

THE DISPOSSESSED IN A. N. AKWANYA'S *PILGRIM FOOT*: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

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Abstract

The poetic collection, Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems, was published by Rev. Fr Prof. A. N. Akwanya in 2005 to mark the silver jubilee of his priestly ordination. It is a ninety-three-paged work divided into six parts with a total of forty-one poems. This research seeks to unveil the fact that the journey of the pilgrim, which is an allusion to the Biblical journey of the three wise men to Bethlehem in order to witness the birth of the savior, Jesus Christ, is not the same. Ironically, the journey of the present pilgrim, who is the speaking voice in the poems, does not take the reader into a holy land but into the heart of a failed state and a dysfunctional family which is made possible as a result of failed leadership. The voice unveils to the reader a panorama and a plethora of dispossessed human beings that inhabit the state and the family systems. This study shall also examine the literary language with which the poet clothes and foregrounds his thematic preoccupation with the issue of dispossession, using nineteen poems randomly chosen from the six parts that the poetic collection is made of.

Introduction

Humanities have been eulogized for their continuity in the protection of human civilization because they are the “embodiment of our history and culture” (Nwala, 6). Literature is an incontestable and integral part of humanities because creative writers in all the genres of literature prose, poetry and drama – like historians spare nothing to bring to the public glare “the important events in the history of their people” (Emenyonu, xii). Poetry which is an indispensable part of literature to which A. N. Akwanya’s poetic collection belong has been described as having its words “full of suggestion, of unrevealed meaning, a meaning which will grow out of them under the influence of thought and imagination” (James Reeves, 34). The words of

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poetry which are the literary language of poetry have three essential elements – imagery, sound and rhythm – and it is with these components that the poet foregrounds his message to the reader. Not only that the imagery in a poem concertizes the substance of the poem, F. B. O. Akpobaro calls it “a portion of the essence of the meaning of the literary work, not merely its decoration” (26). The indispensability of imagery in a poem is seen as the pictures which “constitute the vehicle by which the poet has conveyed his ideas (Egudu, 4). The same Egudu claims that sound of words is the “method by which poetry as an art suggests whatever it suggests” (9). Again, rhythm which is one of the formal features used in literature, particularly in poetry, is closely associated with metre, and consists of stressed and unstressed syllables in lines of poems. Paul Goring et al, underscores its importance by the fact that it “drives a poem forward ... and makes the poem readily memorable” (50). All these poetic devices which the literary writers, particularly the poets, employ in their literary works are like the essence of the skeletal system to the human body or the engines to mechanical appliances. Without them, there is no literature, and without them the message of a creative work does not exist.

It is these devices that the poet in **Pilgrim Foot: A Poetic Collection** employs using the voice of an experienced lyrical persona to uncover the wrath of nature on human beings and human civilization, and the victims of dispossession in a failed state and dysfunctional family system. It is, therefore, the literary language that Akwanya uses to give birth to what Dan Izevbaye calls “ideas whose conception and gestation took place in the hidden recesses of the writer’s mind” (5). Akwanya’s poems, like those of other West African post-independence poets, have “shifted dramatically to matters affecting the nation, the state, tribe, and clan” (Killam Douglas and Ruth Rowe, 217). His thematic preoccupation in almost all the poems in the collection is the failure of leadership at the state and family levels, and leaders whom Charles Nnolim called leaders that failed their people. These are leaders that lack “honesty, integrity, hard work, infectious enthusiasm about others and their welfare, strong moral character, humility and self-discipline” (168). Such leaders cannot be seen to be heroes who remain the “quintessential examples of tact and wisdom” (Cindy Ezengwu, 150). Without these virtues of leadership, the poetic persona in the poems brings to the spotlight dispossessed and fragmented individuals in a failed state and family – Nigeria and Ahime family – which are the symbols of other collapsed nations and dysfunctional families in the world.

Critical Analysis of the Poems in *Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems*

The first poem in the collection, "To the Master of the Universe", portrays the general dispossession of all human beings irrespective of colour, class, gender, age and tribe, as a result of the wrath of nature. The natural disasters that befall man may come in the forms of flood, draught, famine "plague...after rewriting its soft code" or it may be a "desert extending its empire/chases out man and beast". As if these natural disasters are not enough to dispossess man:

elsewhere, an earthquake lays waste human effort
kept up over centuries,
or a tsunami swallows up everything
and in one vast surge of sea
restores sway to ancient chaos (2)

The personification of these natural phenomena with human attributes like plague "re-writing its soft code", a "desert extending its empire" and "tsunami swallows up everything" and "restores sway to ancient chaos" shows the force like human beings with which these forms of nature destroy the civilization of the intruders to reclaim their territories. With nature reclaiming its territories, man is therefore dispossessed of life and property.

Apart from natural disaster dispossessing man, a young man who "had schooled within will/to break inherited poverty's iron law" (2) may also die of blood disorder or a breadwinner in a family may also die in an a road accident. Death from these diseases like "blood disorder" which is described with the human attributes of blood disorder seizing a young man and a bread-winner being cut down by cancer gives the imagery of brutality, the relentlessness, the suddenness and the ruthlessness of these diseases, despite "our greatest achievements/of civilization/and science" (3). There is also linguistic foregrounding in the parallel structures in:

After he had schooled with an iron will
to break inherited poverty's iron law (2)

The parallelism in these two lines highlights the ideas of the young man's determination to succeed in life to break the entrenched poverty in the family. However, the blood disease frustrates his effort to break his family's "inherited poverty", which is also giving the human attribute of inheritance. The repetition of the phrases "iron will" and "iron law" gives musical effect to

the poem. The two diseases – blood disorder and cancer and the accident dispossess the victims' families of their future and present means of livelihood.

In another poem, "Spray from her Moist Hair", the symbol is the earth. The earth here is referred to in the metaphor of mother by the old people because of her "older offspring" she has endowed with power "to marshal wind/rain,/ocean,/and wield mountains/like missiles:/" (21); the younger generations do not treat her with such respect because:

... there was nothing left to inherit,
except perhaps a little patch
here and there to crop corn or yam
and kill one another over

The metaphor in "The big boys never killed/any of their race" is thrust on the animals like lions, elephants and their likes that live in the jungle and even though they "had mighty weapons", yet, "they didn't need for self-defence" (21). The present generation of humans does not have respect for the earth, because of their belief in their civilization, but when the earth shakes its head from time to time there are volcanic eruptions:

If the mountain that plucked off its socket
at that head's shake
crashed just short of your dazed eyes,
what do you do
at recovering your breath
under the spray from her moist hair (22).

The mountain is described with the human attribute of shaking its head and the "spray from her moist hair" is the personification of the volcanic eruptions, which is the poetic name given by the poet for the geological magma or lava that is released from a volcanic vent. Human beings who have disrespected the earth see the volcanic eruption as a "nightmare" because of the catastrophe that accompanies it.

Apart from the dispossession that can be caused by the forces of nature and disease, the lyrical person also takes the reader into the problems of dispossession that occur as a result of family leadership. The fathers who are the heads of the family dispossess the sons. The poet focuses his poetic

searchlight on the family because in every culture, "parents have great regard for their children not only because such children would continue the family name and tradition but perhaps more importantly because such children would take care of them during their old age" (Danian Opata 31). In "Dedication," the poet-persona's voice is heard as he remembers the supreme sacrifice of his father, who died twenty-five years earlier, in dedicating his first son, like Elkanah in the Bible, to the service of the Catholic mission, as a seminarian. The son is immediately captivated by the "chorus/the holy lads were raising just then/to the church's high roof". The "holy lads" which is a metaphor used to describe the other young seminarians gives the reader the imagery of the innocence of the children and reminds one of the imagery of "holy lads" in William Blake's "Holy Thursday" in the *Songs of Innocence* with their melodious songs and the same innocence. However, as the son grew and becomes a priest, he finds out that the allure of priesthood which he had found to be enchanting is indeed a prison and he realized belatedly "How high and close the circling wall" (7). Ironically, the father who has sacrificed him like Biblical Samuel to the service of the mission has passed away. And the persona wonders why his father had voluntarily dispossessed himself "What a man may lean on, as his/certainly, but never could own" (7), because as a priest, the son is fully owned by the Catholic mission. His father, too, by his act of dedicating him to fulfill his "long-nursed flare" (6) has also dispossessed him of his freedom in life.

Besides, in "A Tangle of Words" a lyrical persona thematizes the dispossession of a son by the father on the day of christening by the name he bestows on the baby. He makes clear that because "A word's utterance/when lays out a life/As it did for Theban Oedipus" (14), there is everything in a name. By the reference to the Greek tragic play and the classical hero, Oedipus who committed so many abominations like killing his own father, king Laius, and marrying his own mother, Jocasta, and siring his own children through his mother, there is the emphasis that names given to children at birth can chart the course of abominable actions to be committed by the bearers of such names in future. He mentions such an abominable name like Obierika, which the father when given to a son at birth, "He foists upon this offspring to grow/two or three more personalities/to keep him company?" (14). And not only that the child develops multiple identities as a result of the name given to him at christening, but he emphasizes the permanence of the destructive effects of such names until the person dies in

the imagery of the parasitic plant in the simile of, "it grows like a climber/And braces youth to the heart. Injects probing roots/till the wonder is dead" (14).

The sons that bear such names that thrust on them multiple personalities cannot extricate themselves from the horrible effects of their names and they grow up as murderers or fraudsters or nonentities, who are "justly mixed/Quantity of blood and sinew/If the landlord should say so" (15). The persona warns again about the importance of naming that can dispossess a child because:

You do not live,
But outside of words
And names (15).

In "Home", the persona continues with the issue of dispossession of the son, who lacks any form of training and discipline because the father is lacking in carrying out his duties as the head of the family. The son has turned out to be a prodigal or a nonentity, because, "You have hastened over the deep night/arms at the ready" (64). However, this young man who is a night-crawler has a wealthy father or a politician - "many folds of agbada/pile high on your father's shoulders" (64), but such a son that would inherit the father's enormous wealth is not trained to have any initiative or focus in life because:

... when they slither down
at sight of you
and you are enfolded
in the great robe,
struggling for breath,
do you even stop to think
you can't see a thing
any more? (64).

The father's enormous wealth which is described in the metaphor of agbada that the son will inherit, probably at his death, is described in imagery as the ominous movement of a snake that would "slither down/at the sight of you," which means that the enormous wealth acquired by the father would be wasted or go down the drain when it is inherited and managed by a prodigal son.

In "My Fathers House" in the same poetic collection, the speaking voice which is a son, who has been dispossessed of any initiative by the

father when he was alive, speaks in a boastful tone of the mansion which his father built and which he has inherited. This man who does not listen to his father's advice says that he did not "build myself/a small bungalow" either before or after his father's death. He has not also carried out any improvements on the father's house he inherited because:

They walls are friendly
in a grey unsmiling way
through any harangue;
and I should be glad
some day
to be laid out there
and receive two or three visitors
a time,
no more (65).

This particular house which the persona is proud of to live and die there and to receive visitors in is personified as the walls are friendly in a grey unsmiling way. The human attributes of being "friendly" and "unsmiling" are antithetical statements that underscore the dilapidated nature of the house. He further describes the windows as being out of fashion because they are "narrow windows", the masonry "spring new holes" (66) with "the roof that has turned/black with rust" (66). It is obvious that the persona's house, which he inherited from the father is as old and as dilapidated as the persona because, "I too have blackened" here, instead of grayed" about the temples" shows that the persona is using black dye to darken his graying hair. The aging persona who has nothing to show as his own personal achievement wishes for nothing and he is contented as, "a dutiful son will stay/under this father's shadow" (66). There is the irony in his calling himself a "dutiful son", because in reality, he is a lazy son, who lives off the wealth acquired by his father in life. He compares himself with other lazy creative-like writers who lack initiatives and the other young coup plotters in the 1966 coup, who are overshadowed by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, when he states:

and I am snug like all those poets squatting under Achebe's
and we might have said the same of the soldiers
brought up in Nzeogwu's house (66).

Those poets squatting under Achebe and the soldiers brought up in Nzeogwu's house are overshadowed by Achebe and Nzeogwu in their various enterprises and would never get public prominence and recognition because they lack initiative like the poet who is proud of staying under his father's shadow. For this category of people, "life does not improve until the person improves" (Robert Kiyosaki, 80).

The persona shows the dire consequences of a father's dispossession of his children, particularly the sons, in the last poem in the poetic collection. "For the Family" bears out the statement that a "direct relationship exists between leadership styles and the behavior of people they lead" (Anthony D' Souza, 113). In this poem, Ahime is used to demonstrate the negative results of the head of the family – the man – who has failed as a father to provide good leadership to his family when he is alive. The persona in the first line of the first stanza of this poem announces, "White-haired Ahime is dead" (92). This deceased old man has a polygamous family; he is survived by three wives, twelve sons, four daughters and thirty-one grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Not only that Ahime dies in his old age, but the persona takes time to itemize the number of his survivors in his nuclear but polygamous family. In the second stanza, he mentions that in his lifetime, "he held many national honours;/and he was a consensus-builder" (92). And in the third stanza, he mentions his enormous wealth because, "he was a successful businessman,/owned a chain of housing estates"(92). The deceased makes a testamentary deposition or will when he is alive which is in the custody of "the family lawyer/executor and custodian of the Ahime Papers" (92). One wonders the reason why the lawyer/executor of his testamentary documents would also be the person to invite people and organize his funeral as he "will shortly get in touch/with the caretakers, managers, business associates" (92). Ironically, his family members are invited to his memorial service as sympathizers or guests just like his tenants, employees, business associates, well-wishers and representatives of social clubs, civic groups, political parties, etc (93). Finally, it is ironic that the invitation card is signed by the lawyer/executor and one of male tenants not by any of his children, not even any of the twelve sons. The impression created is that either the man in pursuit of the management of his enormous wealth never deems it necessary to train any of his children or get them involved in the business, and that the sons must have grown to be irresponsible men who are passive in the organization of their father's memorial service, or that Ahime does not trust their capacity and capability in organizing his funeral at death and

entrusted it to his lawyer and one of his tenants. Alternatively, Ahime decides to nip in the bud the jealousies, rivalries, and controversies which would arise from the different components of his polygamous home by deciding to entrust the arrangement of his funeral in his lifetime to his lawyer and one of his tenants. In any of the two situations, the father has dispossessed his children of the initiative they would have had by his leadership style.

Apart from the dispossession caused by the forces of nature and the failure of family leadership, the journey of the pilgrim also exposes a failed or fragile state, Nigeria, as a result of failure of leadership. According to Fund for Peace, a Washington DC-based think tank which ranks 178 countries across twelve indicators, a failed or fragile state is:

... a political body that has disintegrated to a point where basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government no longer function properly. A state can also fail if the government loses its legitimacy even if its performing its functions properly. For a stable state it is necessary for the government to enjoy both effectiveness and legitimacy. Likewise, when a nation weakens and its standard of living declines, it introduces the possibility of total government collapse (Web 2019).

Fund for Peace characterizes a failed or fragile state as having the following features by using some of these risk indicators – security, group grievances, economic decline and brain drain, state legitimacy, human rights and the rule of law, demographic pressures and internally displaced persons and refugees. In 2019 Failed or Fragile States Index, which is a yearly report by Fund for Peace, Nigeria was ranked the 14th most fragile state in the world and 9th in Africa. According to Ladi Olorunyomi, “Nigeria’s ranking has been on a persistent decline since 2005 but at an uneven pace” (Web, 2017).

Nigeria and most other nations in Africa have been classified as failed states. Though these countries have different histories, different languages and different cultures, they all have in common extractive institutions where the elite who design economic institutions make it possible for them to “enrich themselves and perpetuate their power at the expense of the vast majority of people in society” (Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson,

399). Nigeria, in particular, has been described as having a terrible reputation and as a failed state that works" (Richard Dowden, 439).

It is on Nigeria and other third world countries, particularly in Africa, that are failed states because of the problems of leadership that the poet beams his poetic vision in *Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems* to unravel dislocated and dispossessed human beings that inhabit them. In "Harvesters", with its symbolic title of pestilential hordes, the persona presents the different foreign individuals and enterprises that milk the resources of Africa perennially. The first to arrive are the "Little fellows in dark blue coats,/and tight-fitting orange bibs" (28). This group of parasites, who are described as wanderers, probably the Arab invaders from across the Sahara Desert, are described as, "they have no fixed abode,/and always look ahead/to estates to gather in"(28). The perennial parasites choose the best of the crops, "with a low dive across the way/to the field that never fails any year,/of gleanings of maize" (28). As if the Arabs that plunder the wealth of Africa are not enough, Europeans who plunder the resources of Africa are described in the parasitic metaphor of the "industrious weaver birds" as people who travelled a "hundred miles north" also "striping the palms bare" (28) "for the yearly fray in the rice fields" (28). As if the pillaging of Africa's wealth by foreigners is not enough, the owners of the land are also part of the harvesters that milk the land of its resources and they are represented as "the riverain folks" who are waiting to mimic the foreigners that plunder the wealth of Africa. It is, therefore, through the "provenience of imagery which draws attention to itself" (Kofi Yankson, 2009) in such metaphors of "Little fellows in dark blue coats", "most industrious weaver birds" and "The riverain folks" that the poet foregrounds the consistent and cyclic looting of Africa's wealth by foreigners and African leaders. The effects of the monumental looting of the resources are the poverty and economic recessions of the countries in Africa as the dispossessed citizens come to harvest their fields with "hollow pans and steels" (29) and find nothing or empty maize and rice fields as the grains have already been devoured by the pests.

"For the Record" is a continuation of the poet's thematization of the looting of African resources by different races and leaders for centuries. First, the persona mentions the Arab invaders and looters "as they come in waves/across the western mountains" (52). Second, he emphasizes that the looting is now habitual as it has become "Africa's fate also/that all in it who hold privilege,/all, black or white,/make notable uses of it-/off-record-/(52). There is inclusiveness in the indictment of Africa's leaders – whether Arabs,

Caucasians or Africans – by the repetition of the word “all” twice. The repetition is for the purpose of emphasizing that there is no exception to the rule of looting Africa’s wealth. But this persistent situation is possible due to the silence of the people, whom the persona indicts, “because we are a protective brood,/we that banish ignoble deeds”(52). Of particular mention are the various military coups that have been the lot of many African countries. Interestingly, the populace who are tired of the misrule of the politicians “rises to a miracle/of the generals promising a change” (53). And in what N.F. Inyama calls the “consummate irony of the credentials of those who aspired to the corrupt leadership and the institution of reforms and probity in public life (1996:216), the various military oligarchies are worse than the civilian leaders they forced out of office through various coup d’états. As Chidi T. Maduka succulently and plainly put the situation, “the soldiers who have routinely organized coups and taken over governments in various parts of Africa have been worse than the civilians they have replaced” (368). The military regimes that follow after successful coups are not only accompanied by the looting of the treasuries, but they brutalize the people to plant the “seed of successful tyranny” (53) that there is no longer any opposition. The citizens are simply cowed down “to crawl along,/the hushed counsel to wait and see (53). Again, the citizens do not only have to contend with the “miracle” of the generals’ coming that ironically and usually turns into dictatorships, they also have to bear the violence unleashed on them by the police. The persona in a fearful voice reports the extrajudicial killing of an individual, as a policeman “leveled the gun,/and Chris is stout-hearted,/can he mean to shoot?” (53). The persona who is present at the venue of the incident is afraid to talk to the police for, “let someone tell him before its too late-/me?/Why, have the muzzle turn on me? (53). It is obvious that military coups create the situation of a failed or fragile state. One of the features of a failed or fragile state, according to Fund for Peace, is “The loss of control of its territory, or of the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force therein. In such a situation, criminal gangs exercise power. The resultant effects of such a state which is in a distressed position is that, “Violence and other forms of civil strife are always associated with the exercise of power at all levels of political interactions” (Blessing Diala-Ogamba, 311).

The persona as a pilgrim takes the reader through a journey in the seceded territory of Eastern Region’s three-year Nigeria-Biafra War. This is a war which Chimalum Nwankwo claims to be a “Nigerian tragedy or probably

a tragedy that is still unfolding" (6). To Martin Meredith, the essence of the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966 organized by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and other young military officers "was not just to stage a military coup but to launch a revolution, overthrowing the entire old order" (193). However, the consequences of this first military coup in Nigeria, six years after independence, are still felt in the country today as "the country lumbered from crisis to crisis" (Max Siollum, 11) because the hope of Nigeria being Africa's leading democracy dwindles. The Nigerian civil war, being the first civil war in Africa, "which raged from May 1967 to January 1970, has given rise to an interesting body of literature, particularly in the field of literature and poetry" (Eustace Palmer, 6).

A. N. Akwanya is one of the poets who took his material through this brutal civil war. The persona in "Civil War" recalls the memory of a particular girl who died during the war. This girl becomes the symbol of those persons, especially the young ones, who died of starvation during the war. Twenty-four years after her death occurred, the persona is still haunted by "The liquid staring eyes" (33) for:

these twenty-four years
till those same dying eyes started again
in a nightmare
and showed again the face of civil war (35).

This particular girl, like many others that died during the war, does not have an identity because, "no one knew where from, nor who showed the way" (35). It is obvious that wars make people indifferent to terrible plight of others as seen in the paradox of the malnourished girl who "had crawled/right up to charity's doorstep" (35) but did not get any charity either in life or in death. Not only that she met an indifferent world which never gave her food or drink, but also her corpse still lay where she died because the persona says, "She was dead and staring/when I came again from the communal morning piety" (35). But then, nobody can blame them as they, the whole civilian population in the enclave of the besieged territory, are "The helpless victims" from "the relentless pressure of a conquering army" (33). They are also internally displaced persons who move "from one place of refuge to the sanctuary of a market/space/or a school playground" (33) and one of the features of a failed or fragile state is the presence of displaced persons or refugees according to Fund for Peace. The fate of the girl who died out of malnourishment or kwashiorkor is not different from the others

in the embattled enclave of the war, where there is no farming because of the savagery of the war, "no single root earthed" (33), therefore:

limbs and bellies swelled in pace,
life slipped away all around
with the shift of a glance (33).

The soldiers that are defending the territory do not also fare better than the civilian population, because the persona says, "The dying in the battlefield down the deserted road/was distant enough to be unreal" (33). The imagery from such phrases as "bellies swelled", "pestilence in the village", "bony arm", "holes deep in her wasted face", and "life slipped away all around" foregrounds the imagery of a savage war that caused monumental waste of life". This is a civil war because in another poem, "Ruins" in the same poetic collection, the persona talks about an attempt at "a final solution" (37) making allusion to Hitler's Nazi genocidal massacre of more than six million Jews in the Second World War from 1939-1945. It is the same war that a poet and a critic believes, "That the idea of genocide was not imaginary; Biafrans had endured brutal and continuous bombings, shellings, and gunfire, and it seemed to them that the world was only watching and waiting, like a clan of vultures" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 134). In his analysis of Chinua Achebe's poetry, he writes that Achebe believes that:

...the Biafran War (1976-1970) serves a "baptism of fire" for the people, a watershed in their history never to be forgotten, but above all an abomination committed against the very spirit of this people (2019:130).

Moreover, in "Seesaw", the lyrical persona shows the endless dispossession of Biafra long after the genocidal civil war which the Nigerian state wages on Biafra. He uses a woman, Nneka to expose the economic strangulation of the Igbo population. Nneka loses her husband, a soldier, during the war and fifteen years after he last saw her, he meets her again. First of all, the widow's unstable life and the vagaries of hard changes that he has witnessed are described in the metaphor of a seesaw. The devastating thinness of her physique is compared in this simile, "Nneka looked/withered to the bone/as a training bush newly clipped" (39). In her middle age, she has aged so much that "the rim of hair beneath her scarf/showed more grey than black" (39).

Her eye also reflects the excruciating life she has lived is there for everybody to see because, "her eyes rather prominent/like fish stranded in ebb tide/upon the shore" (39). The desperation in her eyes are concretized in this simile of comparing them with those of a fish that is cast out of its natural aquatic environment. Her face is not also left out of the ravages inscribed on it by extreme poverty of raising three daughters as a widow because, "every muscle of the face/now sadly scored deep" (39). The wrinkles on her face are compared with the metaphor of deep gullies in an erosion site. The change in her life is very glaring for everyone to see, "like sky-writing on my face" (39). The persona makes it clear that Nneka's woes in life started with her marriage during the civil war, when her soldier- husband died three months after their marriage and the little boy she had for him died a year after his birth. The finishing of her life at the first husband's death is described in a conceit because, "her life had slammed shut like a book" (4). The emotional and psychological trauma and the hollowness of her life is described with a simile thus, "in her ear, and for many days/her words echoed as a drum" (40). People advised her to go to school; she did, and later remarried. The second husband also died, leaving her with three daughters to bring up. As the lone breadwinner in her family, she is finding it exceedingly difficult to provide for the household because of the state's sustained dispossession of Biafrans decades after the genocidal war. It is:

As well, a war was on,
only now neither air raid
nor shooting was heard;
but the dying
and the hunger and sickness
were well on the pitch of Biafra
for the economic war
the state visited on its own poor (40).

Therefore, the same massive death as a result of starvation and pestilence witnessed in Biafra during the war still goes on as a result of the economic war which the country levies on Biafra.

Moreover, in "Magnus Obidile", the speaking voice of the pilgrim raises awareness over a failed state; one of the features of a collapsed state is its inability to provide public services to the citizens. The persona in this poem remembers vividly the death of a fourteen year old boy five years earlier due to the negligence of duty on the part of the doctors and other

health workers in a public hospital. Despite the dying boy's appeal to be helped, "a hand or two hung back/cold/at a life's wordless appeal/to its fellows" (82). The greatest problem in his death is not actually the death of the young boy, but the deadened conscience of the negligent health workers who were not bothered that a human life was lost, a life that would have been saved if they had done their jobs. To compound his death, there is also dereliction of duty on the part of the state because:

Yet no commission of inquiry,
no inquest was engaged as a public rite
of purging of conscience (83)

In fact, everybody has moved on, including the persona, but the trauma of his death without any medical investigation being conducted into his death by the state, with other "crimes without number" (83) and "thousands of deaths like yours/from indifference" (83) the deceased's mother would have witnessed has been driven into a mad woman as:

You look on unbelieving
that your mother parades herself,
wild and naked, before all the world
since you never knew so much weighted on her
conscience and now she seems far gone powerless to
save herself (84).

Apart from Magnus Obidile's mother who was dispossessed of her son due to the negligence of duty by those who should have saved his life, the persona also presents the state as a fragile one where several criminal gangs unleash violence on the citizens. He mentions extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies where there are "Shootings in out of the way places,/carefully managed accidents" (83). Also "private assassins adjust their prices/to stay in business" (83), and violence and death are unleashed on the citizens as a result of communal clashes over land disputes. Surprisingly, there is the failure of one of the arms of the government – the judiciary – in bringing law and order in the state. This important organ that can stabilize the state in a democracy is a woeful failure and involved in the dispossession of the citizens' rights to their right of inheritance on land because the judiciary is used, probably by the wealthy parties involved in the land disputes, who drag the lawful owners of the land, who may not be wealthy, "and secure official sanction/for theft of lands" (83).

The pilgrim takes the reader into the panorama of a fragile state where there exist human rights abuses and the absence of the rule of law in "Anonymous". This poem is filled with the paradoxes of life, which had been hinted at in preceding poems. He presents the extra-judicial killing of an unidentified young man at the roadside "on this extensive mart on Niger's trunk" (85). Not only is the man "without a name;/no one claims or knows him" (86), his anonymity is similar to that of the nameless young girl that died of kwashiorkor in "Civil War". The difference, however, is that this young man was killed and burnt by the mob and, "The killing itself was quite anonymous" (86). Ironically, both the murdered man and his murderers are the products of the same place as, "both were spawned by our market" (87). This man was accused of burglary and they alleged that he was "caught red-handed in the act" (86) for "meddling with innocent citizens' property" (85). Interestingly, the persona presents him as an innocent man whose violent death was allusively linked to the death of Jesus Christ. As Christ forgave his accusers, those who condemned him for an offence he never committed, and those that nailed him on the cross, the anonymous young man, whose:

charred remains on the roadside with a fixed gaze
at the morning sky was as if praying,
lord do not hold against them this vile crime;
it was just as if he was thinking that (85).

Those who accused and murdered him like Pontus Pilate also declared the innocence of their crime, "With the washing of hands and face at dawn/it is purged away with the vaguer dreams of sleep" (86-87). The methodology of the extra-judicial execution of the unidentified young man follows the course of a judicial procedure that makes a mockery of the legal and judicial system of the state because:

The man's last moments were brief;
and dignified with due process;
the arrest and trial, sentence and death,
not a single phase of justice omitted (87).

The persona puts a glare on the paradoxes of life in the failed or collapsed state, Nigeria. The leaders, political and military, whose failure in leadership dispossesses the citizens go scot-free, while the dispossessed further dispossess other dispossessed. One of the paradoxes of life in this

jungle state is that burglary, which the anonymous man who has already been dispossessed by the state is accused of, is seen ironically as "the greatest crime" (85). The execution of this judgment is by the mob, the wretched of the earth and other dispossessed citizens "spawned by our market". Thus, the executed man is another dispossessed, another wretched of the earth and "spawned by our market". However, the same failed state condones the actions and/or inactions of the leaders that dispossess the masses as seen in other poems in the poetic collection. For instance, in "For the Record", those who loot the wealth of the state go scot-free, "because we are a protective brood,/we that banish ignoble deed from memory" (52). There is further duality in the justice system of the state as presented in "If God Acquits". In this poem, "men can do nothing, but forgive" (54) those who massacre people for religious or cultural differences and also:

The chopping of hands,
of feet
as a pre-emptive lesson
to any who may hesitate to say yea
when asked to (54).

The people who are dispossessed of their lives and limbs easily forgive the leaders that subject them to such violent dispossession by taking refuge in the religious ideology of:

God too freely forgives
our murders:
and if he acquit,
who can condemn? (55).

The same paradox of existence is also presented with so much clarity in "Magnus Obidile", where the health care workers who should have treated the boy did nothing and allowed him to die. Not only did they not face any public probe into his death, but they go scot-free with a dead conscience, because the family of the deceased young man "were crushed/by the confidence of every look they met/instead of eyes falling flat/from conscience" (82). And finally, in "Time for the Military," the persona says that despite the "thirty years/of military scowls and barks" (90), and despite the fact that they loot "the treasury/into the outer pocket of his great gown"

(90), the dispossessed citizens of the state see nothing wrong with their looting of the common wealth of the state and dictatorship, but:

Then we ourselves applaud
that he has the wherewithal
and free hand
to run the state (91).

It is obvious from the above lines that Max Siollum is right in his clam that Nigerian citizens are implicated in the incessant military coup d'états in the country because, "The military were always cajoled into political power and welcomed as heroic redeemers after each coup" (9). The same oligarchs which Nigerians invite and hail into power are condescendingly described as "increasingly corrupt military, bankrupt of ideas and clinging to power" (Guy Arnold, 124).

Revolutionary Impulses in *Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems*

Within the poetic collection, there are some poems where the persona presents political revolution that would usher in a new social order in the jungle failed state. First of such poems is "Short of Breath" where a lone revolutionary is presented in the symbol of "a big black ram/tethered with a halter" (48). The persona had never noticed the presence of this ram, and he is "Alone in that wilderness", which describes the revolutionary as a prophet of old with a lone voice calling for change. Apart from the fact that the revolutionary is "tethered with a halter", which are obviously laws or other impediments made by the state to restrict his movements, "the leash has shortened round the tall grass" (48). Despite all the restrictions to ensure he is not free, he makes a stout effort to break through, because:

He rushes this way
and that,
till at last he can go no further
and digs in his heels,
head-locked to the shaggy bundle (48-49).

The persona, probably like the other citizens, watches him passively without offering any help to free him. Despite the leashes used to restrain him by those in authority, he fights back with all he has and at all costs, including to the point of losing his life, as:

Stubbornly he holds his ground
and full of fight,
though his tongue lolls
like a mature tumour;
though he slowly chokes to death,
he quakes with pregnant energy
like an ancient lorry
idling (49).

The parallelism in lines 3-8 of the stanza above foregrounds the violence that the revolutionary must undergo in the hands of the leaders of the state; yet, his resistance and determination to go on with his fight to enthrone a new social order is seen in the science of his comparison with "an ancient lorry/idling". The persona saw the struggle for freedom in the dream and is very afraid as presented in the personification of the beating of an instrument in "wildly thumping heart" (50). Though the speaker announces he has a fever, this is as a result of the dream of a big black ram fighting for his freedom with him looking on passively. The persona who is a dispossessed citizen of Biafra during the civil war, and regrets his passivity at not offering any help to the dying girl and regrets his passivity in these words:

I remember my fear then,
the last living thing she saw of this indifferent world.
as if a pact, I was gripped with this death;
what should it mean to die
for one watching a retreating back,
mine? ("Civil War" 35).

The same regret at distancing himself and being passive at the revolutionary's fight for freedom is also expressed by the persona in "Short of Breath" thus:

but I can have no rest
from that hopelessly entangled beast;
was it some sign,
or had I my terrible wrack
for standing idly by? (50).

Besides, the revolutionary impulses exhibited by the revolutionary who is dispossessed of his freedom of movement in "Short of Breath", in "Now I Have You", are those qualities of revolutionaries that can dislodge the leaders who dispossess the citizens in a failed state. The revolutionary is here again presented in the symbols of a mad man, the ringmaster and the ironical dog. He makes it clear that a successful revolution should not involve force but it can be achieved by those things and those people that look innocent and we take for granted. He warns the leaders who loot the state, subject the citizens to tyrannical rule and violence, that the revolution that would dislodge them and impose any social order would come from unexpected quarters by those things and people who they think are harmless, because:

Since the mad man
and the ringmaster,
the ironical dog,
can I still bear a businesslike countenance
or forget that a serene smile
might just say,
Now I have you:
See? (51)

Finally, in the last poem in the collection, "For the Family," the persona uses a named individual, "Ahime", to symbolize the looters – public servants, private businessmen – who exploit and dispossess the people. He died in his old age but with all his large family, "many national honours", "a chain of housing estates" and "mining interests and estate farms in the/countryside, he lost his life in a revolution undertaken by the dispossessed citizens of the state. Despite all his earthly wealth, the speaking voice says:

Indeed it is tragic
that he should die
in the unhappy circumstances
of social strife (92).

Paradoxically and ironically, at his death and despite his stupendous wealth and large family, it is his lawyer/executor and one of his tenants who make arrangement for his memorial service, for he does not even get the befitting honour of having a proper burial. He is buried like a faceless

commoner, one of those leaders of the failed state that faceless mob of dispossessed people burnt beyond recognition in the revolution to enthrone a new social order. The persona presented the futility of life and the unbridled quest to acquire wealth at the detriment of the state in Ahime's mass burial thus:

his remains are already laid to rest;
we understand there was a priest
and an Iman
at the mass burial

Ahime's life and death, therefore, illustrate the vanity of life and the consequences of failed state and a dysfunctional family system to any nation.

Conclusion

The poet, through the figurative language loaded with haunting evocative images presents his vision of life in his collection of poems to mark his twenty-fifth year ordination as a priest of the Catholic Church. Like the interconnectivity of the spider's web, the literary language in *Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems*, the central message of the poem – dispossession – lies at the centre of the web. The persona who is on a pilgrimage in a chaotic world order presents the general destructive forces of nature, which may come in the forms of earthquake, tsunami, flooding, desert encroachments, flooding or in the forms of diseases like blood disorder or even an accident. The lyrical persona's voice is loaded with reverence as seen in the title of the first poem in the collection, "To the Master of the Universe". This unseen force that brings chaos is also reverently addressed as "Mother" in "Spray from her Moist Hair". But despite the meekness of this mother, at times, she deals a devastating blow through one of her offspring by releasing deadly volcanic lava on humans.

Again, the persona goes on to x-ray the leadership failure in both state and family levels. The consequence of failure of leadership, whether military or civilian, include war, the rise of criminal gangs that take over the state, negligence of duties that lead to the death of patients, violent mob actions, etc. He shows that a father who acquires enormous wealth without training his children, particularly his sons that can take over his lineage and properly, produces children without any iota of initiative. These children eventually crumble the wealth and estates he has either stolen from the

state treasury or worked hard to acquire. It is finally submitted that the persona believes that the only way the dispossessed in a failed state and in a dysfunctional family can get their freedom and introduce any social and economic order is through a violent revolution which would lead to the violent death of their dispossessors. It is only with the death of the parasites that undermine the growth of the state and family that a new political order would be entrenched.

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