**GROUP 2**

**COURSE CODE: ELS 122**

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**TOPIC: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILLIP UMEH'S AMBASSADORS OF POVERTY**

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**AMBASSADORS OF POVERTY BY PHILIP UMEH**

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The corrupt masters of the economy  
With their head abroad  
And anus at home  
Patriots in reverse order  
Determined merchants of loots  
Who boost the economy of their colonial order  
To impoverish brothers and sisters at home

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The saviours of the people  
Office loafers in the guise of workers  
Barons of incompetence  
With kleptomaniac fingers  
And suckling filaments  
Position occupants and enemies of service  
Locked in the corrosive war of corruption  
With their people’s treasury  
And killing their future

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The dubious sit tight patriots  
Frustrating the corporate will of their followers  
The beleaguered, hungry and famished owners of the land  
People priced out of their conscience and power  
Incapacitated by destitution  
Unable to withstand the temptation  
Of crispy mints and food aroma

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The political elites  
In air conditioned chambers  
And exotic cars  
With tearful stories of rip offs  
Tucked away from  
Their impoverish constituencies  
Lying prostrate  
With death traps for roads  
Mud for water  
Candle for light  
Underneath trees as schools  
Rat for protein  
Fasting as food  
And alibi as governance

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The rancorous elites In battle of supremacy  
For the control of power  
And their people’s wealth  
Mowing down their own  
With white man’s machine  
Oiled by the prosperity of black patronage  
Counterpoised by deprivations  
As the corpses of their able-bodied men  
Women and children lie un-mourn  
In shallow graves  
In their fallow farmlands  
Long abandoned

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The round trippers  
The elusive importers  
Of unseen goods and services  
Sand inclusive  
Who trip the economy down  
By tricking form M  
For harvest of dollars as import  
When their people see neither money nor food

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The able-bodied men on the street  
Without motives, without vision, without mission  
Men fit for the farm  
But glued to the city  
Hungry and desperate  
Constituting willing tools in the hands  
Of political overlords  
For mission of vendetta  
Against political foes  
In their fight for power

Ambassadors of poverty are  
Those who actions and inactions  
Reduce their people’s expectation to nothingness  
Those who antecedents  
Have lost the spark to inspire  
While their people lie in surrender  
Having been defeated by poverty

Ambassadors of poverty are  
All of us whose in-actions  
Steal our collective joy  
Because of what we should do  
Which we never do  
As we bargain away  
Our conscience in the market place  
Under the weight of poverty  
To assuage our hunger  
And our master’s will.

Background of the Poet

Philip Obioma Chinedu Umeh studied English at the University of Lagos; taught English at the Government College, Umuahia where he was senior English Master until 1978, and where he himself had been a student, from 1955 to 1961, one year below the writer and political martyr, Ken Saro-Wiwa in the famous school, to whom he addresses a eulogy, “To Ken Saro Wiwa” in his poems: Victor Ludorum – For the Spartan rigours of Umuahia All for Ken Olives for laurels From the city scattered over seven hills All for Ken…

Umeh is a former Director of the National Productive centre, is an aluminous of the University of Lagos. Before joining the Federal Civil Service in 1988, he had worked as an editor with Nelson/Pitman Publishers Limited between 1979 and 1980. He moved to New York in 1981 and worked with Nok Publishers Limited as General Manager, which he occupied till 1985. He is happily married and blessed with children. And, he is an active member of the Abuja Literary Community.

The poet is a Ballard; a literary stylist, economist, artiste, pace-setter, trend-setter, analyst, columnist, researcher, sociologist, historian, philosopher and an all-rounder, who technically (poetically) says little but communicates little but communicates much.

Umeh used poetic form in his writings to discuss the corruption, poverty and hopelessness he has seen in his native Africa, Nigeria.

BACKGROUND OF THE POEM

This work considers ‘Ambassadors of poverty’ a compound word that refers to bad and corrupt leaders, usually imposed on the masses, who misrepresent their people and the nation, loot and empty the state treasury, leaving the people and the state impoverished, helpless, stagnant, confused and perpetually underdeveloped. Generally, ambassadors are regarded as renowned persons of noble character, diplomats, who represent their people and places (states) in foreign states/areas – in the Diaspora. They are expected to be honest, responsible, reliable, exemplary, and their people’s advocates /the saviour of the people/ (line 10, stanza 2). Unfortunately, the Nigerian elites and bourgeoisie, especially the chief state custodians, are the complete opposites of [real] ambassadors. Umeh describes them thus:

Ambassadors of poverty are

The corrupt masters of the economy

Patriots in reverse order

Determined merchants of loot

Who boost the economy of the colonial order

To impoverish brothers and sisters at home

Office loafers in the guise of workers

Barons of incompetence

Position occupants and enemies of service

Locked in corrosive war of corruption

With their peoples treasury /line 17/

And killing their future

The dubious-sit-tight ‘patriots’

Frustrating the corporate will of their followers

Although politicians are the prime ambassadors of poverty, other elites and the any members of the masses who indulge in any forms of corruption are also ambassadors of poverty. According to Umeh, they are /the political elite/, /the rancorous elite/, /the elusive importers/, /those whose actions and in-action/ reduce their people’s expectations to nothingness/ and /all of us in-actions/. Stressing the particular set of leaders that are ambassadors of poverty in Nigeria, Umeh’s words read:

The political elite

In air conditioned chambers

And exotic cars Tucked away from

Their impoverished constituencies

The rancorous elite

In battle of power

And their peoples’ wealth

The round trippers

The elusive importers

Of unseen goods and services

Who trip the economy down

By tricking from M

For harvest of dollars as import

When their people see neither money nor food

Umeh also lashes /the able-bodied men on the streets/ who have no motive, vision and mission and misuse their body for worthless things, such as political thuggery, hired assassination, ritual killing, armed-robbery, theft, burglary, motor parks touting, hooliganism, cultism, criminality of all kinds, and what have you. He blames them for shying away from farming and other meaningful entrepreneurial ventures and often drifting from rural areas to urban areas. He also blames all for failing to do what they ought to do that they never do. Umeh informs that having been ridden by poverty, the ordinary citizens /bargain away/ their conscience in the marketplace to assuage their hunger and master’s will. Ambassadors of poverty also /steal our collective job/ and leave many youths, especially graduates, perpetually jobless– unemployed and underemployed.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Ambassadors of Poverty’ is Philip Umeh’s satirical poem that ridicules the corrupt ruling class and followers– failed leadership and followership– and poetically offers several suggestions for change and betterment. It is a nine-stanza of unequal length, with the least stanza being seven lines and the longest, fourteen lines. It is richly styled with figures of speech, simple amidst complex language. Metaphor is used deeply and effectively. It looks at Nigerian political leaders, depicted as symbols in inept and corrupt leadership in Africa. It centres mainly on Nigerian leaders, who are lampooned for turning the giant of Africa into one of the world’s most corrupt and poorest countries. The poetic tone is satirical and pungent, as Umeh discusses how the mismanagement of Nigeria amounts to impoverishment by the state custodians. He avers that poor leadership is the bane of Nigeria development, growth and democracy, which has manifested in the impoverishment of the people owing to self enrichment, the lack of basic social amenities and infrastructure, mismanagement, misappropriation, embezzlement, maladministration and ineptitude, and their enrichment of the West, who are already rich, developed and civilised. The West is indicted by the poet for hypocrisy, which has helped in sustaining bad leaders in office in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. This is neo-colonialism, eroding our society. In stanza five, the Westerners are blamed for sponsoring and fuelling numerous African wars of attrition with sophisticated weapons and harmful technology. In the same vein, the Nigerian citizens are blamed by the poet for not having taken proactive and pragmatic measures [actions] to replace the irresponsible leaders–– ambassadors of poverty–– with responsible, credible real ambassadors (leaders). Nigeria constitutes the microcosmic representation of the ugly development in Africa in particular and such other parts of the globe. Satirising the African post-colonial era of Western mimicry by the leaders and the ruled alike, the former more, Umeh stylistically drives home his satiric message with several poetic techniques, such as simple yet sophisticated diction, wit, sarcasm, irony and humour, among others. With metaphor, the poem becomes interesting for its melancholic yet accessible discourse, which is also a serious one. Complex euphemism and paradox are the predominantly used techniques in the poem, which express the poet’s sarcasm the more. The metaphoric title employed exemplifies this. At different points, the poet’s tone moves from anger to defiance, to irony and finally to desperation and sarcasm. The blank unrhymed nature of the poem showcases the common trend in modern lyrical African poetry, which tends to employ elements of orality, song, lyricism and prosaic language for easy and accessible effects. This style has been popularised by African poets like Christopher Okigbo, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, and a host of others.

In the poem, the poet succinctly discloses why political analysts and socialcommentators have classified Nigeria and many other African countries as failed states, which is as a result of their inability to generate purely indigenous/self (African) culture, norms, values, governance/democracy and institutions different from the colonial ones; and the absence of credible, honest, virtuous, responsible and dedicated leaders who take decisions that are in the best interests of their citizens and states. Studies show that Nigeria has incessantly produced greed, egoistic and dubious political leaders, whose misrule–––failed leadership/elitism, maladministration, mismanagement, embezzlement, misappropriation, etc.–––has been plaguing the growth, development, politics, culture, social and economy of Nigeria (Besong, 2016) and thus blighting the nation’s destiny (Nwachukwu-Agbasa et al., 2011:249). It is against this backdrop of bad leadership/misrule and mismanagement of Nigeria that Philip Umeh has written the poem: ‘Ambassadors of Poverty.’

**THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

(a) Theme Of Poverty And Suffering

(b) Theme Of Selfishness

(c) Theme Of Deceitfulness

(d) Theme Of Political And White-collar Corruption

(e) Theme Of Negligence And Nonchalance

Theme of poverty and suffering must come to mind first in this poem. It is the outcome of mismanagement, embezzlement, and awkward supremacy within the country that led the poet to lament on the wide and deep abysm poverty has become in the country. The poet summarized it in the first stanza before spending the rest stanzas to buttress his summary of poverty, suffering and corruption:

"Ambassadors of poverty are

The corrupt masters of the economy

With their head abroad

And anus at home

Patriots in reverse order

Determined merchants of loot

Who boost the economy of colonial order

To impoverish brothers and sisters at home"

Theme of selfishness seem to be the root cause of the acts perpetrated by the villains wearing the robe of rulers. Since the dawn of time, mankind have ceased to cure the disease of selfishness dwelling within them and the generationally inherited selfishness has caused much harm to the country described by poet.

Theme of deceitfulness occurred when the grown selfishness made use of deceitfulness as its evil tool. Those expected to be the savior of the masses became otherwise using "tearful stories of rip-off", heartlessness and "alibi as governance" to play on their citizens’ intelligence while they amass wealth to feather their own nests.

Theme of political and white-collar corruption, the poet described them with mammoth metaphors and imageries such as

"The political elite/ In air conditioned chambers/ And exotic cars..." (according to stanza 4) "Office loafers in the guise of workers/ Barons of incompetence/ With kleptomaniac fingers/ And suckling filaments/ Position occupants and enemies of service/ Locked in corrosive war of corruption/ With their peoples' treasury/ And killing their future"(according to stanza 2)

They perpetrated their corruption through counterfeiting and vain promises providing the populace "With death traps for roads/ Mud for water, candle for light/ Underneath trees for schools/ Rats for protein/ Fasting as food/ And alibi as governance" in stanza 4 of the poem.

Theme of negligence and nonchalance by the masses was also pointed out as one of the causes of poverty the people suffered; they became nonchalant and neglected the destructive hands causing suffering because they were lazy "able-bodied men on the streets/ Without motive, without vision, without mission/ Men fit for farms/ But glued to the city/ Hungry and desperate/ Constituting willing tools in the hands/ Of political overlords" and because the hardworking one were striving for their own survival:

"Ambassadors of poverty are

All of us whose in-actions

Steal our collective joy

Because of what we should do

Which we never do

As we bargain away

Our conscience in the market place

Under the weight of poverty

To assuage our hunger

And our masters' will."

**MORE THEMES OF THIS POEM**

1. The collective malaise and lethargy imposed by bad leadership and poverty on the populace
2. The hypocrisy and negative influence of the Western world on post-colonial Africa;
3. Mediocrity and the incompetence of corrupt leaders and public office holders;
4. The destruction of the collective psyche and morals of the citizens due to corruption;
5. The corruption of power;
6. The stratification of society between the rich political class and the poor ignorant masses;
7. The destruction of human values and hope and their replacement by social retrogression;
8. The lack of direction and purpose due to poverty and listlessness of the youth;

**SOCIAL CLASS STRATIFICATION**

The poet highlights the wide gap created between: the poor and the rich, women and men, youths and adults, such that Nigeria is ruled by only adult and aged oligarchs, the people’s monsters, to the near complete exclusion of youths (and erstwhile, women), the literates and the illiterates, the masters (the state custodians/ leaders) and the servants (the poor Nigerian masses), the oppressors and the oppressed, the law makers and the law breakers, the colonisers and colonised, and the ambassadors and their people––the representatives and the constituencies. Stanzas four and five revolve around the stratification of the Nigerian society, with its attendant adverse effects on the lower class. The poet talks about /the political elite/ in air conditioned chambers/ /and exotic cars/ with tearful stories of rip-off/ tucked away from/ their impoverished constituencies/ (ll.29-34). These lines capture the superficial and mundane values treasured by the political elite. The lower class, on the other hand, are presented with /death traps for roads/ mud for water/ candle for light/ rats for protein/ (ll.36-41). Philip Umeh vilifies them–––politicians, elites, bourgeoisies, oligarchs, and the other dubious public office-holders and civil servants–––for proffering inept leadership that has left the people without a sense of focus and direction under the thrones of corrupt leadership. The applauded development status of England, Japan, China, America and the other developed nations is a function of their elite’s cohesion on national development exploit. This implies that their elites never misuse or loot their resources, unlike those of Nigeria and the like corrupt nations.

NEGATIVE WESTERN INFLUENCE ON POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICA

According to Nwachukwu-Agbada et al. (2011:245), the corrosive and negative influence of the West on Nigeria and other African leaders in post-colonial Africa is highlighted in different stanzas of ‘Ambassadors of Poverty.’ The poet reasons that Western nations encourage African leaders, especially those of Nigeria, to embezzle government funds, which when often deposited in foreign accounts and invested in foreign multi-national corporations/businesses, their economies get more developed while Africa’s and Nigeria’s get more deteriorated and much less developed, having been impoverished. This implies that and shows how Nigerian leaders and their likes develop the already developed West and impoverish and under-develop the underdeveloped/impoverished Nigeria (Africa), thereby sustaining the negative gestures, deeds and legacies (sins) of the colonialists, their yet better predecessors, in/against Nigeria (Africa). Post-colonial Nigerian (African) leaders chastise the ruled with sharp irons and rods worse than their predecessors’ horsewhip chastisement.

**POETIC DEVICES**

1. Alliteration:

One of the critical devices that Umeh used to carry out his message is alliteration. According to Agyekum (2013), alliteration refers to “a series of words that begin with the same letter of sound, especially consonant”, and such sounds are repeated at a frequent interval (pp.226). As a result, Umeh explores the following lines with words in an alliterative form.

frustrating . . . of their followers

People, price out . . . powers

fasting as food

man’s machine

without . . . without vision, without mission

. . . fit for the farm

These alliterative sounds [f, m, p, ʒ, w] employed in the above lines carry a very negative slur on the part of the citizens, who are rendered helpless and hopeless by the political leaders and ambassadors in their own country of habitant. This inharmonious style of literary ingredients also signifies unfairness and untold hardship that political leaders have unleashed on the ordinary citizens. These unfairness and untold hardship has become an intestinal economic wrecker on the lives of the people in Africa, because they feel frustrated by the scam of their corrupt leaders of the economy. Umeh also uses metaphor as one of the essential elements in order to sell out his ideas.

2. Metaphor: With metaphor, it basically deals with comparisons of ideas without the use of ‘as’ or ‘like’. Aristotle in his literary text, The Rhetoric, maintains that metaphor makes learning pleasant and creates knowledge of beauty in its natural sense into a literary work. Accordingly, Richards (1936) describes metaphor as having two-part ingredients. These parts are the ‘tenor’ and the ‘vehicle’. The ‘tenor’ is the subject to which attributes are ascribed to. The ‘vehicle’ is the object whose attributes are borrowed. With this forms in place, Umeh’s sheer exuberance to make use of metaphor as an eminent feat in this masterpiece shows a pale shadow for Africa’s leadership style. The poem marks the freshness of metaphorical clarion in the lines below;

. . . Ambassadors of poverty

. . . patriot in reverse order

. . . with death traps for roads

. . . kleptomaniac fingers

. . . the “saviours” of the people

. . . constituting willing tools in the hands

Umeh’s metaphorical presentation in this regard seeks to explain the nature and the kind of leaders that we have in Africa. These leaders have unduly derailed the good fortunes of their own ‘brothers and sisters’ thereby making life for the under-privileged ones unbearable and evenly unproductive. This is because, leadership style in Africa is arbitrarily poor and often marred by corrupt activities with impunity.

3. Repetition: Repetition has been the core element in the poetic genre. Intuitively, this poem is highly rocked with the repetition of particular structure and it is used in a pictorial manner to suggest perennial nature of the disease called corruption. The repetition of Ambassadors of poverty, quite unceasingly, throughout the poem is meant to create the scale of consistency in the behavior of the leaders. It shows the unwilling nature of political leaders and their failure to rescue their people from the wrath of poverty. They always claim to be economic “saviours of the people” but they are eventually “. . . locked in corrosive war of corruption”. As such, the continent is found to be trading in a failing economy, where the citizens are in the state of a total penury because of leadership problem and mismanagement of the resources.

4. The use of enjambment:

The poem under review has also become successful in revealing the rot in Africa society through the use of enjambment. Enjambment is a poetic device whereby the line in a verse continues into the next line without stopping in order to create iconicity in meaning (Afful-Boachie 2006). It is the only device that runs through every single poem either written or spoken. This literary item plays quintessential role in reinforcing the central theme of any literary piece. Enjambment has been a very common technique in modern poetry, as it is used to canvas the creation of conversational tone. Umeh, just like any other poetic writer, also uses this device (enjambment) to depict the exploration of mercuric canker being perpetrated by leaders in Africa. He further advances on the use of enjambment to indicate the fact that the act (corruption), so deadly as it is, has become a continuous idol of worship and reverence belief which is so much entrenched in African tradition and culture over the decades. Umeh caps his poetic discourse with clear-cut and comprehensive stylistic thoughts. The persona espouses a definite fluid and a magnitude feeling through a co-existed selection of words and other phraseological patterns.

5. The use of simple language: The poem is patterned in rich and simple language with everyday expressions like

. . . ambassadors of poverty,

. . . barons of incompetence,

. . . corrupt masters of the economy,

. . . (steal) our collective joy

These expressions are highly engulfed with noun phrases. These phrases actually give credence to the fact that our leaders and political elites in Africa seek economic expediency with their usual royal game to satisfy their ultimate joy in life. In this work, Umeh uses the present form of verbs like are and do more sparingly for a thawing effect. The poet has tempted to present these grammatical items in his subject to give an emphatic spike that, the act of corruption is a continuous action and ceaseless in its essence, since it has become part of pork-barrel body politics of the present generation of the Africa’s political leaders. As a result, our political leaders live with it, and die in it because it is a perpetual exercise in the continent. It then suggests that corruption is a generational canker and, it therefore does affect anyone after having secured power from the people.

6. Imagery: The poet uses predominating visual images to express his disgust with the corruption which is prevalent in African societies. The negative activities of the so-called “Ambassadors” expose the depth of the corruption in these societies. They are all “Ambassadors of Poverty” giving the word “ambassador” an ironical twist.

The visual image involving “the head abroad and the anus at home” emphasizes the stench of the endemic corruption in the society. There is also the image of government workers who are described as “office loafers” and “barons of incompetence”.

There are other images involving “the landlords” who charge exorbitant rents, thus contributing to the theme of corruption. The political elite, the rancorous elite, and the elusive importers who pursue their own comfort and personal wealth at the expense of the poor.

7. Irony: The use of irony can also be seen in the poem. It can be found in lines 9-10 which says;

Ambassadors of Poverty

Are the saviours of the people.

We can tell that the statement is ironical in nature because the next line views them as / Office loafers in the guise of workers/.

8. Satire: He brings to light the various issues and ills in society especially those caused by corrupt leaders and the acts they believe are hidden from the public.

CONCLUSION

Philip Umeh’s ‘Ambassadors of Poverty’ is a revolutionary poetic satire that calls for change from bad leadership/failed public representation to the supposed one. It awakens the impoverished Nigerian (African) masses of the need to fight against oppressive and despotic leadership rather than playing on with such leaders anyhow. He sympathises with the masses on the man-tailored undue predicaments, while informing the elites of their failure as well as the dire need to turn a new leave, as all their current deeds are sins against the state and its people. He also upholds Nigerianity/Africanity–––originality, advocating a retrace to the good abandoned indigenous ways/systems of life that obtained in classical times in Nigerian and Africa at large.