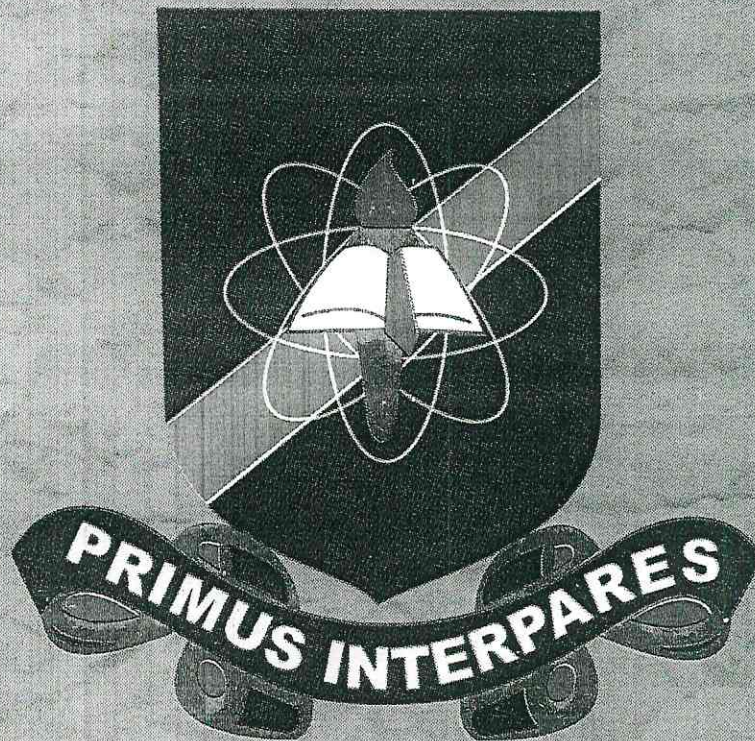


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## Gender and Social Consciousness in Maria Ajima's *Poems of Sanity*

Foluke R. Aliyu-Ibrahim (Mrs)

### ABSTRACT

Reacting to male chauvinism which had dominated earlier African literary texts, first generation female writers became occupied with questioning socio-cultural issues as they affected the woman. Emerging female writing has however become more politically relevant as the works of writers like Adichie, Okekwe, Atta, Nengi-Ilagha, Agary, Adewale, Adimora-Ezeigbo and Ajima show how the political and economic settings impact, in various degrees, on theme and other aspects of style. This paper analyses Ajima's presentation of the social, economic and political systems in Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world in her *Poems of Sanity*. It also attempts an examination of the poet's ideological construct of gender. Through an examination of the themes and style of relevant poems in the collection, the paper asserts that Ajima's gender ideology and social consciousness can be accommodated within the Feminist theories proposed by some African critics. The paper concludes that Ajima's aesthetics can be situated within the feminist agenda of the creation of an alternative text to male writing which is regarded as appealing to female readers.

### INTRODUCTION

For earlier Nigerian female writers, fiction and drama in that order, were the popular media through which they expressed their art. Poetry only became popular with the third generation (emerging). For instance, Nwapa was the first Nigerian female to be published with her *Efuru* in 1966. She followed this with many more prose writings. Buchi Emechetta had her first novel published in 1972. They were followed by prose writers like Ifeoma Okoye, and Zaynab Alkali. In drama, Zulu Sofola is credited as being the first published Nigerian female playwright with the publication of *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* in 1971. Playwrights like Tess Onwueme and Stella Oyedepo joined later.

Before now, poetry seemed not to have been a favourite medium of choice. However, this is not to say that Nigerian female writers were not writing poems before this period. Mabel Segun, for instance, a contemporary of Nwapa and Emechetta, had published her poetry from as early as the 1970s. Second generation female poets who have since joined Segun include Catherine Acholonu and Molar Ogundipe-Leslie who both had poems published in books and journals. Today, there is a larger number

of female literary artists using poetry to express themselves. Such published emerging Nigerian female poets include Maria Ajima, Toyin Adewale-Gabriel, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Promise Ogechukwu Okeke. The commonest use to which Nigerian female poets put their poetry is to criticise the socio-economic and political ills bedevilling the country. The grim realities of life painted in their poems result from a morally corrupt leadership. Other themes found in the poetry of emerging Nigerian female poets are gender perceptions, love and nature.

The focus of this paper is premised on the observable differences in the perception of the forms of oppression of women in the works of first generation of Nigerian female writers and those of today's generation whom, for the purpose this paper, are regarded as 'emerging'. The paper analyses Ajima's presentation of the social, economic and political systems in Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world in her *Poems of Sanity* (2000). It also attempts an examination of the poet's ideological construct of gender.

#### **Comparative Analysis of the First Generation of Nigerian Female Writers and the Emerging Ones**

The works of emerging Nigerian writers, unlike the writings of the first generation of Nigerian female writers, have ceased to see patriarchy as the only form of oppression of the woman. Consequently, their works show a consciousness, and an interrogation, of their social, economic and political environments. Obafemi observes that the inspiration of a more politically relevant approach noticed in the works of emerging female writing was provided by those he refers to as 'middle generation writers' such as Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali and Tess Onwueme (157).

Thus, their focus is not only on the plight of the female but also that of the male as the two negotiate their (sometimes hostile) environment. Their works portray them as being socially conscious. Social consciousness is recognition of the ills in the society and an attempt to correct these perceived social, economic and political imbalances.

However, this is not a complete denial of the presence of political consciousness in the works of earlier female writers. Mabel Segun, a first generation poet, in "*Corruption*" comments on the corrupt leadership in the land which has "curdled the milk and saddened the honey" of a nation that was once "flowing with milk and honey" (44). Such responses to the political climate by literary artists of that period were however few and far between.

Issues such as male chauvinism which had dominated earlier literary African texts and the personal challenges faced by some of the first generation of Nigerian female writers as wives and working mothers, may have necessitated the stress on patriarchy. This does not however imply that some of the challenges faced by first generation Nigerian female writers are not being faced by the present (emerging) writers. Other challenges such as faulty social, economic and political structures, made worse by the mishandling of these structures by a morally-deficient leadership, have merely provided additional material for emerging female writers. Such emerging writers see these structures and their manipulations as constituting danger to both the female and male members of the society.

Thus, the works of these emerging writers not only negate patriarchy, but also interrogate the economic and political landscapes in contemporary Nigeria. Toyin Adewale's tone in *Naked Testimonies* (1995) is that of anger as the poems mirror the decadence into which the nation has been sunk, especially by the leadership. Nengi-Ilagha's *Condolences* (2002) and Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006) question the degradation of the Niger Delta environment as a result of oil exploration, Okekwe's *In The Middle Of The Night* (2004) interrogates the Nigerian political landscape which is governed by a morally corrupt leadership while Adichie interrogates the historical and socio political Nigerian climate in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Waiting for Dawn* (2010) is an exploration into the national and international difficulties bedevilling modern society. A similar theme can be found in some of the poems in Okekwe's collections such as *Canals in Paradox* (2000), *Boundless Vessels* (2003), and *Naked Among These Hills* (2005). In her *Poems of Sanity* Ajima metaphorically refers to her poetry as "Mount Vesuvius" (ii) which is expected to cause some form of eruption for the betterment of society.

Earlier Nigerian female writers had portrayed the woman mainly in positive light. This was probably in reaction to the negative images of women in the works of their male counterparts such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Emerging female writers are however presenting the woman in as realistic an image as is possible. Ajima does this in the text under study. Also the woman is no longer seen as a 'silent watcher' in the collapse of society's economic and political structures. She is presented as a villain in the collapse of such structures just as she is also seen as a victim in the ensuing confusion.

### **Principles of African Concept of Feminism**

Social consciousness is a major tenet of the various theories proposed by some

Nigerian female theorists in their postulations on what should constitute a theory of feminism that is distinctly African.

While proposing her Womanist theory, Kolawole emphasises the fact that the African woman has, since the pre-colonial period, been involved in political activism in society (22). This is corroborated by Zulu Sofola who says that "there was no area of human endeavour in the traditional system where the woman did not have a role to play" (James 150). For Ogundipe-Leslie in her theory named Stiwanism, the ideology of women has to be cast in the context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the continent of Africa today; that is, in the context of liberation of the total continent (226).

A recognition of, and an attempt to correct, these ills as seen in the works of emerging Nigerian female writers imply that these ills are not suffered by women alone. This further presupposes that any attempt at social reconstruction cannot be done by the female alone. Another crucial feature of the theories on Feminism as proposed by African theorists is consequently the accomodationist feature. The accomodationist feature does not see the African male as the enemy but as one playing a complimentary role with the woman for the sustenance of humanity. Acholonu who defines her concept of African Feminism as Motherism, identifies a motherist as "the man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity" (111 emphasis mine). Kolawole's Womanism rejects any form of feminism that sees all the problems in the society as being caused by men and advocates instead, a theory that allows both men and women to work together to solve these problems (27). Nnaemeka calls her concept of African feminism 'Nego-feminism' in recognition of the African principles of negotiation, compromise and balance (377-8).

Badejo stresses that this accomodationist feature of African Feminism demonstrates that:

...power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical.  
African femininity complements African masculinity. African feminism  
is active and essential to the social, political, economic, cultural and evolutionary aspects of human order (94).

This implies that physical differences do not translate to superiority/inferiority; that the woman possesses the same mental capability as the man. African feminism

therefore seeks to present the woman, not as the 'Other', but as one playing a complimentary role with man for the sustenance of humanity.

Furthermore, African Feminism places emphasis on the values associated with the mother, through an acceptance and recognition of her biological role. This negates Western radical feminism. Stiwanism as proposed by Ogundipe-Leslie recommends, among other things, that women need not neglect their biological roles (225). In defining Motherism, Acholonu uses the role of the woman from the African traditional perspective of a matriarch and social nurturer as metaphor (110). Thus, in African literary texts, a character referred to as a mother would be seen as possessing inner strength, teaching, nurturing and creating those that can be considered as positive elements in the society. Values associated with motherhood are "derived from ancient African philosophy and cosmology that in the words of an Akan saying recognise that through the womb of the woman all humanity passes" (Badejo 94.).

#### *Gender Perception in Ajima's Poems of Sanity*

Ajima believes that the woman, except for physical differences, is like the man in all respects. Thus, Ajima shows the woman as having the same virtues and vices as the man. In the dramatic poem 'For Woman - For Winnie' (35), she borrows from the Mandela/ Winnie marriage saga and allegations of infidelity and political thuggery against Winnie which eventually led to divorce. Ajima universalises this experience and makes Winnie symbolise all (African) women, and Mandela, all (African) men. While Mandela dreams of the struggle, Winnie complains, "The hearth growing cold.../ I was second best", yet insists "Even then I didn't care/ For we boiled together/ For the cause" (36). Winnie tries to explain the reason for her unfaithfulness thus:

I tossed, I burnt  
Madikizela for Rolihlahla  
Playing a waiting game  
I stared into eternity;

.....  
An eager maiden  
Quivering in anticipation

For the return of my beloved (35-36)

Mandela however refuses to understand the reason for her unfaithfulness, alleging

that Winnie had betrayed his trust in her. The poem ends with Winnie saying:

It was just a simple lust  
A moment of craziness  
A desire that happens to all men and women;  
.....  
You had chosen the struggle  
I was second best  
Had it been the reverse  
You would long have forgotten  
Fanning new embers in the bosom  
Of one more (38-39)

The dramatic form of the poem makes the experience more accessible such that the reader is able to identify with the two characters. The allusion to Dennis Brutus' poem entitled 'A Simple Lust' (1978) serves as a reminder to the setting of the poem.

Here in this poem, Ajima imaginatively uses the imageries of fire and heat to refer to both the anti-apartheid struggle and also the sexual ardour between Winnie and Mandela. It is in the same vein also that she employs the wind and storm imageries.

In referring to the struggle, Mandela says "I was embroiled by fire" (36) while Winnie says "For we boiled together" (37) to refer to the fact that both were committed and affected by the struggle. The poet employs the images of the hearth when it is hot and also cold in reference to the feelings that the couple had for each other before and after Mandela's imprisonment and Winnie's unfaithfulness. Winnie proffers the reason for her unfaithfulness while her husband was in prison thus: "I waited by the minute (tic- toc)/ The hearth growing cold..." (36). Mandela captures his feelings of betrayal at his wife's action thus: "You left me cold, cold... All those years you left me cold" (36). The sexual imagery is further foregrounded when Mandela asks a question in reference to his sexual organ: "... we have become less enamoured?/ Limp with age?" (37-38).

Winnie appeals to Mandela that had she been the one in prison for so long, Mandela would have done the same thing. Taking a new wife/ lover is compared to "Fanning new embers in the bosom/ Of one more/ our old firequenched" (39).

Winnie compares Mandela's arrival into her life to the whirlwind (35). Mandela in an extension of the storm imagery, but this time in reference to the struggle, tells her, "You never know/ How thick the storm is/ Until you're in the midst/ Of the brew"

(36).

The indigenous African culture recognises that biologically the woman has a vital role to play in the sustenance of the society. Her biological role is thus always celebrated. In 'Just Mother' (30), Ajima refers to motherhood as "The primordial canal of first beginnings". The poet sanctifies the essence of motherhood when she metaphorically calls it a "sacred shrine". Mother is described with a string of predicative adjectives that attempt to capture the essence of motherhood. However, humanity violates this shrine; yet because of her kind heartedness as a being filled with an "unassailable love" for humanity, she is forgiving. 'Woman On The Road' (33) comments on the enigma that is 'Motherhood'. The poem tells of how some women in spite of being in the "...depths/ Of grinding poverty", raised their hands up in cheer, jumped with delight and even "demonstrated/ A few steps Of the royal dance steps/ On the side of the road" as the leaders drove by. The leaders were on a tour to assess the deprivations of the rural populace. The poet sees this reception given to the leaders by the women as a sign of a large heart on the part of the women, especially as it is generally believed that the cause of the poverty in the rural areas in Nigeria is as a result of bad leadership. The poet/persona wonders thus:

In the leaders  
You see your siblings  
You see your hope  
For tomorrow?  
.....  
I admire your hope (34).

The poet is astonished that women in such a state of poverty could still possess enough hope to give such a welcome for such leaders. She attributes this to one of the innate roles of the woman as teacher on life's lessons and ends the poem with words of appreciation to the woman.

In 'Somebody died on the battlefield' (42), the poet uses the imagery of the pains of childbirth, an important stage in the process of the sustenance of humanity, to appeal to warring humanity to remember the suffering of woman during childbirth as she had shed enough blood then and needs no more on the battlefield. Woman:

...forgoes shame  
The minute she gave her life blood  
To bring forth a man-child

To the earth  
Overcome by the overpowering urge  
Gratified by life  
She allowed one big head  
One big head  
To hurt her pelvis (42).

In Nigerian culture, the childbirth process is sacred. Each of the stages of the process, from pregnancy through the actual birth itself, to breastfeeding, can be used to swear on anything, or to bless or curse anyone including the woman's own children. The oath, curse or blessing is believed to be valid. Thus, a tone of anger is implied in the reference to, and repetition of, "one big head" and in the use of the word 'hurt'. This seems like a warning that the same process that gave life may also be used to curse the recalcitrant who are bent on shedding blood.

In 'She's my girl' (23), Ajima celebrates some attributes of the female which some Western feminists may view as repugnant. These include being "sweet, coy, fluttery, flowery, catty, flighty, soft, and mushy". In the line, "She has Eve eyes", the poet alludes to the sexist idea that Eve made Adam to eat the forbidden apple in Paradise and is therefore to be blamed for man being sent down to earth. This image of the 'seductress' is however not seen as negative as each of the six stanzas ends with an emphatic "She goes all feminine on me" while the poem ends with a note of excitement.

The static and stereotyped mother image is a feature of patriarchal writing. Another of such an image is the 'good wife' image. Yet another symbol of the woman in male-authored African literatures is the 'good-time girl' who is set against a mother figure in order to be condemned. Newell says that in women's writings, this Mother Africa symbol is being replaced with kinetic images of women whereby focus is placed on 'specific societies' treatment of the female body... (thus) African mothers or 'good time girls' are portrayed in confrontation or arbitration with the gender identities created for them in particular communities' (7).

This movement away from the static mother (or good wife) image is perceived in 'For Woman-For Winnie' (35) which causes the reader to see the Mandela/ Winnie marriage saga from another perspective. In other words, Winnie is just like any human being with natural sexual instincts that need to be satisfied. Ajima seems to be saying here that it is unfair for man to expect the woman to ignore these feelings.

because had the reverse been the case, Mandela "...would long have forgotten/  
Fanning new embers in the bosom/ Of one more/ Our old fire quenched" (39) and  
Winnie would have been forced by society to accept this in 'good faith'.

Consequently, emerging Nigerian female writers do not shy away from discussing  
the negative attributes of the female gender. Unlike the first generation of Nigerian  
writers who tended to portray an idealistic and romantic picture of the woman, the  
female writers of today present not only virtuous women, but also women characters  
with vices common to (generic) man. 'Crab Dragon', for example, describes a female  
who is hungry for love, using images of predatory animals such as the dragon, the  
vampire and the bat. There are also colours associated with danger and jealousy, such  
as red and green.

Furthermore both the man and the woman are implicated in the destruction of the  
society. In Ajima's collection, this is discernible in her use of the first person plural  
pronoun in both 'Just Mother' (30) and 'Somebody Died On The Battlefield' (42). In  
'Just Mother', both the 'we' refers to both sexes as they violate the shrine of the  
essence of Motherhood, while warring humanity in 'Somebody Died On The  
Battlefield' includes the woman.

Ajima deals with female bonding in 'How Do You Do It Whitney?' (18). In this poem,  
the poet pays tribute to the Black American musician, Whitney Houston. The persona  
identifies with the musician on two levels. The first level of affinity is as a woman.  
The poet praises Whitney's music which she says captures the blessings and hurts of  
womanhood.

The second level of affinity is racial. Thus Whitney's music is described as "heavy  
drumbeats/ Like the hymenal soul beats/ Of our lives" (18). This makes for the  
ultimate recognition of the musician as an African:

Whitney  
You just get the drums right  
African drums  
African daughter  
African woman  
Wuh! You get the rhythm  
Heavy! heavy! heavy! heavy! (19).

The relationship between the man and the woman has always been tensed. Thus there  
has been a perpetual search by each of the sexes to understand the other and,

consequently, both sexes usually view the other as enigmatic. Ajima contributes to this issue in 'Rhythm Desires (For LLS)' (73). The poem which is dedicated to a friend of the poet's (LLS who is a female) refers to a clash between a couple. The poet plays on the different words that are associated with each of the physical bodies of the two sexes to describe their feelings. LLS's emotions are described as fireworks while the hurt she feels is emphasised with the repetition of 'hurt'. Thus while LLS cries "out of *clitoranguish*", the man's pain is referred to as "*peniranguish*" (73). The poet warns that many women "have been felled/ By the *mondcom*/ A male snare" (73). The quarrel results from "... waning flowerings/ Ticking slowly by/ When you want to stretch out/ your hands/ for love/ Touching empty space" (73). The poem ends with a comment on the mystery that characterises the relationship between man and woman:

I ponder sometimes  
Whether women and men  
Understand  
The rhythmic desires  
of one another (74)

Worthy of mention is Ajima's arrangement of words. The line "Whether women and men" (74) is a deviation from the usual arrangement which is 'men and women'.

Also worth mentioning are the sexual images employed by Ajima in the collection. These include her play on the word fire and cold to refer to sexual feelings and the reference to the male sexual organ in 'For Woman For Winnie' (35); the reference to the female sexual organ as a birth canal in 'Somebody Died On The Battlefield' (42); the allusion to Eve which recasts the story of the eating of the apple as a seduction in 'She's my Girl' (23) and the reference to the male and female sexual organs in 'Rhythm Desires' (73).

Firstly these images are indicative of more openness with sexual matters leading to the use of sexual images that were absent in the works of earlier Nigerian female poets and literary artists generally. This is a feature which Ajima's collection shares with other emerging Nigerian female writers. Okekwe in her poetry and her fiction also shows an openness to discuss sexual intimacies and use sexual images. Iloekunanwa's 'Supple Thighs' (143), Okekwe's 'At The Aircraft On The 3<sup>rd</sup> Of Nov.2001' ("Temples" 121) and her 'These Moans' ("Naked" 180) are examples of such poems in different collections.

Equally important is the manner in which Ajima handles these sexual images. In most male authored writings (especially those of earlier authors), the female body is usually denigrated. Ajima however subverts this process to show the power of the female body and therefore the power of the woman. Thus, in 'Somebody Died On The Battlefield' (42), she shows the female body as that which brings forth "a man-child/ To the earth" (42). This body also has the potential to bless or to curse. In 'She's my Girl' (23), the tone of the poem and the repetition of "She goes all feminine on me" at the end of each of the six stanzas ensure that the image of woman presented is not negative. As for 'For Woman For Winnie' (35), both Winnie and Mandela are made to use the same imageries of 'fire' to symbolise sexual urge to show that the sexual urge is natural to both sexes. 'Rhythm Desires' (73), "clitoranguish", and "peniranguish", merely refer to the two sexes. The anguish in the two sexes trying to understand each other is a shared pain.

However of significance to a reading of gender in the collection is the third line of 'She's my girl' (23) i.e. "She **ACTS coy**" (emphasis mine), and the refrain "She goes all feminine on me". These two lines are indicative of the fact that femininity is an act that is put on by the female sex. Femininity is thus not natural to the female sex.

### **Social Consciousness in Ajima's *Poems of Sanity***

One of the roles the poet in the African culture has always played is that of the watchdog of the society. A feature of emerging Nigerian female writers is a critique of the political and economic systems and structures. In interrogating this environment, focus has shifted naturally not only to the plight of the female, but also that of the male. This is a movement away from the idealizing stance in works of earlier female Nigerian writers to a more radical interpretation of society. Ajima in this collection, comments on the political and economic conditions not only of Nigeria but also of Africa.

Commenting on the role of the poet in contemporary society, Ajima says:

The poet acts like a mirror, a seer and prophet in society. That is why the poet is first of all a recorder of all that is happening in society whether those things are open or secret...If a poet keeps quiet when bad things are happening in society, such a poet will also get drowned...the poet works at making society correct itself in the present in order to avoid future consequences. A society which chooses to ignore what the poet is saying does so at its own peril (Personal Interview).

This, she says on another occasion, informs the way she writes:

I am deliberately conscious to write in such a way that when another person reads me, he or she can relate to the writing as if looking at his/her reflection in the mirror and exclaims "hey, that's me!"... ("The Write Stuff", New Nigerian Newspapers Online Edition).

As Okafor says, the social consciousness of female writers shows that women are "actors in a world shared by men and not passive reactors in a man's world" (84). Thus the change in image from the stereotyped image of the woman in the society as an appendage to man as a wife and mother in the writings of emerging Nigerian female writers is a reflection of the place of the writers themselves in society. Ajima asserts that (irrespective of sex), "it is the writer or the artist that watches and washes society" ("The Write Stuff", New Nigerian Newspapers Online Edition).

In the poem, 'We Hover' (71), the persona describes a land, which can be taken to be Nigeria, her home country, where "Everything's hard/ Everything's harsh/ ...Desires are unattainable" (71). The word 'hover' in the title of the poem suggests stagnation, immobility, lack of progress. The land is called "the land of the insane", not because it is populated by the mentally ill, but because the frustration of living in a land, where "Everything's terribly terrible", can lead to insanity. The theme of insanity is emphasised upon with a dream that the persona experiences wherein she is turned into a grotesque figure out of the frustration to re-introduce sanity through her poetry.

The theme of the nation's regression is developed in 'Why' (12). The poet wonders why a nation would persist on regression while other nations are moving forward. Contrasted with an unnamed "Others" who can be presumed to be the people of the Western world who are exploring possibilities in space, the poet portrays Nigeria as a people still "In the stone age/ Murdering one another/ In the huts". However the poem is not just a lamentation. The last line: "This cry must be endless", which is preceded by the repetition of "why" (occurring seven times as separate lines), suggests that the question must continually be asked so that perhaps an answer would be provided. This may also be the reason why there is no punctuation mark (notably, a full stop) at the end of the poem. It foregrounds the poet's wish for a persistent questioning of the system.

The poems sharing the general title 'Beloved Country', (57-67) focus on the abundant resources in Nigeria and the challenges of life faced by its citizens. The poet uses the mother and child images in 'Beloved Country' (57) and 'Your Children' (58) for example, to hail the natural and human resources of the nation. Still retaining the image of a mother but this time as one surrounded by her children, the poet questions the federal system of government in 'Centre Controls' (59) where some of the children "are fat and well fed/ Others hungry, pant in dire need/ Looking to you for relief" (59). 'Edifices' (62) probes what is regarded as "elephantine/ edifices/ That are of little use/ To anybody but the contractors". These are projects that are copied from "colder climes around the globe" such as the Ajaokuta Steel Rolling Mills and the Printing Company in Oku-Iboku. 'Hypo-Theoretics' (63) likens the frequent coups witnessed in the country to the children's game of musical chairs, the consequence of which are weariness and dizziness. The persona stresses that "It is not so much the face, / as the systems that need tinkering". 'The Dispossessed' (64) interrogates the ethnic politics of Minoritization. The poem foregrounds the issue of the Minority ethnic groups in Nigeria as they seek relevance and recognition among "the larger nationalities". As an Iggede from Benue State, Nigeria, the poet refers to herself as "A minority of the minorities" and insists that "The dial must go round us all/ For one head is as good as another" (65). In spite of these travails, the poet/persona in 'The Exiles' Song' (66), employs allusion, repetition and rhetorical question to stress her commitment to her country with the dominant imagery being the interconnectedness of a child with its mother using the umbilical cord symbol.

'Millipede' (67), examines the inadequacy of public power supply when the poet/persona asks, "Oh, NEPA, NEPA/ what shall we do/ with thee?" The electricity generating and distributing government agency is painted as moving at the speed of a millipede and sitting "toad-like/ Staring open-mouthed" at other (younger) African countries like South Africa which in contrast, "have developed wings like the eagle bird".

The neglect of the people by the masses which had earlier been noted as the concern in 'Woman On The Road' (33) is also the focus of the one - stanza 'Una Too like Katakata Sef' (7). The persona, addressing the people in the Pidgin, wonders at their disorderly behaviour. The persona however realises that the people cannot be blamed because:

As I see say  
for this our Obodo country  
If you no rush for sometin

Na so dem go de leave  
you de go

The last line of the poem is reflective of the resigned response which ends most discussions and reflections on their country by Nigerians: "Sha, make God help us!".

In 'The Stone Breaking Woman Of The Plateau' (46), the poet discusses hard female labour. The poem focuses on women who line the roads from the remotest parts of the state to the capital "Breaking the marbled stones" which are natural resources abundant in the Plateau state of Nigeria and which are used for building. The criticism implied in the poem seems tempered by the poet's manipulation of auditory images in the second stanza. This lends to a celebration of the women who break the stones:

They are wiry and strong  
The hammers they hold  
The hammers they wield  
Kpong, kpong, kpong  
The wiry women of the hills (46)

However, in the last stanza, the tone changes to a more serious one as the poet uses the word 'exert' to capture the laborious nature of the job; a job that must be done for the sustenance of not only the women's immediate families but that of their larger society.

The effect of a negligent government on the generality of the people (i.e. both sexes) is alluded to in 'Una Too Like katakata Sef' (7). The poem which is in pidgin English, begins with a rhetorical question which wonders why the people 'like katakata'. Here 'Katakata' means unneeded and unnecessary rush. The reason for this ill-mannered behaviour of the people is because of the insensitive and non-caring government.

'Fear' (56) delves into one of the commonest crimes which has given Nigeria a bad image in the international community, that is, advanced fee fraud (popularly referred to as 419). Business men, religious leaders, the bereaved, and the sick are referred to as "Vultures/ They come in all guises/ Like an invading army" who use all manner of excuses to wheedle money out of the rich. A doubt is however cast on the rich victims themselves as the persona wonders: "Am I too greedy for gain?/ Am I too ambitious?/ Am I too dumb and gullible/ Am I too ostentatious in living...".

Interspersed in some of the lines of the poems in this collection are hints that the

poet's criticism of the nation is informed by love. The second part of 'Millipede' (67) asserts the poet's patriotism and hope for a better future in spite of the bitter criticism embedded in the poem. This is portrayed as one lover chiding the other.

The poet/ persona's patriotism is more graphically captured in 'Me I Love The Anthem' (75) where she celebrates some of the food dishes of the country. The poet proclaims her love for her country and caps the celebratory mood with the musical score of the National Anthem.

Ajima's socio-political consciousness in the collection extends beyond Nigeria to Africa. 'Make your own Utopia' (8), is a reawakening call to Africans not to keep relying on the Western technologically advanced world as the problems of Africa can only be solved by Africans themselves. The pathetic state that Africa is in is foregrounded by the repetition of a line of lamentation in the Hausa language: "Wao Allah na", a cry uttered when one finds oneself in a bad/ pathetic situation.

The poet uses skin colour, not as the criterion for Blackness/ Whiteness, but to differentiate between the technologically advanced Western world and Africa. This can be illustrated in the example she offers to indicate that Africa is not of much significance to the Western world:

Reverend Jesse went to Kosovo  
But he didn't go to Bujumbura  
If you don't take up your cause,  
There is nobody who's gonna take it up  
for you...  
For even if we forget our skin  
They do not forget

The poem condemns Africa's apathy to technological discoveries that make life easier, using the words "sit and stare" which are repeated intermittently in the poem for emphasis. This is juxtaposed with the hard-working attitude of the people of the more developed countries achieved through the employment of the imagery of the ant. It is this same imagery of the ant that she employs as means of jogging the memory of Africans so that they can awaken from their slumber in the rhetorical question thus: "Do you remember?/ We had once been ants" (9).

In 'The Good Samaritan And The ideal' (41), Ajima, alluding to the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, addresses humanity in general. The poet appeals not only for a world where race is secondary but also calls for action rather than theory so that the world would be a better place for all. The use of the first person pronoun again

ensures the inclusion of the female; thus the word 'man' refers to humanity comprising both the male and the female.

One of the challenges facing African literary artists, especially those who attempt to use their works to better the society is the accessibility of their works by a majority of the people, most of whom are too poor to buy books or are illiterate. For poets, it is especially difficult as the genre is not popular. Ajima confesses, "I can't say that my message is reaching the desired audience...the people I want this message to touch are not educated..." ("How I Write", Sunnewsonline). In order to make her poetry accessible to the people, Ajima employs simple language. Some of the poems have the rhythm of everyday speech while a few are written in the popular Pidgin English.

A feature of Ajima's poetry in this collection is repetition, either of words, phrases or entire lines. Apart from being entertaining, this quality of her poetry eases the ability to memorise such poems because it lends musicality to the poems. Ajima graphically represents this through the use of the short lines.

### Conclusion

Ajima's poems xray gender and the general socio-economic and political illsof her immediate society and of the larger world. The poet gives various images of the woman. There is the mother and the good time girl images which are also common in male authored-texts. Ajima however also provides other less flattering images of the woman in order to de-romanticise the image of the woman presented by earlier female writers. The ultimate aim however is to demonstrate that the woman is no different from the man and thus possesses vices and virtues just as her male counterpart. Ajima also attempts to retrieve the traditional role of the female poet which includes censuring the leadership when it is perceived to have derailed from its primary role of serving the people.

It is worthy of note that Ajima employs female images that are derived from her experience as a woman, such as childbirth, and her play on the words 'cold' and 'fire' in the dramatic conversation between Winnie and Mandela indicate that sexual desire is natural to both men and women among other instances. These experiences are not accessible to the male writer. This is indicative of the intention to re-invent literature that a female reader can identify with and find appealing.

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