



Satire in Joe Ushie's *Hillsongs* and *Lambs at the Shrine*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of satire by Joe Ushie in *Hillsongs* and *Lambs at the Shrine*. The collections condemn the ills in the society, failure of leadership, bribery and corruption and all kinds of vices in the society. Through these satirical devices, the reader is awoken into looking deeper at some of the things taken for granted and the society is cleansed of all the ills that hinders its progress.

INTRODUCTION

The thematic pre-occupation of Joe Ushie's *Hillsongs* and *Lambs at the shrine* is satire. M. H. Abrams defines satire as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself" (285). Cuddon quotes Jonathan Swift's definition of satire to be "a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world and that very few are offended with it (82). He added that a satirist is thus a kind of self appointed guardian of standards, ideals of truth; of moral as well as aesthetic values. He is a man who takes it upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of the society and thus bring contempt and mockery upon aberration from desirable and civilized norm. Thus satire is a kind of protest, a sublimation and refinement of anger and indignation.

Cuddon also quotes Ian Jack as saying "satire is born of the instinct to protest; it is protest become art" (83) satire is a useful artistic method to call

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attention to social abuses. It is a gentle art of indirection. Swift in satirizing England for their exploitation of Ireland gives a scientific view that, a scientist has suggested that one year old children are a wholesome food. He enumerates several abuses in the society that the city is full of poor people roaming about who are dying of poverty, filth and vermin.

This is the same picture Ushie paints in his poems. *Hillsongs* is a collection of forty-seven poems, eleven (11) out of forty seven(47) poems that contain satires have been selected to show how satire is used to call the society to order. In the poem "First October", he satirizes those in government for pocketing the freedom we all fought for, that culminated in the Independence Day which is celebrated on every first October of every year. He sympathizes with the poor in the society who are "walking skeleton" who look for how to "stay alive" while the rich are looking for where to "heap their loot". Independence day that is supposed to be a day of freedom and celebration for every Nigerian has become a "day of boom/day of birth" for the rich and a "day of doom/day of death" for the poor.

In the poem "Pendulum", Ushie portrays the helplessness of the citizenry in Nigeria who are caught up in a web of tyrant military regimes and deceptive civilian administrations, one coming after the other. As each regime comes, either military or civilian with its promises of restoring hope to the suffering masses, the poet describes the process as "sandwiched" where the citizens are caught in "between."

The metaphorical expressions "the bloodsucking boots and the sugar - tongued chameleons" refers to both the military and the civilian government respectively. They terrorize the helpless citizens who do not know where to run to for help.

In the second stanza, the poet refers to the two regimes as "two plagues" who are not hidden in their deeds, but "vibrant" to an extent as to pollute the young leaders of tomorrow, that is the youths, who are hereby referred to as "seeds and shrubs."

The poem reaches its climax in the third stanza where the poet figures out that the torture from one regime to the other leaves Nigerians with only one "choice" of remaining "penned" or caged like animals for an exaggerated period of time unquantified. The situation of the suffering masses is further likened to a football that is "tossed between" two struggling football teams who are "unweaning."

Stanza four states clearly that "we" the citizens are like a "sheep" waiting to be consumed by the two regimes "the leopard and the hyenas," with the use of rhetorical question, the persona seeks for "rescue" for the helpless citizens who are in a "democracy" without "democrats."

In the last stanza, the persona expresses hope, a hope that is gradually "rising" as a result of the patriotic efforts of Nigeria's early leaders.

Mezu observes that "the modern African poet has chosen to sing, chant, shout, be angry, rave, curse, condemn and praise when occasion demands it in the interests of his people" (95).

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Ushie in his poems has decided to condemn the ills of the society because according to Mezu "African poetry is a collective experience initiated by an individual in a group but shared by the rest. It has become personal, no longer a collective experience or exploration".

In "Encounter" the persona is described as being innocent of what he is doing but is being exploited by an officer of the law. The poet castigates the corrupt practices engaged in by law enforcement officers who are supposed to fight against bribery and corruption in the society. The persona bribed the officer by breathing "deep into his left pocket". And he laments by saying:

And he left
Taking
The law from my hands
Into his right pocket (19)

This portrays the decadence in the society where bribery and corruption has become a way of life.

In "The Spiv's recipe" the poet satirizes the rich in the society who acquire their wealth through fraudulent means. We see that these kinds of people are seen dressed in "radiant garment" and the society encourages them by bestowing on them "thieftaincy titles." This is the high point of satire because the little is not "chieftaincy" that is common but "thieftaincy". This goes a long way to show that their wealth is gotten through stealing.

The poet also satirizes the society for calling such dubious persons to be voted into "public office" who continue to perpetuate their fraud by looting public funds. Ushie brings into our awareness or consciousness the body of our physical, moral and spiritual environment and creating the reality of our life as it had never been known before.

In "The gun," the persona sees gun as a dual object. It is
Symbol of peace
Symbol of strength
Symbol of law
Symbol of being (22).

When it is used for the purpose it is meant for. But when its use is abused:

We go prostrate
We of the vales
We of the earth
We, of life. (22)

In this poem, the poet tries to send a message across to the society that because of wickedness, selfishness and inordinate ambition, people now use guns which is a "symbol of law" for their own selfish interest. This leads to the death of many innocent citizens.

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This brings us to the poem "Mother hen" which the poet dedicates to Kudirat. This poem talks about the brutal killing of Kudirat, late Abiola's wife who died from the hands of a dictator for fighting for the freedom of her husband who was incarcerated. She is the "mother hen" who for struggling for her husband's release is "Struck" by the "hawk's claws". The tyrants are being described as such. The poet calls her "our forest's spokes bird" because she fought against injustice but she was killed by the "hunter's sling". The poet expresses hope that

In silence may the forest be for a while,
In disarray may the chicks run for now,
But dreams, like air, are arrow-proof. (23)

This means that though she has been silenced, in the nearest future, the fight will continue.

Ushie in his poems paints a happy and peaceful picture of his hometown which contrasts with contemporary societies.

In "Back to kugbudu," the poet laments the suffering of his people who are only remembered during elections. He says his home is "a forgotten book, dust-browned and pale". A town which used to be a "tourists' cynosure" has now been replaced by "broken/Razors of tar"

He feels bitter that the poor and the masses are only remembered "during ballot season" where the politicians deceive the people with "sweet-poisonous tongue" just to get the mandate of the people and after that, they are abandoned. He describes the politicians as "the crowd-prone chameleon" who changes after being voted into power. Ushie uses his poems which is an art of words to show that words are used for both intellectual and emotional effects which is central to the art. "Sweet-poisonous" as an oxymoron is used to portray the deceitfulness of the politicians.

The poem "Urban Blues" is used as a comparison between the life of the poets' village and that of the town. He observes that village life is easy and "rate free" where water and other necessities of life are gotten free. This is in contrast with life in the town where "man's light is metered/ and pipe-borne water is billed." He sees himself "floating" like a leaf "on a sea of tears" and concludes by saying "wretches sit on riches." He looks forward to a situation where life in the town will be easy and sweet just like life in the village.

Like the Romantic poets, Ushie in "Sunrise" and "Moon" eulogizes the beauty of the sun and moon for the life and brightness they bring to every creature.

In "Sunrise" the persona questions the "dark night" that comes with all wickedness. He asks:

Night, dark night,
Where is thy awful owl now?
Where is thy pitiless lion now
Where is thy laughless mood now

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And where, thy haunting dreams? (30)
expressing joy that "dawn is our shepherd" that takes away all the dangerous feelings of the night.

In the "Moon", the persona appreciates the value of the moon in the rural areas where "one sing and dance" under the beauty of the moon in the night. He notices that the electricity in the town does not allow the people to appreciate the beauty of the moon and he says:

In town or camp
You blend your showers
With fire from cable
And it maims your grace. (31)

He concludes by saying that the moon sheds its light on everybody free but the light from electricity is paid for.

Fierce is the face
Of the tension lines,
Harsh, is the bill for he that has,
Stiff is the fine for he that slips. (31)

That the penalty for consuming the light without paying is "stiff. This contrasts the simple and village life the poet experiences in the village.

"Song of the dead" satirizes the human nature where the death is eulogized, praised and well spoken of, the persona observes that when a man is alive, he is not taken care of, but when he dies, he is eulogized with sweet encomiums.

Now I'm the kindest
Now I'm the loveliest
Now I'm the greatest
Now that I'm gone. (38)

He states that no matter how the death is praised, it is of no effect because he is gone. He looks for a situation where before the death of a man, people have "sought" for a cure for his "illness" instead of buying "an eye-catching casket". This poem sends a message to the society to be conscious of the sufferings of the poor who do not have what to eat and wear but at their death "you feed a market of mourners/and you dress my dust in silk". This approach by Joe Ushie confirms the sincerity and truth of poetry because it corresponds to a reality transcending the world of sense and portrays the poet's state of mind.

Lambs at the Shrine is a collection of thirty-two poems. Six (6) out of thirty-two(32) that contains satire will be examined. Ushie satirizes the society for doing all kinds of evil deeds just for the acquisition of wealth.

"Badagry chains" reminds us that slavery is still being practiced in our contemporary world. The persona is saying that slavery did not end in the

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past, but that it is still in our present generation. This time the people are not enslaved by strangers or the whites but by our own "brothers" who assume the role of a "master".

As he remembers the slavery of the past through a "photograph", he is "Awaken to the chains' present deadly grip on his ankles". This is a satire because in democracy, which is the government of the people, slavery should not be experienced. But the reverse is the case because the poor are being enslaved by the rich. Mezu observes that:

Because modern black Africa has been faced with the problem of decolonization, the African poet has come out in full force to defend the oppressed and condemn the oppressor (96).

and that is the battle this poet is fighting to liberate his people from the oppressor who this time is a "brother-master".

Ushie uses the poem "Abuja" to castigate the government for not catering for the needs of the graduates that are turned out every year from the Universities. The poet finds the situation very unfortunate. He notices that the "graduate applicant" who has all the "theories rioting in his heads wears his one shirt/and tar-dazed shoes like skin" walks about the street of Abuja from "office to office" in search of a job which the government cannot provide. He states that government make fake promises of providing employment and the "hopes" of the young graduate swings "like a pendulum" in an expectation of a fulfilled promise. The poet also satirizes the magnificent city where beggars are still found looking for "food" on the "wastes-heaps behind NICON NUGA or Sheraton hotels". He wonders about what a country we have where: Each day, new building plan arrives from France, Britain, America or Japan negotiating for a space to stand among the earlier arrivals already challenging the heights of Aso, Zuma and Strabag rocks (15).

Yet the people living in this country do not have food to eat, they are displaced by one disaster or the other as we see the "Gwari" carrying "her load loud on her shoulder", having no place to live.

Ushie spreads his tentacle of satire to all spheres of human life. "Month-end blues" satirizes the Nigerian civil servants who are "under-busied" and idle, not having what to do, they engage in gossips. The poet observes that despite the fact that the job is not offering the satisfaction it deserves, the workers "more jealous than the Jewish God/seek to admit no other trade" but they complain "day after day" at the end of each month. He observes that while "the young wrestle with resignation", the "old resign to the albatross room" of "terminal emptiness". Meaning that on retirement, there is no hope.

"Fate of the sheep" castigates the powerful in the society who oppress the weak for no reason at all. He compares the powerful and rich to the "lion" and the weak and poor to the "sheep".

The rich not having any reason to oppress the poor look for loopholes to perpetuate their evil deeds. The poor have no reason to question the rich in whatever they are doing, and any attempt to do otherwise, the poor is

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"devour" by the "hungry lion" who feels the "sheep" has no reason to "bandy words" with him.

And the lion, roaring like hell, flew at the sheep, di-sm-emb-eri-ng her and belching as he guzzled the sheep's meat leisurely, showing no sign of guilt or remorse, showing no sign of worry (24)

The "sheep" is likened to the civilian while the "lion" is likened to an "invincible General" who does not have regard for "justice" but believes that his action is "the law of the jungle". We no longer have justice in the society as the poor are oppressed and exploited by the rich. The poem "Better life" satirizes the wives of the Generals who on the pretext of catering for the needs of the rural women, are primarily concerned with their personal benefits. Instead of reaching out to the less privileged women in the rural areas to know what their needs are, these women gather "round this conference table" being decorated with "glittering apparel" sitting according to the rank and "status of their husbands".

They sit in an "air-conditioned-chilled" rooms while the rural women "unknown" and "unheard" of are suffering under the "sun's steady rays in the grain field, inhaling/dust from dawn to dusk". While the "perfumes" of the urban women rises "from the table", the rural woman is in the farm scratching. The tireless earth until dusk when they retire, child on the back and wood on the head, home-bound as beneficiaries of the bitter life for rural women policy (28).

The life of the rural woman is really "bitter" because what is supposed to be her due is being siphoned by the "rural mistress in the Governor's house". Chinweizu, et al. state that "African poetry speaks a public language" (188) for the benefit of the simple man. That is why Ushie's language is elegant and free-flowing. He uses simple language to defend with vehemence his people and to condemn oppression.

"Lambs at the shrine" which forms the title of the book criticizes the act of victimization meted on helpless civilians by the many dictators of the military regime. The poet sees the helplessness of the civilians as "lambs" which connotes a humble and submissive being who are killed amidst "a night walk". This explains that the helpless civilians who are killed unexpectedly least expect their death.

The killers are represented as "vultures" because of their merciless acts of cannibalism perpetrated in order to conceal facts. This takes us back to Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* where he makes cannibalism a scientific suggestion to England for exploiting Ireland, that one year old children should be either "stewed, roasted, baked or boiled to make a fricassee in stew."

"Lambs at the shrine" also lauds the intellectual base of the "lambs" over their possession of golden tongues, which is the more reason which they ought not to die. Yet they are "full stopped in the middle" of display of their high intellectual duties as "early victims/of a hew-man epidemic".

The poet employs an apostrophe in the fourth stanza and addresses the victims as "brothers" whose intellectual impacts are felt despite their demise.

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He expresses this in an oxymoron "talkative silence". He sees them as brave men who have worked among dangerous people who are merciless, falling as victims unknowingly.

The poet pledges under a "creed" in the second part of the poem to remain "dumb", "blind", and "mad" to all issues so as not to fall victim like the "golden lambs/emptied of blood at the/shrine of our new god" (56) being referred to the military dictators.

CONCLUSION

Ushie's poems are more concerned with issues of culture, life, death and the unborn because he has come face to face with the realities of his country that is in a war with itself. His major concern is the believe that poetry is not in the difficulty of diction or distant references and his poems have the virtue of clarity and simplicity of diction as well as poetic eloquence.

Ushie shares the same view with the romantics who believe that the language of poetry should be the language of the rustic man and nature. He has used images drawn from the African and Nigerian environment proverbs and other rhetorical devices in his poetry. African imagery as proverbs are important elements which are at the heart of African poetry.

One of the outstanding thematic features of Ushie's poetry seems to be the projection to the human mind of considerable hopes and challenges. Its intense interweaving of new aspirations and expectations with old perennial pains of the past. Often expressed in fine humour, it nevertheless offers a serious questioning of the values usually regarded as indisputable.

Ushie hopes that through satirical devices in his poems, the society will be cleansed of all the ills that hinders its progress.

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