

# HOPE EGHAGHA AS POET: SATIRE, SELF AND SOCIETY

Christopher Anyokwu

## ABSTRACT

Hope Eghagha is one of Nigeria's emerging contemporary poets whose burgeoning *oeuvre* attests to the satiric achievement in African poetry of English expression, even as he follows in the footsteps of his older compatriots like Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo. Eghagha's poetry is powerfully informed by the ideo-aesthetic elements of his native Okpe-Urhobo Udje tradition, and the Western poetic tradition. Eghagha mobilizes his poetry as a corrective instrument to address this anomalous situation. Therefore, we attempt to investigate how this poet uses the self-as-society paradigm to call attention to the crying necropolis that his country and continent have become, even as we assess his performance as poet.

**Key words:** Urhobo, Udje, Tradition, Change, Oral, Satire and Society.

## Introduction

Africa has always been credited with being the cradle of humanity and is also generally perceived as the oral continent in regard to in part its relatively low level of technological advancement, which in turn is a reflection of the low level of literacy on the continent. In fact, Africans are well-known for their vibrant and energetic lifestyles, and, more importantly, for their oralities manifested through their rites of passage such as the cultural convivial celebration of births, puberty, marriage and funerals. To be certain, Africa is said to be, according to Ruth Finnegan<sup>1</sup> the world's fountain-head of verbal arts due largely to the centrality of the spoken word on the continent. Accordingly, Africans revere people who can speak eloquently, those who are capable of using language in a beautiful and colourful manner.

We have in mind gifted talkers such as griots, raconteurs, bards, poets and singers. Even in the face of the inroads of globalization in Africa and its accompanying technologization and secularization or, in a word, modernization of the so-called Dark continent, Africa's oral heritage continues to wax stronger as it continues to adapt to its new and strange social milieu, adopting and appropriating technological resources for its own relevance and perpetuation. We may talk, for instance, in this connection, of secondary orality whereby oral performers such as poets, griots and singers deploy both print and electronic media to compose, perform and disseminate their works. Walter J. Ong argues as much in his book *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word* (1982).

The technology of writing (Chirography) or printing (typography) and electronic media such as radio, television, video recordings, the cinema and film have furnished additional effective avenues and platforms for the oral bard to *modernize* his craft and, thus, continue to remain relevant in a world in which both the ear and the eye play crucial roles as media of perceiving cultural productions in a rapidly changing world. How does the literate poet feature in all of this and how does he act as bridge between the oral past and the literate present? It is evident enough that the

living (literate) poet, as T.S. Eliot inimitably tells us, is simply an inheritor of the creations of old (or dead/elder) writers and poets.

The living poet, therefore, mobilizes and utilizes these old Literary works – John Wain calls them “masterpieces of the past”<sup>2</sup> – in his own work, applying their contents and forms as the “nuts” and “bolts” of his own poetic material and rhetorical properties. This way, *tradition* is reconfigured and transformed through its new chirographic and typographic format. This is what we intend to investigate and analyse in Hope Eghagha’s poetry, as a cursory look at his poetic *oeuvre* reveals his overwhelming reliance on and indebtedness to his Okpe-Urhobo oral poetics and, expectedly, to Western poetic tradition acquired through formal education.

### **The Udje Tradition and the Satiric Temper**

The Urhobo are one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria, and they occupy a vast rainforest or mangrove swampland in the present-day Delta state in Nigeria. According to G.G. Darah:

The dialectal diversity of Urhobo is such that the spoken form of the Okpe and Uvwie, to take two extreme cases, sound foreign to most speakers of Urhobo. There is, of course, mutual intelligibility at the level of common speech. But this is not the case with poetry which operates largely at the level of idiom and metaphor (2005:1)

Darah goes on to note that: ‘many Urhobo people regard Udu and Ughievwen as the most musical and ornate version of their tongue, according to J.P. Clark in “Poetry of the Urhobo Dance Udje” (2005:1). The Udu-Ughievwen land-whose dialect is considered the most musical and thus central to the Udje tradition – is noted for a large deposit of oil and gas which have been the mainstay of the Nigerian economy since the 1960s. And Udu communities include Oghio, Ogbe-Udu, Ohwase, Oghwode, Ovworhokpookpo, Ovwian, Ukpiovwin, Okolo-Oto, Okoto-Urhie, Erhiephiho, and Eket (2005:3). Now, what is the Urhobo Udje? *Udje* is an artistic tradition that has three aspects, namely, dance, poetry and music. The whole business of Udje was conducted as a kind of verbal warfare, “battles of songs in which participating groups attempted *to sing its rival to a fall*” (Preface, Darah). Udje poetic tradition stretches back to about two centuries, according to notable Urhobo scholars. Udje was, indeed, the classical song-poetry and dance form in the political divisions occupying most of the southern half of Urhobo territory (2005:1). Although, Urhobo poetic forms permit specialization according to dialect groups, the Udje poetic form is distinguished essentially by such features as the phenomenon of inter-community rivalry, the mode of song composition and performance as well as the *vitriolic* idiom. The Udje dance ensembles or troupes were principally based on age-group formations known as *itu* (singular: *otu*), and the typical Udje was carried out by these rival troupes during carnivals and annual festivals. The festival of *Ore* (ancestral worship), for instance, was held during which offerings were made to the spirits of the departed. The Udje carnival proper started a few days after *Ore*. During the festival, songs for religious or purification rites (*urie/omephorho*) were sung. Besides, there were exchanges of insults or abuse (*ekenharhon*) and ridicule or mockery between rival groups, all conducted, it must be stressed, in the spirit of play.

Commenting on the Udje secular song-poetry in Urhobo, J.P. Clark (1965) describes an Udje song-poem as an oral verse in which the features of verbal idiom and melody combine to produce aesthetic effect (cited in Darah 2005:11). The Urhobo recognize two broad forms of song-poetry, namely:

- (a) The religious and
- (b) The secular.

The religious category comprises verses sung or chanted in the context of worship or religious ritual. In Udu and Ughievwen, these song-poems are known as *ile-ebo* or *ile-ega*. The song is usually made up of a simple, short stanza (2005:11). The secular song-poems are those performed for merriment and entertainment. Udje song-poems, therefore, belong to the genre of secular songs. According to J.P. Clark, this secular form of Udje song-poems is characterized by intricate dance steps and drumming style which are fairly uniform and standard among all dances (2005:13). Song-poetry (*Omesuo*) arrangement was expressed in two forms:

- (i) inter-community contest and
- (ii) age-grade or sex profile format.

The first was the practice whereby two neighbouring communities or quarters within the same community entered into a rivalry relationship with each using the other as target for its songs (2005:13). For this reason, the words of every song were especially *minted* to ensure that they hurt the target as scathingly as possible. Udje provides the best illustration of the use of derisive language in song. The practice of *omesuo* is, thus, fundamental to the art of secular song-poetry in Urhobo (2005:13). In terms of structural patterning, the short song-poem is referred to as *ubro-ule* while the long one is called *ulo-eshan* (2005:14). The tradition of satirical song contests known in Urhobo as *ule-ekan*, is fairly widespread in Africa. Jan Knappert (1979, 91) called this tradition “curse-verse”; the Acoli people of Uganda have a very vibrant satiric song tradition popularized by Okot p’ Bitek in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol and Horn of My Love* (1974). Kofi Awoonor in *Guardians of the Sacred Word* explores the Ewe *halo* in Ewe traditional poetry, Oyin Ogunba (1967) in his doctoral thesis examined his Ijebu people’s satirical song-poetry; Donatus I. Nwoga (1971), on his part, investigated the poetics and performance techniques of Igbo culture; and Niyi Osundare bases his poetry on the satirical elements of the Ekiti-Yoruba *Adan* oral poetic sub-genre. The Tiv *Kwahir* or puppetry theatre exemplifies the satirical spirit engendered by the egalitarian and pre-capitalist ethos of the Tiv people (2005:15).

What role does the satirical song (*ule-ekan*) play in the overall effort to improve the moral hygiene of the society in Urhoboland? This brings us to some of the theories of satire as espoused by the Urhobo. First, satire is traced to rituals of purification done to exorcise evil forces which imperil the health of society. Second, the primary function of satire is to identify and expose evil in its broadest sense. Third, among the Urhobo, periodic ritual cleansing is an ancient and widespread religious practice known as *urie* or *omaphorho*. The ceremony involves a symbolic expulsion of diabolic forces through the sprinkling of medicinal water on the celebrants. These purificatory rites are supposed to rid the polity of *idabolo* (misfortune) and curse (*iyorin*). As part of social cleansing, the people also engaged in ritual cursing (*iyorin eduvwon*) (invectives) and the preparation of malefic magic (*orhan*). Increasing secularization of human activities and thought-systems, however, changed the *nature* of satire or Urhobo theory of art. Urhobo people are aware of the use of the Word for exorcising evil or causing harm to someone. According to G.G.

Darah: 'The intended harm of the curse is aimed at the spirit or life-force of the target while satire is directed at the social image or honour of the person' (2005:18).

The Urhobo *omesuo* is, therefore, an institutionalized exchange of insults between two rival Udje groups with a desire to hurt. *Ekenharhon* is central to *omesuo* (exchange of abuse). *Ekenharhon* is a compound term formed from *ekan* – to insult, abuse, invective, deprecatory remark; and *harhen* – to rail at, to ridicule, to deride (2005:19). Udje-satire is an extreme manifestation of the fusion of both the Horatian and Juvenalian tempers, although ridicule (*vwoghiehwe*) is handled in a manner that brings the latter intention to the fore (2005:19). The supreme aim of Udje satire, therefore, is censure, a censure capable of causing the victims social and psychological discomfort. The libertarian spirit of the citizen impels him to employ freedom of speech to flay and denounce the repressive institutions of society. Thus, name-calling, epithets, mimetic representation, parody or caricature are seized upon by the *Obuole* (vocalist) or *omusi* (star artist/performer) or *ororile* (song-writer, composer or poet) to degrade a subject. The spirit that animates satire is that of *criticism*. Satire, then, is linked to social reform and moral regeneration. By the same token, the Udje satirist is seen as a defender of communal norms and socially acceptable values and decorum of behaviour. Depending on how the *ororile* (poet) is being ridden by *Uhanghwa* (the Urhobo muse of poetry), the satirist either uses poetic strategies of masking (*iten*), in which case he deploys indirection or suggestiveness or, as in most cases, avoid metaphorical circumlocution for frontal assault on his adversary. Darah notes that: 'the satirist discerns beneath the world of vice, wickedness and failure, a kind of ideal world attainable only if people heed the satirist's prescriptions for uprightness implied in his condemnation of individuals' (2005:26).

In Hope Eghagha's poetry we encounter the Udje secular song-poetry elements *writ large* as he freely draws upon his indigenous oral sources. He is therefore the satiric persona in his work while his butt is the adversaries, i.e., politicians, church leadership and sundry social types. In fact, much of Eghagha's poetry can be said to be *Jeremiad* owing to its accusatory and starkly denunciatory tone. To be certain, 20<sup>th</sup> – and – 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian (African) poetry looms in satiric achievement considering the preponderant satiric tone of much of it produced by creative minds described by Niyi Osundare as the "angry" and "anxious" generations.

### **Antinomies and Discontents of the Nigerian Post Colony**

As our foregoing discourse shows, Hope Eghagha is primarily concerned about the unsavoury state of affairs in his country, Nigeria, and, thus, elects to use satire to draw attention to the many socio-political problems plaguing his land. In his debut collection entitled *Rhythms Of The Last Testament* (2002), Eghagha boldly announces what will turn out to be the abiding thematic focus of his poetic craft, namely, bad leadership and its negative consequences. "The prelude" the opening poem in the collection, is about bad leadership in an unnamed society, possibly Nigeria. The poet in this piece tells a story of a lunatic who comes to town bringing with him sundry bric-a-brac, picked from here and there, and settles down to a new life in this new environment. However, 'he is the *baale* of the arena', i.e., the ruler, the local authority figures in this place; and the poet counsels people to accord the lunatic *baale* respect: 'give him palm oil for blood'. And he tells us: 'this is the last testament' (2002:8). The collection seems to be about the scourge of political

misgovernance. The poet who sees himself as a “testator” is here to bear witness to the intrigues, the evil machinations and the malfeasance of the political Big Man, the tyrannical ruler. Several other “poems in the collection talk about the critics and evil tendencies of power-wielders; “Ash of history” (2002:29) is another satirical poem which criticizes the fascist or totalitarian high-handedness of despotic military rulership. In this poem, the poet relies on the creative deployment of military register such as ‘shield’, ‘butts’, ‘guns’, ‘bayonets’ and ‘jackboots’ (2002:29). But he reminds those in power to remember their erstwhile infamous predecessors.

where is dada  
where is bedel  
where is sannu  
ashes of history (2002:29)

The use of the image of ash is particularly apposite as it reminds us of the cold and impotent aftermath of a conflagration. Ash or ashes reminds us of desolation, decay, devastation, of utter futility and, more to the point, the ultimate worthlessness of temporal power, as, intertextually speaking, Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* amply and memorably iconize. Another piece entitled ‘The last lover’ is couched in a metaphor of love, i.e., terms of an amorous affair such as ‘blossom’, ‘embrace’, ‘body’ and ‘soul’. But this is only a stylistic strategy, a poetic conceit adopted by the poet to satirise the selfish ways of military top brass and their minions who make money off the hapless denizens of the Niger Delta by colluding with oil companies to explore/exploit oil resources. The mere mention of ‘the oil fire of jesse’ brings to mind the tragic firestorm which razed down the village of Jesse, a hitherto idyllic rural paradise. Dozens of life and property were destroyed in the infernal flames of corporate greed. The line ‘masquerade of green’ seems to refer obliquely but suggestively to military rulers who do not obey the law or follow due process but rather rule by fiat and iron-fist diktat, no matter whose ox is gored.

Another poem which talks about political corruption and the ungodly politics of oil is “At the bar’s back” in which the poet bemoans the sinecure indolence as well as a life of luxury led by ‘bold pot-bellied lions’. These human lions, like their sylvan counterparts, lord it over their hapless compatriots, forgetting that they will finally end up in prison, behind bars like lions in a menagerie, shorn of the fear factor through incarceration and captivity. In the poem entitled “The Handkerchief” (2002:39) Hope Eghagha also expresses the same revulsion at the immoral dealings of “abuja”, a shorthand for politicians. “Abuja”, thus, is a choice destination for political jobbers and journeymen of all ideological hues; a motley pack salivating for the proverbial National Cake. In the ensuing political skulduggery, the nation’s ruling elite usually abandon all moral scruples as they reach for the nation’s jugular. The poem ‘Rain’ is at once about the normal physical rain which falls on objects including humans. But in this poem, this physical rain is used in a metaphysical sense to highlight the deluge of woe and socio-economic and political problems encountered by the disenfranchised masses, notably women who lose their husbands to bad rulers’ anti-masses policies and programmes, and, in some cases, to political adversaries and mean-hearted employers of labour.

The next poem entitled “The Song” takes up this denunciatory tirade aimed at ‘Flowing-apparel men’ (i.e. politicians) who squander the petrol-dollar wealth on themselves. And in spite of their misconduct, these powerful rulers deny the people

avenues of seeking redress or ventilating their grievances: ‘they bark orders/they ban others’; ‘they create organs... to tie up our tongues’. To these rulers, criticism is high treason deserving of death. The poet’s deep dismay and disappointment at the rulers over their criminal mismanagement of oil money finds eloquent expression in the poem entitled “The colour of my earth” (2002:24) and “the divorce” (2002:31) and | “Black gold” (2002:34). The fact is that oil is the economic mainstay of the Nigerian state, a resource found in the Niger Delta region from which Hope Eghagha hails. Being a first-hand victim of official neglect, he thus speaks for himself *and* on behalf of his people.

Eghagha, to be sure, in some of the poems takes up a celebrated anti-Establishment environment-related campaign previously led by Ken Saro-Wiwa before he was killed by agents of the Nigerian state during the military administration of late General Sani Abacha. In the poem “Wawi’s legacy” (2002:19), the poet seems to be jeering at agents of the state who killed Saro-Wiwa, hoping to put paid to his campaign. But in the context of this short poem, Eghagha tells the goons of state that ‘his spirit is the people’. And, since government cannot kill off all the people, it is simply futile to wipe off the memory or/and the spirit of Wawi (Wiwa in reverse order for aesthetic *and* political purposes) which is the motive force of the Niger Delta struggle once championed by Isaac Adaka Boro and taken up by Wiwa and his Ogoni brothers, among others.

‘The redeemer’ which immediately brings to mind the image of a Christ-figure, a popular messiah is an ironic deflationary attack on bad rulers who come to power riding on the crest of popular credulity and misguided optimism only for these ‘redeemers’ to subvert the people’s will and shatter their high hopes, leaving them high and dry. Indeed, these rulers formulate ill-digested imported unsuitable policies which provoke inflationary trends which further drive the already desperately poor masses down below the poverty line. Fittingly, Hope Eghagha ends this collection with a poem entitled “The last testament” (2002:69), a poem which, among other things, acts as the volume’s swansong, as he sees his beleaguered people as “mourners” who merely watch the revolting antics of “the enjoyment-men”, i.e., politicians whose *raison d’être* is to fleecy the country and bleed it white. The poet-testator concludes:

I the unanointed poet in limbo  
dress the red spot in the red clothes... (2002:69)

The colour ‘red’ here symbolizes violence, revolution and danger as the poet-testator is primed in combative action against reactionary forces or, more directly, the so-called leaders of the people who do everything but *lead*. The poet warns these rulers to change their evil ways or else face the music of their misrule. Hope Eghagha, thus, intones:

a testament is my testimony  
a witness to truth (2002:70)

Hope Eghagha’s second collection of poems *This Story Must Not Be Told* (2003) turns upon the concept of “story” – the story as we know is an account of an event that took place in the past or a rendition of an on-going human activity. But more importantly, “story” is an imaginative distillate of a human event or activity that took place before the present time, and, as Achebe memorably muses in his novel

*Anthills of the Savannah*, the story is man's (or society's) escort, a guide to our progeny and a witness to memory. What, indeed, sets human beings apart from other creatures is the capacity to recollect, remember and recount the past, hence memory is the lodestone of man's collective self-becoming and ontologic integrity. The life-world from which most of the poems collected in this volume originated is one fraught with serious social tensions and contradictions, seemingly solution-defying antinomies which bear testimony to the crisis of consciousness, the various problems and challenges of the (post) colonial subject.

A major cause for concern for the poet-persona is the unrelieved and unabating culture of political misrule for which his country is notorious. This singular problem has spawned a variety of other social and economic pathologies both within the public sphere and the private domain. Hence, appropriately, the opening poem, 'this story must not be told', is about how dishonest and devious people attempt to hide the truth of the messiness of things, the fetor of social life in Nigeria and the horrid corollaries of existential *ennui* and the death-in-life that has become the lot of the Nigerian people. Due to the embarrassing nature and the scale of the abominably sad turn of events in the land, people try to "flog" some stories 'into a calabash', and cast it "into a raging sea". There is so much to comment upon here. The images of the 'calabash' and 'the sea' are deeply meaningful. The calabash is a fairly commodious receptacle into which one could stow away or hide unpleasant things or objects; and the sea is so vast that anything cast into it is presumed lost forever. The calabash, however, is by nature fragile and brittle and over time, can burst or be destroyed, thereby spilling its horrible contents. The sea, on the other hand, though vast and omnidirectional, also has a memory. This is because the sea is, metaphorically speaking, the human world. Thus, those who pillage the people's commonwealth and commit all kinds of atrocities, hoping to hush their evil deeds through amnesia, are only deceiving themselves. For Hope Eghagha tells us that: 'like an inferno the truth burns lie to shape the future of the world' (2003:1). Indeed, then, 'the ugliness of our story' must 'get to the market place'. That is to say, however ugly or offensive people's misdeeds and however hard they try to shield or mask them under various guises and pretexts, these evil acts must still come to light. Isidore Okpewho in *The Last Duty* also uses the image of the gourd or (calabash) to comment on the irrepressibility of truth. By saying, therefore, "this story must not be told", the poet-persona is indirectly drawing attention to the *story's* devastating and embarrassing nature, and, by so doing, ironically satirising those behind these anti-social acts. Put differently, highly placed authority figures – politicians, pastors, evangelists, and other public figures-have committed abominations, evil acts for which humanity may be wiped off the face of the earth.

Needless to add, Nigeria's political landscape teems with Okonkwo-surrogates as the next poem entitled "The colour of rape" (2003:3) exemplifies. "The colour of rape" is a poem about how a pastor's son 'stole grandmother's *Umuama*' (pouch of money worn round the waist) and consequently became a rich man thereafter. His father, the Pastor, looks the other way and instead preaches love to his congregation. Here, like Blake's 'the Chimney Sweeper', we discern an unholy alliance between the Church and the State in the sense that church leadership is portrayed as being in cahoots with the evil systems of the secular world, thereby sanctioning evil. What the pastor's son does in the poem is analogous to "rape", and we may extend this rape metaphor to embrace the rape of the common patrimony by Nigeria's ruling cabal. In

the poem, Hope Eghagha says: ‘his balloon was very wide’: the balloon, in this regard, is similar to the calabash of the opening poem, a device forged to hoodwink, to mislead, to deceive the world. Thus, the pastor’s ‘balloon’ of lies is ‘a house of lies’ which must one day crumble, despite his anodyne placebos of sham love. Progressively, the poet goes straight to the heart of the matter, namely: the problem of political corruption and bad leadership in his country. The poem entitled “prelude to the great fall” (2003:4), for instance, satirises in unmistakable terms the oppressive tendencies and the rapaciousness of political office-holders and their family members. The poet criticises the ways and manner in which these privileged personages waste public funds meant for the development of the country.

Using Urhobo proverbial lore and allied stylistic devices, Eghagha warns these anti-people “vampires” of the impending inevitable “great fall” awaiting them. Hence, in the next poem ‘silence of the violated’, the poet in a voice heavy with ominous resignation tells of the deafening clarion of silence: for it is the conflictual interaction of *sound* and non-sound (*silence*) that creates meaning and signification. One of the signifying systems known to man is *silence* – the silence of the robbed duck throws the house of the hawk into panic, as an African proverb goes. If the tongue-tied, disinherited mass cannot fight for their rights, their pregnant silence will haunt the unconscionable hearts and minds of their rulers. The same denunciatory and satiric stance is assumed by the poet in the poems entitled “The king’s throne” (2003:8) and “your beard” (2003:9). Throwing all devices of indirection and/or suggestiveness aside, Hope Eghagha in “the dictator” (2003:10) pokes his finger into the eyes of ‘the smiling general’ who has the self-appointed power to ‘decree’ his subjects ‘into existence’ and equally decree them ‘out of existence’. Ironically, this same all-powerful general is finally done in by sexual indiscretions: ‘unarmoured lovers/unarmoured apples/unarmoured strangers/knocked down the/smiling tyrant’ (2003:10).

Perhaps, one of the most important, if not *the* most important poem in the collection is the poem captioned ‘the blast’. This is a poetic dramatization of the infamous bomb blast which took place at the Ikeja military cantonment some years ago, leaving dozens of Nigerians dead, particularly those fleeing the epicentre of the disaster and ending up in treacherously deep canals in downtown Lagos metropolis:

but life did not flow  
because the water refused to flow  
and they drank black water  
and die in the canal  
while fleeing to canaan  
hundreds of corpses  
hopes drowned in seamy waters (2003:23)

“After the blast” is a poem which denounces the hypocritical self-vindication and witch-hunting by the powers that-be, following the tragic bomb-blast incident. Rendered in the same or parallel manner of J.P. Clark’s poem “Casualties”, Hope Eghagha’s “the blast” and “after the blast” catalogue the profiles of all the various categories of victims. Other poems in the collection are occasional ones thematizing official misconduct and sundry public acts of indecency, for example, ‘wailing in the house of ige’ (2003:41), ‘the story tellers’ eulogizing the likes of Clark, Osundare, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, Okot p’Bitek; and the poem ‘the court poet’s



version' (2003:43) which satirises the habit of falsifying reality by official hagiographers and government's spokespersons who earn their keep by mangling the truth for the peace of power. But Hope Eghagha rightly tells them that they cannot kill the story, that they cannot kill the truth because 'this bleak story' is the very stuff of everyday life, especially for the hapless masses. The same point is made in "power of the story" (2003:100) and "simple story" (2003:111).

We shall now turn our attention to another collection of poems entitled *The Governor's Lodge And Other Poems* (2004), and analyse a few representative poems with a view to establishing the poet's consistency of satiric interest in each of his poetic offerings. The poem "The lingering stranger" is a piece about a private experience of romantic love between the poet-persona and his mistress. Relying both on nature imagery and writing instruments such as "ink", and "book", the poet-persona conveys what appears to be an experience of defloration, an act which recalls that of Elesin Oba and the Bride in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The poet begins from the initial preliminary foreplay and proceeds through the various stages of coital intimacy to a point of sexual consummation which terminates at 'the birth cry', and he 'stop[s] the trip' which he has 'yearned for a hundred years' (2004:3). Yet in a truly Dennis Brutus fashion, the poet seems to conjoin this private experience of romantic or conjugal love with love of country, as he expresses his desire to 'propose a new state/to the leaders of the country'. The next poem entitled "The hatchet man" (2004:4-5) is about political intrigues in a local Christian assembly in which 'The hatchet man' is a past master of dissimulation and dissension, dividing the flock by practising unchristian and, hence, unbiblical acts. He and his ilk preach one thing but do another. The laity out of cowardice and naiveté indulge these 'false prophets' and the result is a Brother Jero-like scenario in which conventional church order of worship is ruthlessly travestied for selfish purposes. The next poem 'The aftermath' is a piece about oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Characteristically, foreign oil companies come into the country to explore and exploit oil and gas, promising to build social amenities and infrastructure for the host communities. Even without conducting environmental impact assessment tests, these oil companies destroy and rape the land, thereby disrupting its biodiversity and ecosystem and, consequently plunging the local denizens, human and animal alike, indeed, the flora and the fauna, into ruin.

"The tight middle-course" (2004:7) like "The hatchet man" is about the church or the Christian Faith as a whole. The poet talks of the 'ephemerals of the sanctuary of idiots', meaning that worldliness and carnality, the love of the world and its systems have crept into the church, turning it into a sham, a place where all sorts of hypocrites masquerade as genuine vessels of honour. Yet, these are willing tools of the devil, who through 'the sincere honesty/of the avid liar' wreak havoc in the sanctuary of God. The poem "Nakedness of the naked" (2004:8) is a classic udje-inspired poem of ridicule aimed at doers of evil and the purveyors of vice in society. Using rhetorical tropes drawn from the Urhobo orature, Hope Eghagha pillories untoward acts in the society insisting that he is free of anti-social acts unlike most people who run the community aground through their anti-social acts and unpatriotic behaviour. The next poem captioned 'It will happen again' pokes fun at bad leaders who take the masses for a ride, impoverishing the polity through bad policies. The poet- persona reminds these bad leaders or rulers that they will come to a sticky end like their predecessors did. The same excoriative sentiment finds expression in another poem entitled

“Tenderness of the thief” (2004:11), a piece deployed by the poet to further satirise the endemic scourge of bad leadership. And, as usual, Eghagha relies on the stylistic strategy of nature symbolism and imagery—barn, weaverbird, palm oil, fire, arrow – to highlight the evil activities of the ‘wily one’:

i salute you wily one  
Ijelekpo  
loose-foot-on-the-run  
fast-fingers-on-the-job  
tempter of the sanctuary (2004:11)

The title poem ‘The governor’s lodge’ is a poem about the grandeur and ostentation of power-wielders versus the biblical misery and the Fanonian wretchedness of the ruled. The collection which takes its title from this poem, dramatizes in the main the quotidian inequities, the injustices and the oppressive tendencies of those who exercise political power over the majority of the populace. In this narrative poem, “the governor’s lodge”, a naïve young boy from a poor background is taken to stay at the governor’s lodge. He is bowled over by the sheer luxury and opulence of the place, the sumptuous dishes and eye-popping delicacies as well as the posh ambience of the paradisaical lodge. He is waited upon and pampered like Akeem, the protagonist in the film “Coming To America”. This story of abundance is continued in a companion piece ‘the contract in which the boy-narrator tells of a great political caucus meeting which takes place at the lodge. At the meeting, party stalwarts, and political hangers –on jockey for contracts, and, at the end of the day, the Governor’s brother wins ‘the fattest contract of the year’. He celebrates this windfall with the Governor’s household as everybody dances in joy, referring to the Governor’s wife as the mastermind of the award. This simply shows how powerful The governor’s wife is and, by implication, how First Ladies wield enormous power over their husbands and, consequently, the whole country.

The next companion poem entitled “The governor’s shoes” is a poem about the countless number of shoes owned by the governor. Like Imelda, the former First Lady of the Philippines, the Governor here is equally famous for the huge collections of expensive footwear in his wardrobe; and he seldom wears a pair of shoes more than once. To be certain, he has special shoes for special events and occasions such as state occasions and, more significantly, visits to his girlfriends or when he wants to lay a new heartthrob. The sheer number and variety of the leader’s footwear speak to the Governor’s vanity and irresponsibility and, using him as metaphor or metonymy, the grave irresponsibility of the nation’s rulers as a whole. The next piece ‘the prayer’ is about how the Governor’s wife engages a priest to make special prayers for the Governor’s household so as to thwart all the evil machinations of their enemies and, for the Governor to continue to amass ill-gotten wealth and power. The priest who is handsomely paid for his troubles, elects to turn a blind eye at the Governor’s bad policies and malfeasance, asking God instead to look favourably on him, even in the face of the absence of leadership on the Governor’s part while the poem ‘the railing’ satirises the meretricious beauty and gilded gleam of the lodge undermined by the inhabitants’ unhygienic ways and lack of basic etiquette. “First night in the Lodge” discloses the unholy alliance between the priest (church) and power (politics). The boy-raconteur tells us of how the priest visits the lodge to pray for the Governor and his family; how he sanctifies graft and injustice, thanking God for the ‘benevolence of the charitable governor.’

“Breakfast at the lodge” poeticizes the boy’s experience of being feted with sumptuous meals as he takes a mental trip back to the dingy hovel of grinding poverty in which his own family struggles daily to subsist, wondering whether his parents and siblings have had a morsel to eat. The poet uses this innocent boy as conscience of the satirist intelligence to denounce the inequality and deprivation suffered by the masses, represented in this context by the boy’s family. “Boyz night in the lodge” reveals the bacchanalia, the orgiastic indulgences of power. The boy here has a very rare glimpse of how the powerful unwind, usually in sexual orgies and wantonness. He sees how politicians defy and violate ‘tiny girls’. We are here reminded of Theo Luzuka’s poem “The Motoka”. For a fee, these girls allow the pot-bellied ‘big-fat men’ ravish them, thereby reducing them to mere objects of erotic gratification. These unseemly and highly despicable acts committed by the powers-that-be recur in many poems in this collection, attesting in the process to the poet’s satiric stance against moral turpitude in high places. If anything, Hope Eghagha allows his anger to bubble over in the poem ‘the rulers’ in which he clearly and pointedly accuses the rulers of his country of causing untold hardship and avoidable problems through ‘earth-scorching policies.

In the poem entitled “To the Mighty Ruler” (2004:84), the poet-persona, continues his accusatory agenda, as he repeatedly holds brief for the so-called common man. *Premonitions And Other Dreams* (2005), like some of Eghagha’s collections of poems, is not so much about the thematic concerns of the individual poems in the collection as about the office of the poet-cantor; about how seriously the poet takes his vocation; in this connection, therefore, Hope Eghagha imagines himself taking on the serious business of standing-in-the-gap for his nation. He sees himself as a demiurgic medium, a prophet-priest-seer all rolled into one, and this multi-functional persona grants him ample latitude and creative freedom to range freely across and over a wide-ranging field of action, prophesying, intimating, foretelling and periscoping the future. Perhaps, it is as well since poets through the ages see themselves variously as vates, savants, legislators, moralists and social consciences of the world.

As an imaginative leader of the society, the poet enjoys the implicit trust and respect of the community due largely to the accustomed awe in which both the Word and, to borrow Eghagha’s phrase, “the words man” are held. As a purveyor of creative ideas, the poet is capable of transforming his sensations, feelings, thoughts, insight and imagination into telling and memorable images through *sound* and in *writing*. Yet, rightly, the poet remarks: ‘Premonitions call for circumspection so the poet as a priest, seer and prophet must be free and at the same time exercise great artistic caution’ (2005:ix). This note of caution is in order because, as medium and vessel for “divine” afflatus, the poet might personalise and/or colonise the message through *hubris* and self-projecteering; and this taint of small-mindedness or exhibitionism (or, yet, poetic narcissism) can ruin and stymie the whole experience. The result will, then, be mere simulation, a deranged echo of adulterate ego. Since society is the focal point of the collection, history, therefore, becomes the (anti)–hero of the entire work. How does history, for instance, fare in the unravelling maelstrom called Nigeria, and, but extension, Africa and the developing world? Hope Eghagha foresees doom of eschatological proportions for his nation. Can it be averted? The consolation is that, the coming doom, according to the poet-seer, is ‘itself not negative’. It is a

transformative, winnowing and purifying fire, a consuming inferno stoked to create hope for the hopeless.

“Premonitions”, the opening poem synecdochically utilises and mobilises the “eye” as the poet’s organ of vision to periscope ‘the sea of time’ as it meanders and traverses ‘the tunnels of time’, in order to grasp ‘the stirrings of the future’. The poet-prophet is here primed for action, and like the Biblical prophet Isaiah, is out to glean portents and urguries, without, however mistaking signs for wonders. Portentously, though, the poet-seer’s ‘left eye’, begins to flutter ‘fan-like’, thus hinting at an ominous turn of future occurrences, such as apocalyptic and seismic events capable of ruining the community. Little wonder, the poet fears that ‘these sleets of eyes... may they never see the owner’s back head’. In Igbo belief, when it is said that the eye has seen the owner’s back head, it is an aphoristic way of saying that calamity has befallen the land or the person or both. Eghagha adapts the theatrical or dramatic mode in this poem in that he furnishes a rather cinematic picture of both immediate and distant eventualities, and like, a guide, ‘the seeing eye’ takes the reader by the hand, as it were, and leads him down and through the alleyways of history, past, present and future. The recurrent dream being had by ‘the recurrent crowd’ speaks to the ‘banality of burials’, or the grisly staple of dread socio-economic happenings and events created or set in motion by the false and self-serving ‘redeemers’ – the country’s ruling cabal. The ritual ‘pot’ of the nation’s collective fate is tragically heading for perdition at the ‘altar’ of judgment. The framing eschatological motifs of this opening all-important poem appropriately chimes with the overall thematic focus of the collection, and also sets the tone for the subsequent poems.

“Other premonitions” (2005:12), for instance, is a compressed intensification of the dire predictions of the first poem. In this poem, therefore, ‘premonitions bear a pointed sword’, i.e.; the sword of Damocles dangling over the people and their rulers. Such words and phrases as ‘frosty’, ‘atrophy’, ‘windstorm’, ‘blasts’, ‘barren arena’, ‘cremation’ and ‘bursting bowels’ concretize and iconize a drearily apocalyptic dystopia. The ‘sailing sailor’ whose acquaintance we make in this poem, is going to lead us, the readers, through many of the poems as the poet invokes him repeatedly perhaps as the alter-ego of the poet-persona. The following poem entitled “The house” reminds us of Karl Maier’s book on Nigeria’s socio-political contradictions entitled *This House is Falling*. Hope Eghagha refers to Nigeria in his short poem as ‘the hollow house’ which stands inside the ‘howling depths of sacred land’. As if they intend the house to collapse soon after rigging it up, the builders (rulers?) built it with ‘rotten woods’, thus, making the house (Nigeria) a ‘howling madness’.

Unsurprisingly, the next poem “the catastrophe” (2005:14) announces ‘the beginning had become the end’. This is because the ‘rotten woods of the preceding poem have become in ‘the catastrophe’, ‘the top wood’ which expectedly ‘come crashing down’. What this nature imagery tells us is that the country’s leaders are, at best, half-hearted quislings and, at worst, sworn adversaries of the body politic. Small wonder, then, in the poem entitled “A country” (2005:17) Hope Eghagha intones sardonically that: it is a cauldron in which the sailing sailor finds himself. Here in this cauldron of a country, ‘the root of connectivity’ has been uprooted or was never in the first place established. The resultant confusion, jingoistic squabbling and warring ethnicities plunge the ‘boiling broth’ of a country into disaster; even as citizens turn enemy nationals. To be certain, according to the poet-seer, Nigeria is ‘a cauldron

[which] eats up the womb' (2005:17). This gruesome state of things naturally leads to desperation on the part of the masses. And, that is the focus of the next poem entitled "Desperation" (2005:18). We continue to track the coming "doomsday" (2005:17) through its tell-tale omens indexed by 'the stolen sword' (purloined mandate?) and 'roasting flesh' as well as 'ruin' and 'destruction' which plague the land. The poem "the democrats" (2005:25) explains why:

Parliament is in their hands  
Legislators have eaten the pounding pestle... (2005:25)

It is, indeed, a very worrying situation whereby those charged with the responsibility of enacting laws turn around to undermine the laws of the land. Legislators and parliamentarians indulge in illegal and unpatriotic activities, thereby throwing the country into chaos and confusion. Eghagha says that these "honourable" law-makers have "eaten the pounding pestle", meaning that they have destroy the source of sustenance of the country. As Ola Rotimi tells us in his play *Kurunmi*, he who swallows the village pestle must sleep standing. Having done the abominable thing, the legislators cannot hide: their abomination will find them out, to paraphrase the Bible (Numbers 32:23). The political recklessness of the country's political class finds eloquent expression in the poem "Dangerous driving", in which the poet adopts the metaphor of driving to highlight how Nigeria's rulers 'drive the country like a toy vehicle. In concrete terms, the country actually is riddled with reckless drivers who readily lend their image of self-destruct to the poet's sympathetic imagination. Besides, 'driving' their fellow compatriots through bad policies and programmes, these rulers have a penchant for ostentatious lifestyles such as travelling by air since the roads are death-traps owing to their permanent state of disrepair.

What provides interest and point in this notable poem is the uncannily ingenious way in which the poet combines his criticism of the terrible state of Nigerian roads and, using that as pretext, his broadside against official graft and criminal dereliction of duty. Similar sentiments are given free rein by the poet in such poems as "Hunger and anger" (2005:36) and the pidgin poem "we salute the generals" (2005:39), "killing and killing again" (2005:41) and "Emergency" (2005:50), a savage attack on the nation's legislators for their storied self-aggrandisement and insensitivity. This poet pleads with his country's political elite "Don't pollute the world" (2005:72) with 'your fart' from 'congested bowels'. He quips that their fart will tell 'the story of your rot to the world'. Poems like 'I come into the deluge' (2005:74) and "I stagger into the memory" (2005:75) show Hope Eghagha winding down his poetic excursus. And, finally, in the poem "End of premonitions" (2005:81-82), the poet brings his hell-raising proclamations to a close, moreover, still forewarning the country of an impending calamity:

sorrows in the field...  
sorrows in the field...

Again, the poet uses the 'eye' synecdochically to represent the sensitive poet who rarely uses the physical eye for prognostications; he uses his 'inner eye', like *Maimouna*, that blind mother of twins in Sembene Ousmane's novel *Gods' Bits of Wood*. Eghagha invariably intimates the futility of mere seeing (without *perceiving*),

as Gloucester in *King Lear* tells us ‘I stumbled when I saw’. Hope Eghagha, thus, discloses future events in the half-light of poetic musings.

### **.Autobiography, Peopled Persona and Poetry**

Psychoanalytic theories have done a lot to disclose and uncover spoors of the textual phenomenon and to *trace* the trajectory of the authorial presence in literary creativity, quite contrary to the critical nay-sayers led by Roland Barthes, who, in his famous work, *Death of the Author* sounded the death-knell of the artist. Barthes’ obituarist agenda has so caught on in the West that it is almost taken as a given that literature practically writes itself, thus reducing the narrating ego to little more than a dissentient appendage to the work itself. Stephen Arnold writes:

In the post-modern west, especially in North-America, where many scholars are “PMV positive” (i.e. post-modernism virus), autobiography has become a most problematic genre for their malady leads them to declare that we live in an era when “history is dead”, and when the focaliser of personal history or autobiography (that is, the unified subject, who some time earlier this century became extinct as a character in fictional discourse), no longer exist. (1992:145)

Arnold further points out that this unfortunate state of affairs in the Western intellectual establishment, resulting from postmodernism and poststructuralism, is even worse in post-colonial Africa owing to the “blurring among all the increasingly porous genres of literature, and there is such distrust of autonomous selfhood, that autobiography is in danger of losing its generic identity” (1992:145). In spite of this problem, we are told that some African writers secret their “personal history” into their writing, thereby making it deeply autobiographical. In James Olney’s *Tell Me Africa: An Approach To African Literature* and *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, the critic reveals “autobiographical content and patterning in J.P. Clark’s *A Reed In The Tide* (1965), in C. Okigbo’s *Labyrinths* (1971) and in K. Awoonor’s *Ride Me, Memory* (1973) and *House by The Sea* (1978).

From the foregoing, therefore, we are encouraged to press on with our exploration of autobiography in Hope Eghagha’s poetry considering the fact that, not unlike his fellow African poets and writers, he is at once a most public and selfless poet and a classic instance of poetic self-identification and self-poeticization. Apart from deploying his first name, i.e. “Hope” for aesthetic effects as word play and punning, he, more seriously, mobilises the notional or ideational ramifications of “Hope” to ponder in a philosophical vein, burning topical issues in his social environment. A few examples will suffice in this connection. In *Rhythms Of The Last Testament* (2002), Eghagha liberally invokes the word “Hope” both for thematic and autobiographical purposes as the following poems exemplify:

‘The river of my ocean’ (2002:25)

When i become  
the ocean  
your river shall become  
an ocean  
surging foams of *hope*

into the crevices of my body.

This quasi-romantic or conjugal (or even amorous) sentiment is *writ large* in Hope Eghagha's work as in "Her love came down" (2002:68), "The lingering stranger" (in *The Governor's Lodge* 2004:3), "passionate rebel" (for Pat) (2004:37), a love poem composed for the poet's life-long friend and wife; "switching on and off" (2004:61). In *This Story Must Not Be Told* (2003), the poet-persona lyricises this same romantic feeling in poems such as "betrayal" (2003:17) and "love of a lover" (2003:19). This love of woman- either as wife, girlfriend, or family-which is an aspect of the poet's *joie de vivre* is transmitted into love of community as the poet uses his name, *Hope*, as organising principle in calling attention to the country's desperate need of social re-engineering and healing following years of plunder and despoliation by its ruling elite. In this connection, the poet utilises self-as-society or, what may be described as "peopled persona", a stylistic pose or device taken from African oral poetics. The oral bard, for instance, might use the first-person singular pronoun "I", but behind that seemingly arrogantly self-assertive pronoun is the social collectivity, the entire community. Thus terms such as *I, you, your* or *it* are various ways of configuring the society of which the poet is part. The poet, then, comes across as a paradigmatic representative of society. Knipp and Olney make a similar argument when they remark that:

Nearly all (West African poets writing in English and French) have written about their experiences as modern, westernised Africans. In poet after poet these experiences emerge as pattern or myth. Secondly, some West African poets design and arrange their collections, to reflect the patterns of their lives. They make poetry out of their lives and autobiography of their poems. Thirdly as members of the educated elite, their experiences are representative of that class. Thus to the degree that they speak for themselves, they speak for their peers. (41 qtd. in Arnold 1992:159)

Olney on his part argues further that African autobiography is "less an individual phenomenon than a social one". Arnold agrees that Africans "tend traditionally to see themselves not so much as individuals but as part of the seamless whole of the community... The westernized artist begins life with this orientation, experiences the common experience, and speaks it for the community. He functions as synecdoche' (41 qtd in Arnold 159) Hope Eghagha's entire *oeuvre* is a typical exemplification of Olney's views on West African autobiography given the overwhelmingly *public* orientation and the thematic concerns of his poems. There is, therefore, a correlation between Eghagha as a serious moralist and satirist and the butts of his trenchant satire, namely: Nigeria's political class as well as church leadership whose lifestyles vivify the disconnect or disjuncture between appearance and reality (cf: Wole Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero*). Eghagha, in "The divorce", for instance, mounts a savage attack on his country's rulers who destroy the environment by exploiting oil and gas and corner the "black money" (*rhythms* 31) for themselves, leaving 'stinking flesh of brotherhood'. The poet nonetheless warns:

divorce took the bed  
making hate burning pots of *hope*  
sitting on the edge of the fence (2003:31)

Indeed, in ‘After the call’, the poet also invokes his name in drawing attention to and thematizing the ruler-ruled disequilibrium:

the smoke of *hope*  
once the belly’s top  
crawls near the fire (2003:47)

Features and elements of self-writing are also found in *This Story Must Not Be Told*. See, for example, in ‘the telephone’ (2003:20), ‘after the blast’:

how else can the octagon of *hope*  
be let loose in the afternoon... (2003:37)

Also consider ‘see what they have done’ (2003:38-40)

i hold it  
It is the calabash of the story  
i wriggle myself free  
my mouth speaks rivers  
and I know that the  
world must hearken  
to the gong of *the telling poet*  
- - - - -  
and there is no *hope* (2003:39).

And, also in “blues for the master” (2003:57) “my religion” (2003:70) “in the cold of the rain”, (2003:77) “native air” (2003:79) “the love of the defiant one” (2003:105) and “power of the story” (2003:100). Hope Eghagha continues his programme of presenting himself or his persona as template or paradigm for his community as exemplified in *Pepper In My Throat* (2007), in such poems as “the world”, “what they have done” (2007:43), “the face of the journey” (2007:52), “The fallen climber” (2007:53) and “the poetry of a mother’s death” (2007:80). This brings us to Eghagha’s *Mama Dances Into The Night* (2007), a volume which is a “reflection on the agony of losing a beloved mother, especially one that has been so doing” (Blurb). Also we are informed that, ‘the experience of this private grief appears as a metaphor for a nation is utter grief, for which nightfall means bleak hope’ (Blurb). If we then follow this line of argument, *mama*, therefore, may be considered to symbolise Nigeria or African or even the modern world beset as it is by spiritual atrophy and moral desiccation. Does *Mama*’s demise, therefore, signify the death of *optimism* embodied in the figural epiphanies of Hope, the poet-persona? What our discussion has demonstrated so far is the poet’s deliberate design structurally and thematically, in the tradition of Dennis Brutus and Christopher Okigbo, to use the self-as-society model to poeticize public themes and topical matters. Accordingly, the poet skilfully uses his name, which luckily, it must be stressed, resonates with larger social formations and collectivities to highlight the tragic abortion of hope, thereby plunging the hopeless masses into a parlous state of “desperate optimism”. This desperate optimism which begins in the first collection and running through his other collections, culminates in *Mama*, in the “death” of optimism, or, at best, the birth of “bleak hope”.



In talking about how Hope Eghagha writes about his personal history which dovetails into the public sphere, there is need to also examine the *nature* and the *definition* of poetry from his viewpoint. It is, thus important for us to do so by looking at how he perceives himself vis-à-vis his vocation as an orally-conscious, public-oriented poet. He perceives himself, for example, in *rhythms* as “testator”, “poet-priest” (*Preface*), “visionary”, “unanointed poet in limbo” (2007:69), and ‘a witness to truth’ (2007:7). He also sees himself in *This Story Must Not Be Told* as “town crier”; and in *Pepper in my throat*, Eghagha considers himself ‘a rebel’ (2007:49); and in *Mama dances into the night* as “a blind person” or “a blind muse” (*Preface*). In keeping with the folklorist paradigm with its noted emphasis on the oral tale or the “story”, Hope Eghagha predictably dons the town crier’s habit in order to declaim (and *denounce*) institutionalised vice and evil, a practice analogous to the Urhobo Udje tradition.

As voice of warning, the town crier in ancient society was taken very seriously by prince and pauper alike, due in large part to their shared view of collective destiny. But in the modern era, the prince (or more appropriately, the king) is far removed from the people. He is a god, and, thus, above the law. The town crier (poet) is himself, in most cases, deeply compromised and conflicted due to his own baggage of moral failings, usually quite known to the king or, at times, instigated by the king himself in order to reduce the poet to a mere “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal”. Thus, lacking peat and pith, a mere dumb bell, the latter-day town crier simply grates on the ears of power as a risible travesty of the real McCoy, and his “message” is consequently laughed out of court. For “the gong of the telling poet” to strike fear into the king (power), the town crier-poet must indeed rise to the high moral demands of visionary priesthood as he harnesses poetic truth and wields it against the apocryphal “facts” of temporal potentates. The “rebellious” bard must be wary of succumbing to the tunnel-vision of the jaundiced interpreter who in angling for gain might miss the message. If, to be sure, the poet claims to be “witness to truth; the question to ask is: what truth? Doctored reality or plain fact?”

Going forward, while the poet’s self-description as “unanointed poet in limbo” strikes the reader as a Freudian slip suggestive of self-belittlement, his self-perception as “a blind person/muse” cannot be taken to be equally self-deprecatory. The poet as “a blind person” reminds the reader of Cupid, the Roman messenger-god of love who is reputedly blindfolded and armed with a quiver of arrows with which he shoots people in order to make them fall in love. For the poet as a demiurgic arrow of love-patriotic and social-is therefore “blind” to bigotry and prejudice or any form of sentimentality. His blindness is therefore not a handicap but a virtue which enables him to be objective, fair, even-handed and unbiased. The poet here is in the same company as Baba Fakunle in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and Tiresias in Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* as well as Maimouna in Osumane’s *God’s Bits of Wood* who is the novel’s voice of vision in spite of her physical blindness. This desire to act as agent of social change and renewal on the poet’s part to a degree aligns Eghagha with the likes of Niyi Osundare, Launko Okimba, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Odia Ofeimun and Tanure Ojaide. On Hope Eghagha’s definition of poetry, he writes in *Pepper* in the poem entitled ‘What poetry is’:

poetry is the smile  
which a drinker of palm wine gives

when the liquid of life  
runs through his hungry veins

my publisher wants me  
to drive a nail into a locked box  
and ask the world to decode  
palm wine and poetry are brothers (2007:75).

Hope Eghagha, who in “At the fringes” (*Mama* 2007:62-63) describes himself as ‘i the poet-on-the-loose/footloose and fancy free’, also in “The twisted mind” presents his persona thus:

hope  
son of eghagha  
the twisted mouth  
will only produce twisted words (2007:70)

The image of poetry as “palm-wine” is suggestive of sweetness, spontaneity and harmony, natural feelings antithetical to rigidity, artificiality or disorderliness. Ironically, he refers to himself as “twisted mouth” which produces “twisted words”. The apparent reason why he says this about himself is his attempt at being sarcastic in a context of verbal duel between himself and his opponent (irresponsible rulers, etc) as the poem from which the phrase is excerpted makes clear. In “simple story” (2007:111) from *This Story Must Not Be Told*, Eghagha tries to explain the nature of his poetry.

some poems are simple  
too simple for poetry  
too simple to answer poetry  
but what is the story  
is it the how  
or the what (2003:111)

Hope Eghagha tells us that the *what* (content) may be ‘a stab’ ‘too deep to be said in a labyrinth’ (i.e. obscure language). Yet, where is the middle-ground, we may ask? If obscurity and simplicity are to be deprecated, in what kind of language may poetry be written? The answer is to be found in the poetic style of Eghagha which for the most part is relatively accessible, thanks to its expropriation of the Urhobo orature. In “poetry and revolution” (*Pepper In My Throat* 2007:71), however, Eghagha delivers a damning verdict: ‘revolutions don’t come with poetry’; which is another way of saying *change* can only come through political action. The question, then, is, why write poetry of social commentary if it is all idle self-diversion? To partly answer this question, Eghagha equates ‘love poetry’ to “poetry” *qua* poetry which is a much wider canvas. True love song or poetry may not effect radical social change such as enumerated in the poem, but the last line: ‘revolutions don’t come with poetry’ is indefensible and, therefore, incorrect as literary history furnishes instances of social revolution caused by anti-Establishment writers and artists such as Soyinka, Neruda, Brutus and Ngugi testify. In truth, the pen is mightier than the sword.

## Conclusion

In this study we have tried to investigate and examine the performance of one of Nigeria's emerging poetic voices, Hope Eghagha whose work has been critiqued in the context of his dual allegiance to his native Okpe-Urhobo Udje satiric tradition and the Western poetic tradition. In examining notions of satire, we have also demonstrated the universality of the satiric mode, featuring as it does both in the oratures of all oral societies and in modern writing. We have also shown how Eghagha in his formal poetry uses self as paradigm to threnodise the sundry adversities visited by his nation's rulers on the hapless masses, stopping short of advocating radical violent political action advocated by revolutionary Marxism. Hope Eghagha consistently portrays himself as a "rebel" with a cause, a visionary bard and satirist at daggers-drawn with authority figures who run foul of societal codes of conduct for which he subjects them to sustained poetic flagellation. His anti-Establishment stance is also revealed through his poetic style typified by graphological deviance and his denunciatory tone. This overarching preoccupation with political themes ultimately makes Eghagha's poetry monochromatically topical on a rather narrowly vituperative canvas. Hopefully, Hope Eghagha will in future cast his sights on broader, more inclusive horizons.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Finnegan, Ruth. *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* 2007.
2. See Wain, John. *Anthology of Modern Poetry*. London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 1963.

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*Christopher Anyokwu, Ph.D*  
*Department of English,*  
*University of Lagos*  
*Nigeria.*  
*Email Address: [anyokwu\\_c@yahoo.com](mailto:anyokwu_c@yahoo.com)*

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