

## **Pain, sorrow and delusion of the masses in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *Songs of a traveller***

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### ***Abstract***

*This work, entitled “Pain, Sorrow and Delusion of the Masses in Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s Songs of a Traveller” examines the kinds of trauma which the masses undergo in the hands of Nigerian leaders. The study focused on five poems in the collection which include: “Oriki of a General”, “Song of an Unemployed”, “A Song for Nigeria”, “Rivers are Afraid” and “Song of Confession”. A juxtaposed and detailed perusal of the selected poems revealed the poets messages in the collection. The work employed Marxist ideological stance, meshed with intertextuality. The work revealed that pain and sorrows of the heart, joblessness, intimidation and wickedness, despotism and delusions, formed the basis of the masses problems in Songs of a Traveller. The work also revealed that the poet truly meshed the Marxist ideology with intertextuality in the collection. Also some elements of ‘njakiri’ (badinage) are manifested in the collection.*

***Keywords:*** *Marxism, Delusion, Masses*

### **Introduction**

In the view of Nwamuo, Nigerian poets should learn to write and respect poetry as a priceless art form and as something that may heighten ones sensibility to living within the society (242). Nwamuo is advocating for committed poetry which he thinks

poets should endeavour to write. Committed poetry is the kind of poetry that speaks for the masses and this is what Ezenwa-Ohaeto writes. His Marxist-oriented poetry speaks for the poor and the perjured. Marxist theory is not merely a sociology of literature but has its main aim as explaining the literary work fully and this means grasping those forms, styles and meaning as the product of a particular society. The theory sees literary works as “forms of perceptions, particular ways of seeing the world which is the social mentality or ideology of an age (Eagleton 6). This paper examines pain, sorrow and delusion of the masses as the major thematic concerns of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s *Songs of a Traveller*. These sorrows and pains which actually eat deep into the fabrics of the masses are caused by the leaders of Nigeria.

In discussing the plight of the masses in *Songs of a Traveller*, five poems from the collection are selected and they include: “Oriki of a General”, “Song of an Unemployed”, “A Song for Nigeria”, “Rivers are Not Afraid” and “Song of Confession”. Ezenwa-Ohaeto is a poet who watches keenly the goings-on in his home land and other countries and knows how to comment on those social ills that affect him and his kins people (Egya, 191). It is because of the love Ohaeto has for his people and because of his level of commitment that he writes, bearing the society’s burden.

### **Anger occasioned by insincerity in *Songs of a Traveller***

In “Song of Confession”, the poet laments on the devious deeds that go on among the leaders in Nigeria. The poet without mincing words says that he is bold in making his opinion known, noting that the bubble has burst and so it is time to talk

(confess). This he sees as part of his responsibility as a poet. He says:

The bubbles have burst  
 The scales have fallen off  
 I can now afford to tell  
 The sordid tale of my existence (4)

With sorrow and pain of the heart as the poet feels for the masses, he pontificates on the happenings in the society at present. He notes that he is not courageous in his stand but just drowning. As a result of anger concerning the state of affairs in the country, the poet chooses to “chant incessantly of things that happen in the society-“our land” (5). Things are not what they should be and so the poet chooses to talk since those issues cannot talk on their own. The masses suffer pain and sorrow caused by the leaders and they (the masses) now have “creased fore-heads” (Ohaeto, 5). According to the poet,

A thousand tales of responsibility  
 Are narrated by our creased foreheads  
 Particles of devious deeds find anchorage  
 On conduct likely to creepily cause  
 A breach of the pulsating peace  
 Which will doomly disturb the equanimity  
 Of the file our land pensively pending  
 On the IN-tray of God’s tingling table

In fact, the poet believes that the menace or ills manifested in this society are so devious that they challenge the peace of

the land. The actions of the leaders are so abominable that even the masses who bear the brunt of these atrocious behaviours may be stirred up to defend their positions and land. The poet, as the mouthpiece of the society, convinces the masses into the understanding of the fraudulent actions of the leaders of the country. Perhaps, this is in line with Nnolim's contention in his paper, "The Critic of African Literature, the Challenge of the 80's" where he observes that our writers are moving towards "social art that contemplates society - we expect art that is propagandist, art that tend towards proletarian concerns and inevitably, art that has Marxist overtones" (11). The poet, aware of the delusion caused to the masses by the state of affairs, as created by the leaders of the land as a result of their misbehaviours and insincerity, reminds them that their actions can culminate in a breach of peace which can spell doom as well as disturb the equanimity of the land.

### **Joblessness as part of pains and sorrows of the masses**

The masses are filled with pain and sorrow as there are no jobs for the youth. In "Song of an Unemployed" the persona laments over the situation of joblessness in the country. The poem discusses the fact that there is no job opportunity in the country and sees the leaders as being unable to salvage the situation. The government assures the masses of existence of jobs or vacancies but never employs any applicant. The government is insincere in almost every thing they do; the poet therefore criticizes the leaders who by their promises for jobs, zoom the "hope of the applicant to the moon", but have his "feet glued on earth". The interviews are conducted with insincerity just as their smiles are purely cosmetic. There is deception coming

from the leaders and the masses mourn their fate with every promise that never materializes. The persona says:

Each interview conducted  
In conference rooms filled  
With smoke of insincerity  
Officials with finger of filth  
Who wear plastic smiles (12).

The government who should fulfill the hope of the masses are those who blow it up with unguarded, illicit, dilatory and Fabian statements. This is why the poet notes that after a month of anxiety, after the interview the same office will inform, “with a brief usual message/that in the prevailing circumstances/a vacancy no longer exists” (12). The poet is worried indeed about the level of delusion which exists in the society. In government establishments, private institutions, there is insincerity and this heightens the pains and sorrows of the common man in the society. The poet also notes that even the mailing system in the country is nothing to write home about; letters take years to get to their destinations, all because nothing works the way it should. The persona says:

I reserve a large aimless grin  
For the post-man who calls  
Once in every seventeen months  
With letters that spend years to travel  
From one street to another (12)

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, as a social critic watches events and human actions in his homeland, with a critical tongue that flagellates the ills and their perpetrators. Izevbaye contends that true commitment “implies that literature should not merely exist in a vacuum with ideas passing from writer to reader, but that the writer, like the reader, should become involved in a kind of ideological dialogue” (11). Seeing himself as the product of his society and surrendering his artistry to the variegated, discursive realities of his society, the poet is wary and watchful, sifting every possible event through the critical sieve of his mind. He feels burdened with the urge to declaim the social maladies around him and beyond that, sees his practice as an ideology, a kind of political force. He sees his task as transforming the society through the power of art. This is what Ezenwa-Ohaeto does in his poetry, seeing the society as needing transformation through art.

### **Intimidation and wickedness of the masses by the leaders**

Even in *A Song for Nigeria*, the poet laments over the intimidating and wicked attitudes of leaders which bring pain and sorrow to the Nigerian populace. The poem, which marks the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nigeria, shows that “we have changed faces” (14), but fortunes have not changed correspondingly. Nigeria has become independent but has not shown signs of good behaviour from the new leaders. This is why the poet contends that in the country, “we tell a tale of broken hearts/we tell a tale of wounded emotions” (14). The poet notes that at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nigeria’s independence nothing has changed, instead the situation moves from bad to worse and the country is filled with fear bred by terror. As a result of the

activities of the leaders, the masses are in a dilemma. The persona tells us that

On a platter of fraud  
 Intellectual stimulus is suppressed  
 It may be difficult to speak  
 It is impossible to be silent  
 For ripples turn into a tide  
 In a cloud of fear bred by terror (14).

In this kind of environmental asperity and intellectual attrition, the masses become soaked in pain and sorrow brought about by the failed society. Man, in his land becomes forever afraid what the society will offer next. The poet is forced to ask:

How many have to die  
 Before we become sane  
 We have gained the power  
 We have lost the glory  
 A committee of elders could  
 Become a committee of murderers (14).

The poet's lament is that those who are vested with the authority of leadership and control are those who have turned themselves into "murderers", and that what is done in the country is fake and unbelievable, done with abundant mollifications to conceal the truth. The poet says:

With publicized orchestrated carnivals  
 Of a trailer load of half-truths

We are suckled and weaned in tribalism  
We remain bowed, bent and beaten  
As we look backward to the ancestors  
Let us look forward to posterity (15).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto looks into the political and social conditions of the society and in that bid tends to heed the advice of Achebe who contends that “an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant” (qtd in Matzke, 183).

In order to be truly relevant and committed, most poets, especially those of the alter-native tradition, engage themselves in the political issues of the country - how the corrupt political leaders through their actions bring pains and sufferings to the masses. They search for jobs, receive promises but are painfully denied of the jobs after interview. The poet actually weeps for Nigeria as the country still remains hopeless so many years after independence. The faces of the leaders have changed but things are still the same. This is why the poet asks: “We have changed faces/Have we changed fortunes?/We have changed hatred/Have we changed hopes”?(*Songs of a Traveller*,15).There is still deception, untruth and hopelessness among us and these are the causes of pain and sorrow which occupy the minds of the masses.

By the very nature of his calling, “the writer is primarily a revolutionary and his principal objective is not so much to inform, educate and entertain, as it is to change the society” (Ebong, in Emenyonu, 72). The writer as a revolutionary thinker, through his writings tries to redirect and channel the mind and consciousness of people towards a new set of values,

a higher awareness or reality. This is what Ezenwa-Ohaeto does with his poetry, trying to make the leaders of Nigeria understand the level at which the masses are losing weight as well as make the masses understand the levels of injustices meted on them by their leaders. This is also what Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied*, and Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* dwell on, ie "the plight of the peasant and the poor" (Egya, 130). The modern poets are indeed committed to the well-being of the masses and this is why Ezenwa-Ohaeto criticizes the Nigerian leaders who cause pain, sorrow and suffering for the people they lead.

### **Military despotism and delusion as sources of pain and sorrow**

In yet another poem, "Oriki of a General", Ezenwa-Ohaeto exposes the despotic nature of Nigerian leaders, especially the military. The poem indicates how the army, symbolized by the 'General', rule by decrees and edicts, thereby causing pain and sorrow to the masses who now live in fear. The poet says:

Welcome to the throne of bayonets  
You now sent forth mysterious fears  
In an early morning shower of bullets  
For a general is in charge  
Do not consider plundered pledges  
Do not decipher doddering dreams  
Even at the brink of disasters  
With perpetual dirge on our lips  
(*Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 37*).

The military regime in Nigeria was the era of extreme fear in the minds of the masses; this is because the military leader can wake up one morning and announce to the public what he wants to do and starts with it at once. This is because they are “the harbinger of heavy decrees/the promulgator of ailing edicts /the director of complex coup plots/welcome to the general in charge” (38).

Many people undergo series of emotional torture and pain when the military begin to give their “staccato orders” (37) because they do not know how anyone may be affected. Corruption and uncertainty from the leaders of the society have actually given many Nigerians a hunch and the poets write to keep the masses abreast of the situation as well as dissuade these perpetrators through criticism. Because they are Generals and leaders, they engage in so many misdemeanors originating from their greed and self deceit. They are

Owner(s) of foreign bank accounts  
 Controller of fishing trawlers  
 Manager(s) of complete companies  
 Land speculator in several states  
 (*Ezenwa-Ohaeto*, 38).

The leaders (the military) have abandoned their traditional role as leaders in pursuit of wealth, and Ezenwa-Ohaeto does not conceal these misdeeds. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada, in the poem, “Oriki of a General” and some others, the military receive Ohaeto’s satirical lash” (73). These are indeed subtle comments on the various facets of the culture of military dictatorship in the country and what they have come to mean in

the estimation of the Nigerian masses. Nwachukwu-Agbada contends that Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poetry is that of "mass appeal" (73) and that the language is that of the "street", "breezy" in tone and the thematic concern is one which captured popular imagination (73). There is no doubt that Ezenwa-Ohaeto writes for the masses, keeping in touch with the great writers' injunctions about relevance and committed literature. In *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*, the poet himself admits that he is the night masquerade itself, 'the invisible one' (*The Voice of the Night Masquerade* 17); he says, "I am the masquerade/ The one they know/Yet the one they dread" (17).

The delusion from the leaders comes in various shapes and colours. The leaders come in as 'Messiah' but act extremely as military, leaving the masses deluded as they think that the military will be messiahs indeed, as claimed. Their various decrees and edicts help them to rigidify and conceal their abnormalities. Ebong contends that what is needed at this point is for the writers to employ their medium of expression to implant the revolutionary message in the minds of their audience (78). The masses shall not be fooled forever by their leaders who for want of leadership qualities make promises they never ever fulfill. This is why writers like Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide et c push this change consciousness into the minds of their audience through their poems. The last of the poems in which Ezenwa-Ohaeto shows some kind of unhappiness with the leaders is "Rivers are Not Afraid". In the poem, the masses are filled with pain and sorrow because the leaders delude them by making them "peddle sickly hopes" (39) and "mumble mournful moans" (39). The leaders never tell the masses the truth and even the news they give are "sanitized

news” (39). The persona feels sorrowful because in Nigeria, there is nowhere to turn: “the sun is too hot/the rain is very heavy” (39). The situation is so hopeless that the persona thinks of impossibilities that he ends up with these questions:

Who can bargain with the hurricane  
to cut a new path  
Except the solid tree?  
Who can convince the thunder  
to strike harmless  
Except the brave medicine man? (39).

Perhaps the poet is evoking the spirit of revolution here, indicating that it takes a stronger evil to drive out an existing one. The poet urges “the hand strong enough” to “smash an event to release/ the dormant rage of the pawn”(39). He asks, “Who has got any friend/In this shark world/Of economic politics?/We remain our own enemies” (40).

The world is sharp and everybody talks of money and that is why the world is one of “economic politics”. In a society where capitalism is the dominant mode of production, the two classes continually wage an ideological struggle for the control of production and the distribution of resources. This struggle is a historical necessity inherent in the contradictions within the capitalist relations of production where the working people are exploited and oppressed by the tiny dominant idle class which controls production. According to Agye, in Africa, where this exploitation and control of production are being done for the interest of the European bourgeoisie and their local allies, the struggle for national liberation becomes the most imperative

(128). In Nigeria this struggle continues among the two classes and they are left in perpetual pain and sorrow occasioned by hopelessness. In all intents and purposes, Ezenwa-Ohaeto has a direction in his poetic craft. His artistic aim was to use his poetry to propel his Nigerian people out of their inertia in a world that has left them behind, particularly in the domain of national development (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 14).

The poetry of Ezenwa-Ohaeto not only rekindles a kind of self-consciousness of the state of affairs of the masses and the exploitation and delusion meted on them by the leaders but also shows some kind of repetition of intention or themes. This kind of repetition is such that through it the masses are made to understand the level of the state of affairs in the country and how these affect them adversely.

### **Conclusion**

Ezenwa-Ohaeto truly writes for the emancipation of the common man in the society, challenging the bourgeois class for their love and pursuit of material things. According to Chuma-Udeh, Ezenwa-Ohaeto “presents a society full of relatives than absolutes - a confused and chaotic environment where the system sacrifices the common man at the altar of materialism” (140). In various styles, the poet exposes the sufferings and sorrows which the common man experiences in Nigeria. Part of the pain and sorrow which pervade the lives of the masses is the delusion caused by the leaders. They never think good of the masses and never tell them the truth. This is why the poet ‘chants’ for a change for better as he personally points out that “the words of the resident poet are for the emancipation of the common man”. Ekpong notes that the predicament, the dilemma

of Africa has always been associated with capitalism, political exploitation ... and that corollaries to these include cultural estrangements, disillusionment with the ruling class e t c. (75). In reality, it is this quest for material things that brings about disillusionment. The masses no longer believe in what the ruling class say and do because they are neck-deep in exploitation, embezzlement and as such deluding those who bank their hopes on them.

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