

Challenging the Order: the Verse as an Instrument of Social Revolt in the Poetry of Jared Angira

Markus Ishaku & Owakuza Otiki

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria

Abstract: This research examines Jared Angira's poetry to investigate how postcolonial African literature provides a space for questioning and restructuring social realities. It probes how postcolonial literature, in Angira's poetry (specifically, *Silent Voices* and *Cascades*), challenges the structures of neo-colonialism while positing other alternative social constructions. Within the context of East African writing tradition, the paper explores the relationship between Angira's creative and ideological endeavours and contemporary Kenyan socio-political narratives. The analysis of Angira's voices, imagery, metaphors, structure, and symbolism provides the basis of this study to establish Angira's poetry as a cultural space for communal consciousness, political consciousness, and aspiration towards social change. It is argued that Angira's poetry is an act of social commentary, not just of a stylistic nature, but an act of epistemic disruption aimed at displacing current norms of ordering and understanding African societies under a postcolonial regime. It seeks to add to our current scholarly appreciation of the ways literary engagements constitute a medium of resistance, dialogue, transformation, and the articulation of social alternatives in the postcolonial milieu.

Keywords: Postcolonial Poetics, Social Ordering, Literary Resistance, East African Literary Tradition, Poetic Voice

I. Introduction

In Kenya, the title of first poet is accorded to Jared Angira, a second-generation African poet in most aspects, if only for his prolific work which far outnumbers that of his East African contemporaries; or for the reason that Angira, as part of his generation, focuses his instant and intense passion on the pitiable conditions of the common African. The four intellectual collections he published from 1970 to 1979—*Juices* (1970), *Silent Voices* (1972), *Soft Corals* (1973) and *Cascades* (1979)—constitute a considerable poetic corpus, particularly when viewed in the context of Kenya's relatively sluggish pace of literacy programmes and the comparatively young age of the poet. While critics such as David Cook may overstate Angira's concern with what they describe as his "verbal acrobatics" (1977: 51), one cannot deny the skilful command of language and imagery evident in his verse. Yet this technique should not distract from Angira's overarching goal of social reform; beneath the verbal dexterity there lies a profound thematic current intended to combat the ills that plague society.

In this essay, I examine how themes such as poverty, injustice, the incursion of technology and other social and moral problems are addressed by Angira in *Silent Voices* and *Cascades*. Angira demonstrates his poetic prowess through the logical and developmental thrust of his four collections: from *Juices*, which largely exploits immediate cultural and floral associations, through *Silent Voices* and *Soft Corals*, which probe social realities of the downtrodden and working class, to *Cascades*, which expands his poetic canvas to modern, cosmopolitan and world themes. In *Juices*, Angira's poetry is rooted in immediate reality but mixes cultural experiences and floral beauty. The poet utilises his skill in handling culture in producing commentaries on social realities: thus his itinerant muse longs for "social ordering" which is unfortunately conspicuously lacking.

Prostitution, disparity in wealth, political corruption and most importantly the phenomenon of “deculturalization” become recurring topics (Wangusa 1973:52).

His second collection, *Silent Voices*, is more focused on the struggles of the disadvantaged members of society. Together with his fellow African poets and particularly Christopher Okigbo, Angira articulates the deep sympathy and care for the oppressed and impoverished. A certain revolutionary tone permeates his efforts to find solutions to the depressing living standards of the ordinary and working masses.

This tone is even intensified, perhaps even exacerbated, in his third volume *Soft Corals*, although in comparison to *Silent Voices* it is arguably a less successful exploration of themes. According to Adrian Roscoe, *Soft Corals* is, for a variety of reasons, “a disappointment” compared to the two collections it follows; for now, it seems that Angira has outstripped his sources of inspiration (1977:97). In terms of poetic maturation and variety of thematic engagement, *Cascades* remains Angira's most polished work. He moves beyond the specific constraints of cultural and pastoral poetry to engage with the larger universals of human experience—religion, technology, race and issues pertinent to developing nations.

These global issues of materialism, exploitation and corruption are thoughtfully treated. In *Cascades*, Angira emerges not only as a sensitive observer of social realities but as a voice of the society, delivering the sobering truth:

It is vanity
no man can take out of this world
what he did not bring into the world

II. Definition of Keywords

Postcolonial Poetics - Literary strategies used by formerly colonised peoples to describe and represent their experiences with colonialism and the aftermath. Includes the concern for identity, power, language, and representation in postcolonial societies. Incorporates linguistic innovations, mixing oral indigenous traditions with Western forms of expression to produce hybrids that are a challenge to dominant discourse. In Angira, is seen through fragmentation and the distortion of narrative conventions in order to represent post-independent Kenya.

Social Ordering - Processes, structures and systems by which societies classify their populations into hierarchical strata and organise and manage the distribution of social relations, power and economic resources, etc. Consists of both formal institutions and informal culture. In the postcolonial era, this Ordering remains haunted by colonial legacies and in negotiation with traditional Ordering mechanisms. The work of Angira is focused on the ordering of post-independent Kenya society while trying to break from inherited ordering and shows how new elites perpetuate the ordering processes inherited from colonial power.

Literary Resistance - Strategic use of literary devices and modes to attack hegemonic ideologies, social and political structures and narratives. Involves figurative rather than overt actions. In post colonialism involves the creation of alternative narratives in challenging colonial representations by centring formerly marginalised groups. The Angira work offers literary resistance to the post-independence corruption and oppression of a new elite. The resistance involves the strategic deployment of allegories, satires, metaphors, etc to avoid direct criticism, but these works are designed to be accessible to the knowing and savvy audience.

East African Literary Tradition - This tradition encompasses the writing that has come from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and some other East African countries after independence. It developed in dialectic with indigenous oral forms and Western models and styles of writing. It is characterised by its social-political concern with national issues such as cultural identity, cultural authenticity and political responsibilities. It includes works in English, Kiswahili and vernacular African languages.

Poetic Voice - The specific constellation of style, language, content, and worldview that is particular to an individual poet. Includes diction, syntax, rhythm, imagery and tone. Postcolonial poets, in representing postcolonial experience, sometimes develop fragmented voice due to experience of colonisation. The Angira voice is hybridising the indigenous African oral forms with modernist stylistic strategies to negotiate the representation of post colonial African societal realities.

The Silent Voices of The Majority

Commenting on *Silent Voices*, the poet himself says that the collection:

Consists of crude voices gasping in the dark, of voices trapped in between despair and existence, of voices caught up in a maze but always seeking to get through. They are voices from the rusty tin cans of the slums, seeking an outlet into the gay city; they are voices corked up in empty gourds. They are the searching voices that must achieve their goals in a strong silent quietness, quietness that defeats the drums. Yet in themselves the voices are drumbeat, pulsations, heartbeats... Some of the voices are everyday voices, even of children thrown by their mothers into latrine pits; some are of progressives caught up in competition and self-promotion. Here is a conglomeration of voices ⁽¹⁾

Angira's first concern in this collection is the search for knowledge about these silent voices. Informed by Jean Paul Sartre's concept of silence as speech in itself, Angira tries to penetrate silence and understand its voice:

How I wish to understand your voice
and appreciate your beauty
and unmask the seat
of your fathomless power (*Silent Voices* 1)

In his contemplation of silence, Angira is quick to hear it speak and see it move and thus desires to measure the volume and strength of this movement:

How I long to measure the volume
of that variable music
of your giant power
that shake houses apart
and cripples tree
scrap vessels on blues (1).

The brevity of this opening poem is its first achievement in drawing the poet's anxiety for the inquiry after the unheard masses languishing in silence. However, the poet opines that it's no lethargic silence but a unique kind of music. And to get a hold of this 'variable music', Angira takes refuge in the nether region in a 'pinhole' where he discovers silence in an 'undug anthill.'

His delve into the untapped potential of silence suggests his desperate attempt to salvage humanity in a fractured society suffering under the pang of economic and social distress of the downtrodden masses.

In the depth of the pinhole, their silent songs seem to have surrendered their destinies, dancing with the tune of their plight. 'They're singing to that music to be released, the silent lament that can only break a bone and can't open a door, but it carries them through', and it implies a despair so profoundly felt that they have nothing left but to join in the 'music to be released'. The poet implores them to stop dancing to this dirge of helplessness and stand up to bring about a change in their lot. /Shall we dance the waltz / when the taut cord / becomes flippant?

From the "pinhole", as if from an observatory, Angira scans the world of the downtrodden, a world of slums and slavish existence:

a one-way road
dusty with flour of sand
the slum bears the load
of the port's bulk of labour (4)

In this slum environment, however, is a world of humanity with its unique existence where occasionally one sees: "a potent girl comes out | wrapped in a black bui bui | and feet in papping sandals | tender in steps ... terror at sex" or "street Arab boys | with parched garments | countless times to form | a bed for bugs". And, in the evening one finds:

loose beauties called harlots
smart in their surface posture
sit on verandas with grotesque smile
waiting like alchemists for their clients (5).

At night the slum is given its joys – “sound of drums, and seen to move, ageing damsels and lads dancing in circles.” BUT this is no real life; they just pretend to live because they are bored to death and tired of being depressed while in city – planners of all sorts, wealthy persons – sleep off cakes in their sweet beds, living merrily – they exist in slum because “senior servants of the municipality and gov- ernment planners”(5) can afford to stay away – the gap between slum and city has to be wide. As they are neglected, nobody will care about them. – they always remember the rich and beautiful and not beggars(7).

In another poem “No coffin, No grave”, Angira mocks the life of the poor vis-avis of rich.

It said in this poem... the man.. Was buried without a coffin without a grave:

the scavengers performed the post-mortem
in the open mortuary
without sterilized knives
in front of the night club (46).

Society often shows no respect for the body of an ordinary person, who may barely warrant a grave. In contrast, the burial of a wealthy individual is marked by salutes, royal wreaths, and is carried out according to their wishes:

Well, his diary ... showed he wished
to be buried in a gold laden coffin
like a V.I.P.
under the jacaranda tree beside his palace
a shelter for his grave
and much beer for the funeral party (47).

The wreath and extravagant entertainment that go with the burial suggest a society of careless affluence and callous bourgeoisie, because in this same society one finds:

... school girls grumble under the black pot
sleep under torn mosquito net
and let lice lick our intestines (46-7).

The poet is deeply hurt and dismayed at the predicament and neglect of the common man and views with contempt the money oriented materialistic world in which money seems to be the supreme value. What is then expected from Angira is to attempt a social readjustment of value, breaking the conspiracy of silence to restore the dignity of the common man and voice his pathetic plight in the society. He also intends to safeguard the common man from the external onslaught by the foreign culture and economics and relieve him from the suffocating clutches of the parasitic religion. This explains the presence of poems dealing with culture and religion in *Silent Voices*. After having shown in the poems cited above the wretched lives of the slums and their plight, Angira states further that the imposing alien culture including religion in the towns is another aspect responsible for the plight of the common man. It is forced upon him and he being narrow minded and provincially oriented does not assert himself being inferior to those living in town who imbibe this culture and accepts the yoke of such repressive culture. The problem of cultural aspect now demands the attention of the poet. Angira is greatly interested to liberate the common man who has been thrown into exile by alien culture and religion. His 'If' seeks to justify African culture by showing its intrinsic value, the African philosophy of life. For example, it is thought that if...

a squirrel crosses my way

Or if:
while on a trip
then luck is mine
but when it's a cheetah
or wild cat that crosses there
I turn and go back.

I dream my relative dead
in midst of sweet slumbers
I wake in joy
knowing he is overfed
the previous night
and if I dream, I am dead
I rejoice for growing an inch (3).

These are the beliefs which Christians refer to as superstitions. As an embodiment of culture, the poet echoes the correctness of these beliefs as an element of the peoples philosophy of life. Besides beliefs there are taboos in the peoples way of life which he reminds to strengthen peoples moral values.

For example in *She Has Not Dreamt*, Angira brings back the Kenyan Luo custom of which requires that a widow does not remarry until she articulately affirms that she slept with her dead spouse through a dream.

But in this poem, woman rejects making such an assertion whether or not she could have dreamt about him as she considers this method of narrating her conjugal affairs outdated and outmoded. This woman is, therefore, representative of the modern Africans who despise their traditional norms due to external cultural influence. The yearning to revitalize African customs leads Angira to grieve over the disintegration of his ideal native African society in *The Siege of Ramogi*. In this and the *Uncion* poem, Angira blames alien religions including Christianity for the erosion of African traditional values such as what he expresses as '...that exiled me | for eloping | with the mother | of my children'.

His cultural society would possibly find little gravity in his conduct of eloping with his wife, whereas he found himself out casted by the laws of Christianity.

Angira prefers to be frank and sincere, and this frankness is evident even in his personal relationships, as reflected in the poem *Rebirth*, where he expresses his thoughts candidly:

I hear I have not been faithful to my ladyship
I told her she was getting wrinkled
I said her belly was getting too big without foetus
She was concealing spots on her thighs
with thick stockings
she was greedy to her children
she was wearing too many masks...
I divorced her for all these (82).

In this poem, the speaker discusses a woman who pretends in many ways to be fashionable, using "too many masks." However, the poet believes this pretension is unnecessary. As a result, he decides to end his relationship with her rather than tolerate such deceit. Similarly, the poet also parts ways with his Roman Catholic faith because he finds it rife with hypocrisy, particularly regarding the practice of celibacy. In the poem *The Fall*, the poet notes:

Wasn't that holy nun going unholy
at the night club
behind the chapel,
who said sex is unholy,
not the father of Jesus (46)

The nun, who claims that indulging in sex is unholy and is, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, unmarried, seeks sexual satisfaction at a nightclub. In another poem, *The Sendoff*, the poet contrasts the nun's obscenity with the hypocrisy of a priest who suggests that the Catholic faith is no purer than traditional religions. This perspective calls for a social reordering of values.

The purpose of *Silent Voices* is to inspire the docile masses to overcome their passivity. These masses are suppressed in a society governed by a negligent government and a callous bourgeoisie. The poet's critique of religion acknowledges its role in instilling a culture of subservience among the masses, which makes them docile and vulnerable to exploitation.

Cascading Action by the Majority

In *Silent Voices*, Angira delves into the underground world of the slums and the cramped living conditions of the working class. He investigates their lifestyle and compiles a report, which he presents in *Soft Corals*. In this latter collection, Angira appears to reiterate his observations from *Silent Voices*, but with a more critical perspective. This is particularly evident in his critique of complacent academic poets and superficial classroom revolutionaries. His assessment in *Soft Corals* uncovers even more alarming truths about society in *Cascades*.

Faced with the harsh realities of the present and the uncertainty of the future, Angira shifts his focus to the individual within society. He emphasizes this point by stating that:

Cascades are poems about man as an individual first, who yearns to be understood before he is lumped on the conveyor belt, the group on whose behalf philosophies are propounded, the guinea pig in the laboratory who seeks to be heard, at least before the experiments start².

In this collection, Angira examines the plight of humanity amid economic hardship and the challenges posed by advancing technology. He emphasizes the importance of restoring justice and equity in society, advocating for equal participation of ordinary individuals in the struggle for life. That is all he asks from contemporary society. He says,

I will not ask for anything more
Not a high price for the time,
Not a favour in your manager
Not a gift for a special day.
I'll not ask for anything great (24).

Angira understands the challenges faced by individuals like himself who seek justice and social order. In the poem *Concert for the Concord*, he reflects on poets who have been ostracized by society for their views against social vices. He remembers figures such as Michelangelo, Rimbaud, Vladimir, Pablo Neruda, and many others, including Okigbo says:

We too are outsiders
Floating in the absurd
Like him
We pass like Myths
O Sisphus (115).

Like the writers mentioned earlier, Angira and his fellow East African authors encountered similar challenges. While the poet is not entirely idealistic about the masses and social justice, he is aware that those he fights for may one day betray him. Nevertheless, this realization does not lead him to abandon the masses or their struggles. Instead, he focuses on addressing their weaknesses first in order to understand:

Where lies
Meaning in all these
Seemingly incidental
Built-in mechanism (7).

The exploration of the hidden power of silence in *Silent Voices* reappears in *Cascades*. Understanding the inherent mechanisms of individual behaviour can help the poet transform a meek and complacent person into a dynamic fighter ready to "tunnel through" their many selves in search of the truth.

This truth reveals that people are living in a regimented society dominated by technological advancements and increasing computerization. Angira expresses deep concern about the detrimental effects of technology on both the physical and mental strength of individuals. In today's world, technology has made people lazy, incompetent, and idle, as they increasingly rely on machines to perform tasks that they should undertake themselves. Consequently, individuals become redundant, and their lives lack courage and determination. As a result:

These days the happy
Are those
Who do nothing
They don't dwindle
To goblins ...
These days the safe
Are those
who say nothing
They don't disappear
Among the myriad teeth (48).

The harmful effects of technology are further illustrated in the poem *Newscast*. Even the radio which brings news to people carries its traumatic impact on the human conscience:

Listening to the newsreel today
Is like watching open wound
A painful conscription from which you emerge
Shaking like a leaf (56).

The radio brings horrifying news of death caused by locomotives and the television accentuates the horror by showing the pictures live. The result of this on individual's psyche is dehumanization and insensitivity to holocaust. That is why:

The caster's voice, indifferent
Marks his distant observation tower
Cinematically passing the pain
To the listener, the viewer' (55).

The modern man goes to bed with a gorged mind caused by the horrifying evening news on T.T., and:

As if that is not enough
Flashes the last decapitate of the mind
Late news: Two hundred executed
By firing squad - Imagine that,
Ten O'clock at night! (56)

The rate at which the camera and the video bring to us pictures and secrets about ourselves, distresses the poet in *Canto on the Oblong* where he laments about the nakedness of man, how his secrets are made public issues:

Our lives today,
Are void of solid lids
Open and simple
Like civilian aircraft hangers
Our secrets today
Are the privacy of the public,
What we classify as privately confidential,
Are the chorus at the rallies (93).

Technological inventions, ironically, are essential to modern life, and this fact further troubles the poet, as he struggles to understand and adapt to them. Even while flying in a plane, the poet feels uneasy because he doesn't know the exact altitude above sea level, this is:

Because the mind
Has never gained altitude,
Has since take-off
Been paying the bills (106).

His mind is fragmented by the drifting clouds and the thought of the high flight bill he has paid. In a situation where life is already so difficult, the burden of such an expensive flight bill is enough to break one's heart. The frustrations of life are expressed in the poem *A Note to Mother*.

Got a job to live on
Though would make money
And help you.
Married a wife
Though got companion for happiness,
Brought kids
Wishing for responsibility (94).

The poet's expectations remain unfulfilled due to the harsh realities of his time. For the average person, life lacks meaning, even though they make up the labour force and bring more children into the world to enhance the labour market. As a result, frustration drives them toward self-destructive behaviours, leading to a "slow withering of our lives." This slow deterioration represents a gradual death caused by drug use:

We take to pills
To lull us to sleep
Killing ourselves slowly (109).

Cascades is a collection of poems that addresses contemporary issues facing individuals today. The central thesis of this collection is that these situations require critical examination in order to restore justice and sanity in society. The most affected by these problems are ordinary people, who bear the burden of social injustice with stoic dignity. The poet aims to harness this stoicism and self-respect of the masses into a revolutionary force to restore social order and emancipate his generation.

To achieve this social transformation, Angira contrasts individual struggles with the broader political challenges in Africa. In the poem *The O.A.U. Melody*, the poet criticizes the African Union (O.A.U.) for its lack of political will and moral commitment to improving the conditions in Africa. Not only does the organization lack a unifying spirit—being described as "the most fragmented | Of the United Organizations"—but it also appears weak against international forces that threaten its existence. As a result, the O.A.U., which should be a source of strength for the African people and a point of pride for its leaders, is now likened to a "toothless dog."

... a victim
Whose judgement is delivered
At the kangaroo court (91).

The organization operates according to the whims and caprices of 'Mafia gangs' in America and the corrupt executives made up of African heads of state who obey the directives of political gangsters in the United States. As a result, the poem serves as an indictment of the ruling class in Africa for prioritizing the political and economic interests of America and other European countries over the well-being of the continent itself. In the poem "Extract from the Boulevard Liberatto," we encounter the plight of the common man:

between the fallen walls
Of the old cathedral [where]
Everything is a jumble
Littered with the irrelevant
and the shapeless (5)

The 'irrelevant' and the 'shapeless' politicians in Africa's socio-economic landscape are responsible for the 'fallen walls' of our history as well as the widespread poverty and chaotic conditions faced by the underprivileged. What is crucial now is for the common person to transform their latent energy as an underprivileged individual into a revolutionary force, enabling them to liberate themselves from these political vampires and economic exploiters.

III. Conclusion

Angira's poetry may be viewed as populist due to its focus on the evident issues facing society. However, it is important to note that, beyond this populist appeal, the truths expressed in his work are significant. The strength of his poetry lies in the wit and sarcasm he employs to convey his themes. His imagery is often simple yet striking, as it reveals surprising insights to the reader. Compared to his contemporaries, Angira demonstrates greater skill in the use of imagery and language. He avoids overwhelming his poetry with obscure images and attempts at sophisticated artistry, despite occasionally referencing older English poets. Even when he expresses admiration for Christopher Okigbo's writing, he does not adopt Okigbo's mystical and allegorical style (Goodwin 1984:222). In contrast, Tanure Ojaide argues that Angira's work, particularly *Cascades*, is infused with Okigbo's wordplay and rhythmic movement (1996:60). Ultimately, Angira's poems convey a powerful message about the contemporary African experience and the betrayal of the hopes of the continent's suffering masses by their leaders (Senanu and Vincent 1988:302). This also reflects Angira's quest for a social order that serves the needs of the neglected ordinary citizens of Kenya and the broader African continent.

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