



Exploring Thematic Discourse through Style Study in Select Poems of Joe Ushie: A Systemic Functional Approach

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Abstract

This study explores select poems from Joe Ushie's five collections of poems. These collections are: *Popular Stand and Other Poems* (1992), *Lambs At The Shrine* (1995), *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), *Hill Songs* (2000), and *A Reign of Locusts* (2004). From these collections, one poem each is selected and analysed in this study. The poems that are selected from these collections are poems with thematic discourses that border on Socio-political issues, events and experiences within the corpus of the Nigerian nation. The choice of poems with socio-political themes is predicated upon the fact that discourses on social and political issues have been and will always be topical within and outside the ambience of literary creativity. The study is anchored on the theoretical framework of the M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, though borrowing a lead from Ushie (2014)'s analytical perspective of selected third generation Nigerian poets. The study reveals that Ushie's poetry is rich, insightful and engaging in socio-political themes and discourses, wrapped with the clothing of stylo-styntactic strategies of transitivity, mood and residue, and the theme and rheme system. The study recommends further stylistic research into Ushie's poetry in areas such as phonology, lexical and morphology, lexico-semantics, graphology as well as textual devices, which are rich areas of stylistic investigation.

Key Words: Joe Ushie, systemic functional Grammar, socio-political and poetry.

Introduction

Joe Ushie is a contemporary Nigerian poet whose poetry has made him stand out on the ivory tower of poets of his generation. Ushie's

poetry is characterized by a pantheon and plethora of literary fecundity and he constantly dwells on socio-political issues, events and experiences. Ushie's poetry falls within the category of the third generation Nigerian poetry (Inyabri, 2006). The thematic preoccupation of the third generation Nigerian poetry, in the view of Inyabri (2012), is the exploration and criticism against societal ethos and ills that have calibrated and orchestrated socio-political and economic gory within the "polity" of the Nigerian nation. Ushie sees poetry as an outlet to expresses socio-political consciousness as a "social advocacy" strategy. In his view of the contribution and burden of "contemporary Nigerian poets" to the nation's advancement, Jenkwe (2007) states "... that contemporary Nigerian poets have successfully played the role of participating actively in offering solutions to the socio-political and moral problems of the nation through their advocacy" (p. 165). For Ushie, pointing out the socio-political ills and misdeeds is the hallmark of any country's growth, development and advancement, as no nation can succeed in the face of corruption, terrorism, tyranny and social maladies. Exploring topical issues in the society as always been the major thrust of literature and creative writers in whatever genre of literature that is available for such a writer to explore (Ekpe, 2015, 2016, and 2019).

Ushie's poetry is quite insightful, engaging and advocative in nature. It explores thematic discourses that are topical and appealing both within the ambience and corpus of the nation's national issues, events and experiences, and beyond. Testifying to this position, Essien-Eyo (2012) avers: "a budding Nigerian poet, Ushie is one of those writers who, like many other African writers, could be described as committed to representing in his writing the realities in his nation and continent as he sees them" (pp. 242-243). Corroborating Essien-Eyo's view on Ushie's poetry, Aboh (2013) adds that "reading Ushie's poetry, one finds evidence that it is inspired by social realities of his immediate Nigerian society, as well as the African continent" (p. 181). The social decadence and political turbulence that characterise most African nations, and Nigeria as a point of emphasis, cannot be left unnoticed by Ushie. This is the rallying point of his poetry. In his description of Ushie, Aboh (2014), describes Ushie as "... an erudite,

prolific, yet polemical poet. His writings, adequately mirror his unshakable determination to liberate his people from plundering socio-political arrangements in his country and in Africa as a whole” (p. 542).

Socio-political themes, for a period of time now have been topical themes in the poetry of most modern day Nigerian poets. According to Onwudinjo (2005):

...themes of political consciousness are the most dominant and recurrent in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Such themes aimed at arousing the consciousness of the Nigerian masses to the political condition of the Nigerian nation have continued to engage the attention of many contemporary Nigerian poets (p. 62).

Ushie’s poetry explores the abysmally deplorable state of governance both during the military and civil rule in Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2016). The state of the nation has become topical and thematic for about three decades now, and has become a source of concern to the creative writer, whom the society has come to recognize as the conscience and voice of the masses. In the words of Aboh (2013) “just as do many Nigerian poets, Ushie, in his writings shows a comradeship with ordinary Nigerians” (p. 170). Ushie shares in the appalling, affright and terrifying condition of the masses. His poetry evokes the malignant and cancerous state of things as it affects the down-trodden in modern day Nigeria (Bassey, 2008).

Not only does Ushie’s poetry border on socio-political matters, it also spans to the theme of issues related to the environment of the poet. Revealing this, Aboh (2014) states that “the bulk of the discussion on Ushie’s poetry has concentrated on how he captures the depleting ecosystem” (p. 541). The poet demonstrates his undying concern about the state of our environment. The poet acknowledges his awareness of the exploitation of nature’s endowment by man, without any attempt to replenish the ecosystem. This is why Inyabri (2015)

describes Ushie's poetry as "pastoral" poetry, where the poet explores the flora and fauna of his immediate environment. The poet exploits this avenue to explore on themes that not only border on the exploitation of his environment, but also the politics, intrigue and stratagem arising there of. Expressing this position, Inyabri (2015) states: "... Ushie's pastoral poetics articulates a post colonial ecocritical sensibility which emphasizes resistance to hegemonic structures in post-independent Nigeria, and how its expression of subjectivity and dwelling, its deep sense of rootedness, can be understood ..." (p. 174).

Such discourses on issues of environmental degradation and exploitation have generated a great deal of tension and strain in the country, particularly within the Niger Delta region. According to Ushie (2011), the socio-political quagmire, tangle and bog, arising from the marginalization of the people and exploitation of their natural endowment and resources have given rise to poetic works that have become speaking voices on the plight of the people of that region. Literary creativity becomes an outlet for the people of this geographical area to address critical and topical issues that have generated burning discourses in the nation's polity. In his critical perspective on the deplorable situation in that region, Ushie (2011) explains: "Meanwhile, gas flaring, acid rain, decay of infrastructure including schools, roads, health and communication facilities in the area stared the people in the face" (p. 531). Owing to the thunderous nature of the issues around the Niger Delta and its environment, Darah (2011) and Bassey (2011), describe the literature that sprung from that region as literature that spur and inspire revolution and change. Some of these issues and many more have formed the raw material upon which Ushie's poetry has emanated.

This study therefore, explores socio-political and environmental related themes and discourses in Ushie's five collections of poems. From each of the collection, one poem related to socio-political and environmental issues is selected, analysed and discussed. The poems are "By the year 2000" from *Popular Stand and Other Poems (1992)* "Song of the Season" from *Lambs at the Shrine (1995)*, "To the

teacher” from *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998), “The gun” from *Hill Songs* (2000) and “Song of the thief” from *A Reign of Locusts* (2004). The study is rooted in the M.A.K. Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar.

Theoretical Considerations

The systemic functional Grammar was propounded by M. A. K. Halliday. It came after the scale and category grammar, with its focus on meaning. This theory explores language from the angle of the meaning the functions of language achieve in a communicative discourse. Meaning is quite essential in stylistic study as the main aim of interpreting a work of arts is to decode the meaning there in (Ekpe, 2013, 2014 and 2018). “For Halliday” in the view of Bloor and Bloor (1995), “language is a ‘system of meaning’. This is to say that when people use language, their language acts are the expression of meaning (p. 1). Explaining further, Bloor and Bloor maintain that language is a ‘text’ within the context of the functional grammar. A text could either be spoken or written language as confirmed in the words of Bloor and Bloor (1995): “A text in Halliday’s terminology is a chunk of language that is actually spoken or written for the purpose of communication by real people in actual circumstances. Both spoken and written texts are equally valid as objects for analysis (p. 4). Therefore, in exploring the functions of language, using the systemic functional component of Hallidayan Linguistics, Bloor and Bloor (1995), Eggins (1996), Emezue (2012), Alabi (2013) and Oben and Ekpe (2018) state that language performs three “metafunctions”. These are: the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of language. These metafunctions of language are most effective when explored within a particular context of use. It is also worthy to explain at this point that these three metafunctions of language as far as the functional grammar is concerned, are designed to suit the analysis of the clause (Bloor and Bloor, 1995, p. 30). We proceed to explain the thrust of each of the components of the functional grammar.

The interpersonal metafunction of language explores language as a tool for interaction, be it at the spoken or written level. With this metafunction of language, the clause is viewed as an instrument to exchange information or message (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014,

Olateju, Oyebode and Ademilokun, 2014 and Aboh and Uduk, 2017). In analyzing language using the interpersonal metafunction, Eggins (1996) state that attention is on the “mood system”. The clause is analysed based on the mood structure, which is the mood and the ‘residue’. The mood has the “subject and finite” (Eggins, 1996, p. 156). Every other grammatical elements after the finite falls under the residue. The grammatical elements of the residue are the ‘predicators’, ‘complement’ and ‘adjunct’ (Eggins, 1996).

The ideational metafunction of language explores the clause as a representation of real life experiences (Ufot and Thomas, 2016 and Aboh and Uduk, 2017). This borders on the transitivity system, where the function of the various elements of the clause operates. The focus of the ideational metafunction of language is “the system of transitivity”, involving the “process type” (Eggins, 1996, p. 228). The process types could be ‘material’, ‘mental’, ‘verbal’, ‘behavioural’, ‘existential’, ‘relational’ and ‘circumstantial’. We can explore or analyze the clause using any of these process types or a combination of a number of them.

The textual metafunction of language explores the clause as message (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014 and Aboh and Uduk, 2017). The focus here is on the Theme system. The textual metafunction of language explores language has a tool for the creation of a text (Olateju and Oyebode, 2014). The Theme system in the view of Eggins (1996) has two components, which are the ‘Theme’ and the ‘Rheme’. The Theme in the words of Halliday (1985a:39) cited by Eggins (1996, p. 275); “is the element which serves as “the starting point for the message: It is what the clause is going to be about”. The Rheme in the definition of Eggins (1996) “... is the part of the clause in which the Theme is developed” (p. 275). The clause starts with the Theme, which is the known information, built up and ends with the Rheme, which is the new or supplied information. In exploring the clause using the Theme Rheme system, the focus is on the Rheme, because therein lies the message of the clause.

Textual Analysis of the Poems

The Theme Rheme is applied in the analysis of “By the year 2000” in *Popular Stand and Other Poems* and “The gun” in *Hill Songs*. The poem “To the teacher” in *Eclipse in Rwanda* is interrogated using the Mood Residue, while the Transitivity system is applied in the analysis “Song of the Season” in *Lambs at the Shrine* and “Song of the thief” in *A Reign of Locusts*.

Textual Metafunction in “By the year 2000” from *Popular Stand and Other Poems*

The poem “By the year 2000” in *Popular Stand and Other Poems* focuses on the poet’s hope in democracy in Nigeria, as the past military governments/ regimes had failed to meet the expectations of Nigerians. This poem is analysed using the Hallidayan Theme Rheme system. The poem is a very long one with sixty-eight lines, so we cite only twenty-nine lines in order to save space.

“By the Year 2000”

1. We will feed
 Theme Rheme
2. By the year 2000
 Rheme
3. We will feed the world
 Theme Rheme
4. We will climb
 Theme Rheme
5. By the year 2000
 Reheme
6. We will climb the moon
 Theme Rheme
7. We will own
 Theme Rheme
8. By the year 2000
 Rheme
9. We will own the world
 Theme Rheme

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10. We will move
Theme Rheme
11. By the year 2000
 Rheme
12. We will move the Sahara
Theme Rheme
13. We will make
Theme Rheme
14. By the year 2000
 Rheme
15. We will make snakes walk
Theme Rheme
16. We will drain
Theme Rheme
17. By the year 2000
 Rheme
18. We will drain the Atlantic
Theme Rheme
19. We will give
Theme Rheme
20. By the year 2000
 Rheme
21. We will give dogs horns
Theme Rheme
22. We will feed
Theme Rheme
23. We will climb
Theme Rheme
24. We will own
Theme Rheme
25. We will move
Theme Rheme
26. We will make
Theme Rheme
27. We will drain
Theme Rheme

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28. We will give –
 Theme Rheme

29. By the year 2000
 Rheme

(Popular Stand and Other Poems, pp. 8-9)

“By the year 2000” As Message

Theme Rheme

The Theme Rheme elements in this poem are presented as parallel structures to evoke the optimism the poet had for Nigeria’s democracy to mature and stabilize by the year 2000. For example,

We will feed (line 22)
We will climb (line 23)
We will own (line 24)
We will move (line 25)
We will make (line 26)

The Theme in this poem is the unmarked theme expressed through the pronoun “We” occurring twenty-one times (lines 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28). The Theme “We” represents the Nigerian people of all works of life, whom the poet believed will come together to advance the nation’s democracy. The message of a clause lies in the combination of the Theme and Rheme, which according to Halliday cited by Ushie (2014), the Rheme develops the Theme. The Rheme of this poem is the heart of the message of the poem. The Rheme, “will feed” (line 1), “will feed the world” (line 3), “will climb” (line 4), “will climb the moon” (line 6), “will own” (line 7), “will own the world” (line 9), “will move” (line 10), “will move the Sahara” (line 12), “will make” (line 13), “will make snakes walk” (line 15), “will drain” (line 16) “will drain the Atlantic” (line 18), “will give” (line 19) and “will give dogs horns” (line 21), all foreground the desire, zeal and effort that will be made to advance the country by the year 2000. The Rheme “By the year 2000” (lines 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, and 29), occurring eight times, points towards the time that the poet expected our democracy to be stable.

The verbal groups “will feed” (line 22), “will climb” (line 23), “will own” (line 24), “will move” (line 25), “will make” (line 26), “will drain” (line 27), and “will give” (line 28), are all Rhemes expressing the actions and efforts of Nigerians to have a better democracy. According to the poem, Nigerians are willing to do even the impossible to make democracy work. This is the cradle of the message expressed in this poem. The Rheme “will feed the world” (line 3), expresses the poet’s optimism that by the year 2000, hunger will be a thing of the past. “Will climb the moon” (line 6) portends that by the year 2000, there will be no darkness, caused by power failure in the country. “Moon in this context symbolizes light and constant power supply. The Rheme “will own the world” (line 9), foregrounds possession of wealth. The poet foresaw wealth and abundance in the country by the year 2000. “Will move the Sahara” (line 12), expresses the fact that all forms of dryness and hardship will cease by the year 2000. “Sahara” is a symbol of hardship and aridity. The Rhemes “will make the snakes walk” (lines 15), “will drain the Atlantic” (line 18) and “will give dogs horns” (line 21), all express the message of doing the impossible to make democracy work in Nigeria. Ushie, in this poem express high optimism for democracy in Nigeria. For the poet, building a sustainable democracy, should be the goal and focus of all Nigerian.

Ideational Metafunction in “Song of the Season”

From *Lambs at the Shine*

The poem “Song of the season” in *Lambs at the Shrine* is subjected to analysis using the transitivity system to discuss the poem as a Representation of the maligning of the Ogoni people. The poem has sixty-three lines, but we cite only twenty lines because of space.

“Song of the season”

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. | <u>We</u> | <u>begin here another stanza</u> |
| | Actor | Process: Material Range |
| 2. | <u>of this song of the season,</u> | <u>attired</u> |
| | Range | Range |
| 3. | <u>in stable uniform,</u> | <u>mourning another</u> |
| | Range | Process: Material Goal |

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4. Prometheus, Kenule Saro-Wiwa
Goal
5. The roasting streams mourn you
Phenomenon Process: Material
Senser
6. The poisoned rivers mourn
Phenomenon Process: Material
7. The famine-choked Ogonis mourn you
Phenomenon Process: Material
Senser
8. In the leopard's clenched teeth
Actor
9. is the prime lamb of our yard,
Process: material client
10. but near the leopard's head is
Range
process: material
11. the hunter's aim.
Goal
12. In life, you stirred Ogoni
Range Actor Process: material Client
13. In death, you stirred the world
Range Actor Process: material Client
14. You will not die
Actor Process: material
15. Unless death is dead
Actor Process: material
16. You will sing
Actor Process: material
17. the requiem for the leopard
Goal
18. Listen to our song, O gods
Process: material Actor
Range Goal
19. and echo in your whistles
Process: material Range

20. this cry of the living
Goal
(*Lambs at the Shrine*, pp. 57-58).

“Song of the Season” As Representation

Transitivity / Process Types

This poem is a representation of the marginalization of the Ogoni people, who agitated for their denied rights. The Ogoni land produces crude oil, a natural resource that enriches the nation. Yet, this community is bedeviled by poverty, lack of infrastructural facilities, unemployment for her youths, and many more undersirable conditions. The outcry of the people of the land, advocated by their spokesman, Kenule Saro-Wiwa, led to his death in November, 1995, by the then General Sani Abachi’s led regime. The transitivity / process type of the Hallidayan functional grammar captures this theme, as a stylistic perspective in the interrogation of this poem.

The poem has eight occurrences of the actor. The actor “We” (line 1) and “Our” (line 18), refer to the masses, who have risen in protest against the unjust killing of their leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa. In lines 8 and 15, the actors “In the leopard’s clenched teeth” and “death”, respectively refer to the military tyrants who metted out injustice on the people of the land. The actor in lines 12, 13, 14 and 16, in the pronoun “you”, refers to Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni leader / activist.

The process types in this poem are the material and mental processes. These process types describe the state of action in the poem. For example, we have nine occurrences of the material processes in the poem, found in line 1 (“begin”), line 3 (“mourning”), lines 9 and 10 (“is”), lines 12 and 13 (“stirred”), line 14 (“will not die”), line 15 (“is dead”), line 16 (“will sing”), line 18 (“listen”) and line 19 (“echo”). “Begin” and “mourning” foreground the commencement of the mournful state of the masses over the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa. “Stirred” portends Saro-Wiwa’s actions against the oppressors of Ogoni land. Saro-Wiwa protested and stood against the denial of the people of Ogoni of the right of basic social amenities, considering the fact that they contribute a great deal to the wealth and resources of

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the nation. “Will not die”, refers to the resilience of the masses not to be silenced in the face of opposition. Though Ken Saro-Wiwa is killed, the struggle continues. This view is strengthened by Bassey (2008)’s argument that though Ken Saro-Wiwa was physically killed, he still remains alive “... in the mind of the poet” (p. 23), and by extension, the masses. This is also the case with the verbal group “will sing”. “Listen” and “echo”, express the outcry of the down trodden. The three occurrences of the mental process “mourn” (lines 5, 6 and 7), foregrounding the sad state of mind of the masses over the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

We have the Range occurring nine times, most of which refer to the military tyrants. For example, “attired in stable uniform” (lines 2 and 3), “near the leopard’s head” (line 10) and “in your whistle” (line 19). The goal which is the aim of the oppressors is captures in “Prometheus, Kenule Saro-Wiwa” (line 14), “the hunter’s aim” (line 11) and “the requiem for the leopard” (line 17). These expressions capture and express the fact that the aim and target of the oppressors is to silence the Ogoni people and stop them from fighting and agitating for their rights. The poet presents the people of Ogoni as victims, which within the transitivity analysis, is the client. This is seen in the expressions “the prime lamb of our yard” (line 9) and “Ogoni” (line 12).

The entire land of Ogoni and her natural resources rebel against the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Senser in the poem. The pronoun “you” (lines 5 and 6), points to Ken Saro-Wiwa. The phenomenon, “The roasting streams” (line 5), “The poisoned rivers” (line 6) and “the famine-choked Ogoni’s (line 7), all point to the anger in the land. Words like “roasting”, “poisoned” and “famine-choked”, bare testimony to this. The criticism against the victimization of the people of Ogoni has been a burning issue which Remi Raji, another poet of Ushie’s generation has evoked in his poem titled “Deadlines”, published in the volume, *A Harvest of Laughters*. “Deadline”, has enjoyed an insightful and engaging criticism from Ushie (2014), from the perspective of transitivity of the Hallidayan functional grammar,

which has inspired and shaped the perspective and approach of this study.

Interpersonal Metafunction in “To the teacher” from *Eclipse in Rwanda*

Because of the interactive nature of the poem “To the teacher”, the Mood Residue is applied in the analysis of this poem. The poem has eight stanzas, so for lack of space, we select and analyse five stanzas.

“To the teacher”

1. You are that chaff spat out
Mood Residue
2. When sulking of succulent fruit
Residue
3. is done;
Residue
4. You are that immobile roadside
Mood Residue
5. tree which every mobile object
Residue
6. flies past;
Residue
7. You are that rock at bed of river
Mood Residue
8. round which every batch of water
Residue
9. Passes;
Residue
10. You are that Ladder kicked off
Mood Residue
11. once the climber reaches the
Residue
12. fruit-bearing twigs
Residue
13. You are that whetstone that
Mood Residue
14. Sharpens the grey matter for
Residue

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15. exploring greener pastures that
Residue
16. field your will - O' - the - wisps.
Residue
(*Eclipse in Rwanda*, p. 31)

“To the teacher” As An Exchange / Interpersonal Discourse

Mood Residue

This poem is an interpersonal discourse between the poet persona, which is the speaking voice in the poem, and an addressee, which within the context of the poem, is “the teacher”. The teacher in this poem is used as a metaphor for all who impart knowledge and mold character in the society. Ushie calls for a change of attitude by the society towards the teacher. This is not surprising as the thematic pre-occupation of Ushie’s poetry is in itself an advocacy thesis. In her comment on the general theme of this collection, Essien-Eyo (2012) states that *Eclipse in Rwanda* “... presents a panorama of the ills and wrongs in the society and declares the poet’s resolve to go on protesting until the situation changes for good” (p. 243). There is an exchange of emotional concern between the speaking voice in the poem and the addressee. The stanzas in the poem are presented in parallelisms to express the declarative mood captured in the poem. Ushie, sympathizes with the plights of teachers in the world, with emphasis on the Nigerian nation, over their poor treatment.

From the Hallidayan systemic functional perspective, this poem is made up of the mood and Residue. There are five instances of the occurrence of the mood in the expression “you are” (lines 1, 4, 7, 10 and 13). The pronoun “you” refers to the teacher, and the auxiliary verb “are”, prepares our minds for the condition of the teacher, which the poet captures in the Residue. The poem accounts for sixteen instances of the occurrence of the Residue. A great number of the residues in this poem foreground the message of the poem. For example, “that chaff spat out” (line 1) and “when sucking of succulent fruit” (line 2), express the fact that the teacher in our society is often viewed as a tool to mold lives and characters, but later dumped. The

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expression “chaff spat” evokes that which is used and thrown away; while “succulent fruit”, a nominal group, foregrounds that which is valuable and enjoyable. For Ushie, the teacher is highly valuable and respected, with a great wealth of experiences, but often discarded after being exploited by the society. This is implied in the words “Out” and “sucking”.

Other examples of residue in the poem with stylistic functional significance are: “that immobile roadside” (line 4), “tree with every mobile object” (line 5), “that rock at the bed of river” (line 7), “round which every batch of water” (line 8), “that ladder kicked off” (line 10), “fruit-bearing twigs” (line 12), “that whetstone that” (line 13), “sharpens the grey matter for” (line 14) and “exploring greener pastures that” (line 15). The nominal group “immobile roadside trees” refers to the teacher, who is always available to the services of the general public. “Tree”, within this context is a symbol of wealth and prosperity, which the teacher carries. “Mobile object”, portends the beneficiaries who tap from the well of knowledge of the teacher. The residues in lines 7 and 8, foreground the teacher as the foundation and life-wire of our nation. “Rock” symbolizes a strong foundation, while “river” and “water” connote life. In line 10 and 11, the teacher is portrayed as a link to the society’s success, and the treasure base of the nation. Words such as “ladder” and “fruit-bearing”, bare testimony to this. Other expressions that account for the value of the teacher to nation building are “whetstone”, “grey matter” and “greener pastures”.

But as valuable as the teacher is in the society, Ushie avers that the teacher is neglected, cheated and undermined. This is captured in the expression “Kicked off”. The addresser exchanges a melancholy mood and disposition between he and his addressee. He calls for a change of attitude towards how the teacher is treated and rewarded in our society. This is not coming as a surprise as in the words of Aboh (2013), “Ushie is mostly an activist, playing active, leadership roles in the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)” (p. 179). And it is common knowledge that ASUU, among other agitations, agitates for

the well being of teachers, especially at the tertiary level of teaching service.

Textual Metafunction in “The Gun” from *Hill Songs*

“The gun” is a short poem which explores the power of the gun both to individuals and organizations. The gun is an instrument of protection, attack and even prestige. With the gun, wars are fought; and with the gun, peace and order can be broker. This poem is interrogated in this study using the Theme Rheme system of the Hallidayan functional grammar. The full poem is cited.

“The gun”

1. Symbol of peace
 Theme Rheme
2. Symbol of strength
 Theme Rheme
3. Symbol of law
 Theme Rheme
4. Symbol of being
 Theme Rheme

5. Aargh! Its Voluminous barrels
 Theme Rheme
6. from where wisdom falls
 Rheme
7. Aargh! Its generous barrels
 Theme Rheme
8. from where life runs.
 Rheme

9. From hill to hill
 Rheme
10. Its damning force echoes
 Theme Rheme
11. Symbol of thrones from whose
 Theme Rheme
12. wide nostrils mangled dawns are breathed

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	Theme	Rheme
13.	<u>At</u> Theme	<u>its trigger's whims</u> Rheme
14.	<u>Its</u> Theme	<u>muzzling, ceiling mercies</u> Rheme
15.	<u>We</u> Theme	<u>are prostrate</u> Rheme
16.	<u>We</u> Theme	<u>of the vales</u> Rheme
17.	<u>We</u> Theme	<u>of the earth</u> Rheme
18.	<u>We,</u> Theme	<u>of life</u> Rheme

(*Hill Songs*, p. 23).

“The gun” As A Message

Theme Rheme

The textual metafunction of language focuses on the clause as a message, realized through the Theme and Rheme (Bloor and Bloor, 1995, Eggins, 1996 and Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). In this poem, we observe thirteen occurrences of unmarked themes, and one occurrence of a marked theme. The theme “symbol” (lines 1, 2, 3, 4, and 11), and “its” (lines 5, 7, 10 and 14), refer to the gun. The gun according to Ushie in this poem is a metaphor and symbol of authority, power, order and peace. The theme “We” (lines 15, 16, 17 and 18), refer to the masses and subjects of those in power, who obey the directives of those who hold the gun. In his explanation of the poet’s use of the pronoun “we” in this poem, Aboh (2013) explains:

Ushie uses the pronoun *we* to show his oneness with the mass majority. Therefore, *we* is aptly utilized to demonstrate the poet’s concern for the masses, as well as his commitment to effecting change in society. The use of *we* is an emphatic linguistic device that enables the poet to echo the

people's dehumanization of forces that are greater than them (p. 174).

The message of this poem is complete and richly embedded in the Rheme. According to Halliday cited in Ushie (2014), the combination of the theme and rheme in a clause brings about the holistic message carried in that clause. There are eighteen instances of the rheme in this poem. The Rhemes "of peace" (line 1), "of strength" (line 2), "of law" (line 3) and "of being" (line 4), all foreground the aims, purposes and motif of using the gun. The rhemes "voluminous barrels" (line 5) and "generous barrels" (line 7), are parallel structures describing the strength of the gun. These nominal groups perform a descriptive function. "voluminous" and "generous" portend the so many things that could be achieved using the strength of the gun. "Barrels" implies the quality of power and strength. The rheme "damning force echoes" (line 10), is an imagery appealing to one's sense of hearing, expressing the frightening sound of the gun. The rhemes "mangled dawns are breathed" (line 12), "Its trigger's whims" (line 13) and "Muzzling, ceiling mercies" (line 14), all foreground the fact that the gun is capable of terminating life, and putting its captives at its mercy. The parallelisms, which are rhemes in lines 15 ("are prostrate") 16 ("of the vales"), 17 ("of the earth") and 18 ("of life"), are metaphors for those who are subjects and victims under those who are privileged to have and own the gun. "Prostrate" evokes a state of being emotionally devastated, and physically incapacitated. "Vale" pertains to death and farewell. The gun is capable of terminating life and bring about sorrow. "Earth" and "life", are nouns that imply transient, ephemeral and fugacious. These rhemes show how frail, fragile and friable we can be, when faced with a gun. Ushie's message in this poem is to show the gun both as an instrument and a weapon.

Ideational Metafunction in "Song of the thief" from *A Reign of Locusts*

In analyzing the poem "Song of the thief", the transitivity system is applied to interrogate the injustice within the corrupt fold in the nation. Ushie in this poem laments on how corruption in high places in concealed, while the very corrupt high and mighty expose the

corrupt practices of the down trodden, just to distract people and hide their own sins. This short poem is cited below with the analysis of the transitivity system.

“Song of the thief”

- | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. | If | I | <u>steal</u> | <u>my neighbour’s chick</u> |
| | | Actor | Process: material | Client |
| 2. | <u>they’</u> | <u>ll pin</u> | <u>my name</u> | <u>on doors</u> |
| | Actor | Process: material | client | Goal |
| 3. | If | I | <u>steal</u> | <u>a whole bank</u> |
| | | Actor | Pr 164 | Goal |
| 4. | <u>they’</u> | <u>ll tell</u> | <u>the tale</u> | |
| | Actor | Process: material | Range | |
| 5. | <u>with name withheld</u> | | | Goal |
| | | | | Goal |
| 6. | If | I | <u>pocket</u> | <u>the nation’s purse</u> |
| | | Actor | Process: material | Client |
| 7. | <u>they’</u> | <u>ll tell</u> | <u>the tale</u> | |
| | Actor | Process: material | Range | |
| 8. | <u>with name withheld</u> | | | Goal |
| | | | | Goal |

(*A Reign of Locusts*, p. 29)

“Song of the thief” As A Representation

Transitivity / Process types

“Song of the thief” is a representation of the injustice within the corrupt fold. Ushie, in this poem criticizes the exposure of some persons who are corrupt, and the concealing of the corrupt practices of others. Ushie expresses his consciousness of the fact that our leaders claim to fight corruption among the masses, when they themselves are corrupt; and do everything to hide their shady practices. From the perspective of the Hallidayan transitivity, we have six occurrences of the Actor. The Actor “I” (lines 1, 3 and 6) refers to the masses, probably those in low public offices, such as civil and public servants. Their corrupt practices, which according to the poet is not weighty is expressed in the client “my neighbour’s chick” (line 1). The Actor “they” (lines 2, 4 and 7), portends the corrupt politicians

and wealthy people who amass the wealth of the nation. The weight of their crime is expressed in the goal “a whole bank” (line 3) and the client “the nation’s purse” (line 3). The material process “steal” (lines 1 and 3), “‘Il pin” (line 2), “‘Il tell” (lines 4 and 7) and “pocket” (line 6), foreground the action that leads to the crime and betrayal. The client “my name” (line 2) refers to the image of the down throdden who is exposed of his or her corrupt deeds. The range “the tale” (lines 4 and 7) and goal “with name withheld” (lines 5 and 8), foreground the injustice and betrayal in the world of corruption. It is worthy to note that Ushie is not encouraging corruption, but only pointing that a thief should not conceal his sins, and expose that of another.

This is the scenario in our country where government claims to fight corruption, only when it involves members of the opposition group, and the common man. For Ushie, corruption is corruption no matter the magnitude or who is involved. This depicts and portrays Ushie as a poet who is bent on seeing sanity in the society. This is the hallmark of Ushie’s vision as a poet, as according to Ebam (2007), “to Ushie, a vision of society as suggested by literature which emphasizes the good and de-emphasizes the bad is what we need to have a “meaningful society”, a society that is cleansed” (p. 15).

Conclusion

Using the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Model, this study has explored the stylistic functional value of the clause as Representation, Exchange and Message in five select poems of Ushie. The poems selected, analysed and discussed are poems bordering on socio-political maladies such as failed democratic expectations, the grave injustice to the people of Niger Delta, the deplorable plight of teachers, intimidation and terrorism and the maladaptive demeanor among the corrupt fold. Apart from exploring the thematic concerns of these poems, the study goes as far as showing how language is used to express the vision of Ushie, as a contemporary poet, laden with the burden to see a society that is morally functional. The study shows how stylo-syntactic strategies such as transitivity, mood and residue, as well as theme and rheme, have revealed the thematic discourse in Ushie’s poetry.

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