The Protest Poetry of Rome Aboh: *A Study of a Torrent of Terror*.

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Abstract: **The legacy of the second generation of Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare to contemporary writers is an uncompromising exposition of social and political realities, a passion for justice and equity for the suffering masses, and a belief that the prevailing repressive political system can and should be changed. In their acclaimed mission of the poet as a 'righter' of wrongs, recent Nigerian poets are generally continuing in the tradition of protest poetry: their sympathy for the masses is evident in their strident condemnation of societal evils; their methods are artistic and linguistic clarity and directness of expression. Rome Aboh, one of Nigeria's most recent, third-generation poets, has joined the swelling voices of young poets with his debut collection of poems, *A Torrent of Terror*. This essay examines his poems in the light of the protest tradition bequeathed to contemporary poets by the older generation of dissident voices. It adopts both the sociological and formalist methods of literary criticism in evaluating his poems, both of which show that Aboh is not simply concerned with portraying the moral turpitude and soico-political decadence that bedevil contemporary society; he is also asking for a general overhaul of the system in ways that will ensure the enthronement of egalitarian and humanistic values. The objective of the paper is to demonstrate the functionality and relevance of contemporary Nigerian poetry.**

***Keywords*: Nigerian poetry, protest, Rome Aboh, social and political reality.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The vast landscape of written Nigerian poetry is characterized by chiaroscuro and tonal nuances, but it is all the same a common landscape under the glare of one poetic sun. Whether we peruse the pages of Soyinka, Clark, or Okigbo (representatives of the first generation of written Nigerian poetry), or those of Ojaide, Osundare, Ofeimun and others of what has been termed the second generation, or yet the fairly recent but no less copious pages of Isidore Diala, Joe Ushie, Remi Raji, Sola Osofisan, Olu Oguibe, Afem Akeh, Esiaba Irobi, or Onookome Okome among others of what again has been called the third generation of Nigerian poets, there is the same general concern with the society and the wellbeing of its inhabitants. The poet's voice has always expressed the feelings and sentiments excited by contemporary experience. That voice, sometimes, is self-indulgent, ruminative, whining; sometimes it rises to a near-hysterical condemnation of the abuses and injustices that the society is subjected to. To the Nigerian poet of all generations, a common abhorrence of social and political injustice animated their poems. Nigerian poetry has, *ab initio*, been essentially a functional art.

The difference among the poets of different generations is one of temperament and artistic choices—choices as to what resources or tropes to deploy (imagery, symbol, myth), the nature of the diction (colloquial or erudite), the nature of the tone and so on. One set of poetic choices may have resulted in that kind of subdued poetry which rests content with portraying or lamenting the decadence of the society. This is the kind of poetry associated with the first generation of written Nigerian poetry as instanced by Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, John Bekederemo Pepper Clark and the earlier Christopher Okigbo. Of this group of writers Joe Ushie writes that: "Although these poets explored the African cultural environment for their imagery in the bid to validate their African cultural heritage, they did not seem to succeed in substituting African communal vision and a people-oriented artistic style for the individualism that characterized their European poetic models" (14). Their pre-independence expectations of a just, egalitarian and equitable society having been disappointed by the political elite, and overwhelmed by brazen social injustices, tribal jingoism, blatant moral depravity, and unbridled materialism, their art displayed its influence in terms of techniques and the individualism that is associated with an angst-ridden consciousness.

However, the Nigerian civil war that broke out in 1967 and lasted until 1970 aggravated the depravities and philistinism of the ruling elite and honed the temper of writers towards a people-oriented art. Oyeniyi Okunoye has aptly observed that: "The stage for Nigerian writers to confront the erring indigenous ruling elite was set as far back as the late sixties, before the civil war broke out, though it was the civil war that really served as the catalyst for what Chidi Amuta (1988:92) calls 'the politicization of the Nigerian literary imagination' " (66). Beginning with Okigbo's poetry, specifically with his "Path of Thunder" collected in his *Labyrinths* (1971), the vision of Nigerian art tended towards communal interests and the techniques became more populist. Generally, it became more radical in tone and confrontational in posture. Isidore Diala has noted that Okigbo "bequeathed to generations of Nigerian poets after him a creed of rebellion . . . and a poetics of dissidence," and that "these continue to reverberate in Nigerian poetry" (8).

The post-civil war Nigerian poets include Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun and Tanure Ojaide. Together with a number of others, this group of poets are commonly labelled the second generation of Nigerian poets. Brazenly Marxist in ideology and, thus, revolutionary in outlook, these writers reacted against the sins of their predecessors—their reserved and muted tones, their imagistic

and mythopoeic subterfuges, as well as their arcane diction and prolix syntax. While deferring to the achievements of his predecessors, Niyi Osundare (probably the foremost of his generation of poets) has identified concern with political praxis as the hallmark of his generation's art:

> It is not possible to read Soyinka, for example, without coming away with the image of somebody who stands for justice. But very often, we don't get that impression that Soyinka believes that change is not only possible but inevitable. . . . I believe that our generation really started off reacting and really feeling that change is not only possible, that it is possible to read a work of art and be influenced by it (qtd in Adagbonyin 77-78).

In his survey of the second generation of Nigerian poets, Ode S. Ogede has summed up the temper and inclination of these poets in the following way:

> Outrage became such a key mood because the poets needed to speak with passionate, angry tones, defying all the previous conventions of restrained art. These younger poets learned that they must not only make powerful indictments protesting against the dismal state of affairs, but suggest clear measures to remedy it because the military rogues who preside over the maladministration of their country are hard of hearing and can only be moved with insults, full-throated and clamorous, not beautiful images. Consequently, compelled by the need to sound factual and down-to-earth in re-creating the real mood of the down-trodden people born of their deprived status, the majority of the poets have been unable to resist the temptation of making a recourse to the use of plain prosaic language as a natural discourse of poetic composition (63).

The enduring legacy of the second generation of Nigerian poets to succeeding generations is thus a poetics of confrontation and protest; the idea that art should not only indict and expose the ruling elite (be it military or civilian), but that it should also demand for change, it should show that a better society is possible and attainable—a just and egalitarian society built on communal and humanistic values. Art in general and poetry in particular must take a stand against corruption, incompetence, dictatorship, oppression, poverty, disease, exploitation, individualism, materialism, nepotism, and all such vices as prevail in contemporary society.

But art cannot effectively portray suffering humanity in recondite language and outlandish imagery. The urgency of the poet's social and political mission requires that the poet address his public in a simple and accessible idiom, that he should demolish all linguistic barriers between him and the audience he addresses, lest his function as town-crier and socio-political engineer is defeated. As Sule E. Egya has argued, the functionality of recent Nigerian poetry demands that "the poet brings himself closer to his audience for and about whom he crafts. Deliberately, he demystifies the craft of poetry so that ordinary people will understand what he means" (124). This is the poetic creed that the third or emerging generation of Nigerian poets has inherited from their predecessors. Osundare describes them as those "born around Nigeria's independence (1960), Nigeria's midnight children, as it were, who have spent the first three decades of their lives confronting the nightmare that their country has become" (qtd in Ushie 22). According to Ushie, Osundare "describes their poetic temperament as ranging from angry through despair to despondent" (40). This group of poets includes Ismail Garba, Nduka Otiono, Emman Usman Shehu, Afam Akeh, Chiedu Ezeanah, Remi Raj, B. M. Dzukogi, Moses Tsenongu, among others. This essay shall focus on Rome Aboh's debut collection of poems, *A Torrent of Terror* (2014), as a new voice in the general poetic outcry and protest against corruption, injustice, oppression, and poverty in the Nigerian society.

Protest and Dissidence in Rome Aboh's Poetry.

Born in the Cross River State of Nigeria, Rome Aboh has joined the general outcry against corrupt and incompetent authority with his publication of *A Torrent of Terror.* A study of his style and thematic concerns shows that Aboh has partaken of the heritage of protest poetry, whose duty, as Ananda P. Srestha has argued, is to raise its voice for the cause of the oppressed and exploited masses:

> Protest poets throughout the world have been the nation's voice of conscience. They have through history swayed governments, toppled dictators and changed political systems. They have mirrored society in its various forms, and moreover, oppression in all its aspects. They have vehemently criticized and held up to ridicule the vices and corrupt practices of brokers of power and have in all earnestness, like true crusaders, taken up the responsibilities of restoring political stability, social harmony and above all the sanity of a nation (259).

The poems in *A Torrent of Terror* are collected into three sections: "Patriotism", "Patterns of Love", and "Reflections". As the title suggests, the poems of "Patriotism" are concerned with exploring and delineating the poet's love and devotion for his country; in "Patterns of Love" Aboh ruminates on the vagaries of love and passion; "Reflections" is a nostalgic recollection of childhood experiences, fond memories of his rural hometown and his parents. It is thus with the first section, "Patriotism", that this study is mostly concerned, because the poems of this section are avowedly poems of protest and dissent against the moral, social and political perversities of contemporary Nigeria, though the poet as well takes swipes at international tyranny, global issues of terrorism and religious intolerance.

The poems of the "Patriotism" succinctly define the role, vision and mission of the poet as a writer. In "Righter" Aboh argues that "Every writer/ is a righter, Niyi Osundare echoes," and that the poet is duty-bound to "write for the people." But the poet's duty does not end with depicting the travails and predicament of the people; his words must also provide hope and comfort to them, his message must embolden the masses and inspire them with the spirit of resistance:

> Let these words soothe hurting hearts,

Let these strengthening words unhindered
Stream like the Ungwu-Bedia River,
Enriching the pauperized,
Empowering the oppressed (18).

The poet's earnest desire that his words should affect the people is indicated by the repetition in the first two lines of the passage, which give the impression of a supplication. "Let these words soothe . . . /Let these strengthening words" enrich the people who are under the yoke of exploitation and oppression.

In the next and last passage of "Righter", the exhortative tone continues, but the poet's emotions are getting the better of him as he resorts to insult and name-calling:

Let these words forewarn the brute.
O these words be the *akpakwu*
on the tyrant's stubborn skin.
Let these words be the guilty conscience
of the king ruler (18).

The choice of words in this passage is instructive; the idea of a tyrant-king-ruler itself suggests authoritarianism, the absence of freedom and the rule of law. Furthermore, the tyrant-king is called a "brute", thus suggesting the bestiality of the tyrant, his cruelty, savagery, sadism and heartlessness. More importantly, the passage adds another aspect of the poet's duty—to forewarn the oppressor of his imminent doom—besides detailing the people's woes, comforting them and strengthening them for a possible confrontation with their oppressor. The poet's earnest wish is that his poetic utterances may have some effect on the oppressor, that his words may irritate him to the extent of making him change his attitude towards his subjects: "O these words be the *akpakwu*/ on the tyrant's stubborn skin." In a footnote, the poet explains that *akpakwu* refers to "wild beans whose contact, especially during the dry season, with the skin produces an awful itching" (18). When a poet writes with the express objective of irritating and infuriating the regnant authorities (rather than making them complacent in their atrocities), that makes him subversive, confrontational, and dissident.

In "Verse", the theme is again the role of the poet and the function of poetry in contemporary society. The poet begins by telling us that the impetus for his poetic effusions is anger, thus conflating versification with vexation:

I write in verse
because I'm vexed.
And this verse must shine its rays
on these crooked paths of our vexed land (19).

In a land of "crooked paths" and angry people, poetry serves to "shine its rays" on a benighted society in order to make straight those paths. The poet proceeds in the next passage to declare that:

I sing not my inherited lore
on the corridors of sycophancy;
for this verse must reach out
to the botched people of this land (19).

For Aboh, the noble calling and heritage of poetry must not be abused or debased by indulging in sycophancy, praising the character and personalities of the rulers for selfish purposes. His poetry should rather serve the people's interests; it must completely identify with the masses, and to do so:

It must bear the eyes
That see the forsaken people of this land.
It must bear the ears
that listen to the wailings of torture.
It must carry the heart
that feels the sour pain
of girls caught in insane erections (19).

The poet's verse is honed by the perversities that prevail in his country, by the neglect that the people suffer in the hands of political authorities, by the cries of tortured men and women, and the pain of girls who are sexually abused by licentious rulers. These are issues that the poet believes require urgent attention. Because the poetry is inspired by humanist values and concerns, it must bear the eyes, ears and heart that see, hear and feel with the people. Such poetry cannot but register the "sour pain/ of girls caught in insane erections." This image is effective not just because it captures the helplessness of unfortunate girls in the grip of libertine power, it also impresses on us the idea that their pain is "sour," acidulous, harsh in the palate of good-hearted people. Furthermore, "insane erections" suggests a gruesome spectacle of young girls being impaled by erections that will not succumb to the pleas of their victims. The protest in this poem rests on the poet's identification of his craft with anger, his refusal to sing the ruler's praises, his resolve to expose the "crooked paths" of the land, the torture and pain of the masses, and the wantonness of ruling class.

In some of Aboh's poems, the political class is particularly taken to task for their chicaneries and betrayal of the people's trust. "A Letter to the MP" is addressed to a representative of the political class, who is also supposed to be a representative of the people in the national assembly. The writer of the letter is purportedly the people themselves, who are thus the poetic persona. The letter details the people's woes and predicament, their filthy and disease-ridden lives, and also emphasizes the fact that the Member of Parliament has not come around to visit his constituency since he was elected into the National Assembly:

Dear MP,
When you cajoled us to vote for you,
was the last time we saw you.
Abandon the impotent words-acrobatic
in NASS.
Come and see our matchbox houses
cramming us in on bedbugs-infested mats.
Come and see our eczema-coated skin, our only linen.
Come and see our children's kwashiorkored bellies
and mumps-fattened jaws.
Come and see rodents and reptiles besieging our hospitals,
and bats ambushing our dilapidated classrooms.
To you we cast our votes,

to you have we turned.
The dog does not eat its own kind (25).

The people are here trying to reason with the man whom they elected into the legislature, asking him to leave for a while the senseless sophistries of the National Assembly, their "impotent words-acrobatic," and visit his constituency to see for himself the hard realities of life to which his people have been abandoned. The picture presented of their living conditions is one of abject poverty, squalor, pestilence and disease. They are all crammed in "matchbox-houses" and lie on "bedbugs-infested mats"; their children, afflicted by eczema, mumps and kwashiorkor, attend schools that are full of bats. The hospitals, supposed to be models of hygiene and sanitation, are infested with rodents and reptiles. In this poem Aboh relies on vivid imagery to evoke an overall spectacle of utter dereliction and destitution. The tone is not so much of anger as of despondency, as befits the idiom of dignified elders writing to berate a wayward son who has breached the trust reposed on him and thus disappointed his community.

Continuing in the same subdued tone and traditional wisdom, the collective persona reasons that:

To you we cast our votes,
to you we have turned.
The dog does not eat its own kind.

The people are here reminding their political son of their communal ethos, advising him to desist from a dog-eat-dog attitude of ruthless self-interest and savage materialism. But should their political son persist in his selfishness to the detriment of his own people, the elders warn him that: "We will leave this place for you./ You will inherit our corpses."

The letter to the parliamentarian ends with a strongly worded threat to the errant politician. The people will succumb to the extremity of death if their political leader continues to pursue his selfish ends to the neglect of his own constituency, he will come back with all his ill-gotten wealth only to meet a land littered with the corpses of betrayed people. This would be the ultimate disgrace he will have to face for his own unaccountability. This threat has become pertinent since common sense has failed to influence him. The poem is protesting against failed expectations, unfulfilled political promises, and the pursuit of personal interest by politicians to the neglect of the masses who voted them into power. The striking thing about this poem's technique is the communal persona; it is the people as a whole who are speaking to the self-aggrandizing politician through the medium of a letter. Aboh adopts the plural form of the first personal pronoun "we" as the speaking voice instead of the singular individual "I". For one, this strategy enhances the ends of a people-oriented poetics as against the self-indulgent and self-reflexive methods of ultra-modernism. Second, it pits the people against the individualistic and acquisitive tendencies of the parliamentarian in particular and politicians as a whole.

It is remarkable that the bulk of Aboh's protest poems adopt this same technique of using "we" as the voice that articulates the grievances of a people perpetually subjected to political falsehoods and betrayals of trust. In "Silent Echoes," the people are once again expressing the anguish and pain caused by the selfishness and rapacity of politicians:

We can hear the silent whisper
of our own cries from hurting hearts . . .
Let us yet echo silently
of how to your famous wall of greed
you have nailed our undaunted aspirations.
Let us yet echo silently
of how your debilitating stay hangs
like a dark cloud over our beleaguered vision (26).

The space of contest is between "we/us/our" (the people) and "you" the politician whose greed has dampened the spirits of the people and whose presence in the political arena is likened to "a dark cloud" that blurs the people's vision.

"If Again" is a swipe at politicians who at first claim to identify with the masses' predicament, but having thus won the people's hearts and votes, turn their backs on them, renege on their campaign promises, and become more concerned with enriching themselves than with ameliorating the plight of the electorate:

If again they come lamenting
of owning no shoes
we will for them build a shoe factory (27).

The poem takes as its context the speech made by Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan on the 8th of September, 2010 at the congress of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), when he declared his candidacy for the Presidency of Nigeria. In this speech, he confessed that he grew up in a poor family, that he went to school without shoes and had no school bag, and that for these reasons he understood the problems and challenges of ordinary Nigerians:

> I was not born rich. . . . In my early days in school, I had no shoes, no school bag, I carried my books in my hands but never despaired; no car to take me to school but I never despaired. There were days I had only one meal but I never despaired. I walked miles and crossed rivers to school every day but I never despaired. Didn't have power, didn't have generators, studied with lanterns but I never despaired. . . . Fellow Nigerians, if I could make it, you too can make it. . ..
>
> I want all of you to know that I am one of you and I will never let you down! I want you to know that I will keep hope alive; I want you to know your time has come. I stand before you today, humbly seeking your support for me, Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan, to run for the office of the President of Nigeria (qtd. in Bello 88).

This speech may have contributed to Dr. Goodluck's popular support and to his eventual victory at the 2011 national elections. What Aboh's poem is protesting against here is the fact that Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, once elected into office, became a grasping bourgeois like all the rest of the politicians;

he went ahead to amass wealth for himself and his cohorts while the masses continued to languish in poverty and misery, as the poem continues to tell us:

Of all the promises of fresh breathable air;
Here we are, stranded
In the wilderness of expectations.
Of all the promises of megawatts light
Deep darkness torments still
Our sorrow-filled-demon-crazy days (27).

In this poem, the conflict is again between "they" the political class and "we" the masses. The politicians' bag of intrigues contains sentimental stories about their own hardships and promises of a better life, all aimed at winning the minds of the people. But having secured political power, they leave the people "stranded/ in the wilderness of expectations," still engulfed in "deep darkness" because of lack of electric power.

In "The Dark Days" the persona is, once again, the masses who are found wondering where to escape from the depressing situation they find themselves in:

Where do we go
From festering lies assailing our sensibilities,
from legislators devouring
national vault even before approval . . . ?
Where do we go
from these dark days
of sorrow-packed existence? (29)

The poem captures the frustration and helplessness of a people who are repeatedly fed with lies by self-seeking politicians. The same sense of frustration is also portrayed in "Contraption" in which the people describe themselves as trapped between two evil and menacing classes—the politicians and the military—who are busy despoiling the land that the people hold so dear to their hearts:

We are caught here
In this land we love
With the whole of our hearts
Between the ass- kicking *militeria*
And the web of money-coated-tongue *polithiefians* (35).

The people have little, if anything, to choose between the brutality of the military class and the brigandage of the "*polithiefians."* The coinage is instructive in its coupling of politics with thievery.

Aboh's poems do not only protest against bungling and corrupt politicians and the brutal military class; his protest embraces in its scope the evils of international politics, terrorism, as well as the injustices perpetrated beyond the Nigerian shores. "Hour of Truth," for instance, begins by declaring the poet's aversion for romantic themes and gaudy language, and then restates the poet's commitment to exposing the socio-economic realities of the society:

All I care is to
write not in beaded words;
but in words encrusted with bitter memories,
memories of hunger-swollen-belly kids trudgin'
mine-ridden streets of Khartoum, Kabul
Timbuktu, Damascus, Maiduguri (21).

For Aboh, acts of injustice anywhere in the world should concern the poet in particular and the writer in general. The eponymous poem, "A Torrent of Terror," concerns itself with political turmoil, especially anarchy, terrorism, and religious bigotry all over the world. The poem addresses those international leaders whose activities have resulted in the dehumanization and oppression of mankind:

Yours is the brewing anarchy
at Tehran, Pyongyang.
Yours is the streaming jihad
In Darfur, Bamako.
Yours is the state-managed pogrom
in Aleppo, in you is the personification
of tyranny;
your torrent of sarin gas
has made many men childless,
and so will your children be fatherless
among men (23).

Besides placing a curse on mongers of war and the fomenters of chaos, the poem takes issue with the United States' policy of detaining suspects without trial at Guantanamo Bay, as well as with the self-perpetuating tendency of African dictators like Robert Mugabe:

Your reign is a torrent
of inmates in Guantanamo Bay;
Yours is the thirty-year tenancy
in Harare; demagogic land distribution
raining hunger (23).

Super powers like Russia are accused of fomenting anarchy across the world and then profiteering from the arms sale that results from the conflict, with total disregard for the loss of human lives:

Yours, the Putin rush
Of weapons to Syria, now Ukraine
Finding solace in others' death (23).

The same bitter indictment is made in "I See," a poem which links the anarchy of Assad's Syria with Russia's war-profiteering and the sufferings of the common man:

As stubborn, sad Assad
still strays in Syria,
women have become circumstantial widows
at the prime of marriage . . .
as children increasingly become fatherless . . .
I see nothing
absolutely nothing
but torrential rain of Russia-made chemicals
falling belligerently on Huns, Aleppo, Quasar (34).

The recurrence of sibilant sounds in the first two lines underscore the link between Assad, Syria, stubbornness and the idea of straying. The word "strays" in itself suggests the idea of

a person, in this case the ruler Assad, who has gone astray, lost or alienated from his group. The result of such loss of direction in a leader is that the people are subjected to untold hardships—women become widows at an early age, children are orphaned, girls are raped. Worse than that, a situation is created in which foreign powers like Russia seize the opportunity to sell and test-run their deadly weapons.

II. CONCLUSION

This study has analysed the poetry of one of Nigeria's recent voices that has joined the swelling choir of protest and resistance against injustice and oppression. The dominant themes of Aboh, as of his predecessors, are the corruption and cupidity of political leaders, as well as the incompetence, irresponsibility and irresponsiveness of successive governments, the miscarriage of socio-political institutions, all of which result in the poverty and frustration of the common man. More than a decade after the restoration of democracy and multi-party politics in Nigeria, the poet looks around him and still registers the same dehumanizing conditions that prevailed during the dictatorship of previous years.

The tone and temper of Aboh's poems are generally of anger and impatience. He exercises his right as well as the people's right to be heard, to complain about their living conditions and to criticize the government that is incompetent and callous. The protesting voice, when it is not the people themselves speaking, is the poet's voice raised on behalf of the people. The urgency of the people's plight and predicament renders the poetic voice impatient with ornate artistry, thus the poet's language is simple and straight-forward criticism of the reality before him; it is the language of a poet concerned pre-eminently with freedom, justice, human rights, and social transformation.

This research has affirmed that there is a potent relationship between contemporary Nigerian poetry and the society from which it derives its raw material. An analysis of Aboh's poems has shown that third-generation Nigerian poetry keeps on exploiting the age-old nexus between art and the society, and between text and context.

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