

## **Towards a New Form of African Novel: Ada Ugah's Theory of the Novel in Ballads**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the balladic novel as initiated by Ada Ugah and highlights its advantages over the traditional novelistic format greatly influenced by the European romance tradition. Texts that provide material for the analysis include Ugah's first two trail-blazers: *Ballads of the unknown soldier (a novel in ballads)* and *colours of the Rainbow (a novel in ballads)*. The paper contends that the balladic novel has many qualities that give it good prospects of success over the conventional novel. It stresses the fact that it is more indigenous to the African because it has affinity with the traditional oral tale and fits into African story-telling forms. It is lyrical, chantable, easy to dramatize, short and illustrated with pictures therefore easier to read, and more amenable to aesthetic embellishments. It is, therefore, projected that the balladic novel is likely to become the African novel form for the 21st Century.

### **Introduction**

African novelists and their critics seem to agree that the present format of the novel is out-moded. There is an on-going search for its re-modelling and calls for the restructuring of the African literary landscape have become more fervent at seminars and conferences.

As far back as 1980, the troika of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike put forward arguments in favour of the domestication of African literary forms. Ada Ugah is one of the vibrant voices calling for a new African poetics. His call is contained in an essay titled "Anatomy of Nigerian poetics" which forms the "Introduction" to his first collection of poems, *Naked Hearts* (1982).

In an interview published in a Nigerian weekly (20 January, 1991), Ugah repeated his call and stated the motivating factor thus:

I conceive of writing .. as a form of personal revolt against the status quo of things ... including creative writing. It seeks to be a major departure from the celebrated tale-bearing mode of the Achebe tradition which Nigerian fiction has been identified. At any time of writing, I felt that something different and experimental should be ushered into our literature.(*Name of weekly*)

In the same interview, he emphasised that “the chief factor in my writing is an alternative to any given existential model”.

In his “Foreword” to *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier*, Chidi Ikonne stresses the point that “experimentation is what African literature needs right now if it must outgrow the shibboleth of its dated and sterile matrix”. Ada Ugah’s ‘novels in ballads’ are his contribution to the prevailing literary search for an alternative to the waning European romance tradition, widely adopted by African novelists and prose writers.

Before Ugah’s contribution, others had tried through the medium of their novels to give a new face to the African novel structure and concept. Some of these include Kole Omotosho who adopted a strange style in *Just Before Dawn*, Gabriel Okara in *The Voice*, Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreter*, Femi Osofisan in *Kolera Kolej* and Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy*. These earlier efforts were neither sustained by young writers nor given the place they deserve in the development of Africa’s fictional discourse.

However, Ada Ugah’s experimentation with the balladic mode of the novel seems to have received great acceptance going by the number of rave reviews the novels have provoked, especially in Nigerian newspapers. Some of the reviews are critical while others are favourable and sometimes compliment and recommend his theory. Among the reviewers, one can cite Terhemba Shija, Krees Imodibie, Chris Aba, Chidi Ngangah, Edde M. Iji and Francis Unimna.

Hornby’s *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (1983:59) defines a ballad as a “simple song or poem, especially that tells an old story”. R. N. Egedu’s (1979:6) definition of a ballad is more elaborate. According to him, “The ballad is in the form a song, traditionally, though more modern poems using the ballad form need not be songs (...) they often tell a story.” M. H. Abrams (1981:12), defines what he calls the popular ballad thus:

The popular ballad (known also as the “folk ballad” or “traditional ballad”) is a song, transmitted orally, which tells a story. Ballads are thus the narrative species of folk songs which originate among illiterate, or only partly literate, people.

Ada Ugah’s novels are a collection of popular ballads of Idoma tribe in Benue State of Nigeria. *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* seems to fit in much more to the ancient and heroic mode of the popular ballad than to the journalistic “broadside ballad” in *colours of the Rainbow*. Both balladic novels are close to what Abrams (1981:13) calls literary ballads. According

to Abrams, ‘A literary ballad is narrative poem written by a learned poet in deliberate imitation of the form and spirit of the popular ballad’.

For the purpose of this paper, a novel in ballads is regarded as a narrative mode of literary expression that interfuses several forms including poetry, drama, prose, dance, chant, orality and myth. The balladic narrative is Ugah’s preferred novelistic form chosen to manifest his creativity and express his own humanity in line with his lucid impulse of literature as game playing. It is his chosen format for the novel through which he marries expression with communication and renders his messages and objectifies his pet theory of literature as manipulation by authorial imagination (Ugah, 1989).

Both in theme and style, *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is a good example of a “balladic novel”. It is a penetrating novel, containing songs whose subject-matter is epic. It is a praise song in honour of Eje, the “unknown soldier” who on the 4th of October, 1988 killed a 3.9 metre long gigantic python. It is “a celebration/of the man from middlebelt/on a highway to Ilorin” (*Ballads*, 14). It is an “ear-shot ballad/of the epic combat/of man against destiny” (*Ballads*, 15). This heroic achievement is compared with the feat of “Samson and the Lion”, of “David and Goliath” and of “Bayajida and Daura”. (*Ballads*, 10). By this heroic act, Eje rejoins the mythical icons like Prometheus, Samson, David, Ogun, Amadioha and Bayajida.

*Colours of the Rainbow* is a song of patriotism, lamentation and woes. This point is made by Edde M. Iji in his review of the novel in a Nigerian weekly (*Sunday Chronicle*, 20/1/91).

Ugah’s *colour of the Rainbow* epitomises his emblematic songs of lamentation of the fortune-plagued Africa with all her over-exploited, ravaged and under-explored potentials... a song of great patriotism nostalgia... it laments the African national questions now seemingly intractable.

In the same review which Iji titles “Allegory for 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic”, he considers the balladic novel as a, “medium that combines refined poetry, story-telling and dramatisation, through the prisms of mythicising or mythologizing, recreation or reinterpretation of myths and myth-like experiences.

One must stress here that popular ballads date back to the folk songs, commonly associated with the oral traditions of peoples with unwritten literary forms. The ballad is a poem meant for singing, originally linked to communal dance. Omonode (1995:50) identifies certain characteristics common to ballads to include the representation of physical courage as a frequent theme and the common people (not nobles) as the main characters.

Judging by these criteria, one can say that Ugah's 'novels in ballads' are good examples of the balladic forms.

### **The strong points of 'Novels in Ballads'**

Most of the critics who have reviewed Ugah's 'novels in ballads'— like Terhemba Shija, Krees Imodibie, Amunde Ugah, Chidi Ngangah and Francis Unimma, have expressed the opinion that they deserve greater attention in the development of discourse on Africa's fiction. In fact, it is the belief of this paper that the balladic novel deserves a major position in any consideration of contemporary African literature.

There is cause for hope that sooner than later, the balladic novel will be more than a match for the traditional form, if this trail-blazing effort is sustained and perfected. For one, it shows great originality, freshness and spontaneity, qualities often missing in the conventional novels. It is refreshing and likely to rouse other African writers to further efforts in this novel approach.

A distinguishing factor of novels in ballads is their brevity. In their shortness, they reflect a sense of urgency and appear more factual in than the longer form of the novel. The traditional novels are rather long and tedious to read.

In today's jet age world, where time is money, the short balladic novel is more likely to attract greater patronage. The readership would prefer novels that can be consumed with less tedium, time and energy. Readers would prefer novels that are time-saving but at the same time, thrilling and educating, entertaining and informative.

Another easily noticeable stylistic embellishment of Ugah's 'novels in ballads' is the cinematographic montages that adorn their cover pages and the photographic interfaces of the inside pages. In *Ballads of the Unknown Soldiers*, he employs pictures to illustrate his ballads. The novel carries a total of twenty-five (25) photographs or illustrative drawings, some of them repeated for emphasis.

With these pictures, the novels are easier to understand. Reading the novel becomes more pleasurable and comprehension is enhanced. The novel appears to be an experiment in visual poetry, photo journalism or cartoon strip narrative.

The cover illustration of *colours of the Rainbow* is an excellent example of picture-montage. It is visually impressive. It is made up of drawings of men and women in different trades and representing the twenty-two Apa tradesmen, each dressed up in the clothing of his trade. At close examination, one finds a palm wine tapper, farmer, barber, town-crier, cobbler, singer, physician, rain-maker, priest, mason, inn-keeper, dyer, blacksmith and a trader.

On these pictures are superimposed the drawings of a horse and an eagle with a gun in-between them. They allude to Nigeria's third dream of

having a taste of democratic rule. The horse on the left of the gun was the symbol of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a party with leftist bent; while the eagle on the right was the party emblem of the National Republican Convention (NRC), a party with rightist inclinations.

The gun at the centre symbolizes the military that mid-wifed and nurtured the two imposed grassroots parties, standing by to play the role of umpire. The pictures are decorative and they add aesthetic quality to the novel. This photographic montage, which is an expressive device, is comparable to a painter's technique of 'collage' of newspaper cuttings or cartoon bits to a surface of painting. On account of the currency and actuality of its subject-matter, *colours of the Rainbow* is closer to what M. H. Abrams (1981:13) calls the broadside ballad, which according to him is "a ballad printed on a single sheet (called a "broadside"), dealing with a current event or issue..."

Another trait of ballads is the fact that they are episodic and dramatic. According to M. H. Abrams (1981:12), "Typically, the popular ballad is dramatic (...): the narrator begins with the climatic episode, tells the story tersely by means of action and dialogue (sometimes, by means of the dialogue alone)."

Ugah's balladic novels are highly dramatic and are easily adaptable into the film medium. *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is arranged in a manner that allows it to be staged. Also, characterization is well developed and these make it easy for the work to be acted. In fact the novel has been successfully staged as a play, (Onwudinjo, 20/1/91).

Similarly, *colours of the Rainbow* is richly laced with dramatized scenes. The entire format is very episodic and the dialogues are dramatic. Characters are clearly delineated. For these reasons, the novel, like the *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is easy to put into drama.

One particularly dramatic scene is the drama-like dialogues of the 22 Idoma Elders who are standing dazed before the threshold of the rainbow glow, each intoning his swansong of woes and appear wearing the peculiar dress of his profession, representing different trades. This scene can very well pass for a costume play.

*Colours of the Rainbow* has also been adapted for dramatic presentation by a Nigerian dramatist, Akomaye Odey and performed by the 'Cross River State Cultural Centre Board' on the 12th of April, 1991, for a select audience at the University of Calabar Arts Theatre on the occasion of the public presentation of the novel.

An important element of balladic composition is that it is musical and easy to dance to. The arrangement of the words creates harmonic effect. *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* has folksongs incorporated into the story. Sound effect is achieved in Ugah's balladic novels through the element of alliteration. For example, one appreciates the phonoesthetic value of the following lines: "(with shades/of Blue, Brown/Black/Velveteen green)"

(61). Harmonic effect is achieved through the alliterative bond created by the /b/ sound and the monosyllabic structure of most of the words.

In *colours of the Rainbow*, one often finds juxtaposed a cluster of words with identical initial consonantal sounds. The sound effect of alliteration can be seen in these lines: “A sage sings his sea-song” (2); “whose sorrowful souls sinks a thousand times a day” (10): “my ripest fruits are delicacies/man and mammals merry” (13). The auditory sameness of the consonants give auditory appeal to the reader and endows the novel with its musical element.

Also, the flowing dramatic dialogues of the 22 elders/tradesmen are chantable. In bewilderment, each of them choruses his swansong. They chant tunes of frustration, alienation, deprivation, suppression, political blindfold, sheepish followership and marginalisation of professionals leading to brain drain. This scenario is a vivid picture of the Nigerian situation under military misrule.

Another reason why the balladic novel stands firm against the established traditional novelistic form is its amenability to aesthetic embellishments. By their oral nature, novels in ballads allow for addition of stylistic elements as ornaments.

A peculiar ornamental feature in balladic novels is the frequent use of capitalization as an expressive device, thrust into the foreground of the reader’s attention. Ugah also introduces into his novels, profuse use of parentheses and eccentric use of italics. One notices that out of the 109 pages of *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier*, 54 italicised pages are parenthetically presented. These are all stylistic innovations, verse lineation in prose is an element of stylistic embellishment in the novels. The large margins add to the aesthetic lay-out of the novel. At the end of it all, one is left with the impression that the balladic form of the novel is stylistically more endowed than the traditional novel.

### **Affinity with African story-telling forms**

The balladic novel appears to be a direct offspring of the traditional oral tale and shows a way of accommodating oral practices in a written milieu. For one, the ballads, like the oral tradition, constitute one of the narrative traditions of the African.

The African novelist would be trading familiar grounds and closer to the indigenous tradition because there are remarkable affinities between the oral tale and balladic novel. Both are short, episodic and interluded with folksongs. Mythologized, the balladic novel shares similarity of character or structural resemblance with orality.

Like the African ‘griots’ or tale-bearers, Ugah adopts the across-the-genre style of composition and narration. One notices a harmonious blending of poetry, music, dance, oratory, drama, myth and history in both novels under study. His novels are multifocal in their thematic

preoccupations. Their fields of discourse are so varied and diverse that one medium proves insufficient to discuss all of them. Therefore, to convey his message, he has to explore other modes like poetry, dramatization and storytelling.

This genre-mixing is in conformity with his theory of literature as borne out of the ludic impulse that sees the writer as a manipulator (Ugah, 1989). He, therefore, adopts a holistic approach that fuses poetry, prose, diary, drama, and meditation. In an interview (Onwudinjo, 20/1/91:SM5) Ugah affirms that as “a matter of fact, I don’t usually distinguish between the genres while I’m writing”.

In his review Chidi Ngangah (21/7/1/90:7) rightly points out that *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is some sort of “across-the-genres exercise executed in the spirit of his theory of the literary imaginer as game player”. So evident is the fact that while the conception of Ugah’s balladic novels is prose, their composition is poetic. The syntactic arrangement and typographic realization of the stories on the printed page are poetic. His type of poetry has generated sporadic reactions, sometimes unflattering like this statement from Chris Aba (8/9/89:5) about the *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier*:

If one is thinking of ballads in terms of the high quality ballads and cultivated poetry which we find in the ballads of Coleridge... *The Ancient Mariner*, one would be disappointed because Ada Ugah’s ballads are a mockery of poetry.

In the same review, Chris Aba dismisses the novel saying “the whole work is poor”. It is the belief of this paper that a stylistician’s work consists in identifying “unorthodox” features in a work of art and attempting to proffer explanations for a writer’s choice to “deviate” from the orthodox. Chris Aba seems to miss the point in his judgement by mistaking the deliberately complex simplicity of diction adopted by the balladeer to mean an aberration. Ugah’s simplicity of language is in consonance with R. N. Egudu’s assertion that: “Ballads are characteristically simple in language and presentation. (Egudu 1979:46).

Again, this is Ugah’s revolt against old fashioned customs of poetry, like turgidity and obscurity of language. Ugah himself had explained in an interview (Onwudinjo, 20/1/91:SM4) that accessibility of diction and communicability has to do with “generational poetic movement” and the “town-crier poetic practice of the “wordsmiths” of the earlier generation of poets like Wole Soyinka. Ugah’s poetry is clearly less pompous and less hermetic.

What has become idiosyncratic about Ugah’s poetry is that though he adopts verse lineation, it is written in free verse, with no rhymes at the end

of the lines. Its metrical composition deviates from customary norms. This accounts mainly for the novels' simplicity. What one sees in both novels is a gentle and loose stretching of the conventional metrical pattern. The metre gives way and what we see are mere lines, broken into somewhat poetic manner. One would rather describe Ugah's poetry in his balladic novels as "rhythmic prose" or "versified prose".

Be that as it may, the poetic ring of the novels is unmistakable. They are rich in figures of speech, beautiful metaphors, similes and images drawn from the Idoma traditional poetry. As if they were poems, the novels open with "invocations" of the muse for inspiration and protection. By this practice, Ugah is blending African with European poetic traditions.

The poetic narration of his novels makes his descriptions vivid, concise, concrete, memorable and rhythmic. Poetry suits the balladic mode. Poetic language lends itself more accurately to praise-singing, which is what *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* is all about. The language of poetry is the language of celebration. Again, the short, crisp and rhythmic poetic syntax of *colours of the Rainbow* is appropriate to the field of discourse. The themes discussed in the novel are vexed and the "semi-sentence" language of poetry is the language of anger, lamentation and bewilderment.

If genre mixing is a narrative technique commonly adopted by balladeers and traditional tale bearers (or griots), they also borrow profusely from mythology. Novel in ballads, like the oral tale, is a medium that easily offers itself to mythologizing or mythicising. Myth and myth-like experiences are often recounted or re-interpreted in orality. Ugah's novels in ballads tell the author's own experiences or popular Idoma myths. They appear as reminiscences and recollections, using stories handed down from the past, especially concepts and beliefs that make up early history of the Idoma people.

*Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* has history as a mythologized poetic focus. There is a conscious attempt in the novel to mythologize history as a way of celebrating heroism. The main event itself sounds like myth. Eje Oji's feat is epic and appears too fantastic to be true. His heroism appears as an impossible achievement, which can come about only through a miracle or supernatural means. Perhaps this informs the thinking of critics like Chris Aba (8/9/89:5) who would rather "recommend it for children and those interested in folktales".

In *colour of the Rainbow*, we have Idoma myths being historicized. While his first novel is the story of an individual, the second is a story of the Idoma society. *Colours of the Rainbow* is a mythicised narration of Idoma legends. In line with his ludic theory, the myths are manipulated and given a semblance of verisimilitude.

In Idoma mythology, Ekema symbolizes a child prodigy, a spirit child akin to 'Ogbanje' or 'Abiku'. Ekema is born with a complete set of teeth, speaks at birth, walks on the third day and is taken away by spirits on the



seventh day. Also highlighted are the mythological history of Ogwuchekwu and the mysteries surrounding the 'Odejo', the tree of creativity. The novel captures the Idoma lore of astral projection and belief in the spirit world, as handed down from the past.

*Colour of the Rainbow* also presents the 22 titled elders of Idoma kingdom, each with his separate identity. These are all Idoma mythological analogues that show man in his continuous struggles against and with nature. On the whole, *colour of the Rainbow* shows that Ugah has a deep knowledge of the rich Idoma mythological lore.

*Colour of the Rainbow* is historically relevant to students of Idoma and Nigeria's political history. In a satirical manner, it alludes to the two political parties formed by the Babangida administration to usher in Nigeria's aborted Third Republic. Apart from the revealing photographic montage on the cover page, the Ogwuchekwu family is emblematic of the Social Democratic Party, the National Republican Convention and the military.

Ene, the mother, represents the Social Democratic Party and while Ogwuchekwu, the father symbolises the National Republican Convention. This is revealed in this introduction by Ekema:

I am Ekema, the source, a little to the right is my father  
Ogwuchekwo we are a troika. (*Colours.*, p. 52).

Fears were expressed that the two parties were being manipulated by their creator, the military, and that the two parties and their creator would constitute an inseparable trio in the politics of the Third Republic. In a subtle manner, this fear is reflected in this passage.

A young woman on the left an elderly  
man on the right and in the middle standing  
a seven-day old baby with a gun!

The watch-dog and 'interventionist' status of the military is subtly re-echoed here too. This balladic novel is prophetic in that barely two years after its publication, the military intervened in the body politic of Nigeria and the two political parties along with other democratic structures were dismantled. *Ballads of the Unknown Soldier* too is historical in that it is an effort to mythologize a historical fact. It sublimates a historical event that actually took place. One wonders if all in all, reality is not being overstretched by Ugah. Albeit, his theory of literature in part, argues that the writer is merely engaged in make-belief as opposed to verisimilitude and that the reader should be able to draw a line between what is true and what is false.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion, the comparative advantages of the novels in ballads outweigh those of the well-established traditional novel form. One has cause to believe that they are more appropriate and more effective in marrying expression with communication of a writer's worldview.

Ugah's courage in trying an alternative to the European type form is praise-worthy and his trail-blazing effort in the balladic medium of narrative, as a form of the novel is worthy of emulation. If for nothing else, it constitutes an excellent take-off line for future balladic novelists to imitate and excel.

His innovation is indigenous to Africans as it is anchored on existing literary forms without necessarily making it obscure for the 'foreign' reader. The novel in ballads is a medium through which our heritage is retained and made 'palatable' even for the 'foreign' reader.

The balladic form of the novel as introduced by Ugah has been well received, going by the enthusiastic praises and critical adulation that have greeted it. If this pioneering effort is sustained and if the balladic novels are well-perfected, they will soon begin to compete favourably with the present novel format in terms of readership and patronage. They may as well as just provide the answer to the search for the African novel form of the 21st century.

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