl for safety on their bellies
when the loser with Mobile Police escorts
trample with rifles with the
Owners of cars, money and names,
Our democracy which swears in
Illegalities with highly legalized phrases
(44)

As the poet grows more vociferous, so does his art suffer too as
the following lines show:

This is our democracy, full belly democracy.
It is democracy which destroys churches
And destroys mosques with mammon and
Other destructive gods of war.
The democracy that hums with comfort
And cheers at the violation of children's rights.
The rights of the minority and the workers
And others who pay their taxes;

...

The one that saves the destructive
That destroys the virtuous and the Christlike

...

That feeds the carrion birds,
But starves the starling indeed

The poet is visibly annoyed and derogatory terms such as
"Beelzebub," "mammon," "Balial," "carrion birds," "wicked,"

“demon”, “crazy,” “dictatorship,” etc are freely used for effect.

It follows, as the saying goes, that evil deeds will breed evil consequences. Therefore in “Songs of Sorrow”, Ukam paints a devastating picture of the kind of institutions, situation, natural phenomena, people, that flourish in such a debased society. Here, the whole nation, 'our home' as the poet calls her, is a 'citadel of misfits', where the innocent is “amputated for freedom sake”; where “our homestead dry/where the trees are withered”. The country has become “the home of the people/whose consciences are seared with ...seats of iron /... / where the people's will is tangled down” and “human ribs mirroring society”. Beyond the above the welcome from this kind of country is one that ushers you in “rusted technologies and culture/ to the famine of truth and love and joy”, to “the carrion birds with human features/scavenging every tie that binds our homestead” (53).

The diction and images employed in “Songs of Sorrow” are again symbolic. The withered trees symbolize death of life, just as “human ribs mirroring society” indicates the starvation and general suffering level of the people. Technology is meant for advancement, but ironically, according to the poet, ours is “rusted”. In other words our own technology does not serve its purpose, it is not functional. The “Carrion birds” are cannibalistic and they represent the exploitative and destructive tendencies of those in governance.

In “Don't Love Me”, the poet does not need the love of “vampires/that drain with relish her victim's strength”; but he desires the love of:

...the justice of the poor,
 To feed and dwell with those that lack
 To mourn with bereaved and the many oppressed
 (38)

In “Democracy” he is concerned about “the rights of workers and the minority”. The poet’s readiness to identify with only “the poor”, to “dwell with those that lack” and “the many oppressed” and to advocate “the rights... of the workers”, is derived from his Marxist inclination. Marxism itself is a philosophy against capitalism, against bourgeoisie control of the forces of production, against class distinction in the distribution and ownership of resources. It is not therefore surprising that Ukam’s poems take the form they do. As a Nigerian poet and critic notes, “Marxist writing seeks to portray the forces of class struggle at play in a given text, in order to awaken the proletariat’s consciousness in the progression towards the eventual overthrow of the bourgeoisie” (Ushie Voices 91). In his own preface to *The Little Cobra*, Ukam asserts that the collection is “meant to heal the oppressed people of earth...” (v).

In “phallic” and male-oriented literature (Ogunyemi “Women”), there is a tendency for the oppressed people in need of healing to include only males. Not so for Ukam. His protest is gender-unbiased. And that is why in “The Razor”, the poet raises his voice against “rapists of our sisters” and “violators of children’s rights” (“On Democracy”). The poem is both a celebration of the heroic deeds of a brave woman fighter and a condemnation of those violators of women rights.

A great number of poems in *The Little Cobra* are dedicated to people, and not just ordinary people but people who are dedicated to liberation struggle or the cause of freedom. These include such African heroes as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Steve Biko. Others from Nigeria are Ikechukwu Madunagu, Ingrid Essien-Obot, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi, Claude Ake, Eskor Toyo, among others. The poet celebrates their “long legend trek to faithful

freedom" (40) and to these people he echoes:

The brave and the heroic deeds you wrought;
How you defied the rain, thunder storms
And the tropical heat,
To chant the father's songs of freedom
(41)

Ukam's protest against injustice and exploitation is also reflected in the songs of victory and freedom in his poems. 'Freedom' 'victory' 'overcome' 'redemption' occur several times in the collection. This shows the poet's obsession with liberation struggles and achievements. A fitting illustration is the poem dedicated to Gani Fawehinmi, the radical Nigerian lawyer and social crusader: "Freedom March":

Gani or our gains
We shall march to redemption
And then the voice of Eskor Toyo
And that of Claude Ake shall
Be heard by the hard ears
Then we shall fly to freedom
Like the airs
And we shall also drive the
Wheels of freedom
Feel for freedom
Feed for freedom
And all shall Gani Fawehinmi
And like it is, we shall
Tramp to the Elysium
(62)

One of the functions of poetry is that it excites the imagination. In spite of its shortcomings, John Ukam's poetic imagination compels us to join him in the cry against all forms of social perversions and to demonstrate the need for total freedom from the shackles of imperialism and neo-imperialism. His poetry depicts "a voice of reason and conscience", which "remains passionately outspoken against hypocrisy and corruption" (Zell vix). And he resolves, like the radical Odia Ofeimun, "to activate in others this refusal to accept what deserves to be changed" (160).

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