
**ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE POETRY OF
JOE USHIE**

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Abstract

There is a continuous growing suspicion of the relevance and the survival of literature; but seemingly, ecocriticism aptly justifies the impetus and functionality of literature as a discipline. Ecocriticism is an earth-centered literary theory that tries to analyze and evaluate how literary texts contribute to the change and improvement of our environment. Although, it is incontestable that the 21st Nigerian poetry has been stifled by other sister genres especially the Nigerian novel; the paucity in the corpus has not in any way daunted or muted the muse of the Nigerian poets. This paper attempts to explore Ushie's eco-critical concerns and how this new direction has informed on man's relationship with the environment. Ecocriticism confront the despoliation of the environment and strives towards making the society a better place. Besides expounding the ideals of ecocriticism, the paper mirrors and confronts Nigeria's current societal realities like: violence and bloodletting; uneven distribution of power and wealth; corruption, injustice, fear and anxiety. Finally, the paper is hinged on the assumption that one cannot attest to loving nature without loving humans as well, hence, the paper melds and negotiates Ushie's treatment of the environment and human activities in a view to achieving attitudinal change.

Keywords: 21st Century Nigerian Poetry, Joe Ushie, Ecocriticism, Environmental (In) Justice, Sensitization and Change.

Introduction

Throughout history, poetry has been a vehicle for societal representations of thoughts and experiences: profound or banal. It carries a people's imagination, dissatisfactions, drives and ultimately birth new dreams and ideals in achieving a stable or near utopian society. Different crevices of the poet's society are awoken and where misunderstandings abound, are visualized, resolved or at worst, attempts are made for answers to be proffered. Unfortunately, in contemporary Nigerian literature, the corpus of poetry has encountered a relative decline in comparison to other sister genres like prose, non-fiction and drama.

One cannot blame the flaccidity of the contemporary Nigeria poetry solely on the 'nonperforming' Nigerian poet because, even globally, accelerated lifestyle has increased geometrically and dramatically due to advancement in technology. Hence, the society is absorbed in striving towards technological and scientific advancement rather than paying attention to "unimportant and emotional" yearnings of man that literature proposes. Also, the manifold nature of globalization has impinged on societies. For instance, the growing urbanity and fast pace existence of man in his society has hindered a commune with oneself, nature and the environment. Hence, this paper takes its root from the contention of human, animal and environmental scarification. It is no

gainsaying that our society pays little or no attention to issues like deforestation, global warming and desertification. It is also pertinent to stress here that the Nigerian society holds sacrosanct its anthropocentric viewpoint and as such other forms of life is less important. Even *The Bible* in Genesis 1: 27-28 backs man's dominion over flora and fauna thus:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and every living thing that moveth upon the face of the earth. (King James Version)

This passage gives mankind absolute authority and as such places man at the apex of creation to conquer and have dominion over flora, fauna and other elements on earth. Against such conditions, mankind continues to assert himself over the air, water and earth spaces, but eco-centric writers argue for man's stewardship rather than his tyrannical domination of nature. William Rueckert in "Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society" avers that, in ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (5). This is man's foremost existential agenda. Hence, Cheryl Glotfelty implicates literary scholars worldwide for their complicity stressing, "... if we are not part of the solution we are part of the problem...how then can we contribute to environmental restoration...from within our capacity as professors of literature (xxi). In fact, Glotfelty goes further to accentuate this negligence of the earth when she duly observes that, "You could easily discern that race, class and gender were the hot topics of the late 20th century, but you would never know that the earth's life support system was under stress. Indeed, you might never know there was an earth at all"(xxii).

Indeed, the Nigerian society believes that a homily to nature is symptomatic of western gibberish and that the earth cannot be harmed. This is therefore analogous to a situation whereby one lives in a dirty house; goes out every day to make a living but takes no cognizance of the disarray in his home. Even in highly literate circles, there seems to be a mistrust of issues like Carbon credit and afforestation which amongst other environmental friendly programmes are viewed with suspicion. But these visible realities of a dying earth, a careless and carefree society are all around us for all to see, hence, we must continue to urge the poet to keep singing no matter how frightening the songs are.

Literature, opines Serpil Oppermann in "Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder"

can be perceived as an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language and imagination, which can then be linked to the problems of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain(3).

This gives the writer, poet, novelist or dramatist the impetus to express the un/dignified thereby disseminating societal infelicities and also encouraging positive consciousness of handling and healing the earth. For these reasons, Soren Kierkegaard in *Either/Or* aptly describes the poet as:

An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, sounds like lovely music ... And people flock around the poet and say: "Sing again soon"- that is, may new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music ... is blissful. (4)

The poet is here portrayed as a possessed

being that must create beauty in spite of the poet's anguish and even when beauty gets tangled with ugliness of life, the poet is bedeviled with these enormous tasks. Joseph Akawu Ushie is from this bloodline of unhappiness, and so he continues to sing to keep from crying. Though, there is a seeming dearth in the corpus of Nigerian poetry; there is also a visible paradigm shift in the thematic preoccupation of contemporary Nigerian poetry. This change is borne out of a global attitudinal change and concern towards the despoliation, maintenance and preservation of the ecology.

At a time when there is allegedly no place on earth that has been unaffected by man's defacement of the natural environment, the contemporary Nigerian poets alongside their other counterparts, are continuously gaining grounds in registering the unpalatable relationship between culture and society towards the environment. In such stride towards awakening our eco-critical concerns, some contributions have been made to articulate man's unmindful impact on the ecosystem. Some notable contemporary Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, and Joe Ushie amongst others lament and denounce the wanton pillaging and degradation of nature, the environment and the society.

Ecocriticism goes by several nomenclatures like Green Cultural Studies, Environmental Literary Criticism, Eco-poetics, and E-theory (Oppermann³). Furthermore, Oppermann claims that no literature survives outside the environment that produces it, since it directly examines the question of human constructions such as meaning, value, language and imagination which can then be linked to the problem of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain. This shows a clear link between literature and the society. In fact, Riane Eisler stresses the fact that "ecocriticism" advocates a rethinking of our commonly held beliefs and perceptions, and our versions of nature, towards creating a consciousness of the essential unity of all

life (26). On his part, Lawrence Buell observes that ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in the spirit of environmental praxis such that, ecocriticism projects an interest in redefining human relationship to other species thereby creating and maintaining a linkage between nature and culture by reacting and behaving in relation to nature and ecological aspects (2). According to Amir Abbasi and Bahman Zarrinjooee in "William Wordsworth's Poems: Signs of Ecocriticism and Romanticism", ecocriticism is a nascent and a deepening undertaking which is viewed with strong skepticism but succinctly portrays the literary artist as a contributor to solving "real" world problems (203).

This paper focuses on the poems of Joe Ushie, apoet who laments the despoliation of the ecosystem, and as well interrogates the indignities of the Nigerian society. Ushie is regarded as a "third generation poet" (Aboh 540), he is one of the recent voices in our poetic wilderness that projects the aesthetics of nature and decries the deplorable state of the landscape of the Nigerian environment by human activities. Ushie also portrays the interconnectedness of the environment, culture, social and even the political landscape in maintaining human and environmental degradation. Consequently, Ushie re-routes our consciousness into being mindful of the "impact" that man has made on the environment. He also celebrates the aesthetic manifestation of nature in arts and life on one hand, and a concern for the protection of the natural environment on the other which is one of the key foundations of Ecocriticism.

Therefore, this paper feeds on Ushie's impulse of sensitizing his society on the following fronts: individuals and societal disposition, reaction and relationship towards ecological activities, environmental challenges militating against man and how man himself has become a threat to his environment. More so, because "man is a product of his environment" (Olatunji 7), Ushie also explores themes like poor leadership,

corruption, sectionalism and other infelicities abounding in the Nigerian society. Finally, apart from the novelty and paradigm shift of Ushie's thematic preoccupation, the paper also explores Ushie's innovative craftsmanship as it contributes to 21st century Nigerian poetry.

Ecocritical Concerns of Joe Ushie

Mankind has always been fascinated by nature. Everything about nature speaks of a beauty that has marveled writers and left a few capable to capture the resplendent magnitude of the human environment. The hills, rivers, mountains, forests and even raindrops inspire inexplicable feelings of splendour. Nature always teaches us innumerable lessons as well as generates several enigmas and fewer answers. This responsiveness of the artist to the experiences of his society is what Joe Ushie in the collection of his poetry under discussion illuminates. This section foreshadows Ushie's strident nature-portrayals and his categorical condemnation of the socio-political, cultural and economic atrophy of nature. All writers are made of many parts and Ushie is no different, therefore, his preoccupations are multi-dimensional as depicted in his collections: *Popular Stand* (1992), *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995) *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998) *Hill Songs* (2000) *A Reign of Locusts* (2004) *Tsunami Blues* (Ed.) (2006). This essay randomly selects related poems from the various collections to periscope the lamentable situation of man and the society, the deplorable ecosystem and harsh socio-cultural and political practices that are against humanity and nature. In "Echoes from the Silent" Ushie clearly states his thematic concerns that are consequently the road map of this paper. He writes:

In celebration
 Of innocent trees
 And beast found
 Among the fallen

In this genocide
 Of man on man
 Beast and trees (*Eclipse...*, 57)

This leans on the ambit of man's inhumanity to man and man's exploitation of nature. "Nature" according to Raymond Williams is, "Perhaps the most complex word in the language" (219). It is used here relatively to mean the flora and fauna, air, water, rocks, and even fire and the solar system. These dichotomies are the prongs with which one can capture Ushie's nuances. Aboh believes that, "The bulk of the discussion on Ushie's poetry has concentrated on how he captures the depleting eco-system...how human activities destroy the ecology(sic)" (541). Aboh further warns against the unjustified betrayal that one can easily make from such lopsided conclusions (541). Hence, Ushie's critical acclaim stems from championing and inviting the reader in partaking in the critical debate and concern for human experiences and his environment; thereby placing Ushie's significance and prominence on his ability to evaluate cultural traditions and portray the indebtedness of human society and culture to nature.

It is important to stress that Ushie's childhood is more than a background to the birthing of his poetic oeuvre; rather, it influenced his poetic creativity, his celebration of nature and its beauty and subsequent concern about its destruction. In *Hill Songs*, the poet persona gives a firsthand account of his interaction with nature, thereby portraying its beauty and fragility. In "Hill Song", Ushie paints a beautiful panorama of a landscape which protects and provides succor for the flora and fauna. He writes:

O hills of my birth
 My umbilical accord
 Silent sentinel on whose
 Crowns my forefathers dwelt

Your ridges like a forgotten garden

In whose curved palms we lie

Massaged by gently-sailing wind

Your crown of rocks worn

Like berets in whose womb

The rodents dwell

... to nurture man, beast and tree (9)

From this poem we can unearth a palimpsest of diverse imagery created. On beholding the landscape again after a long period, the persona expresses a joyous feeling in his heart and that transmutes immediately to the reader. The line “O hill of my birth” addresses the hills as if they are lovers thereby creating a nostalgic image of a long lost love. This panorama further appreciates and expresses the relationship between the persona and nature (hills), thereby creating a bond between man and his environment by stressing the relationship as a historical normalcy. The poet creates such profound imagery because he grows from such a background and makes strong claims of his ancestral ties to the hills. It also creates a portrait of a mother (the hills) and a babe (the poet persona) in a nurturing relationship. Apart from the image of kinship, also created is the aesthetic and photographic depiction of the hill side. These portrayals are painted expressing pleasure, conviviality and euphoria in the presence of the hills. Finally, in the last few lines, the poet makes the hill a home for not only himself as a human being, but for animals and trees too. He draws attention to his ancestors' historical instinctive reliance on nature and in turn nature acted as protective umbrella. The landscape is a cornucopia of beauty and tranquility which can be translated to mean that God can be found in nature. Therefore, just like the romantics of old, Ushie portrays the scenic hillside as a place where God may be found; nature becomes a balm, provider and protector in the times of

spiritual and socio-economic need.

Apart from the awe of nature, Ushie juxtaposes a lamentable image of the hill, the second part of the poem hammers on the impact of human activities on the natural environments. He shows that man is corrupted by civilization. There are several tropes of man's inexcusable struggle in vain to conquer and destroy the earth. This portrays the deplorable and chaotic relationship between man and nature, in the wake of this, the environment experiences a deflowering and rape by human activities as captured in the following expressions: “axe and flame”, “undressed, nude”, “greed-fanned flame”, “greed-clad axe”, and “greed-brewed death” (*Hill Song*, 10). Unequivocally, this blames the destruction of the environment on the insensitive and dominating actions of man-the destroyer/devourer whose:

fingers have turned my

hills to dust

Whose slings have sigh-lenced

Birds of my bloom

Whose gourd has dried up

The spring of my bloom (11).

Godwin Ushie and Idaevbor Bello are of the opinion that, first, the hill carries maternal and martial credentials and secondly, that “an image of helplessness runs through the end of the poem, the image of man's predatory nature and greed that have robbed the hills of their greenery and life” (4). The poem bemoans man's destructive explorations by showcasing how man has fingered every part of nature, disemboweled the hills, and defiled the rivers and forests leaving the environment in a hapless situation. Lawrence Buell argues that “apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that environmentalism has at its disposal” (2). This is a labyrinth from which deeper “truths” are expected to be made bare not by western writers only, but by all who wish to express the experiences of the domination of nature. These writers try to

showcase diverse cases of the fragile earth as a dying living organism.

In Ushie's poems, we see diverse images of man's rapacity. This predatory nature is further captured in "God and Man" in *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998). He writes:

God made the hills
and the hills bears the tree;
man made the knife
And the knife fells the trees (40).

Nigerians are a religious people and Ushie uses this perspective in the above poem to bring to the fore the interplay between God and man to establish the presence of a creator who made all things and gave man the command to oversee and not to destroy. Ecocritics have always debated the interplay of a godhead in the affairs of man and nature resulting in the causality of the wanton deplorable nature of the ecosystem by human activities. Cultural ecologist, Eugene Anderson also expresses his anger and complains of the indifference and apathy shown by the public towards nature (3). Anderson further observes that one of the ways to retrace man's steps to the appreciation of nature is to peddle the sensitivity of nature. Apart from portraying the abysmal treatment of the earth, Ushie further advocates for a conterminous existence among man, beast and plant, a mutual relationship that is beneficial to all. But man's activities continue to show clearly his disregard for nature.

In *Lambs at the Shrine* (1995), the poem "Gadfly" draws heavily on the triangulation of the activities of man, nature and the consequences of the rapacity of man on the ecosystem. Similarly, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", the poet persona bemoans the death of the albatross, a harbinger of good and evil thus, "for all averred, I had killed the bird that made the breeze to blow/...I had killed the bird that brought the fog and the mist" (Abbasi and Zarrinjooee, PartII, Line

10/16). A key lesson one learns from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariners" is atonement; when we seek forgiveness from nature we get forgiveness as seen in the case of the Ancient Mariner. But unlike the Ancient Mariner, the poet persona in "Gadfly" observes the "killing of plant and animal" done with impunity and no sense of remorse. The poet persona is dumbfounded because human beings are unrepentant. In spite of the heaviness and topicality of the environmental issue, some people as well as some writers have come to display "righteous silence" as man consistently plunders his environment. The poet believes that the earth dies gradually due to the inconsiderate activities of humans and the illogical silence expressed by those who could speak for the environment and have refused to do so.

Ushie believes that his appreciation of nature does not end in despair but in hope. That is why "Hill song" in spite of the anarchy created by inhuman activities, depicts the poet persona's preaching growing bolder and louder in encouraging everyone to fight for a healthy earth. In the same vein, "Song of Sisyphus" bespeaks the poet's obdurate pride and persistence in paying allegiance to the appreciation of nature and vows to continue his obeisance until everyone is aware of the scarification done to earth. He insists: "I cannot stop crowing aloud this song / Until the cock pays its terminal toll to nature. / I will sing, I will sing, I will sing s a m e song lifelong" (*Eclipse...*, 10).

A large number of people are still ignorant of the fact that the earth is suffering. The image of "the cock" symbolizes cockiness, headiness, stubborn pride as mankind exercises absolute and perverse "authority" over flora and fauna". Hence, Ushie goes a little further to project the ideas of what Max Oelschlaeger describes as "preservationist environmentalism", a situation whereby an ecocritic prioritizes local or regional landscape in the discourse of ecocriticism and the environment thereby shaping an emerging poetic national identity. Ushie goes down to his roots-- the Bette Bendi people -- to paint pictures of hills, rainforest, vales,

flora and fauna and to extricating practices and values to inspire ecocritical ethos. The poet is displeased that despite the awe nature inspires and the moral topography displayed, humans are struggling vehemently to conquer nature.

To recap, this section uses Joe Ushie's poetry to enlighten people of what is happening in the world. The section also notes that ecocriticism shows the interrelatedness of man, the society and nature, and the infelicities inflicted on nature by man. The poems under discussion attempt to sensitize man to change his approach and attitude towards nature and to understand that all life forms are linked.

Style as the Man

Count de Buffon's famous epigram, "Style is the man" foregrounds a writer's hallmark of character; hence, foreshadowing the personality of the writer in the process of interrogating the writer's thought and expression. The communicative and expressive vehicle Ushie conceptualizes in his oeuvre is likened to Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide in content and style. Ushie's poetic oeuvre also charts and resonates the ideals posited by these ecocritical greats aforementioned. Ushie departs from the rubbery and starchy poetry that characterized Nigerian poetry of the 20th century. In fact, Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* (1987) becomes more of a constitution or a road map defining the type of poetry that would become the foundation of contemporary Nigerian poetry. Biodun Jeyifo clearly explicates in the foreword of *Songs of the Market Place* that:

"New" poetry differs from the "old", pre-Civil War poetic vintage of Okigbo, Soyinka, Echeruo and Clark as much in the new subjects and themes of poetic expression as in the demystification of the language of poetry. While the older poets generally deployed a diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe

calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists, the new poets have taken the language of poetry, the diction of figurative expression, to the marketplace- to the popular daily press even. (ix)

Joe Ushie's poetry speaks not to a certain coterie but to all; it carries a velvety simplicity and clarity that invites, excites and informs. His style is well suited to his thematic preoccupation, be it eco-criticism or social activism. Even his literary devices are homely as he draws largely from the storehouse of his peoples' history, culture, language and landscape "to conform to the larger institutional context that is being addressed" (Aboh, 110). Ushie draws from his region's experience to propagate to the larger society his viewpoint. Be it ecocritical or sociopolitical concern, he employs every day speech to shun the plasticity (an embodiment of a true ecocritic) of the old poets mentioned in Jeyifo's quote above. In fact, Ushie's collection of poems cogently subscribes to Osundare's position of what constitutes "good" poetry, Osundare stresses that:

Poetry is not the esoteric whisper of an excluding tongue not a clap trap for a wondering audience not a learned quiz of a Greco-Roman lore Poetry is a life spring which gathers timbre the more throats it plucks harbinger of action the more minds it stirs (3).

In the bid to connect to the reader in content and form, Ushie keenly follows the simplicity which Osundare professes above, therefore making his poetry easily accessible so that all can be informed and as well be educated by them. These simple, strong and expressive poems confront our inner self and stir us to action

Also focal in Ushie's rendition is his use of neologisms. This technique brings freshness, humour and authenticity to contemporary Nigerian poetry; this newness is seen in words like, "hewman" (human), "Softstitutes" (substitutes), "Compagriots" (Compatriots), "subvival" (survival),

“camera-daring” (camaraderie), “sigh-regn” (sirens), “atmosfear (atmosphere), “tyrelessly (tirelessly), “liprousine” (limousine) and “homo sappers” (Homo Sapiens). The poem “Night, still” is a collage of neologism depicting the unending quagmire suffered by the poor; it expresses a continuity of exploitation and appeals that the bards, griots or poets should continue his hymnal for positive change using the “swords of words” to eradicate unjust government. He writes:

Of crocodiles nurtured by hewman
[human] flesh...

And the bard, like a vulture
feasting

On own child's carrion, seeks
softstitutes [substitutes]...

Fear not, compagriots
[compatriots]...

Our ungoing [ongoing] wounds.
("Night, still", 11-12)

These words played upon are not baseless or artificial but are rather concrete, witty and they appeal to readers. Ushie's imagery which though can be said to be regional, brings his poems home to readers.

Another key asset of Ushie's poems is his extensive use of allusions to real life people like Kenule Saro-Wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi, Kudirat Abiola, General Ibrahim Babangida, General Sani Abacha and a host of African and non-African characters that readers either emulate or loath, chide or cherish, and those are fondly remembered or those that should be hurriedly forgotten. Ushie utilizes some literary elements like euphemism, allusion, metaphor, symbolism, personification, allegorically and different literary devices to convey his themes. Also, apart from direct reference to human beings, indirect allusions are also used to depicting linkages between human and animal characters in order to showcase characters that are greedy, frail, starving, insatiable and

dangerous. Also some characters are made caricatures, some are elevated while some are satirized depending on their humanistic principle. According to Garba Ismail Bala

Most of the time these metaphors are references to Nigerian political scene human characters are powerfully substituted with that of vulture, hyena, hawk, tiger, lion, fox, or dragon in order to capture the precise, pervasive image (and indeed the reality) of injustice, extra judicial murder, corruption and all other vices associated with the long reign of military dictatorship in Nigeria, and to some extent with the present crop of “civilian dictators”. (5)

In the innumerable animal guises pointed out by Bala above, Ushie's collection of poems under study capture the foible of leaders; as well as pointing accusing fingers for murder, social infelicities and other flaws that are characteristic of bad governance. Ushie weaves all these into his collection of poems thereby charting and interrogating human and environmental injustices. On one hand, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Ushie declares his affinity with nature and the way humans have corrupted the earth. On the other hand, he also appropriates socio-political experiences to intimate us with diverse ills in the society.

Social Commitment

It will be a misconception to wholly label Joe Ushie a nature poet without considering his lamentation against inequality, inhumanity, poverty and other social malaise replete in the society. Ushie understands the mechanics that, the defense of nature and that of the environment is entwined with the advocacy for social justice. In spite of the variegated nature of ecocritics, their commonality towards humanistic ideals is fore because you cannot argue to love nature without loving humans because these are inextricably interwoven. Lyn White Jnr is of the opinion that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them”(6). This truism goes ahead to stress that the

springboard to being a good nature lover is to express a high degree of concern to human experiences. Therefore, Ushie can be labelled an eco-social critic and social commentator who agitates for the wellbeing of human beings as well as the environment.

Also, Ushie, like many other artists understands that power is the real catalyst for any real social, cultural, economic and political change. Ushie's preoccupation goes beyond the boundary of ecocritical concern. Most writers have shown themselves to be dedicated artists to ideals they hold dear and a large portion of this majority tend to fight against the ills of the society. In whatever genre, the sheer determination of literature and literary artists is to uplift the downtrodden in the society. They have professed their roles, sensibilities and responsibilities to art and society. Thus, Romanus Aboh claims, "The new Nigerian poetry therefore performs the simultaneous function of charting a poetic tradition of linguistic simplicity and poetry as a platform that can be calibrated along the axis of social change" (108). This further cements the duality of nature artists as social critics. In whatever capacity, these writers lament the quagmire in their societies.

According to Macauley Morwain, Ushie belongs to the generation of Nigerian poets described as "lamentation poets" (128). Morwain suggests that these poets lament the socio-political decadence, lack of visionary leaders, poor economy and a sickening educational system. Joe Ushie therefore employs plain poetic diction and style and a shiftless persistence to express the angst of the people borne by the ineptitude and indifference of Nigerian leaders.

In all his collections of poems, Ushie expresses strong predilection to portray litanies of man's inhumanity to man; he periscopes societies burdened with incompetent and corrupt leaders who enjoy the unending squalid plight of the masses. Bassey U. Bassey in "The Hills and the

Vales: Images of Leadership in the poetry of Joe Ushie" observes that "Ushie's poetry is a faithful record of the socio political happenings in his contemporary Nigerian society. It shows the society as one in which the leadership is not only insensitive but murderous" (24). In the same vein, Aboh observes that "Ushie's poetry continues to lament the systemic corruption and abuse of power, which causes the gap between the rich and the poor to widen even further. ..the theme of man's inhumanity to man has been at the centre of his poetic engagement" (542). Though from recent recollections, Ushie further stretches his writer's telescope beyond the shores Nigerian to other African countries.

Beginning from the Nigerian space, Ushie expresses the ineptitude and insensitivity of military and political leaders in their diverse era of governance. For instance, the poem, "Badagry Chains" draws attention to a paradigm shift from what slavery was to what it has become in our contemporary society. The poet persona observes that though we register an end of white slavery, but a new brand of slavery is on the rise. This dastard form of slavery is orchestrated by black upon blacks, "brother-master/we hang, still, from these chains" (*Lambs at the Shrine*, 12). This servitude which the persona expresses is made possible by the mechanism of power. Nigerian leaders, be it in politics or military, have been found guilty of corrupt practices; they are indifferent to the plight of their followers and perpetually keep them in servitude. These leaders are portrayed as thieves, stealing from the country's treasury to foreign countries of Europe and America. The poet persona juxtaposes the situation of the rich/ poor, slaves/master satirically thus:

How can we forget you, O great one,

When, even now, we lean on foreign vaults

Where our communal sweat winters

in private coded accounts

("Musa's Legacy", 16)

Ushie writes of a historical insensitivity of African leaders; he writes of the vicious cycle of churning leaders that are insensitive to what the people want. The poet shuns the self gratification of African leaders past and present. In “Termitarium” the poet persona x-rays the betrayal, unresponsiveness and inconsiderate nature of African politicians voted into power to salvage the squalid situation but have become blind with greed. The poet uses the termite, a mere insect to teach us a lesson in avarice. The poet writes:

The termitarium is a truer democracy.
 The workers build the empire
 And leisure in it blissfully;
 Ours is a sad song.
 We sow the seeds,
 They reap the fruits;
 We hunt the game,
 They eat the meal,
 Their eyes perched at the dish
 Of our sweat and blood,
 Ears restless for another bigle (sic)
 Of another armoured return (20).

The last two lines paint a pathetic historicity of the fugacious nature of power tussle between the politicians and the military in Africa. These restless situations are causal to poverty, poor education and retrogression in all spheres of the society. Also, in “Beehive” another social insect is analyzed to aid the depiction of class structure and struggle, uncertainty and disillusionment created by an endless waste of the rich natural resources in Nigeria and the continuous widening of the social gap.

Also, Ushie uses his poetry to accuse all who are involved knowingly and unknowingly in the subjugation of the poor by concluding

that everyone is responsible for the human condition of the society. He implicates everyone for their actions and inactions.

Commitment to Change

Society is a web of social interactions and interrelationships. Literature has always been an outlet for the discourse of current realities in the world; hence, we understand our culture, mis/directions and our fears even better. Ushie uses his collection of poems as a tool for social critique; as an avenue to lament and rally for social change and justice, and also as an opportunity for societal transformation. Going by recent happenings in our societies today, our society is retrogressing; deforestation, global warming, inequality, and the syndrome of the rich getting richer to the detriment of the poor. Ushie sees this as a reawakening of our consciousness to the depravity, insensitivity, corruption and gullibility of the Nigerian leaders. It suffices to say that, this is a wakeup call for change to everyone. Osundare as an ecocritic also promotes this call for positive change in the following words:

I sing of the beauty of Athens without its slaves of a world free of kings and queens and of other remnants of an arbitrary past of earth with no sharp north or deep south ...of the end of warlords and armouries and prisons and hate and fear of deserts treeing and fruiting after the quickening rains...I sing of a world reshaped (*Songs...*, 89-90)

Like Osundare, Ushie advocates human freedom “of the beauty of Athens/ without its slaves” and also believes in brotherhood and mutuality-“with no sharp north/or deep south” and of an ecological reshaping. Ushie also unequivocally attunes his poems to these ideals of change, solidarity and an attitudinal change towards pressing questions like: “What happens when science and technology evolve unchecked ” Ushie also asks the question, “What happens when the diversity of our language, culture and socio-political differences tramples upon our harmonious and progressive existence”

These collections show that the consequence of the decay in the government is tantamount to the decay in the lives of the people. The poet also posits that apart from political decay, the masses on their part must shun negativity; strive to work together so as to upturn their societal quagmire and above all, live together in peace and unity. Random examples from Ushie's poetry collections fittingly show what Ime Ikkideh in the foreword of *Eclipse in Rwanda* (1998) noted as a "new voice with modulations that vibrate with creative freshness". These modulations, Ikkideh speaks of pertaining Ushie's poems, highlight what Ushie contributes to the canon of Nigerian poetry. Ushie expresses his discontent with every aspect of wrongdoing in the society. For instance, he decries the sycophant in the poem, "Towncrier" in the collection *Eclipse in Rwanda* who hones the unattainable things that the fake politician cannot do.

The poet also calls for change from all spheres of the society: from the rich who build tall fences to keep out the poor; to all women of easy virtue as seen in the poem "Lady X" (*Eclipse...*). The poet questions the negligence of the teacher who is a torch bearer but remains unrecognized for his contributions. Also, Ushie raises the consciousness of the society on the issue of child abuse, especially the maltreatment of orphans as seen in "Song of the Orphan" as the poet continues to hone the dictum of change. In the poem "Song of the thief", the poet clearly dissects the degree of stealing and the how the Nigerian society ascribes punishment. The poet juxtaposes the petty thief who is heavily punished for stealing an inconsequential item and the looter who gobbles the nation's treasury and he is seen as a hero. In whatever capacity, the poet decries any form of cheating or stealing by the rich and the poor alike.

Seemingly, there are several advocacies for change in Ushie's collection of poems. To leaders most especially, Ushie expresses the impermanent of power, and that violence begets violence, religious bloodletting, poverty and other attendant realities that

hinder growth and development. To the masses, Ushie strongly agrees that it is important for all to work together to oust the common enemy through solidarity and friendship across religious borders because the fight is against a common enemy and for a common course. In *Reign of Locusts*, he captures this thus:

A Christmas goat

A Ramadan ram

Tethered to a stake, trembling...

Round a stake

Are a million we

In reins of a midge

In whose reign the land bleeds

Yet if we but stir as one

These chains our bleat will break

But in idiolects we moan our common pain.
("Shackles", 43)

Ushie here reiterates his desire of oneness, showing that even the ("midge") corrupt and parasitic leadership can be dismantled if the masses cooperate. He observes that the peoples' diversities and plurality in language, culture, disposition and race are but a beautiful patchwork that makes the nation a great one and if multiplicity is properly harnessed, we can oust corruption and all its attendant realities.

Conclusion

The concern of this paper is multifaceted. First, the commitment to nature shows the contributions of Joe Ushie and a host of contemporary Nigerian poets trying to aesthetically redefine the face of Nigerian poetry by an audacious paradigm shift in content and form. They cogently dissect the interplay between literature, climate change while conceptualizing the future. Though ecocritical concern is but a recent issue in the

corpus of Nigerian literature, this paper fastens into environmental issues to demystify the interconnectedness of man and nature; how nature: the landscape, flora, fauna and the ambience opens us to the appreciations of our environment.

As depicted in Ushie's poems, this paper also attempts to capture and decry the ignoble cultural behaviour by man on the ecosystem. Hence, pictures of the rape of trees, streams and of pulverized hills and vales, the powerlessness of nature against the oppressive whims and caprices of man are all described. Though, Ushie's poetry laments all these destructions and more, the paper also projects that, in all disservice shown to our environment, nature might seem to have self-healing abilities though, but these are not certainties that our environment as we know it will stay green and healthy forever. The paper therefore calls for attitudinal cultural change that would make our environment and the world a more habitable place.

The other section of this paper renders Ushie's condemnation of greed, bad leadership, powerlessness, poverty, corruption, avarice, bloodletting, nepotism and various vices replete in the Nigerian society. This paper shows that Ushie's poems demands for change; they appeal for good governance, provision of social amenities and infrastructure by the government and the remediation of the plight of the poor and downtrodden. Ushie tows the position of social commentators and agitators across national and continental fronts to explicitly rebuke the malaise of war and strife in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole.

Finally, this paper displays Ushie's craftsmanship as he adroitly weaves plant and animal motifs, and people's experiences in depicting the gory impact of man's inhuman on the people and the ecosystem. Ushie speaks clearly of memory, beauty, fragility, danger, constancy and change; and by so doing calls for the repositioning of our behavior

towards handling our natural environment and also striving to promote the responsiveness of the artist to change our environmental, social, cultural and political frontiers for the benefit of man in the society.

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