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POSTCOLONIALISM IN TRANSITION: FROM COUNTER-DISCOURSE TO NON-COUNTER-DISCOURSE IN JOE USHIE'S *YAWNS AND BELCHES*

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Abstract

The transitory nature of critical practice does not grant literary approaches the licence to remain in stasis, and the corpus of postcolonialism in its broad spectrum takes no exception. Although counter-discursivity is the elixir that gave postcolonialism its golden cast, non-counter-discursive conceptual frameworks have been devised by critics to bear the burden of present-day postcolonial desiderata. Drawing upon postcolonial literary theory, Quayson's divergent conceptualisation of postcolonialism and Oyewumi Agunbiade's concept of inverted disillusionment, the paper adopts the qualitative content analysis methodology and purposive sampling method to interrogate postcolonialism within and beyond the primal threshold of counter-discourse using nine poems in Joe Ushie's *Yawns and Belches*. Cognizant of the postcolonial motifs which the aforementioned poetry collection is replete with, the paper argues that the heavy presence of non-counter-discourse does not deny its eligibility in the canon of postcolonial literature. Furthermore, it reinforces the notion of inverted disillusionment to argue for the collective complicity of the masses against the decade-long belief that the sheer source of socio-political decay in Africa is the African leader. This deceptive conviction absolves the egoistic citizens of their vicious partnership with egomaniacal leaders who plunge the people to disturbing depths. Having highlighted lucid illustrations culled from Ushie's *Yawns and Belches*, the paper concludes that the degenerated postcolonial status of Africa is not merely a product of the activities of the West or African political elite at the top stratum but also driven and sustained by the masses who offer themselves as expendable tools for the disruption of principles that should ensure political sanity.

***Keywords**:* **Postcolonialism, Counter-discoursivity, Joe Ushie's Poetry, Yawns and Belches, Non-counter-discoursivity**

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Introduction

While postcolonialism may appear to be an easily and finely knitted academic study, the evolutionary status of critical practice has revealed frays that must be timely stitched. From among the many contemporary Nigerian poetry collections that have addressed post(-)colonial issues, Joe Ushie's *Yawns and Belches* stands as one of the best exemplars in demonstrating the transition that has perforated postcolonialism from counter-discourse to non-counter-discourse even with the arrangement of poems in the collection. With fewer poems on counter-discourse and more poems on non-counter-discourse, Ushie emphasises the fact that postcolonialism can retain its postcoloniality even without wrapping its entire existence and essence around the interaction between the First World and the Third World. The principles that define a literary theory are rarely constant as critics modify existing tenets to accommodate the dynamics of changing critical relations. This submission is corroborated by Brannigan (1998) who contends that 'Literary theories and critical practices are always in transition, because they are always in history, always subject to change and constantly being revised and reused' (p.219).

The aggregation of postcolonialism is not exempted from these modifying possibilities although certain conclusions have apparently been made as to what defines postcolonial literature and postcolonial criticism. Some of the issues pioneering the problematic divide of this field of critical practice are captured by Biccum (2002) who avows that 'There is no consensus in the field of Postcolonial Studies either about its object of study or the terminology it uses to describe both itself and its various objects' since there have been several arguments regarding 'who is “postcolonial”, when is the “postcolonial”, and what it means to be “postcolonial” ' (p.34). These areas that are central to 'postcolonial' polemics have been addressed by critics through the years, and their submissions converge and diverge at certain nodes. However, the problems engulfing this theory are not limited to those identified by Biccum as there is also the problem of what morphologically constitutes the adjectival resultant of the word 'postcolonialism'. Quayson (2000) acknowledges its hyphenated and unhyphenated variants — 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial' — noting that while the former is usually chronologically inclined, the latter is not.

Within this context, 'post-colonial' is mostly used to indicate the period after imperialism while 'postcolonial' transcends chronological limitations as it could alternate the periods before, during, and after colonialism. It is in this regard that Gilbert and Tompkins (1996, p.4) write that postcolonialism 'is frequently misunderstood as a temporal concept, meaning the time after colonialism has ceased, or the time following the politically determined Independence Day on which a country breaks away from its governance by another state'. In this light, it is fallacious to only think of this concept from 1957 following Ghana's independence, or from 1960 within the context of Nigeria, or the period trailing 1961 in South Africa (or, by extension, 1994 when the African National Congress [ANC] won the first democratic election in the country). For Ashcroft et al. (2002), the term 'post-colonial' covers 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day' (p.2). Their concept of postcolonial literature is then hinged

on the node that connects colonialism and colonies/ex-colonies, concretised in their view that this literature engages the 'world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures' (p.2).

In one of Quayson's explications of postcolonialism, this critical approach involves 'a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire' (p.2). Nonetheless, Quayson tackles the constricted stand by Ashcroft et al. on who the postcolonial is. For the trio, the postcolonial covers, among other countries, African countries, Caribbean countries, India, Pakistan, South Pacific Island countries, and the United States of America (Ashcroft et al., p.2). This view, for Quayson, overlooks the imperial position of the USA today solely because it was colonised by the British. Correspondingly, Quayson's conception of postcolonialism is not restricted to literature of former colonies. For him, it is mostly the content, and not the society of emergence, that defines postcolonial literature. The content of postcolonial literature is the most problematic, for while many argue that it must be counter-discursive, some have countered the counter-discursivity usually associated with postcolonialism.

Ashcroft et al. assert that postcolonial literature is steeped in 'the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial' (p.2), one that is tasked with the duty of 'revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past' (Gandhi, 2019, p.4). This stance parallels Kehinde's (2006, p.94) assertion that African postcolonial texts 'have become veritable weapons for dismantling the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as “Us” and “Them”; “First World” and “Third-World”; “White” and “Black”, “Colonizer” and “Colonized”'. According to him, the 'primary concern of most post-colonial African novelists is to salvage the history of their people that colonialism has manipulated' (p.94), the mark of counter-discourse. The effect of colonialism on the colonised is intergenerational, so intense it is that the 'post-imperial writers of the Third World therefore bear their past within them — as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a postcolonial future …' (Said, 1994, p.212).

Colonialism can then be viewed through the lens of historical trauma, leaving behind scars rather than wounds because, while the overt physical occupation may have ended, the psychological, cultural, and economic impacts still linger. The duo of Rukundwa and van Aarde (2007) capture the postcolonial debate in their claim that some see postcolonialism as a tool for challenging exploitation and discrimination everywhere, while others find it ambiguous, ironic, and even limited in its scope. For Osundare (2002), 'The “post-colonial” is a highly sensitive historical, and geographical trope which calls into significant attention a whole epoch in the relationship between the West and the developing world, an epoch

which played a vital role in the institutionalization and strengthening of the metropole-periphery, centre-margin dichotomy' (p.4). Even so, postcolonialism offers more than just a vessel sent to the Centre where the postcolonial writer is charged to disrupt 'the European narratives of the Orient and Africa, replacing them with either a more playful or a more powerful new narrative style…' (Said, 1994, p.216).

Perhaps, Mishra and Hodge (2005) had this thought lurking around when they declared that 'A postcolonial critique turns us away from postcolonialism, towards the words with which Foucault concludes his own contribution to the debates begun by Kant: a critical interrogation of the present and the necessity of "the labor of diverse inquiries"" (399). In context, by turning away from postcolonialism, postcolonial criticism draws on a wide range of perspectives, disciplines, and methods to delineate how the present can work towards meaningful change. The age-long view that a postcolonial literary text must orbit primarily around the empire/counter-discursivity has made some writers dissociate themselves from this description. This is crystallised by Osofisan (1999) who states that '… all our work continues to privilege the 'Centre' — by which is meant a former colonial country in Europe, and that we still take this 'Centre' as the focal point of all our activities of resistance in Africa' (p.3).

This way, the African writer, for instance, is trapped in the loop of '"writing back" to an "Empire" … and hence is perennially a "counter-discourse". This kind of reading therefore presumes, that is, that we continue to acknowledge the overweening presence of an 'Empire,' in which our roles are not only subaltern but are also an automaton gesture of response to the presence of the "Other"' (Osofisan, p.3). Osofisan urges the critical reevaluation of unilateral interpretations, arguing against labelling his work, and that of others, as solely 'counter-discursive' or 'post-colonial'. These terms, in his view, limit his works to mere decolonisation tactics, neglecting the simmering relevance of bifurcated and even trifurcated issues beyond the historical presence of colonialism. The conclusion that the hallmark of postcolonial literature is counter-discursivity denies it the universal leeway to evolve in a constantly evolving world. To cage postcolonialism in the vortex of counter-discourse is to initiate its process of obsolescence or lead the field to a critical cul-de-sac as there will come a time when writing back to the Centre will be secondary in postcolonial intercourse.

In African literature, this is not unusual as African writers had long started looking inward — there is no need to assume the Achebesque character 'who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames' (Achebe, 1975, p.78). Over the years, tons of mind-reorienting, history-rewriting, and future-forging literary productions have been sent out to the Centre to remodel preconceived and biased ideas held by hegemonists about the subaltern. Although there are persistent thoughts that undermine the truth value of the reality of the Occident as a people with civilised civilisation, the exigencies of post-independent societies, especially in Africa, demand that writers write to reroute the bearing taken by narcissistic leaders who are aided and abetted by egocentric followers. Even so,

these literary works, although not counter-discursive, should not deny their eligibility in 'postcolonial literature' solely because they do not serve as epistles directed to the Centre.

Denying monopolistic and conclusive claims and stressing the open-endedness of his position, Quayson avers that a postcolonial project has to 'be alert to imbalances and injustices wherever these may be found in East and West, North and South, and whether they are to do with racism or child pornography, women's labour or micro-minority rights, political authoritarianism or the degradation of the environment' (p.12). In a spate of arguments revolving around counter-discourse and non-counter-discourse is Quayson's submission that a postcolonial text or critique 'must be seen as a project to correct imbalances in the world, and not merely to do with specific "postcolonial" constituencies' (p.12). Quayson is one of the earliest scholars who thawed the counter-discursivity which had long frosted postcolonialism, asserting that a literary text bearing the mark of 'postcolonial' must be aware of and accommodate the disproportion of power distribution irrespective of the spatial and temporal setting of such a work and its thematic foci, whether human/anthropogenic or naturogenic — its primary essence should be interlocked with the idea of redressing unfair situations.

Pitting the thematic concerns in Ushie's poetic oeuvre against such postcolonial motifs as 'slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe' (Quayson, p.2) reveals that *Yawns and Belches* qualifies to be watermarked as postcolonial poetry. Counter-discourse, as indicated by Quayson, is one of the many concerns of postcolonialism but not its entirety. With the proliferation of various conceptual frameworks on how to critique a literary text from a postcolonial perspective, Agunbiade (2013) proposes inverted disillusionment which argues for the collective complicity of the masses as opposed to its precursor, postcolonial disillusionment, which views the degenerated state of Africa as the result of 'failure of leadership' (Achebe, 1984, p.1). Agunbiade believed that 'Theoretically and philosophically conceived, inverted disillusionment is foregrounded as an alternative engagement paradigm in reading African literature of the postcolonial era. It sits at the crossroads of postcolonial African literature and criticism as it advocates the extension of the frontiers of disillusionment in African Literature' (p.1).

Agunbiade's model is not geared towards counter-discursivity but the understanding of Africa's postcolonial situation in its emphasis on the collective responsibility of the people for their challenges while contesting the traditional view that makes African leaders solely take the fall for the mishap of the continent. Therefore, this paper uses the qualitative content analysis methodology to critique nine poems purposively selected from Ushie's latest poetry collection, *Yawns and Belches*, to x-ray the transition of postcolonialism from counter-discourse to non-counter-discourse, discussing the different issues emerging from both blocs.

Review of Related Literature

As one of the most expansive and interdisciplinary areas within critical theory, postcolonialism accommodates various studies anchored on different concepts. One such study is carried out by Kehinde (2006) who examines how postcolonial African novels serve as agents of decentralisation aimed at subverting the misconceptualised beliefs held by imperialists about the Third World. Using Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) as a representative postcolonial African text, Kehinde shows how African writers deconstruct stringent views about the Global South. From a counter-discursive perspective, Kehinde unravels the (c)overt intertextual leaning of Coetzee's *Foe* as a rejoinder to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) whose focus is to critique existing canonical works that perpetuate negative representations of Black identity. He reveals that the crux of Coetzee's novel is to project how 'African history did not begin with the continent's contact and subsequent destruction by the European colonialists. Rather than being the beginning, this period signalled the end of the beauty, communality and reciprocity characteristic of the way of the African past' (93).

Analogously, Burney (2012), like Kehinde (2006), investigates how writers have attempted to oust the denigrating representations of the colonised by the colonisers. She stresses 'the importance of postcolonial resistance that undercuts the tropes of Orientalism, narratives of empire, and colonial discourse' (p.105). She underscores the art of writing back to the Centre as a prerequisite for postcolonial discourse, drawing illustrations from Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965) and Salih's *Season of Migrations to the North* (1966) as prototypical counter-discursive texts written to rewrite the narratives in such texts as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Kipling's *Kim* (1901), Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and Camus's *L'Etranger* (1942). Burney emphasises the intertextuality of Ngugi's *The River Between* and Salih's *Season of Migrations to the North* as ripostes to Conrad's novella.

In her study, Amirouche (2021) posits that in the wake of postcolonialism, the African novel emerged as a tool for rewriting dominant narratives. Amirouche explores how African writers employ counter-discourses to decolonise the mind, challenge cultural imperialism, and forge a new sense of identity and history. Using Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1979), Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *A Grain of Wheat* (1985), and *Petals of Blood* (1986), Amirouche reaffirms the position that the main purpose of a counter-discursive narrative is to undermine the dominant discourse by creating new narratives bent on empowering the colonised and resisting the colonisers. Like Agunbiade (2023), as a conceptual framework for investigating the socio-political issues in African postcolonial literature, Usoro (2025) theorises the concept of paradoxised Ubuntu to examine how African politicians, on the average, selectively invoke and fundamentally invert the principles embedded in the foundational philosophy of Ubuntu. Rather than a genuine embodiment of communalism, interconnectedness, and empathy towards every individual, paradoxised Ubuntu manifests as a strategic appropriation of its rhetoric.

This concept involves foregrounding aspects of unity and shared identity during campaigns

or in moments requiring collective action, deploying the language of kinship and mutual support to garner favour and legitimacy; a carefully curated performance of Ubuntu that conveniently eclipses the tenets of accountability, ethical leadership, equitable resource distribution, and a genuine commitment to the well-being of all community members. The selective embrace of certain ideals that are divorced from their holistic framework is instrumentalised for consolidating power and masking self-serving agendas, creating a paradox where a philosophy intended for collective advancement is twisted to serve individual or elite interests. This paradoxical application results in a political terrain marked by a superficial adherence to communal values trailed by inequalities and a disregard for the ubiquitous interconnectedness that Ubuntu espouses. While politicians eloquently speak of brotherhood and shared destiny, their actions often point to the prioritisation of personal enrichment, the entrenchment of patronage networks, and the suppression of opposing voices — all actions antithetical to the spirit of Ubuntu.

Etim (2019) examines the history, historicity, historicism, historification, and historicality in selected poetry collections of Osundare and Ushie. Although his research involves *Yawns and Belches*, Etim adopts a historicist approach as opposed to the postcolonial approach used in this paper. Enukora and Okolo (2021) examine six poetry collections by Ushie: *Eclipse in Rwanda*, *Popular Stand and Other Poems*, *Lambs at the Shrine*, *Hill Songs*, *A Reign of Locusts*, and *Yawns and Belches* to detail how the poet utilises water-related images and symbols to communicate messages concerning environmental degradation. In another study, Okolo and Enukora (2021) employ ecofeminism to investigate the intersection of ecology and feminism in selected poems by Ushie. Ufot (2021) highlights how Ushie's thematic concerns in selections from *Hill Songs*, *A Reign of Locusts*, and *Yawns and Belches* (2018) are seriated through anaphoric, cataphoric, deictic, dialogic, and presuppositional connections.

Yet another time, Enukora and Okolo (2022) examine how Ushie's poetry deploys botanical imagery and plant life to reflect the realities of 21st-century Nigeria. Udoinwang and Akpan (2023) unravel the revolutionary contexts of Ushie's social vision in his oeuvre, engaging the political, economic, and environmental backdrops that are prominent in selected poems from Ushie's *Eclipse in Rwanda*, *A Reign of Locust*, and *Yawns and Belches*. Romanus Aboh (2024) examines indigenous eco-consciousness in Ushie's poetry, including *Yawns and Belches*, using Bette-Bendi indigenous epistemology as its conceptual framework. Although Ushie's poetry suffers no dearth of studies, how counter-discursive and non-counter-discursive postcolonial elements operate in his poetry remains unexplored, an area this paper investigates.

Postcolonial Indices in Ushie's *Yawns and Belches*

Yawns and Belches (2018) mostly oscillates between the First World and the Third World or the Global North and the Global South, the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor, the satisfied and the starving. In 'In Vitro Fertilization', the poet intersperses the poem with

narratives that point to how life was before the West imported colonisation, and the aftermath of this exploitation. It is noted that 'The western hemisphere is a womb which / Of its own, not bereft of bouncing fruit' (p.24). In vitro fertilisation is an unnatural way of conceiving, a procedure characterised by artificiality and used to describe the process in which the West conceived people from the Third World. Perhaps, the use of IVF, which is colonialism in this context, would have been justified if the children of the West had defects since the need to create healthy children would have been foundational. But they were not, and 'at the height of its belching season / it craned toward distant virgin wombs' (p.24).

Thus, the West underwent IVF but it was not because it could not conceive (at all) or have 'bouncing fruits' (p.24); it was nothing other than a deliberate and calculated act of manoeuvre. The upward or outward movement of cranes depicts extension beyond the normal range of human motion, an inference that the West strained to grasp regions beyond their reach. With this mechanical action, the West was able to 'scoop a mixed species / Of eggs for robust in vitro fertilization' (p.24). According to Chamberlain (2010, p.xii), the 'Berlin West Africa Conference drew up the ground rules for the European acquisition of territory in Africa. Although technically only applying to the coasts of West Africa, the provisions of the Berlin Act (February 1885), such as “effective occupation”, were applied to the whole continent'. Technically, the Berlin Act applied only to the West African coast, but the principle of effective occupation was extended to the entire continent, a parallel to the persona's account that the West 'scooped a mixed species' (Ushie, p.24).

The aftereffects of colonialism are of concern both to the colonised and the coloniser because the unnatural mixture of races/peoples by the West, in Ushie's view, birthed terrorism. This is demonstrated when the persona says that 'This all-incubating womb begets a cataclysmic breed briskly / Building, blessing, bursting or blasting the belching womb' (p.24). According to MacMahon (2007, pp.102-103): 'The notion that the relationship between sound and meaning is arbitrary is a cornerstone of post-Saussurean linguistics, yet seems to be at odds with the attention to and deliberate use of sound-patterning in poetry, and with the intuitions of readers that such sound patterns are significant…'. The last quoted line of Ushie's poem above bears the dual burden of thematic and stylistic weight as the repetition of the voiced bilabial plosive /b/ is not used solely for its sake. This follows Fonagy's (1971) observation that 'p', 't', and 'k' sounds give a poem an aggressive quality (quoted in MacMahon, 2007).

The tone of the poem deduced from the sound combination including the stringing up of the /b/ sound is an indication that the persona is angry, specifically with how the avoidable activities of the West have generated a series of problems that has plagued the world at large. He recounts that 'Now, everywhere in our world, whether belching or yawning / The fire burns same, ignited by famine and myrmidons of faith' (p.24). Due to the dishevelled nature of the world order, killing has become 'the cacophonous sound reigning in every ear / And the garment worn by every belching or yawning clime / Where *hew-manity* has ousted the humanity of every clime' (p.24). This seemingly small change in the morphological

transformation of 'humanity' to 'hew-manity' transforms the former from a general term for humankind's compassionate and empathetic nature into something brutal and destructive.

In 'World-class democracy', Ushie continues painting a picture of the West as a bloc that cloaks its exploitation with paternalistic benevolence, exactly what Cornevin (1980, pp.25-26) states within the context of a racially stratified South Africa as seen in the excerpt: 'The backwardness of the black peoples, the justification for white trusteeship, is repeatedly stressed; for example: “White South Africa is committed to develop the distinctive people, many of whom are only at the beginning of the long road towards self-government and economic and technological self-sufficiency” '. Transposing the same benevolent gospel from South Africa down to the West African country of Nigeria, Babawale (1989) posits that conventional analyses of colonial rule often focus on the perceived positive outcomes, citing advancements in infrastructure like transportation networks, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and other public works. However, alternative scholarly perspectives, notes Babawale, argue that the effect of British colonialism in Nigeria was the disruption and suppression of pre-existing social and political structures, including established systems of governance and social hierarchies.

The title of Ushie's poem is drenched in irony because a world-class democracy, better than basic democracy, is supposed to be stuffed with principles reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's classic explication: 'Government of the people, by the people of the people' (Wolfgang, 2005, p.15). Quite on the contrary, the democratic form of government whose hallmark is the sovereignty of the people rather confers power on those at the top; the belching, keeping the other regions 'In prison uniform / Of diverse colours' (p.17). Said (1989) addresses this in his assertion that colonialism had 'lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved' (p.207). Said argues that while political liberation is a significant step, it does not erase the persistent effects of colonial rule as they manifest in a combination of socio-economic challenges as witnessed in many countries across the African continent. The continual marginalised state of the colonised is made obvious in subsequent lines of the poem using such words as 'serf', 'bondsman', 'peon', 'fellah', 'coolie' (p.17), all of which are descriptions for servants in the different regions where colonialism prevailed, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America — the three regions from where the West pulls its resources according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1983).

The poet does not ignore the partitioning or cartography of Africa by the West in the last stanza of the poem: 'Along dividing lines drawn / By the bloc of the belching few / At whom we pelt helpless curses / In the idiolects of our colours' (p.17), substantiated by Thomas Bassett's (1994) exposition on the cartography of West Africa that 'Maps served as both instruments and representations … [that] contributed to empire building by promoting, assisting, and legitimating the projection of European power' (p.316). The poem that best delineates the partitioning of Africa by the West in Ushie's latest collection is 'One with the Beast'. The persona watches as his favourite TV channel exposes how 'Kingdoms and

empires of chimps and lions and / Hyenas main or murder to secure territory' (p.20). Using these animals, the poet shows the similarity between carnivores and the empires that suppress(ed) the Other, the Orient, and the subaltern. Britain justifies the presence of her empire in many countries by exclaiming that she, 'too, had been munched by the roaring Rome' (p.20).

In the preface to *The Rise and Fall of Modern Empires*, Levine clarifies that 'In the modern world, empires have been a constant and characteristic element of the political landscape. … They were also, for the most part, white empires ruling principally over peoples considered inferior, not least because of their racial difference from their European overlords (2016, p.x). Levine implicitly acknowledges that empires have also dominated other European countries, meaning that intra-European domination was a feature of earlier eras. Against this backdrop, Britain has tasted the violent military action that forced many of the indigenous peoples of Britain to accept Roman rule, while other communities submitted to the Roman army without a fight (Mattingly, 2006), thereby rationalising the colonisation of countries like Nigeria and India. Witnessing the savagery of animals, the persona cannot help but conclude that there is no 'boundary between man / and beast / between these mobile feral emperors and the stationary empires / and kingdoms' (pp.20-21). Thus, humans pose no markers that distinguish them from animals of the wild since 'all else ends in the womb of the stronger in empire of the wild / or of city' (21); every clime maintains the law of the survival of the fittest.

The poet transitions to non-counter-discourse with the eponymous poem of the collection, 'Yawns and Belches', emphasising how undemocratic many African nations are even though they camouflage themselves as democratic nations. The poet's persona says in the opening lines: 'Divine Wisdom created the fingers unequal but / Supplies both the shorter and longer ones equally; / Man carved democracy for the equality of all but / Supplies health to a few and death to the majority' (p.15). Ushie acknowledges the fact that although God made fingers to be unequal, He made provision for them in equal proportion. However, mankind failed to imitate God and machinated his scheme of things — humanity developed various systems of government, some, like democracy, programmed to be of the people, for the people, and by the people but in reality are of the few rich, for the few rich and by the many poor. The democracy practised in most African countries was 'carved…for the equality of all / but supplies health to a few and death to the majority' (p.15).

The persona highlights the stark difference between expectation and reality. Ushie is very antithetical in the poem as almost every stanza places good against evil, the rich against the poor. In the fourth stanza, for instance, the persona says: 'Beneath these imperial hills are yawning vales / Staring desperately at crowns of the belching hills / From which the vales receive largesse of drains / Parcelled and decorated with labels of grains' (p.15). The rich are on a pedestal where they are revered and looked up to by the poor while the latter are looked down on. This elevated position allows the self-centred officials to get, firsthand, the treasure meant for all in large quantity. Like dogs, the demoted position of the masses

allows them to receive crumbs that have been packaged and sent down to them. The decoration of the crumbs tricks the people into believing that they have received something worthwhile. This antic by the rich keeps the masses in a position of contentment where they do not feel the need for resistance.

The poet's persona goes further to say that 'the imperial belching hills daily share indispensable / life among themselves and roll only death down the vales' (p.15). 'Indispensable' shows how important life is, yet the belching rich do not pass it to the masses but share it amongst themselves and leave the poor to battle death. Ushie underscores the equality that accompanies death irrespective of which socio-economic divide one belonged to while alive. For him, the rich often act like gods,

> Forgetting, as they belch angst down the vales, that
> we are all
> But weightless straws on the flowing stream of
> impartial time
> g
> o
> i
> n
> g
>
> d
> o
> w
> n
> .
> .
> .
> At leisure pace of the stream, both the imperials and
> the lowly vales,
> Ending just where the muscles of the just stream or of
> Time's whirlwind
> Deposits us, where the earthworm or fish feasts on
> us, belching or yawning (16).

Death is impartial, against the partialness of life. This reality should compel mankind to be fair to all, knowing that there is no special preference given to the highly placed in society.

The poet employs logodaedalianism — the arrangement of 'words in unfamiliar structures beyond ordinary syntax, perhaps employing unusual punctuation and typography, even inventing words' (Ekpenyong, 2003, p.65) — to visually represent the movement of humanity through time as people age. The persona makes a clarion call for the practice of democracy in its unadulterated form, for death knows no man; neither the belching few nor the yawning many will defy this inexorable end. The electoral process in many African

countries has witnessed a surge in violent events involving political parties. As a common African reality, Ushie stresses the causes and effects of electoral violence on the people. Hoglund (2009, p.417) notes that 'Electoral violence is separated from other forms of political violence by a combination of timing and motive. The time aspect relates to violence carried out during the election period. The objective of electoral violence is to influence the electoral process and in extension its outcome'.

In Ushie's 'Weird Harvest', the poet's persona uses allegorical portraiture to explore Hoglund's position on electoral violence regarding timing and motive. A surface reading of the first two stanzas of the poem reveals the use of agricultural terms to project the electoral process typical of the Nigerian setting. He reveals: 'These sweet-tongued ogres plant and water here a wide species / Of weird crops: blindness of the majority; hunger for the honest, idleness / Of seed-bearing youth and fratricidal feuds among the tethered' (p.27). In folklore, an ogre is a man-eating giant, and Ushie uses this metaphor to describe politicians who use propaganda and vain promises to mobilise thugs used as war dogs during elections, the motive for inciting such violence is to influence the electoral process and its result. These weird crops are the political thugs who are forged by their blindness to the truth which may come in the form of tribalism; the political weaponisation of poverty; and unemployment which has reduced youths with potential (seed-bearing) to hooligans.

The motive for mobilisation is made concrete in the following stanza where the persona says that the seeds of discord are planted so that they grow 'As weapons for harvest of throne in that brisk ballot season when the / Belching hills and yawning valleys commune, when the iroko and grass / Commune on the soil in the lethal grip of greed, creed and thirst' (p.27). These lines reflect the shammed communality of the rich and the poor during elections. When it is time to gather support, the rich descend from their hills and commune with the poor in their valleys. The typography of Ushie's poem highlights the position of the two parties accurately placed by the poet for pitch-perfect conceptualisation. Apart from their positions in life, the difference between the belching and the yawning is noticed in their size — the 'iroko and grass'. This antithetic phrase allows readers to compare and contrast the disparity that exists between them. However, election season becomes a leveller where the rich and poor bond superficially in the quest for power propelled by 'greed, creed and thirst' (p.27). This means that even their reason for the power tussle is not anchored on the need to satisfy the needs of the general public.

The collective complicity of the masses in the socio-political retrogression argued by Agunbiade is evident in subsequent lines. It is time to wage war on members of the opposition to suppress their votes but the politicians who are supposed to spearhead the violence are nowhere to be found. The political elite retire to their mansions while they watch the yawning ebb their lives, making the persona wonder where the children of 'the governor and of the minister' and 'the party chair and of the contractor' are in the 'frenzied march towards his opponent's house, axe-armed…' (p.27). The possession of an axe signals a movement that will snowball into violence, injuries, and death. In all of this, the poor

cannot find 'the spouse, the cousin, the niece or the nephew of the belching / for whose stool I'm [the yawning are] dying to secure' (p.27). In 'Message to My Congressman', the persona highlights the common reality of suspending one's manifesto and promises immediately after victory is secured. He eulogises his congressman: 'Proud son of our clan / Eagle that breaks the palm kernel on another's head / You, who digs the dry land until it turns into a swamp / And digs the swamp until it turns into metallic dry field' (p.29).

The congressman is powerful owing to the metaphor used in his description because, as a powerful, apex predatory bird, the eagle ascends altitudes and covers distances that most birds cannot reach, implying that the subject addressed could break limits and lay groundbreaking foundations for future generations. The use of the pronoun, 'our', in the opening line of the poem shows that the exploiting politician is an aborigine just like the poet's persona; a son of the soil. The first line sets the sarcastic tone of the poem as the persona praises the 'proud son' as though he is onto a noble cause, but a closer look into subsequent lines reveals the ravaging quest embarked on. In his analysis of the proverbs in this poem, Usoro (2024, p.200) points out that 'the persona is not supposed to suffer because he has his brother and congressman at the helm of power. However, it is quite pathetic that in the African political sphere, and even in the poem, a person suffers even when his friends and comrades control the affairs of the state'.

It is revealed that the proud son is voted by his people to address their needs as the poet's persona addresses him: 'Proud son of our clan, I salute you / It is true that the war was not an easy one / As it raw wounds are still all over us / All as a show of our loyalty to your cause' (p.29). The antithetic lines, 'You, who digs the dry land until it turns into a swamp / And digs the swamp until it turns into metallic dry field' show the capacity wielded by political leaders. That is, they have the power to convert and revert certain situations, but they usually choose the path of exploitation where they keep taking and never giving back in the same proportion. Once the level of consumption supersedes the level of production, the masses are made to suffer tremendously for they do not have the resources to tackle the aftermath of such exploitations. Beyond that, the electoral season is not devoid of 'war' and 'wounds', and this demonstrates the level of commitment of the electorates to their revolutionary attempt to ignite positive change after years of retrogression. They, unfortunately, are not prepared for the impending ultra-regression.

Politicians parade themselves as revolutionaries who will turn around the state of things to an ideal setting. Sadly, on assuming power, they neglect the electorates who bear 'the wounds and scars with pride' because 'One does not go for a harvest of honey without / Preparing for stings by the bees' (p.29). In fact, the persona believes that 'Our lost cousin and broken bones and machete wounds are / But necessary stings by the wild bees whose honey is ours' (p.29). To oppose political godfathers during an election is a Herculean journey that features uncertainties in different forms, pain, and death; one must be prepared to accept whatever tragic reality one wakes up to. The persona asserts that he is not oblivious of the dangers involved in fighting for a just cause before engaging in the resistance towards

narcissistic political godfathers because the plan was to endure the 'necessary stings' that would in the end yield positive results (honey). The popular belief that there is no gain where there is no pain leaves out the fact that there could be pain with no gain as evinced in this poem — 'lost cousin', 'scars', 'wounds', 'broken bones', 'machete wounds', are devoid of positive results in the end.

Honey harvesters have honey to compensate for bee stings, and the electorates think that by successfully installing their envisaged 'revolutionary', they have secured honey. It is noteworthy that the persona has unflinching trust in his congressman so much that he still regards the congressman's opponents as his. This is achieved by the graphological configuration of the words 'our' and 'your' to form '(y)our' (p.29). He adds: 'Brother, we bore all those pains and scars for you / Because we know you as one of us who was / Born here, and whom, like all of us, the wasps / Of life stung early' (p.29). A lot has changed since the persona's congressman assumed political office and has only succeeded in inheriting the greediness of his predecessors, with the many problems he vowed to address still staring at them in the face as indicated by the persona: 'I write to you today because I fear you have forgotten / All that we went through together' (p.29). One whom the persona regards as his brother and congressman has neglected him; he has forgotten the hurdles crossed by his comrades-in-arms to put him there.

The anxiety that has permeated those who voted the congressman into power is rooted in the fear that he has 'allowed … [himself] to be swallowed by the maelstrom / You had left behind, who had lost a limb, a life, an ankle / Or an eye in the battle to push you up' (p.30). This tragic cycle is not far-fetched or any different from the Nigerian situation as it is exemplary of politicians to betray the hope of those who elect them into power. One wonders if they always intend to loot the nation's treasury even before they are elected or if they suddenly become kleptocratic after being elected. After reminiscing their collective struggles to transform and not conform to the degenerated socio-political state of the nation, the persona is compelled by this betrayal to evoke pity through the use of rhetorical questions:

> O Brother, son of the tiger, son of the warrior, how come you hunt
> and eat alone?
> How come you've forgotten so soon our toils together on the hills,
> on foot to Obudu?
> How come you've forgotten this soon our lost cousin, the staring
> scars from knife cuts?
> How come you've turned this soon into dust the honour and prestige
> of our forefathers?
> How come you've joined the thievery which we

ought to shame with
immortal songs? (31)

These questions emit poignancy and trigger a sense of reevaluation in the minds of politicians who the persona refers to as his brother and congressman.

The political sphere of the African continent contradicts many intuitive ideas, one such archetypal scenario being the art of joining a team after losing against them. In the poem, the congressman joins them even after beating them, rendering useless all the struggles of those who fought with their resources and lives to ensure his victory. It then appears that the masses who speak with great panache against corruption are dilettantes who would meteorically ditch their purported sense of patriotism at the dawn of victory — a game where participants view leadership as a treasure hunt. Ushie subtly avers that the only time leaders temporarily disrobe with their kleptocratic accoutrement and consider the masses is when it is time to canvass for support from the people ahead of elections. In 'Ballot Season', the poet persona says that in electoral seasons,

The air-bound bird stoops and swoops now
d
o
w
n

t
o

u
s
your soles hugging our rugged soil
your beak drinking from our common stream
your foreign tongue replaced with our common idiom
your dance steps holidaying with those of the earth-bound (p.28).

The structural arrangement of the words visualises the downward swipe of the air-bound bird (politician) to feign communality with the common man.

Ushie describes these politicians as air-bound birds because they do not normally mingle with the earth-bound masses, but in this season, they identify with the yawning many and pretend to understand and share in their pains. During electioneering, the belching neglect their anglicised tone and use indigenous languages to deceive the masses into believing that they are concerned about their well-being. Once the electoral season is over, the local government chairman retires 'to his edifice in the state capital', the '*executhief*' governor to 'his estate of guilt in the federal capital', the 'African president' to 'his home in Paris, New

York or Dubai' (Letters on the Streets, p.14). He adds that 'the belching of all worlds of wonders and weapons / Search for new homes in the skies as their destination, leaving us behind / In grime of our own blood and sweat as the helpless yawning of our lands' (p.14). Ushie creates a coinage by blending 'executive' with 'thief', resulting in '*executhief*', illustrating how corrupt these leaders are.

The level of corruption increases depending on the politician's level in government: while the local government chairman would move to the state capital when he is supposed to remain in the local government in which he has been elected, the governor moves to the federal capital instead of remaining in his state and the president makes a foreign land his home, leaving the masses to take solace in their collective piteous laments which bind them together. The corrupt politicians come with such meagre items as seasoning cubes and salt to rally for the people's support. Before they go back to oblivion in their castles overseas, the poet urges that the people use this opportunity to resist them. The persona is against such hypocritical interrelationships as far as ballot seasons are concerned, one that is substantial in 'Hidden Verse' where he says:

Let us hide still
This verse of steel
l
i
n
k
i
n
g
Our two hearts, shielding the verse
From the brutal bombs of tongues

Or else we make of ourselves a playground
Where belching and yawning tongues play around
(p.73).

This playground is not genuine but a façade meant to trick the masses. Again, the poet uses logodaedalianism in writing the word 'linking', the graphic representation showing linkage in itself.

Consequently, the masses need to cut off such links because these politicians are 'lame gods' who drink the 'blood of men / That god who eats but flesh of men / That god who loves but ruins and tears' ('Lame gods', p.23). The description, 'lame gods', is paradoxical because like in Greek, Roman, Norse, Egyptian, and many other mythologies, it is believed that gods are powerful, but 'lame' here depicts powerlessness even when they claim to be gods by 'leaning /on the swords and words of frail followers for his protection' (p.23). With these lines, Ushie portrays 'a reversal of roles between god and Creation' (p.23) because like God, gods are not supposed to rely on their creation for survival, but the reverse. As opposed to

the belief that the rich are all-powerful (like gods), the poet's persona emphasises the fact that they rely on people for protection, and thus, are rendered lame and powerless when resisted. Where the people fail to resist but continue to indulge and help perpetuate the excesses of the political elite, then Agunbiade's argument is further validated.

Conclusion

The poet's personality as a revolutionary compels him to use his collection of poems to chastise the political elite who oppress the masses and the masses who offer themselves as soldiers of fortune, also demonstrating how the West has replaced colonialism with imperialism. The status of postcolonialism as it is today is a product of generational mutations modified to accommodate contemporary issues, one that began solely as a counter-discursive approach which was marked by writing back to the Centre. Over time, the concept of postcolonial disillusionment where African leaders are projected solely as the bane of the postcolonial degradation the continent reeks of was devised. This paper, however, has used inverted disillusionment, a more recent conceptual framework in postcolonial studies, to argue for the collective complicity of the masses. Electoral violence, for instance, cannot be effectively executed without the masses conceding to the whims and caprices of the political elite who are bent on amassing wealth for themselves. These issues have prickled the lives of Africans and have caused them to come to terms with the fact that the hope of a near-utopian life they envisaged at the departure of colonisers has so far become a mere wish and daydream. Nevertheless, with concrete illustrations drawn from Ushie's *Yawns and Belches*, the degenerated postcolonial status of Africa is not merely a product of the activities of the West or African political elite at the top stratum but also driven and sustained by the masses who offer themselves as expendable tools for the disruption of principles that should ensure political sanity.

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