

## Satirical Forms and Strategies in Joe Ushie's *Popular Stand* and Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror*

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### Abstract

The influence of socio-political and economic realities continues to flock the literary sphere of Nigerian literature. In the genre of poetry, a park of social and political realities have always been the burden of early poets like Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa Ohaeto, J.P Clark, Christopher Okigbo, among others, all in the attempt to portray the disillusioned status quo of the country as a result of bad governance. In a similar vein, contemporary poets like Musa Idris, Peter Onwundinjo, G'Ebinyo Ogbowei, Kalu Uka, Gbemisola Adeoti, Ogaga Ifowodo, among others, alongside the early poets still feature the stark and dark, diseased and ill circumstances that keep the minds of Nigerians disillusioned. However, this paper investigates the satirical strategies and forms (Horatian and Juvenalian) in Joe Ushie's *Popular Stand* and Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror*. Using New Historicism as a theoretical framework, the analysis attempts to show how the various types of satire and sub-satirical devices are used to question regurgitating socio-political adies in recent times. Furthermore, Ushie and Aboh are substantiated as satirists as their use of pun, ridicule, sarcasm, farce, innuendo, irony, travesty and other satirical tools help the quest for change amidst the prevailing upheavals hindering national growth and development in Nigeria.

*Keywords:* Satire, Joe Ushie, Rome Aboh, Nigerian Poetry

### Introduction

This paper attempts an examination of the satirical elements in the poetry of Joe Ushie and Rome Aboh. Some critics have maintained that Joe Ushie's poetry fall within the same tradition of other Niger-Delta poets in

presenting or capturing the pessimistic notion of the politics, economy and sociology of the South –South region of Nigeria. On the other hand, Rome Aboh's poetry is yet to receive salient scholarly attention. This study, thus, examines satirical themes and devices in Joe Ushie's *Popular Stand* and Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror*. It verifies the idea that Ushie and Aboh's poetry contain various satirical elements. Their recourse to various satirical forms questions the scatological status quo of contemporary Nigerian politics, economy, and sociology and this projects both poets as contemporary voices and counterparts in the quest to create awareness about certain ills and failings in Nigeria. Thus, the various satirical forms utilised are not out of place as this paper seeks to assert that the use of direct and indirect satirical forms give value to the poetry of Ushie and Aboh as the poems in *Popular Stand and Other Poems* and *A Torrent of Terror* respectively will be used to show. The paper also regards Ushie's and Aboh's poetic rendition as vital in assessing the contemporary Nigerian situation.

Born in Bendi, Cross River State, Nigeria; Joe Ushie is a poet whose poetry has been widely studied. He is known for his representation of socio-political, ecological, cultural and economic issues in his poetry. Amoah and Lillet (2007) reiterate the fact that Ushie's poetry is an obliterature that reacts to contemporary social, political, and personal experience (p.143). Thus, Ushie's poetry generally interrogates power and corruption in Africa. Ushie has written several poetry collections, including *Popular Stand and Other Poems* (1992), *Lamb at the Shrine* (1995), *A Reign of Locusts* (2007), *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), *Hill Songs* (2000) and *Yawns and Belches* (2018).

Rome Aboh hails from Obudu in Cross River State, Nigeria. He currently lectures at the University of Uyo. He holds an M.A and a Ph.D degree from the University of Ibadan (Hanson 6). Besides *A Torrent of Terror* (2014), he has also published a novel, *Above the Rubble* (2015), and several articles of his have appeared in reputable journals locally and internationally.

The poetry of Ushie and Aboh have received some scholarly attention. On the poetry of Joe Ushie, Adebisi (2015) identifies Joe Ushie as a contemporary voice in Nigerian poetry and further categorises him and other emerging poets like Remi Raji, Ogaga Ifowodo, and others as the third generation poets in the history of Nigerian poetry (p.27). He

says that Ushie, like other third generation poets, is socially committed and the language of his poetry dwells on the themes of political leadership, mis-governance and dictatorship (p.28). Adebisi also asserts that the technique of Ushie's poetry is highly allusive and smeared with symbols and images of rhetoric (p.30). He further submits that "For Ushie; animals become the metaphoric framework for exposing the exploitative and destructive proclivity of Nigerian leaders" (p.31).

On the same note, Kehinde (2008) claims that Ushie's poetry carries the philosophical outlook of the Marxist ideology especially from African historical, economic, and social perspectives (p.335). Kehinde continues by suggesting that Ushie's techniques are ironic, whimsical, and deporting by poking sophisticated turn (p.36). Thus, to Kehinde, Ushie's poetry employs copious diction used in referring to Nigeria in derogatory terms and as sub-standard. Kehinde engages one of Ushie's poem, "Rites of Passage", and to him, Ushie uses this poem to investigate the chaotic rites of passage in Nigeria (p.335). This is to say that Ushie's poetry examines the recurring and diseased stages of Nigerian politics, economy, and society at large.

Solanke (2013) also places Ushie among contemporary Nigerian poets like Femi Oyebode, Nnimmo Bassey, Uche Nduka, Usman Shehu and Ademola Dasyuva. He likens the themes and techniques of their poetry as part of the span of discourse that featured among preceding generations of Nigerian poets like J. P Clark, Wole Soyinka, Odia Ofeimun and Tanure Ojaide (p.2). Solanke submits that Ushie and his other contemporaries are part of the old war-horses (p.3). Etiowo notes that earliest and present poets in Nigeria including contemporaries like Ushie majorly waged the poetic war against political failure and betrayal in the country (2014, p.133); and concludes that the language used is aggressive and revolutionary (p.133).

Still on the style of Ushie's poetry, Ushie (2005) declares that Ushie's poetry is filled with metaphorical devices which the poet uses to present the "unfavourable, negative and destructive activities which poses threat to the environment" (p.1327). For Ushie (2005), Ushie is concerned about the ecological status of his land and this makes his work ecocritical.

Aboh's opinion on Ushie's poetry is hinged on the style of language, or "semantic map" (2009, p.6). In other words, the poet's word

metaphor depicts the idea of the socio-political attack inherent in the poetry of Ushie. Thus, according to Aboh, “carefully selected diction and other linguistic apparatus are central to exploring and relating meaning in the works of Ushie” (pp.6-7).

On the other hand, Aboh’s *A Torrent of Terror* has received little or no critical attention. Drawing from this, this study attempts to expand and contribute to scholarship on his work. In the meantime, Hanson’s impression is that Rome Aboh’s *A Torrent of Terror* makes ample use of linguistic devices with obvious lexical and semantic implications and that through the “various use of lexical orations and semantic vehicle, *A Torrent of Terror* communicates Nigeria’s socio-political and economic experience” (2015, p.14). Thus, to Hanson, the special/stylistic diction used in the poems is useful and central to the meaning of the poems and by extension relates to the themes discussed (p.15). On the relevance of the thematic preoccupation raised in the collection - *A Torrent of Terror*, Hanson submits thus: “Aboh’s lexical choice is informed by the socio-political situation in Nigeria and the raging trauma that is gradually encompassing the world as he depicts” (p.24).

It can be seen from the preceding that Ushie is a poet that has received a lot of critical attention while Aboh is also making his mark as a young poet in Nigeria. Ushie’s poetry has evolved over the years to cover a variety of themes and techniques. However, not much has been done about anchoring it on the subgenre of satire. This paper attempts to breach that gap in scholarship of these poets.

New Historicism is the critical approach adopted to unravel some of the themes and techniques projected through the use of satirical forms and expressions in Ushie’s and Aboh’s poetry collections. By extension, we will show the validity and appropriateness of the use of satirical devices to the discourse of the themes of socio-political and economic upheaval in modern Nigeria.

New Historicism originated in America and the term was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1882 (Kar, 1995, p.75). From the early 1980s, the theory has been further accepted as a mode of literary study as developed and influenced by other proponents like Clifford Geertz, Louis Montrose, Mikhail Bakhtin and Louis Althusser in the post-structural, dialogic, deconstructive and Marxist theory of criticism (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.219).

The main tenet of New Historicism is that a text attends primarily to the historical and cultural manifestations of its production, its meaning, its effect and of its later critical interpretations and evaluations (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.218). In applying New Historicism as a critical theory, the text; both in form and content, is conceived as a discourse or verbal formations and ideological products of historical conditions specific to an era. That is, what New Historicists refer to as representations (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.219). This is to say that the interpretation and understanding of a text is forged between the viewer (reader) and the object (literary work), between the past and the present, between the textuality and historicity within the tools of negotiation, exchange and circulation (Lai, 2006, p.13).

### **Satire as a Literary Device**

The word satire is gotten from the Latin word *satira*. It is used in diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward its attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.320). There are arguably two types or broad divisions of satire - formal satire or direct satire and indirect satire or informal satire.

Formal or direct satire addresses the reader of a work or a character within the work itself. Direct satire speaks in the first person pronoun "I" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p.320). Direct satire is of two major types: Horatian and Juvenalian satire. Horatian satire, named after the great Greek poet, Horace, deals with topical subject matters presented in a gentle, light-hearted and ironical manner, outlining a personae's folly and shortcomings. Horatian satire is very popular with the poetry genre. Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) is a typical example of Horatian satire.

Juvenalian satire on the other hand is a type of satire that is bitter, angry and attacks public subject matters (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p.321). This type of direct satire utilises a public style of utterance to evoke contempt, moral indignation, and aberration (Quintero, 2007, p.7). Popular Juvenalian satire includes Samuel Johnson's *London* (1738).

Indirect satire also known as Menippean or Varronian satire is a common feature in prose fiction genre. It is a type of satire that uses characters as the object of satire due to their characterization in a prose

work (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p.321). An example of popular indirect satirical work is John Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel".

### Satirical Elements in Joe Ushie's *Popular Stand*

Joe Ushie's *Popular Stand* (2005) makes copious use of diction that is highly satirical on the surface. The poem, "The One-man Show" is an example of the Juvenalian satire. From the title "The One-man show", the poet is disgusted at the ruling mechanism of the military whose dictatorial mode of leadership and system of governance is presented as rigid and inconsiderate. The poem opens thus:

The self-blindfolded  
 he sees no footprints as  
 he treads that ancient path  
 leading to that blind alley  
 that has mangled millions.  
 Daft

He sees no statistics of the  
 unhappy ghost of those ants  
 battered by his brutal boots  
 souls defiled by soles.

Daft –  
 He frolics with the tears  
 of both man and god  
 (p.19).

The lines above assess the modus operandi of the military personnel and their conducts. Thus, the main character in the poem is synonymous with the ruling culture and arsenals of military leaders like Babangida and Abacha in the early 1990s as they manhandled and forcefully subjected individuals who attempted to criticise them. The poet ascribes the "death", "torture", "tears", and "agony" of the Nigerian citizens to be as a result of the "brutal boots", "frolics" and "daft" nature of the military rule. To Ushie, the military and their mode of operation constitute the absurd and they are highly animalistic. The poem employs burlesque in the title "The one man show" as the military ruling system, which is a

one-man show, does not conform to the democratic structure of the country. Therefore, the military and their system of governance remain an eyesore, horror and mess to the growth and development of Nigerian politics.

Ushie lampoons and makes a caricature of the political institution, ruling and bourgeoisie class of the Nigerian society. The poem, which is very typical of the contents of Juvenalian satire, attacks the ills, upheavals and trajectory of ordeals meted on the citizens due to the clear disparity in social class and status. In “Our Hero”, Ushie, through farce, presents a persona that is an anti-hero of the people due to the selfishly accumulated material wealth and extravagant life. But he is sarcastically called and hailed as “Our Hero”. The poem portrays the hero thus:

Earth on earth he replies  
like a truant child  
Building skyscrapers on sand:  
Mansions, sand, mansion, sand [...]  
Those glistering unto - the wisps  
Those wonders of the age that buy glee  
To be “safely thus”, he prepares  
For standby an omnivorous concoction  
In comfort and death-proof security  
(p.20).

The above indicates an indignant undertone of satire through the exaggerated and extravagant description of the people’s hero. The poet scorns at the unequal attainment and possession of material wealth by the country’s oligarchs. To the poet, the country’s political lords who are also the bourgeoisie class have constituted and engineered poverty, abject doom, and offer frail hope to Nigerians. The hero’s acts are akin to the exploitative traits of the Babangida and Abacha regime known for capital loots used to “secure” “unarmed tomorrow”, “comfort”, and to guide against their “death”. Besides the political caricature made by the hero, the poet also mocks the unrealistic and intangible philosophy and policies of the military in his allusion to “Socrates”. Socrates taught in the Greek Polis about the philosophy of life and truth was able to educate the Polis

but the poem's "hero" is juxtaposed with Socrates because his political antics breed "wild yells" and "scars" of war. Thus, Ushie identifies the military regime as being responsible for the social and political culture of bad leadership in Nigeria.

Another poem, "Elephant", depicts the political institution of the country. It is first used to symbolise the juicy wealth of the nation and secondly, the spiffy looking and robust political class. The poem is built upon a series of paradox thus:

Eat  
 The tenuous Elephant  
 or  
 Your tenure expires  
 But, from somewhere  
 I can hear this faint warning echo:  
 Elephants feed also  
 (16).

Through the above, Ushie presents the nature of leadership using the image of the "tenuous elephant". Both the leaders and citizens are vulnerable and can be preyed upon. Thus, for Ushie, it is ridiculous that life in the country for the leaders and citizens is like a rat race; you eat or you are eaten.

In the poems "The Sot" and "Son of the Soil", Ushie creates a persona whose drunkenness and nativity are challenged by the nation's unequal distribution of wealth. The sot is a drunk and represents the helpless citizens' pessimism about the future of the nation he belongs. The poem describes "The Sot" and his Dutch courage:

Drink drenched like foam in water [...]  
 Swear to beat up all damned fools jeering  
 At him as if he were drunk [...]  
 Announces in contentment that  
 he has equalled Jesus  
 three falls and rises enroute to  
 calvary, Hallelujah  
 (p.17).



The above lines draw the reader's attention to the level of squalor and abashment of the drunk who seeks solace and "contentment" in his religious faith in Jesus and thus equates his "falling" and "rising" with the state of drunkenness. To the poet, the state of drunkenness is an example of various social habits and moral vices that the helpless citizens have settled for. "The Sot" justifies himself thus:

Let them build their skyscrapers  
 in Lagos, London or Lisbon  
 in Abuja, America or the Atlantic  
 I build mine here  
 in my holy tummy my temple, Hallelujah [...]  
 There is truth in the bottle  
 (p.18).

The above lines satirically lament the absurdity and ugliness of the drunk's social status that the poet uses to create awareness of his drunken state. For the poet, the uneven distribution of the national cake in a country like Nigeria has driven many into indulging in a variety of immoral acts and social vices just to satisfy themselves.

"By the year 2000" and "Popular Stand" stand out as Ushie's most captivating Juvenalian satires in the collection. This is because the poems reveal the verbal formations (diction) as obvious in the irony of the poems' titles and rhetorical strategies. The two poems bluntly condemn, ridicule and ignite contempt for the dishonest and destructive behaviours of political personnel. It also frowns at the unrealistic and insincere character of politicians and leaders. The poem "By the year 2000" sarcastically opens thus:

As these our democ-  
 racies running a relay race  
 with the gritty men in  
 rugged metallic uniforms  
 fails to denote our cries  
 We invest our hopes  
 in that miracle year -2000  
 (p.9)

From the above, the poet uses pun -“demo”-“cracies” to reveal his amusement at the expectations of the year 2000. The persona is hopeless due to the military regimes which are represented by “metallic uniforms”. “By the year 2000” continues on the note of parody and sarcasm:

Our mother is old [...]
 her self-deifying ants
 multiply yoked to
 collective hara kiri [...]
 as we wait the year –2000
 to be mothered or murder [...]
 By the year 2000
 We will feed the world [...]
 We will own the world [...]
 We will make snakes walk [...]
 We will feed
 We will climb
 We will own
 We will move
 (pp.9-10)

The above throws mockery at the uncertainties of dashed hopes of the country’s citizens of which the poet is one. To the poet, the low class populace continues to wallow in disillusion, sadness, and aberration. Thus, the poet remains pessimistic towards change because “snakes” are still crawling, “dogs” have no “horns” and so, hunger, starvation, increased violence and all kinds of vices persist. However, the country, due to corrupt and failed leadership, is prevented from “climbing the moon”. The poem submits the result of the “cataclysmic artifice” and “myopic forecasts” much anticipated by the year 2000 thus:

But,  
 from Christ to Nostradamus  
 from the nuclear factory to starring Africans  
 From disvirgined forests to Aids;  
 Some thin unfed voice,  
 hypermetropic, whispers.  
 “around that miraculous 2000

some miracle will erupt  
to ignite eternal bliss”  
(p.11).

The above ironically presents the aftermath of “forecast”, great expectation and foretells the year 2000. For Ushie, the possibility of political, social and economic change in a country like Nigeria remains unattainable and every Nigerian dream or aspiration is sure to attain menopause except a miracle salvages the situation.

While the poem “By the year 2000” draws attention to disloyal and unpatriotic leadership, the poem, “Popular stand”, draws attention to the diseased state of the politics, social life, and economic culture of Nigeria. To Ushie, there is a need for a change or total overhaul:

This suffocating popular stand  
Breeds oven-hot creeds:  
If we harness those faint voices into a shout  
If we join those faint fist into a punch  
If we collect these tear trickles into a pool  
(p.12).

The above shows the irony of intention from a people inhabiting the “Popular Stand” or a “popular region” or “popular nation” said to be the giant of Africa. For the poet, the “Popular Stand” breeds “oven-hot creeds” with beliefs, notions and idea of militancy, battle and even war against the inhibiting institutions of politicians on the corridors of power. To Ushie, the fate of the Nigerian people and nation can only be resolved through vengeance and violence. The “Popular Stand” concludes:

Our cry the gods will echo  
Our echoes will shake that hill  
Our might will crush that down  
Our bid will daze the leopard  
Our flood will cleanse the land  
Our fate lies here, in our faith  
Here at this oven-hot popular stand, not  
THERE  
(p.12)

This section has analysed selected poems from Ushie's *Popular Stand and Other Poems*. Poems like "When I Think", "Son of the Soil" and "The Sot" are copious examples of satires that attack social vices, immorality, and follies that characterise and reflect the germane problems of the Nigerian nation. While poems like "Our Hero", "The One Man Show", "By the year 2000", "Elephant" and "Popular Stand" all mock political leaders and the bourgeoisie class who engender disillusionment and inflict the less privilege in the country with pain, agony, and other sorts of socio-economic and political upheaval.

### **Satirical Aesthetics in Rome Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror***

Aboh's *A Torrent of Terror* (2014) is divided into three sections named "Reflections", "Patterns of Love", and "Patriotism". For the purpose of this paper, poems have been selected only from "Patriotism".

The first poem of the collection "Ibie" exposes the fear and mental trauma that engulfs the poet due to the ills and failures that characterise the nation. The poet depicts the ill activities of the political class who loot and cart away a bulk of the national wealth and then leave proletariats with little or nothing to survive on. The poet presents his trepidation thus:

Afternoon:  
 a giant African rat scurrying  
 For hiding:  
 a falling  
 banana trunk  
 Night:  
 Auguring booting owls,  
 grief-stricken mewing cats  
 brutal barking dogs,  
 Morning  
 another politrickster is born  
 (p.20).

The above represents the fact that the politicians and political activities are among the reasons why a country like Nigeria is termed a "Giant African Rat". It cannot measure with or be compared to other African

countries who have lesser or minimal natural resources to go round because of the massive corruption in the nation. Thus, for a daily routine of corrupt practices that occur at “noon”, “night” and “morning”, it is inevitable that “anger”, “grief” and rage burn in the head of many hopeful citizens like the poet.

“A Wondering Man” is a Horatian satire that appears to be mild on the surface but attacks the unrealistic and confused system of government in the country. The poet attests to the fact that federalism as a system of government has contributed to the elongating the unending tussle in the different regions of the country:

I wonder what you would do  
 If the plane you were to board  
 was to be flown  
 by an inexperienced federal character  
 (p.38)

The persona’s confession and surprise above is tied to his dissatisfaction with the federal system of government in Nigeria, which has been unable to neither satisfactorily distribute, manage nor equally distribute the national wealth. For the poet, situations like these plunge a country into so many upheavals, turmoil and terror just as reiterated in other poems like “Moment of Despair”, “Contraption” and “A Torrent of Terror”. Hanson (2015, p.24) observes on this note that the use of language is active and revolutionary, which corresponds with the active effort of conscious resistance and leached terrorism by the military and its collaborators demonstrated in their refusal to provide the basic needs of Nigeria. So, a poem like “Contraption” condemns the unproductive and unrewarding patriotism of a citizen towards his country due to unprofitable, ironical and unrealistic benefits. Instead of freedom, the unstable economy of the country results in “Contraption”. The poem contrasts thus:

We are caught here  
 In this land we love  
 with the whole of our hearts  
 between the ass-kicking militaria  
 and the web of honey-coated-tongue polithiefians

Going forward is as  
difficult as making a U-turn  
(p.35).

From the above, the poet ties the reasons behind the unrewarding patriotism to the highhanded “ass kicking” and deceptive “honey-coated tongue of polithiefians”. For the poet, the retrogressive antics of the political class have left citizens at “extreme deliriums” which corroborates with the love (patriotism) for such a country.

“Moment of Despair” draws on the irony of peace-making in the Bakassi peninsula under the President Obasanjo regime between the year 2005–2008, which today is rumoured to have been a politically arranged bargain among Nigerian political lords and Cameroon collaborators. The poem opens thus:

Their unbilical cords uprooted and  
dumped at the Hague,  
Now Bakassians go as would refugees [...]  
and their ghosts like Hamlet’s  
Wonders till on that peninsula  
(p.24).

Aboh in the poem ironically concludes thus:

O you peace-bring terrorist [...]  
Now we all can attest  
to the fullness  
of year emptiness,  
the magnitude of wickedness  
(p.24).

The above lines frown at the hope and aspirations of countrymen thrown into despair by political and economic opportunists whose bargain and quest for material wealth is done at the detriment of patriotic countrymen. Just like in the poem “A Letter to the MP”, citizens are left to inherit “Matchbox houses”, sleep on “bedbugs-infested mats”, parade “Eczema-coated skin”, and “Breed children with kwashiorkored bellies”,

“school in dilapidated classrooms” and only await “Balance of equation” before the judgment throne.

Aboh reveals the tumultuous failure of the country and his satirical poems warn against the obliteration inevitably in need of a miraculous change and reversal of things for the better. His poems also attempt to rewrite the status quo or image of Nigeria and even Africa at large.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed the satirical elements in the poetry of Ushie and Aboh with close reference to their respective poetry collections, *Popular Stand and Other Poems* and *A Torrent of Terror*. It has been shown that both Ushie’s and Aboh’s poetry are projected by copious satirical devices of which hyperbole, irony, innuendo, sarcasm, farce, travesty, lampoon, juxtaposition, burlesque, oxymoron, among others, are prominent. Also, Ushie’s *Popular Stand and Other Poems* appears to make use of the Horatian type of satire to discuss the serious socio-political menace in Nigeria during the military era of Sani Abacha and Ibrahim Babangida.

On the other hand, Aboh, in his collection, has been able to assess the political, economic, and socio-cultural status quo of the country by drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that Nigerian citizens are pessimistic due to the realities they are forced to contend with. So, his use of satire as analysed in his poems is more serious, harsh and biting.

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