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## Throes of Death in the Twenty First Century Nigerian Poetry: Uche Peter Umez's Aridity of Feelings

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### Abstract

There is no doubt that in Africa, especially, Nigeria, the average man is constantly in the process of dying or ending up his life in a very painful or unpleasant way. He is either dying physically or metaphorically. This gory experience of the average Nigerian man is aptly captured in the twenty first century Nigerian Poetry. This paper is a discourse of incidents of this gory experience of the average Nigerian man, as expressed by the average Nigerian writer. The study, in particular, ruminates on the throes of death in Uche Peter Umez's Aridity of Feelings. In this collection, the poet-persona x-rays the various problems that plague the African society, especially, Nigeria. They range from HIV/AIDS to vandalism of oil pipelines, armed robbery, kidnapping and Boko Haram menace: all culminating to destruction and untimely death in the twenty first century. Analysis of some poems from the collection does not only reveal these problems but will also proffer solution to them.

**Keywords:** Throes of Death, Twenty First Century, Nigerian Poetry, HIV/AIDS, kidnapping

## Introduction

This collection of poems is sequel to Emenyeonu's evaluation of "a matter of commitment", which he considers as "a vision to create a strong awareness and understanding of African literature on the African continent". [1]

In this vein, I see the *Aridity of Feelings* as one collection that cannot be ignored in the myriad of problems faced by African countries with special reference to Nigeria. The collection provides us with copious illustrations of frustrations, poverty and death in the continent of Africa.

This issue of poverty and its attendant frustration and death is just an indication of the fact that Africa is an underdeveloped continent. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his interview with John Esibi, "all of the countries named as underdeveloped in the world are exploited by others; and the underdeveloped with which the world is now preoccupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation. [2] A.D. Amateshe notes that this "under development include... the big material difference between minority who exploits and the majority who are exploited." [3] Even as we are independent, we Africans

(Nigerians) are constantly being denied the fruits of our labour. There is no doubt that a lot of what we produce goes into the foreign markets. Again, a lot of whatever that is paid for these raw materials that are sold to foreigners in the foreign markets goes into the hands of the rich few who own the means of production and distribution of the national wealth. This class of privileged people continues to make huge profits from the labour which is cheaply provided by peasants and workers. To help us get a clearer picture of this deplorable economic contradiction. Walter Rodney has this to say: "development in a human society is a many-sided process. At the level of individuals, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom and creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material wellbeing." [4]

Amateshe observes that what we are experiencing today as development is quite the opposite of what Rodney noted as development. He went further to say that, "in a capitalist system, there is no way the material well-being of the under privileged can be improved because in addition to labour, there is exploitation by those who control the system. They are subjected to poor living and working conditions" [5] [(7-8)].

It is important to note that it is this exploitative socioeconomic and political relationship between the West and Africa (Nigeria) that characterize what we know today as African [(Nigerian)] political landscape. Reflecting specifically on the Nigerian scenario, we are all aware of how lack of trust and betrayal led to the Nigerian civil war.

Enyinnaya writes that "The Nigerian civil war has been a canvas on which images of recent Nigerian poetry rebound. This is manifested in the imagery of violence which has invaded Nigerian poetry in recent years". (6)

In the light of this treatise by Enyinnaya, we can locate Umez's *Aridity of Feelings* which has drawn sufficiently from the Nigerian Civil War to evoke images of horror and death. Instances abound of kwashiorkor disease. The AIDS patient is likened to the kwashiorkor patient of the Biafran war.

Augustine Okere writes that "like the poets of the first generation, these poets choose society as their poetic focus". (7). He cites Niyi Osundare as saying it is

Man

Meaning

To

Man

It is along these lines that we shall examine the throes of death in the poetry of Uche Peter Umez.

Robert Frost writes that "poetry begins in trivial metaphors, his own and other peoples". (8) The discreet handling of metaphors purifies the work and gives lively vent to the literary work. In his own reflection on what poetry is, Lenard Okola has this to say: "Poetry as an expression of human emotions and sentiments is one of the oldest of man's activities." [9] By this, we come to terms with the fact that poetry is an activity that we carry out when we want to express our deepest feelings and emotions. Hence, we can say that death throes come as a result of poverty as people grind their teeth in its face. In the poem, "Grind", Umez notes that "shades of grim days etch agony/on motley faces of kindred/mired in poverty". (10) Umuez considers the abject poverty which the people of Nigeria live in even though they are people "of a rich land". He mirrors the oil boost, arable land and numerous mineral deposits latent in Nigeria, yet, her people cannot eke out a living. Thus, their faces wear tired wet looks and personal dehumanization.

"The millstone is around their necks" adding to their misery. Millstone in the poem signifies burden. These are man-made or artificial burdens put on man by man, imposed on man through obnoxious laws, taxes, VAT and other governmental regulations. Police extortion and other vices cause the people to grind their teeth. These millstones, ranging from obnoxious policies and lack of infrastructure are made worse every day. People thirst for water even when rivers abound. There is nothing to cheer as their destinies are hollow adumbrating throes of death.

In the poem, "Abandoned", children are not spared the throes of death. The face of a "10-year-old" is screwed up/like mashed potato, his eyes like those of a "dead fish" with no "glitter for tomorrow" This conjures a picture of a living dead as his fingers shake and jerk like one suffering from Parkinson disease. He sleeps on the hard pavement for a bed with a face bereft of smiles. This ten-year old lad has a hairless head and swollen belly which are suggestive of malnutrition akin to kwashiorkor. The boy is hungry and he is on the brink of collapse. Society is unfeeling and does not care for him in "this bustling afternoon". Society is full of life as people go about their daily chores with no cares. This

poem is packaged in well-crafted words like "screwed up", "mashed potato", "hairless head", "swollen and sagging", "buzzing flies", "bustling afternoon", etc. These words and phrases convey images of poverty and destitution.

In "Broken", death stares us in the face. The lines are uneven, showing the brokenness of life. The lines come in spasm indicating the long and tortuous life of an AIDS patient. The persona confesses "my life is as fragments within/a memory". This person was once hale and hearty, living a robust life but now things have fallen apart and her life fragments as she lives, faints, gets well and falls sick again. This is indicative of an unhealthy life style. Even when she looks healthy externally, she dies by instalment within. She is a shadow of her old self. She was "once/beautiful to behold". It implies that the persona was beautiful and life had a lot of charm for her. Men sought her as she relives such experiences thus:

When I frolicked with  
men of red-hot loins

and my laughter  
echoed with the  
euphoria

of wine in my belly-  
now caught in AID'S

throttle hold I am the  
lone shadow faded by  
dusk. (11)

Her experience is hilarious as she enjoys unlimited attention from men.

From line 18 of the poem, there is a twist which begins with an adverbial "now" followed, by "caught in AIDS throttlehold". The throes of death are very evident and death becomes inevitable. The persona laments, "I am the lone shadow faded by dusk". The last phrase of the poem "faded by dusk" reflects shrouded imagery reminiscence of death fading away from form to grotesque form of formlessness. The word, fade evokes death from the original top, the counterfeit, from the authentic to the artificial. The second word that cries out for analysis is 'dusk'. This suggests eventide when people hasten home to rest. When chickens go to roost, so does the persona hasten home to her maker having gone through the travails of life.

The morning of life is gone, now it is eventide. The poem begins its letters in the lower case suggestive of the diminishing nature of life. Consider:

My life is as fragments  
within

a memory. (Lines 1 &  
2)[12]

These are the oddities of life from wholeness to fragments, a dark memory of human life. When we bubble and when we crumble into rubble; when we are a beauty to behold and when we crumble into rubble detested and rejected. This poem stands at the centre of circle of life. Sometimes, we are the cynosure of all eyes and latter we become despicable grotesque and horrifying through sickness. The poem portrays AIDS as the scourge of humanity.

The beauty of the poem can is seen in the choice of words as can be seen in the following lines:

a sprinkling/of shards  
(lines 3 & 4)

scattered over the  
fickle sands (line  
5)once beautiful to

behold (line 10)[13]

The phonemes that make up the words are properly orchestrated into a rhythmic twist.

AIDS is a dominant scourge that started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has no known cure, thus posing great danger to humanity. It is at present

ravaging various countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It calls for urgent attention. Huge resources are required to manage those living with HIV/AIDS as many are from poor homes and cannot afford the antiretroviral drugs to keep afloat. It, therefore, becomes a timely sub-matter for poetic discourse to bring to our awareness and psyche the devastating and dehumanizing nature of AIDS. The 21<sup>st</sup> century must be challenged to find an answer to the scourge of AIDS. Most people fold their arms and watch helplessly as humanity is depopulated by its menacing and devastating nature. On another note, the poet draws our attention to the caution required in life, especially, in conjugal relationship. AIDS does not discriminate against personality, high or low, for our persona dined with the high and the mighty, the cream of society and yet she contracted the deadly AIDS. This calls for a rethink in our way of life.

The next poem "Encounter with an AIDS victim" uses a male persona who is now full blown with AIDS. The persona is compared to a Biafran kwashiorkor ridden man with a hairless head, thin as a pencil and with scabies all over his body. Again, he has the appearance of one with tuberculosis. His appearance is scary, frightening, and pitiable.

He is "of sickly Biafran victims/on footage/rose to mind" (lines 4-6).[14] The Biafran experience is one of the worst in the history of human carnage. Inch by inch, the poet describes every part of the AIDS victim who has become a scarecrow. No part of the body is spared. He has become a scum and the wretched of the earth. In this poem, there are several images of poverty. They include:

threadbare -line 1

painfully thin- line 2

scorched herbage- line 9

eyes of a cavern- line 9

cheeks, coarse and blanched- line 11

leper's sole. Lips blistering- line 12[15]

Simile dominates the poem:

Like a consumptive- line 3

Like an old coating of paint- line 14

Arms like his legs- line 17

Arms that lay stiff like  
ostrich's legs- line 16

...as when/A millipede  
crawls- lines 18 & 19

and as a hare- line 24

a nod like a lizard- line  
25

like/rust flakes- line  
27

and as a hare... line  
31[16]

The rhetoric question, "Oh good Lord! Is this one of your creatures...?" (line 28), provides a summation of the persona's deduction of the entire encounter with a male AIDS victim. He is out of form. The poet persona uses various forms of comparison to compare him to some form of bestiality so much so that he asks God if this can pass for humanity. AIDS as a problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has both economic, social, health and moral questions begging for answers. Humanity is astonished at its ravaging march but helplessly, we look on since there is no known cure for it.

The title poem "Aridity of Feelings" shows indifference to human plight by the way we carry on and go about our normal business as though nothing tragic has happened

especially, when we share no kinship with the deceased. We have forgotten our traditional norms and values and like metal beings walk about without feelings. The poet catalogues sundry activities that often lead

to death in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They include:

Kerosene explosions

Pipeline vandalism

Bomb explosions

Bullets from  
uniformed men

Armed robbers

Militia bullets

Accidents in streets

Accidents on roads

Accidents on  
highways, etc [17]

Perhaps, he forgot plane crashes and boat mishaps. But his list is long enough to send shivers down our spines as to the level of insecurity in our society today. These problems do not seem to be addressed by the government, the civil organizations and even the citizenry. It simply appears that we have resigned ourselves to fate, awaiting our own death through any of these forms. Away from diseases and infection, death still stares us in

the face, Umez rhetorically asks, "so news of death or destruction as common as cold/stirs no grief in our hearts?/Stirs no dismay in our thoughts?"

The menace of Boko Haram and those parading as Fulani herdsmen has cheapened death in Nigeria. Bomb explosions are no more discussed. The news comes and fizzles out. No one gives a thought to the level of destruction and the number of dead people.

Each day, the number continues to rise with no serious action on the part of the government. As a result, various explosions and sporadic shootings have become the order of the day. They no longer make headlines as people look forward to some other news items. But from whichever angle we look at it, Umez's *Aridity of Feelings* addresses the Nigerian problems or better still, problems that have bedeviled the Nigerian society.

From the foregoing, we can assert that Uche Peter Umez, through his poems has launched a blistering attack on the Nigerian polity. He has criticised our unfeeling nature using a very sick 10-year old who is left in the streets to beg while people walk past him, uncaring and unfeeling. He is out of school and greatly malnourished. The poet also goes to explore

the feeling of a female AIDS patient on the one hand and a male AIDS patient on the other hand. As if that is not enough, he accuses us of Arid feelings to show how deadened we are to the plight of other people. These poems draw the attention of the government, the civil society and the gentry to the plight of Nigerians, nay black Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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