

**Interrogating the Poetics of Politics in Chuma-Udeh Ngozi's  
*Chants of Despair* and Asika Ikechukwu's *Operation  
Python Dance***

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**Abstract**

In every literate society, poetry has always stood as a medium for buttressing the social, economic and political conditions of a community of people. Poetry has always endeavored to address issues concerning human conditions such as poverty, bad governance, marginalization, political disenchantment, ethnic struggles, illiteracy, ignorance, injustice, and lack of basic amenities. Nigerian poets over the years, have always drawn their themes and milieu from societal issues, political and situational changes in the country. This research studies the boundaries of poetry and politics against the backdrop of national discourse and particularly examines Chuma- Udeh Ngozi's *Chants of Despair* and Asika Ikechukwu's *Operation Python Dance*. This paper further investigates and portrays the extent to which poetry has endeavored to discuss, address and confront political problems and societal changes as exhibited in these works under study. The theoretical framework employed in the research is the sociological approach. This study concludes that in aligning poetry with politics, issues pervading nations are given a literary identity and in confronting the political situations and disenchantments that have belabored the average Nigerian character, the peoples' dilemma is brought to limelight and probable solutions, proffered.

**Key words:** Politics, Poetry, literature, and Political Disenchantment.

**Introduction**

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, literary writings aroused as a result of man's effort to document the activities and happenings in his environment. Throughout the annals of history, literary writings especially poetry have always endeavored to address societal issues and human conditions in any given contemporary society. Creative writings and literary criticisms are usually propelled by a number of themes and motifs. However, such motifs could aim at protest against oppression, ethnic struggles, bad governance, poverty, political emancipation and disenchantment. The type of literary writings found in Africa, especially in Nigeria can be termed as a literature of protest and commitment, simply because it tends to confront socio-political problems in any given African society. However, this paper presents poetry as a potent tool for social criticism and proper political re-direction as it relates to the multiplicity of societal issues that are predominant in the Nigerian society. Nnolim Charles is of the opinion that every generation of writers, have always written with burning desires to address the societal issues in their society (5). This implies that writers especially poets in Nigeria have been pushed to address these societal issues through their writings. Ifejirika Echezona speaks of poetry thus:

Poetry involves a profound expression of one's feeling, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, perceptions, ideas, philosophies and mood about almost everything which attracts one's attention and makes an impression, negative or positive one. These phenomenon on which poetry could be written include the universe and its contents, man and his environment, God and all his creations... politics, economy, religion, culture, family. Poets are the most sensitive of other literary writers and their sensitivity is often expressed in the most figurative, economical, emotive, and connotative more than novelists and playwrights. (1)

Chuma-Udeh buttresses the tenacity of the Nigerian poetry towards the reorientation of the society mindset. She is of the firm opinion that poetry should be geared towards the political orientation of the society: "The Nigerian poetry is studied herein in its true nature as a part and parcel of the historical sketch of the contemporary socio-political events of every given period of the nation's struggle. The type of poetry found in Nigeria becomes a revelation of the country's socio-political life, depiction of the inner psyche, aspirations, yearnings, dreams and mental characteristics of the group of people that made up Nigerian nation"(5). Over the years, Nigerian writers especially poets have drawn their milieu and themes from situational changes and societal happenings in their contemporary society. The two Nigerian poets understudy is not an exception. The type of poetry projected by these Nigerian poets, borders on the evolution and complexities of changes in the Nigerian history, politics, economy and cultural developments. However, most Nigerian poets through their writings, have endeavored to emphasize and re-echo on the importance and improvement of human conditions and social structures in the Nigerian contemporary society.

Moreover, this paper presents Chuma-Udeh Ngozi and Asika Ikechukwu as two Nigerian poets who have a similar perception and ideology that buttresses the condition of the average Nigerian character. Just like every other literary artist, they have surveyed, studied and analyzed their immediate environment and therefore have been propelled to write as a result of the happenings and societal issues which they discovered in their contemporary society. Their collections of poetry understudy are two powerful literary outputs which has endeavored to touch the core essence of human existence in Nigeria.

The poets understudy have perceived poetry as a potent tool which can be used to advocate for proper political redirection and

societal re-orientation in Nigeria. Through their literary writings, they have portrayed serious concerns for the extent of societal conditions like poverty, illiteracy, injustice, marginalization, ethnic conflicts, and political disenchantment as predominant socio-political issues found in Nigeria. These outlined socio-political conditions forms the statement of the problem deduced in this research. The theoretical framework of this research hinges on sociological criticism. Sociological criticism is a theory and a critical school of thought that has its concern geared towards literary works that reflect the conditions of people and the society.

This paper explores the works of Chuma-Udeh Ngozi and Asika Ikechukwu as poets toiling together for humanity and posterity. Through their poetic prowess, they have contributed their quota towards combating the multiplicity of socio-political problems found in their immediate environment. This scholarship therefore becomes an attempt to work towards a relatively re-defined a Nigerian society that will be free from bad governance, poverty, and political disenchantment. It will also attempt to trace theses societal problems as it affects the average Nigerian character. This paper will also examine the influence of poetry as potent tool wielded by the Nigerian poet in the course of advocating for socio-political positive changes in his immediate contemporary society.

Asika in *Operation Python Dance* states;

Remove these guns from our hearts  
Remove these bullets from our faces  
Guns will not quell our voices  
It will not drown our tears  
Only peace can sink this song  
Only love can halt this match  
Only dialogue will calm this spirit  
Only visible actions can evaporate this struggle  
Remove the guns from our hearts! (12).

Here the persona sees poetry as a means to peaceful

and marginalization as recurrent societal situations in the Nigerian society. He sees poetry as a tool for x-raying the pressing contemporary issues in the country. Asika uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation and social control. He has used poetry as a means of encouraging dialogues and peaceful negotiations to solve civil unrest, political upheavals and ethnic conflicts in the country. This poet understudy tries to re-echo on the agitations of the indigenous people of Biafra to the Nigerian government. Chuma-Udeh Ngozi's *Chants of Despair* is an in-depth analysis of the contemporary Nigerian society:

These poems  
With all their jumbled vulgarities  
With all their clustered misgivings  
With all their chaotic condemnations  
With all their frenzied uncertainties  
With all their turbulent confusions  
Are written for the love of my country  
A land flowing with milk and honey  
A land of plenty and surplus  
A land more than the Promised Land  
Dampened by depravity and degeneracy  
Echoing with the eerie squeaks of the poor and hungry  
Rumbling with the weird whining of the depraved and  
disillusionment  
Reverberating with the bizarre yelping of the down  
trodden  
As long as injustice persists in our society  
As long as two third and more of the citizens  
In my rich oil country live in perpetual hunger and  
depravity  
As long as the disparity in my country fosters and furthers  
As long as the gulf between the haves and the have nots  
breeds and broadens  
The country's conscience will always be troubled and

plagued

By the eerie chants of Despair; the forlorn voices of the  
deprived and disenchanting (13).

The persona denounces poverty in its entirety and also portrays the extent of class consciousness in the Nigerian society. Chuma-Udeh voices out poverty as a recurrent societal condition in Nigeria. She talks about the deplorable wide gulf between the rich and the poor. She explores the political atmosphere in the country and points an accusing finger to the insensitivity of the people in power. One alluring characteristics of this collection of poetry is its virtually unavoidable connection with socio-political realities in the nation's body polity. The poverty and destitution portrayed in the chants of despair is as a result of socio-political problems. All around the poor were reminders of what they were and of their impact. They live among rich who flaunt their plentiful before them. The poet gives the true definition of poverty thus;

I tell you my brother,  
Poverty is not a disease  
Poverty is far from an affliction  
Poverty is not lack or want.  
I say as Monday is Monday  
And Friday is Friday, poverty is an ailment  
Real poverty is a fate worse than a cancerous virus  
It gives no chance. it eats up everything.  
It is worse than a corrosive acid.  
It devours a man and leaves him like a walking carcass  
It makes a man a shadow thing... lifeless but living  
Poverty sucks up a man  
Like an orange in the hands of a hungry school child  
Poverty cracks a man like the palm kernel  
And sucks him up like he is the nut inside  
When it come, it comes with all its relations  
And reduces a man to a mirage.  
My brother, poverty is a taboo.

It is evil!  
It is hell! (11).

Chuma-Udeh ardently believes that poverty is a gruesome fate. She agitates for a re-definition of the relationship between the rich and the poor. The poet presents a society in chaos, a society hanging on a keg of gun powder, ready to explode. She combines truth and precision in a wonderful analysis of life. Her poetry is not a-political, but principle of politics. This lends her work open to a variety of political spectrum. The stark of poverty manifest in every facet of the common man's life; in the church, in the market place, the daily interactions and relationships between the two classes in the society and even in the streets they walk on.

For Chuma-Udeh, poetry becomes a medium for political intercession and social control. The task in this paper is an exploration of her use of poetry to expose the socio-cultural and political dilemma in the Nigerian landscape. The average Nigeria individual suffers great social deprivation, political marginalization and economic alienation in spite of abundant natural resources. Among other problems portrayed by the Nigerian poet, political disillusionment and socio-political issues becomes the order of the day.

The Nigerian poets under study has endeavored to use their literary outputs as a re-directive tool to combat these cankerworms which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society. These outlined problems in the country has been instituted by political and economic conspiracy of the past and present moribund Nigerian civilian governments. However, most post-independence poets like Wole Soyinka, Maik Nwosu, Festus Iyayi, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Tanure Ojaide and a host of other Nigerian poets, has taken a similar stance on these predominant issues in the country. The poets understudy presents poetry as a tool for x-raying the pressing issues in the country. Chuma-Udeh opined that her poetry serves as a means through

which the apparent representation of the stark reality of the contemporary quandaries in her society is portrayed (123). This implies that poetry in its entirety brings to limelight the conditions, socio-political events and developments of the Nigerian contemporary society.

Moreso, Chuma-Udeh believes that poetry no doubt serves as a framework for a discursive understanding and analysis of the Nigerian society and its history as well as its contemporary woes (122). Through the poetic lenses of the poets understudy, we see their superhuman efforts in bringing to the limelight the problems that has belabored a society of people fore-grounded by multiplicity of societal issues in Nigeria.

Ordinarily, in line with the symbiotic relationship between the poet and his contemporary society, Chuma-Udeh uses her poetry to negotiate the pathetic plight of her impoverished, oppressed, and exploited and class conscious society of people in a bid to attract attention, proffer an alternative vision and advocate for proper political redirection. Her literary writings raises a number of political questions, provoked by multitude of socio-economic responses and offers a clear insight into the intrigues surrounding the Nigerian contemporary society. For the poets under study, poetic activism serves as a platform for a discursive understanding and analysis on the extent of socio-political problems and its effects on the entire nation. In the context of the poetic collections, it is therefore not far-fetched to describe the poets under study as poet-crusaders who have used their poetry to mediate and intervene in the social contradictions of the nation's polity. For Chuma-Udeh Ngozi and Ikechukwu Asika, poetry is a kind of public duty which they owe to their people, to expose, reconstruct, and negate the actualities of political disenchantment in Nigeria. The core essence of this research is to prove that the poets under study intersects with the realities of political disillusionment and as such has come to be a formidable and reliable voice in Nigerian literature. Their poetic panoramas

found its place among this expanding matrix of coexistence between the average Nigerian individual and his society.

### Conclusion

Chuma-Udeh Ngozi and Asika Ikechukwu through their poetic lenses and prowess have agitated for proper re-orientation, redirection, good governance, peaceful resolutions, dialogues and proper negotiations through their writings. They both share the same ideology that good poetry should serve as a means to foster the improvement of the human conditions in any given society. The two Nigerian poets understudy has endeavored to use poetry as vehicle for political mediation and social control. They ardently believe in the infinite power of the Nigerian poet as a seer, an observer, an agitator, and a promoter of positive events.

This paper concludes that the Nigerian poet should stand as an engineer on the course of building peaceful bridges across the nation through his writings. The paper arrives that good poetry should modulate politics in any given human society. This paper further concludes that the poets understudy are two strong voices to reckon with in the course of voicing out the immediate concerns and societal issues that are predominant in the Nigerian society. The Nigerian poet must be a flag bearer bringing about waves of positive societal changes, good reforms and improvement to the values of the lives of the average Nigerian individual. With the help of the collection of poems understudy, this paper so far has endeavored to examine the place and essence of poetry in the Nigerian contemporary society. This paper has examined the place of art (poetry) in the Nigerian society as it relates to politics. Finally, this paper projects poetry as a means to achieve proper political re-direction and positive societal changes in the Nigerian society.

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