

Poetry as Mental Excursion: Ezenwa Ohaeto's *the Chants of a Minstrel* as Chants of a Poet-Raconteur

Leonard Obina ONWUEGBUCHE¹, Onyebuchi NWOSU², Amarachi CHIMEZIE³,
Ngozi G. UGOCHUKWU⁴, Peace Amara AKUNEZIRI⁵ & Prisca O. BOB⁶

1,2,3,4,5.Department of English and Literary Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University,
Ndufu-Alike, PMB 1010 Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.
6.Evangel University Akaeze, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.
Email: ²onyebuchi.nwosu@funai.edu.ng

Abstract

This study interrogates the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations that dominate the poetic engagements of one of contemporary Nigeria's great poets, Ezenwa-Ohaeto in his last poetry collection entitled *The Chants of a Minstrel*. The focus is on the traditional performative roots of his poetry as well as the roving-story-telling vibes in this collection which ended up as his poetic swansong. It examines the ever-increasing link between verbal arts and written verses by projecting the oral essences, the roving-nature, the universality and multiplicity of thoughts expressed in most poems in the collection. The paper identifies the narrative aesthetics of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poetry and the various aspects of human condition which the poet portrays in the text. By identifying the poet's artistic exploration of some highly important socio-political issues and his unwavering concern for the well-being of the world and its people, it reveals how the poet in looking at various facets of life, showers both soothing and corrective remarks that not only expose the numerous intransigencies of human existence but also lend a helping voice in the mission to better the earth. With this, poetry is showcased as a veritable aesthetic medium that maintains affinity with traditional story-telling roots while exploring modern national and global issues.

Keywords: *Contemporary Nigerian Poetry, Oral Roots, Ezenwa-Ohaeto's Poetry, Poetic Excursion, Poet-Raconteur.*

INTRODUCTION

Among the frontline Nigerian poets whose creativity and artistry have remained quite remarkable, fervent and strident since their emergence as poets, Ezenwa-Ohaeto has maintained a distinct and conspicuous presence in African poetic arena. The depth of thought, richness of imagination and fervour of his poetry has attracted volumes of comments by critics. Sallah (1995) says that he is one of the new poets of west Africa with little or no colonial hang-up. (p. 10) His poetry is often devoid of foreign poetic garbs, and this positions him amongst the avant-garde poets whose works heavily rely on African traditional poetic lore but ultimately sensitise the people on ways to positively transform their societies.

Other critics like Elansi (2003) see him as a post-modernist poet whose works deal with issues which are of serious concern to the Nigerian people (p. 22). Such issues include injustice, economic imbalance, social and political problems. Commenting on this, Abati (2003) affirms that Ezenwa-Ohaeto sometimes turns poetry into an instrument of awakening revolutionary consciousness. "Using ironies and sarcastic humour to condemn dictatorship that barricaded the Nigerian society for so long while at the same time mobilizing the common people to demand an improvement of their lives" (p. 18). Udentia (1996) classifies him among "the

‘older’ generation of the revolutionary poets whose poetic mode and social concern clearly demonstrate the charting of a new poetic tradition and a new alternative sensibility” (p. 94). Perhaps the most outstanding quality of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry lies in his deliberate attempt to communicate to even the ordinary people. His language though simple is of the finest poetic quality. Sometimes he goes head-long to use pidgin and Essacob (2002) believes that his adoption of this style of communication is not an indication of his incapability of using standard English but a desire not to exclude any segment of the population from his poetry (p. 27). Highlighting this, Otiono (1998) observes that “this is street poetry, a stylistic experiment and innovation that has been given impetus by the need for poetic language and form to cope with experiential reality (p. 57). This tendency is called the democratisation of the language of poetry.

There is also a strong commitment to socio-political issues in Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry. Ogene (2014) alludes to this when he asserts that “a close study of some of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poems reveals that he is a poet, with profound social commitment, a critic, a crusader who aims at awakening sleeping minds, sensitizing gullible hearts and igniting latent fire in the soul of the masses to challenge obvious cases of injustice, inequality and dehumanization that abound in the society” (p.171). However, Oyali (2011), views his poetry from another prism by linking his poetry with that of Niyi Osundare, especially in their recourse to the incorporation of traditional ideals in their poetry. To this, he believes that this tendency foregrounds the parallels in the styles of Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Niyi Osundare, especially their deep reliance on the oral traditions of their various ethnic groups. This to him depicts that there are ample similarities in their indigenous societies and by utilizing them in their poetry, they are highlighting that such should serve as a unifying factor for the various tribes in Nigeria. Indeed, there is performance dimension to Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s as most of his poetry rely heavily on traditional African oral poetry. To this Ogundipe (2017) observes that “the adoption of oral forms from the indigenous ethnic language features prominently in much of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry” (p. 101). Also, Echezona (2013) points to this fact when he asserts that “unlike the English poetry, Ezenwa-Ohaeto does not observe the prosodic features of meter, rhyme and generic classification...He makes conscious use of idioms, chants and other traditional poetry devices to give his poetry a touch of oral poetry” (p. 171).

However, in spite of this array of studies, none has specifically undertaken the study of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry as a depiction of traditional oral chants which are usually rendered by traditional raconteurs who traverse the length and breathe of most Igbo communities and entertain and inform people through their melodious and highly insightful poetic performances. The only closest study to this dimension of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry is that by Stephen Ogundipe (2017) which focuses on the phenomenon of orality in contemporary African poetry with examples drawn from Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry. The general nature of the study makes it a perfunctory discourse on certain aspects of orality in the poetry, though the crux of the research is “utilising the techniques of oral resources by African poets does not necessarily reflect political undertone but [depicts] an acknowledgment of the aesthetic forms of the oral forms” (p. 100). Having observed the ‘overview’ nature of the study, this paper is therefore conceived to delve specifically into discussing Ezenwa-Ohaeto poetics in *The Chants of a Minstrel* as being synonymous with the chants of the traditional Igbo oral story teller, roving poet or an itinerant poet. The tendency is to relate his poetry in *The Chants of a Minstrel* to that of African traditional *griots* or native spinners of numerous yarns whose masterful story-telling prowess is capable of holding an audience spellbound with their highly entertaining stories and meaningful anecdotes that address some basic issues in the society. Furthermore, Ogundipe

had argued that ‘the minstrel persona in Igbo society functions as a community conscience and enjoys immunity from persecution. The protection empowers the minstrel to significantly contribute to the socio-political well-being of the society through the chants.’ Going by this, this paper would attempt to proffer some answers to the following questions: To what extent does Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry in *The Chants of a Minstrel* depict him as the society’s conscience? To what extent has he said the not-easily-uttered or spoken issues to those in power and those transgressing in one way or the other in the society in the same way the poet-raconteur or the roving poet would fearlessly do? To this end, this essay is couched into three segments, while the first part introduces and situates the discussion and highlights the major perspective to be examined in the study, the second part, with copious examples and illustrations, explores the chant elements and features of traditional itinerant poetry in the collection while the last part serves as the conclusion where the identified features are reiterated.

Echoes of Itinerant Poetic Excursions in Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s *The Chants of a Minstrel*

The title of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poetry collection “the chants of a Minstrel” has both traditional, religious and symbolic connotations for it not only evokes a myriad of thoughts in the reader but arouses insights that are usually associated with the melodious musical exploits of a roving poet- a minstrel. Chant is not only a vocal expression but a middle-ground expression between speech and song. Though it has both the tempo and melody of a song, it is uttered with the tone of a speech and it is not only a revered expression but it is often spontaneous. Chant, according to *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*

is an intermediate stage between speaking and singing ... and is of two types: religious chants – associated with preachers in churches and traditional deity priests; secular chants is prominent in the epic poetry of many countries..... used for dignified and elaborate form of narrative poetry dealing with heroic legendary and historical events as well as drama and romance of love. (p. 212)

On the other hand, minstrelsy as an act is a global phenomenon that dates as far back as the existence of man. According to Enekwe et al (2002), “minstrels have performed since the beginning of society, uniting the arts of poetry, music and sung verses to their instrument” (p. 386) They further quoted W. Chappel as saying that the skill of minstrelsy “was considered as something divine: their persons were deemed sacred: their attendance was solicited by kings and they were everywhere loaded with honours and awards” (p. 386) Some ascribe the titles of entertainers historian and philosopher to the minstrel but in all, the minstrel is a “versatile performer who seeks to hold the attention of his audience with all the talents and skills he can muster” (Enekwe et al, p.386).

The minstrel is synonymous with a poet-raconteur or a roving poet who goes about making people happy through the recitation of chants and songs that tell stories of high entertaining and educating verve. The poetic yarns that are spewed by some roving *griots* are not only loaded with rhythmic and mellifluous expressions but they are didactic and insightful narratives that comment on various aspects of human condition. Though the title of the poetry collection: “the Chants of a Minstrel” is implied, the meaning is all encompassing with no poem bearing the title, rather, all the poems draw elements from the title. In the opening comment in the collection, the poet draws attention to the fact that in the course of his chanting, he is going to traverse almost all ends of human knowledge as he says “the minstrel assumes many guises, appropriates many voices and uses many characteristics in performance” (p. 7).

In the same vein, the poetry collection is filled with poems which embody multifarious shades of views and opinions. Divided into five sections depicting different moods, poise and dispositions of the minstrel, the beginning part entitled ‘the chant of a mad minstrel’ has an opening poem captioned ‘The Pre-chant.’ As an introductory chant, the minstrel (the poet-speaker) does a kind of throat-clearing as he chants.

I am a man of moods

I am a man of chants

.....

I feel the chant well up

I iron my rumpled thoughts

Leaves of memories awaken

In sudden gusts of remembrance. (p. 12)

In the poem, the poet persona sees chanting as that which depends on the chanter's state of mind and that which rises spontaneously like ocean wave that “wells up” while he tries so much to assemble the vituperating thoughts properly like one ironing a rumpled cloth. And like the pages of a book, once the leaves of the book of chants fluff open, they ignite fountains of reminiscences which form the crux of the minstrel's poesy.

The effects and capabilities of the tongue is the thrust of another poem entitled ‘The tongue of a mad minstrel’. One could wonder how such tongue of a mad minstrel would wag or nag; whether it would waft inanities or render abuses. But the tongue of this particular “mad poet-speaker” in Ohaeto's poetry collection seems to be well controlled as it only effuses statements like “I have seen mother tongues/ I have also seen murder tongues.” (p. 15) Mother tongues means different dialects and languages while “murder tongues” are those predatory and slanderous tongues which revel in criticizing, and “dissecting” people. The parallel placement of the terms “mother” and murder” changes the meaning of the lines but it seems the poet's focus is more on people who have murdering tongues as he castigates them:

When actions become actionable

When deeds become misdeeds

The tongue becomes a murder tongue (p. 15)

A tongue that utters various meanings assumed or read into people's actions or turns human deeds into misdeeds is really a murderous tongue. In the world today, many people kill with their tongues more than they do with guns and knives. People who indulge in slanderous vituperations or those who belie others or gossip vehemently against another are practicing the brutal acts of killing with their tongues, so the poet speaker chastises them.

Then in another poem “The dilemma of the minstrel” which is imbued with sarcastic and ironic innuendoes targeted at those who abuse leadership roles popularly entrusted onto them, the poet captures the feelings of a poet who seems to be at a cross-road. Placing leadership at a very high pedestal, the poet speaker chants that “Sometimes we see a country/ From the fart of one citizen’ (p. 18). Somehow, the kind of leadership a people have determines their fate in life; the leader's “fart” which could either be foul-smelling or aromatic, symbolizes the character of the leader which has far reaching and serious repercussion on the people. Wondering what could become of the people when their leader is neck-steeped into

wrongdoings, the poet asks:

When you catch
The Pope perusing pornography
Do you report him to God?
Your faith tumbles down (p. 18)

The witty concatenation of the three words in the second line “Pope perusing pornography” to gain a vibrant alliteration helps to make pungent the whole meaning ensconced in the stanza: that the action of those at the top though they are sometimes unquestionable, greatly affect the behaviour of the followers for whether the poet-speaker reports the Pope’s gross misdemeanour to God or not, one thing is certain: his faith has tumbled down.

The same thought reverberates in the poem “The mad minstrel plays with fire” where the poet’s voice becomes a harbinger who warns those who toy with fire to desist from such acts. Fire as used in the poem aptly symbolizes a lot of things as in this excerpt:

There is fire on the tongue
There is fire in the mind (p. 21)

Fire as used above signifies power; no wonder the lines are followed with these words of caution:

If you live in a grass hut
You do not raise a flame too high. (p. 21)

The fire we have here contrasts with the first. It represents a weakness; so while the man of power should be cautious how he applies it, one with a weakness should not do things that could aggravate his vulnerable state. This is further emphasized: “The fowl exempts itself promptly/When the game is to jump over fire” (p. 21). To conclude, the poet-chanter reveals the volcano like nature of a minstrel’s artistry. He may look quiet and dormant but when he begins to exhibit his skills, people are greatly shocked: “But the fire of a minstrel’s tongue/Are live coals covered with ash” (p. 21). The metaphor of live coal magnifies both the potency and the havoc a poet’s utterance could cause. The lines are couched in simple non-banal language that tailors the oral performance of a minstrel who also is regarded as a roving poet. With such skills, Ohaeto seem to be consciously thinking in the native lore while writing in English. He seems to be working in line with Odueme’s (2019) assertion that African poets deliberately toe the line of native performers. As he observes, “conscious of the need to sustain the functional role of the oral poetic art in the written art form, writers of modern African poetry, adopt elements of the traditional poetic art techniques and skilfully fuse these into the creation of their scripted pieces” (p. 149). The poets in some instances invoke native metaphors which help them to appropriately domesticate their thoughts and aligns it contextually.

Similarly, in the poem “The minstrel with post-colonial goatskin bag” the poet becomes a poet-singer-critic who attempts to fathom where post-colonial poets draw their inspiration from:

Each post has a goatskin bag
But is there a post-modern muse

For a postcolonial poet or is there

A postcolonial muse for a post-modern poet? (p. 23)

A goatskin bag is a hold-all kind of bag used by elders or medicine men in traditional societies. It houses all the paraphernalia of their calling or position. In African literature, it has come to signify both the acumen and accoutrement of a poet or writer.

In the second section of the collection with the title: “The Chant of a Wandering Minstrel” readers are taken through the fulcrum of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s travelogue. He vividly and captivantly recreates the experiences and scenarios, which confronted him in the various Euro-American cities where he has either resided or visited. These experiences are what he relates to that of a native troubadour who traverse from one end of the community, village or town to another, rendering his song and making people happy.

I frolicked into Frankfurt

Walking under drizzling rain

Glancing furtively towards

Lighted restaurant windows

That night Frankfurt was a vision

Of technology struggling for human warmth (p. 31)

Despite the dazzling beauty and technological magnificence of the German city of Frankfurt, the poet still subtly comments on its quiet-and-near-lifeless nature of the city as portrayed in the last two lines: “technology struggling for human warmth.” This depicts the city as one with high technological advancement but almost castrated of human touch. From there he moves over to Sweden, on Uppsala precisely:

But Uppsala had no extreme season

Pubescent girls and boys walked

Unburdened by debts, responsibilities

A rite of passage their elders had passed (33)

The picture that we see here of Uppsala is indeed a city with clement seasons; with nubile girls and matured boys milling around happily, thinking less of means of survival as their parents fully take care of them. This contrasts with London where the weather as the poet-traveller (minstrel) records, is always foggy and the minds of immigrants are foggy too.

I limped into London

Ah! London of a thousand tales

Told by the books of the Empire

But the fog of ten stretches monotonous (p. 34)

For the minds of the immigrants to be foggy implies great tension and anxiety over immigration issues, especially the undocumented immigrants who could be tracked down, whisked away and deported at the next available flight. As illegal immigrants, they are fearful and uncertain of their stay over there.

This is made more poignant as the poet-traveller further recounts a visit to some “immigrant brothers now trapped abroad” and as he puts it, these people

Dream of the summer of homeland
And write letters of trilling paradise
Without the taunt of assimilation
Without hints of constant searches (p. 35)

The above lines indicate a clear mark of commitment as he is terribly concerned with the plight of African migrants in Europe and America. According to Ezeji (2016), Ezenwa-Ohaeto, no doubt, aligns himself to this position- that a writer must be committed to the course of his society and his work must be seen as being relevant to the welfare and wellbeing of his society” (p. 53).

These non indigenous Londoners in their letters to the people at home (as the poet recounts) paint a good picture of London but exclude their loneliness, harrowing experience and the inhuman treatments meted out to them. These are their ‘taunt of assimilation’ and ‘constant searches’ for belongingness.

Leaving London, Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s wandering minstrel arrives Serbelloni in Italy where his poetic periscope captures the reeking stench of corruption and decaying morals.

But Italy seeps into Serbelloni
The mangle of Malpensa airport
Mars the opening day of flights
The tales of vanishing morals
Filter from the pages of daily news
The deeds that dent the throne in Rome. (p. 34)

From Europe, the minstrel hops into USA where he recalls meeting several brothers (black immigrants) who America have helped greatly in shattering the lofty dreams they once haboured about their future.

I hopped into Houston
A visit to the brothers from home
Each still in the daze of dreams
The dreams Texas had rewritten (p. 36)

And lastly, Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s poet-speaker breezes into Boston where he observed “only the toxic mixture of self and society/Art and atrocity are now in close proximity” (p. 36). This shows a city with much feelings of individualism and “statism” among its so called indigenes; a city that is touted as the haven of knowledge- with the presence of Harvard University, but yet it is an epicentre of graft and social malaise -“atrocity.”

Ohaeto’s poetic artistry indicates his highly observing acumen as he deploys the agency of poetry to critique each city the poet has once visited by making a subtle remark of his little observations about the city.

Racism is another issue that does not elude the roving eyes of the travelling- minstrel projected by Ezenwa-Ohaeto in collection as he chants:

Only the skin burnt with eyes
Knows the pain of probing eyes (p. 42)

The roving poet-persona states that an immigrant's hurdles start from the airport- "the airport is not a port/But a pot of purification/Awaiting the traveller" (p. 42). Indeed, most Western airports are "pots of purification" or avenues where African immigrants are subjected to various levels of dehumanizing, debasing and harrowing assessments and evaluations that make any one that comes out of them unscathed to look like a metal that has been forged through some kind of smithing. When the black immigrant is able to scale through the immigration hurdles at the airport, other racist obstacles await him. As Ohaeto's poet-speaker recalls, in the street and in the bus or tram, a distance is maintained from the immigrant: "in the bus in the tram/Empty seats near one sitting/With commuters clutching the rail/Show the map of the mind" (p. 43). The mental imagery of one sitting on a seat with many vacant empty seats left around him while people still clutch to the rails, speaks volumes about the reeking depth of racial divisiveness. People would prefer to stand and clutch to the rails of the trains than seat near a person of another skin colour! But that is not all, the poet exposes the narcissistic and exclusive lifestyle of the West despite their claim of waxing stronger in their bid to better humanity. "They want to save the world/Something big out there to do/But the dying next door neighbour/His name they do not know" (p. 43). It is ironic that people who are so reclusive in their attitude should be the ones who "want to save the world." To sum his poetic treatise on racism and western apathy/individualism, the wandering poet-speaker sternly admonishes them ironically:

They do not torture animals
They do not starve their pets
They prevent cruelty to animals
But let the distant human perish (p. 43)

The question that is asked is whether it is better to love animals more than fellow humans. This indicates a terrible mark of hypocrisy for how could one hate a fellow human because he or she is of a different skin colour but lavishes immeasurable affection at a pet that is less human. The roving poet in Ohaeto's *The Chants of a Minstrel* disapproves such double standard acts.

In the section entitled "The chant of a sentimental minstrel" "Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poetic invocation reaches its climax as the poet-speaker instructively chants on issues revolving around romance and intimate affection. The poems in the section are quite multidimensional. Aside other topical sentimental issues, the poet cautions young maidens against certain behavioural recklessness. The first is chronic dependence on artificial body make-ups

If you stitch fragments of beauty together,
An eyelash of beauty trembles longer than life
The lipstick becomes a weapon of emotion slit
Beauty can then glow and glitter like a sharp razor
When beauty becomes excessive it subdues the wearer (p. 52)

By and large, excessiveness and extremism in anything is wholly sinful and repulsive for these days, in a bid to enhance their appearance with make-ups, many ladies over-do it such that they redesign themselves into living-masks. There is also an exhortation on youthful exuberance:

When a maiden reaches puberty
She can even deny the spirits salutation
But after puberty the maiden understands
Fresh palm-wine ferments with time. (p. 52)

Pointedly, a girl who attains puberty feels larger than life; she feels atop the whole world as she curries attention and marvels at her scintillating physical endowments. But with passing years, those attentions she courts and her beauty begin to wane.

Furthermore, Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poet-speaker, acting as a roving poet exhibits a kind of culture shock as he expresses utter dismay at the level of physical exposure displayed by some western ladies who go for summer picnics.

They will lure me into sin
In this summer parade
The sun sizzled off their apparel
They jingle braless breasts
They parade naked flesh. (p. 55)

Though such wanton parade of flesh elicits numerous desire and thoughts, the poet speaker struggles to hold himself together as he chants: "I ignore the sight/The sights of a thousand desires" (p. 55) With this, the poet advises men who suffer as a result of women's indecent dressing to try as much as they can to ignore them and their seductive exposures!

Moving away from the scene of lascivious displays that ignites lustful desires, the minstrel chants of his uncontrollable feeling of true affection for a lady he calls Akumjeri.: "the last flower in the season of love" (p. 61). He rains praises on her physical and non-physical traits.

From her steps
I saw the walk of tomorrow
I saw the tomorrow of dawn. (p. 57)

Her steps, as forward-lunging as they look, also portray her as a bringer of good-luck for in it the poet sees "the tomorrow of dawn"—a new beginning.

Shifting from the chants of sentiments and loveliness, the itinerant minstrel launches into that of mourning and remorsefulness. He chants dolefully as he laments the departure of some towering figures in Nigerian political and literary landscape. Grouped under the title "The Chants of a Mourning Minstrel", the four poems in the section have an introductory one entitled "The Minstrel also Weeps." This opening poem sums the felling that pervade the section as the poet speaker chants that "The burden of grief/Weighs heavy in the mind/...if time dissolves memories like mist/Will memories dissolve pain" (pp. 72-73).

The first poem “Where does the Rainbow Live” is a lament for C.K.N. We would ascribe these initials to Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu because of the military aura that pervades the poem. C. K. N. is the maverick revolutionary leader of the first military coup in Nigeria-15 January 1966. The poet persona calls him “Soldier that we know/Flower that grew in thorns” (p. 74). C. K. N. unwaveringly carried out the plans and ideology of the coup--(to sanitize the rot in the Nigerian polity), but was betrayed by some of his colleagues who allowed sentiments to dictate their roles. The coup as a result failed and sadly C. K. N. did not survive its after effects. Making reference to C. K. N.’s presumed killing of some perceived corrupt political top shots in line with the “purge the nation” spirit of the coup, the poet speaker chants “You weeded the farm planted yams/But they ate them in your absence” (p. 74). To register the kind of majestic honour he accords him, he lauds him with epithets that are fully loaded with folk imagery:

Fire that devoured water
Crab that could not be eaten in secret
Hunter that tamed leopards (p. 74)

He expresses his grief at the loss of this widely acclaimed intellectual and military scion thus:

I have graded these tears
If death must visit the clan
Let it take away only idiots (p. 74).

A man as intelligent as C. K. N. does not deserve the kind of miserable death he experienced: “No army bade you farewell/No soldier gave you a last salute” (p. 74).

“The Calabash does not sink in water” is another threnody-chant and it is dedicated to Amos Tutuola who lately though belatedly has come to be recognized as one of the foremost Nigerian prose-wordsmiths.

Amos the offspring of Tutuola
You wielded a pen in spite of odds
You tilled the soil of fiction
You enchanted minds with tales. (p. 77)

Though he had little education, Tutuola had the finest of human creative imagination as the poet chants: “You coined words and made words coins/You widened imagination beyond reality/...A calabash does not sink in water.” (p. 77) As one of Nigeria’s literary icons, Tutuola has remained afloat (visible) in Nigeria’s literary scene. Acknowledging the fact that it is in the works of Tutuola that one could get the true taste of African literature, the poet-speaker calls him “salt” that attracts praises. “The calabash did not sink in water/And salt does not indulge in self praise” (p. 78).

Another poem “The tree we climbed to touch the Sun” is an elegy to John Munonye—another great Nigerian writer. He is portrayed as a mighty tree that “stabs steeply” into the sky: “The tree we climbed to touch the sun” That means he facilitated and directed people to places they gained enlightenment! (p. 80). Ohaeto’s poet-chanter recalls some of the worrisome ramifications of John Munonye’s literary life: He was not particularly rated high among his contemporaries despite his prodigious output and some critics who ventured to study his works

lashed critical strokes at him. But in the face of all these, he maintained an affable mien -he never bothered nor fired back any negative tirade at his critics.

The needle may be small

It is not something for the fowl to swallow

But his throat of songs tough like rhino skin

He swallowed the needle of our incessant irritations. (p. 79)

Despite that his works were vehemently criticized, some critics also praised his artistry but for both camps, his death was indeed a terrible blow: “death has touched tender parts of our hearts” (p. 79).

The last poem in the section “Kolanut lasts long in the mouth of those who value it” mourns the untimely exit of Ola Rotimi, a renowned Nigerian dramatist who died in 2000. For the poet-voice, creativity is a calling and Rotimi took the path of the theatre.

Something tugs at our heart’s strings

Many roads lead to our hearts

He took the road of theatre and drama. (p. 83)

And after taking to such a road, he exhibited great mastery of the art. “Ola Rotimi showed us/Even in pulling a cart is craftsmanship” (p. 82). Till date, it has been difficult to surpass Rotimi’s dramatic feats among those who are engaged in Nigeria cum African dramaturgy for Rotimi was quite productive and ingeniously creative.

Ola Rotimi like a tree of value

You quickly grew dense foliage

You also produced succulent fruits. (p. 83)

The “succulent fruits” are dramatic masterpieces, which he bequeathed us and because we value and revere him, our hearts would ever pamper his memories.

The last section of the collection titled “The Chant of a Musing Minstrel” would have befittingly been placed at the introductory part as it highlights the scope, nature and rudiments of poetic minstrelsy. In “The Destiny the Minstrel did not choose”, the poet’s-voice expresses the belief that creativity is not usually borne out of one’s deliberate inclination but that of chance and avocation.

I did not choose the minstrel

The destiny chose the minstrel

I did not request to chant

The chant gushed of its own accord. (p. 86).

Chants according to the poet tumble out of thoughts spontaneously. Also he reiterates the natural law of karma/nemesis where every act begets or rewards itself:

The desire to cheat, refusal to be cheated

Cause the loud hum of open market

But if you sell sand as salt in the market

You get paid stone as money in the market. (p. 97).

Mischief-makers are often the victims of their mischievous acts, the poet says and goes further to instruct that there is much power in the human tongue:

A pit dug by the tongue is large

It cannot be covered up by hand

But pleasant words may draw

A snake from the depth of its hole. (p. 98).

The tongue as shown above is both an instructive and destructive instrument; the onus lies with the user, to use it to abuse or to use it to soothe and edify.

The influence of African traditional lore on the poetry of Oheato in the collection under study is overwhelming if not enormous. According to Udueme (2019), “the influence of traditional oral poetic forms on modern African poetry has been significant. Fascinated by oral forms which their respective communities relied on ... before the advent of literacy, modern African writers borrow from these oral traditions and blend them with the features of the written Western literary forms” (p. 149). From the use of traditional imagery and localized metaphors, the poet-speaker lunches into a moment of systematic poetic invocations during which some chants of aphoristic sayings that underline a rich knowledge of Igbo proverbial lore are elicited. Below are some examples:

The fish is bent while it is still fresh

The chant echoes before the time of tears (p. 92)

When you destroy the bridge of hope

Be sure of your swimming skill (p. 93)

When a whisper becomes prolonged

Even the deaf hears the secret (p. 101)

If you cannot do a great thing

Do the little in a great way (p. 105).

The arrangement of these aphoristic thoughts in parallel dual lines depict the balancing sequence of the Igbo traditional repertoire which constitute the linguistic pool from which the poet has insightfully but stylistically drawn most of his poetic expressions in the collection

CONCLUSION

By giving printed voice to the age-long art of minstrelsy which implies the tendency to move around and entertain people with soothing poetic chants and songs, Ezenwa Ohaeto in *The Chants of the Minstrel* embarked on a kind of mental excursion characterized by metaphysical and prevaricating renditions, coordinated rants and purposeful meditations. By invoking and sustaining the roving-poet motif and sustaining the exploration of multiplicity of issues rendered variegated places, Ezenwa-Ohaeto utilized poetry as an instrument of socio-political commentary just as poet-raconteurs would usually do. However, in rendering the chants, the poet exhibited a perfect mastery of the poetic art of roving troubadours who criss-cross streets and pathways chanting their songs. Worthy of note is the fact that though the issues

discussed are numerous, deeply engaging and cut across national, continental and global boundaries, they opened vistas through which revelations are made on how best to make the world a more habitable place. From the vivid recreations of the experiences the poet garnered from his sojourn in Europe and America, to the dawns of romantic escapades and loneliness; from the elegiac chants that mourn some literary and political heavyweights in Nigeria to the cautionary words about the power of the tongue and some witty conundrums gushing out from the mouth of the musing minstrel, Ezenwa-Ohaeto offers his views about the nature and state of human existence. Unknowingly, while he assumed the persona of a minstrel to chant poems that bear divergent and multifaceted meanings, he never knew that he was rendering his swansong. Though the collection happily afforded him the greatest privilege of sharing the LNG Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2005, with one of the fathers of African poetry—Gabriel Okara, death did not allow this beloved minstrel to keep chanting further as it struck him down in October 2005. But like Dubem Okafor said in his poetry collection *My Testament*, the words of a poet always outlive the poet. “Yet the fires of death shall purge them/Shall have no sway over them/The creature survives the creator. (p. 7). Though Ezenwa-Ohaeto, the itinerant poet died after delivering these richly-encompassing poetic lines in *The Chants of a Minstrel*, his chants echo and reverberate now and ever more.

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