

## Interview

## 'Condition Of Creatures Inspires My Writing In

**Professor Joseph Ushie is an academic of repute whose poetry gives the usual philosophical 'isms' a new definition. In this interview with ANOTE AJELUOROU, Ushie takes on the many twists and turns of Nigeria's literary and cultural landscape against the political ferment, and why a project like The Nigeria Prize for Literature instituted by the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) is most welcome intervention worthy of emulation**

**Congratulations on making the long list of The Nigeria Prize for Literature. How does it feel coming this far out of over 250 poets?**

**T**HANK you very much. Before I say how I feel, let me use this opportunity to commend, once more, the members of the management of the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) who initiated this great vision of establishing this highly prestigious literary prize for Nigerian literature, and also their successors who have sustained and continued to improve on the vision. You can't appreciate this noble choice of a Corporate Social Responsibility project fully unless you understand the environment in which the Prize has been established. Our continent, Africa, is cursed with leaders most of who are competitively hostile to ideas and knowledge and mistake even honest criticism for a coup about to oust them from their political offices. Literature and other forms of cultural production are usually veritable media for the interrogation of the competitively failed political leadership in Africa, and the leaders know this. To bring the point home, let me refer to a quotation in one of my essays in which I also quote from some other source: "It is this awareness of the strength of literature to create awareness and possibly mobilize political actions among the oppressed that has earned the African men and women of letters the phenomenal hostility of the African neocolonial dictator, as evident in the advice given Nigeria's former President, Olusegun Obasanjo, by a one-time Guinean President, Sekou Toure:

Sekou Touré said to Obasanjo, 'I have such people (as Fela Anikulapo Kuti) in my country, but long ago I realized that they are very dangerous opponents. So, I became patron of all the artists, for the simple reason that they have a talent that no government has. In one song, he can destroy years of my work' (Shaxson, 2008, 17).

The above scenario underlies the existence today of a uniquely African genre of writing known as Prison Writing, which describes the accounts of African intellectuals, particularly writers and journalists, who had been imprisoned, tortured, exiled, killed, or had their works burnt or banned, etc. This gives you a clear picture of why the vision of the NLNG to establish and run this important Nigerian Literature Prize as a part of the organization's Corporate Social Responsibility is everlastingly praiseworthy.

Now to your question. Naturally, it feels good and somewhat reassures that one isn't doing too badly as a writer. But as I've always maintained, winning or not winning prizes for one's writing, for a serious writer, is just a side wind which shouldn't become the main motivation for writing. But, as I had said at the outset, it encourages especially given the high profile of Nigerian literary writing not only in Africa but in the world today. To win any literary prize in Nigeria therefore translates into being one of the best on the

African continent as a whole.

**It seems this is your first time entering for the prize. What are your expectations?**

Yes, this is the first time I've submitted my work for this particular competition. Of course, like any competitor especially whose work has come this far, my expectations should be quite high considering that this same collection, *Yawns and Belches*, was the winner of the 2019 ANA/Shehu Sani Poetry Prize. It is actually those who read it after it won the ANA/Shehu Sani prize that insisted I must enter it for this other outing. So, all the confidence and expectations I have, had been bestowed on me by those readers and critics, including some of those who had served as judges in the earlier outing.

**What's the thematic concern of your collection, *Yawns and Belches*? How much of current socio-political realities does it address?**

I'm sorry to say this question is almost unanswerable by me. Or, perhaps, I should say I cannot answer it satisfactorily for the reasons that writing, for me, is like one emptying excess emotions or compassion onto a page. Once that is done, I leave it to the experts, that is, the readers and the critics, to discern the nature of the emotions or the compassion. But what I do know is that much, if not all, of my writing is derived from my conviction or thoughts about life and the world as articulated in one simple poem in my earlier collection, *Lambs at the Shrine* (2005).

The title of the poem is "isms": *Ask me not/ whether I'm*

*for the left or/ for the right/ Because I need/ neither left nor/ right to know/ when my neighbour/ is hungry/ ill or naked/ Before the -isms came, I was human.*

As this poem conveys, what inspires or motivates my writing is the condition of fellow creatures - animate/inanimate, human/non-human - that make up the totality of our world. This is the thrust of much of my writing, both in the scholarly and creative realms. The title of *Yawns and Belches*, for instance, reflects this concern. It reflects the painful dichotomy of society - not necessarily along the routinely proclaimed lines of religion and region of origin - but according to those who are feeding fat from the commonwealth and belching, on the one hand, and those starving amidst plenty and are, hence, yawning, on the other. Belching stands for overfeeding while yawning symbolizes hunger or starvation.

This division manifests in a million different ways in the society, and this is, in sum, what you find also in this collection. It shows up in the violence of the strong on the weak in the family; in the oppression of the minorities by the majorities; in the manipulation of the ordinary citizens by the elite; in

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unarmed by the armed members of society; in the weaponization of wealth and power against the poor and powerless; and in the destruction of the silent, helpless, speechless non-human world of flora and fauna by human agency. This is the general thrust of the collection, but, as I had said earlier, the reader has a greater responsibility of establishing more precisely what each poem in the volume is focusing on than I can do.

**You're among a strong cast of poets vying for the USD\$100,000 The Nigeria Prize for Literature. How does this make you feel about your work? What's your writing process and how do you manage it with your primary job as a lecturer?**

This is a composite question some of which parts are more easily answerable than others. I think the question of my feelings about the success so far of this work in this competition was tangentially broached earlier. Yes, the prize money can stir up the spirit somehow, but the real essence of winning is beyond the cash. For me, the real essence is that winning would assure me that both the style and concerns of my writing are on the right tracks, and that I should, hence, only ramp up my seriousness.

The cash, no doubt, is an attraction, but no matter how much it appears to be, it can be spent sooner than later, but not so the output in terms of further writing that the victory would engender, which would certainly outlive me.

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ing process can be complex. As I hinted at earlier, it derives mainly from the material environment, much of the time in the form of an itch. That is, you encounter a certain given situation which touches your heart in the form of severe pain, ecstasy or sorrow, and it ignites the inner you to respond. That itch is like a cough which can hardly be suppressed. So, whether I'm in the class teaching, in the exam halls invigilating, in the church, with friends or family, celebrating or mourning, on the street watching a fight over one hundred naira, watching news on the TV, some deep memory, I try to scratch the itching spot, and in doing so, I plant a seed for a poem which I'll keep developing over a period of time.

Perhaps that is why my poems seem to be always connected to the realities of our land. It follows that it is always the force of the itch that compels me to buy out the time from my routine job as a teacher to write in spite of the huge responsibilities and tasks before me at every given moment. I am also a fanatic of African music, particularly of the classical Congolese, East African, Southern African and West African music. Sometimes I begin with the rhythm of a favourite track and begin to fill in my own words even when I don't understand the language of the song. That way, the emerging poem would normally have a very balanced cadence. In other words, my poems write themselves in collaboration with the environment while I serve mainly as the midwife.

Specifically in relation to my work, for instance, now that I am the Dean of my Faculty, it has to be a matter of ascetic self-discipline and loyalty to the itch whenever it surfaces. Indeed, it's just a matter of ordering one's priorities, too. The courses I teach and, sometimes, my interactions with the students also yield verses. Inasmuch as the job takes much of my time, there are also ways in which I harvest the zest to write from it, sometimes.

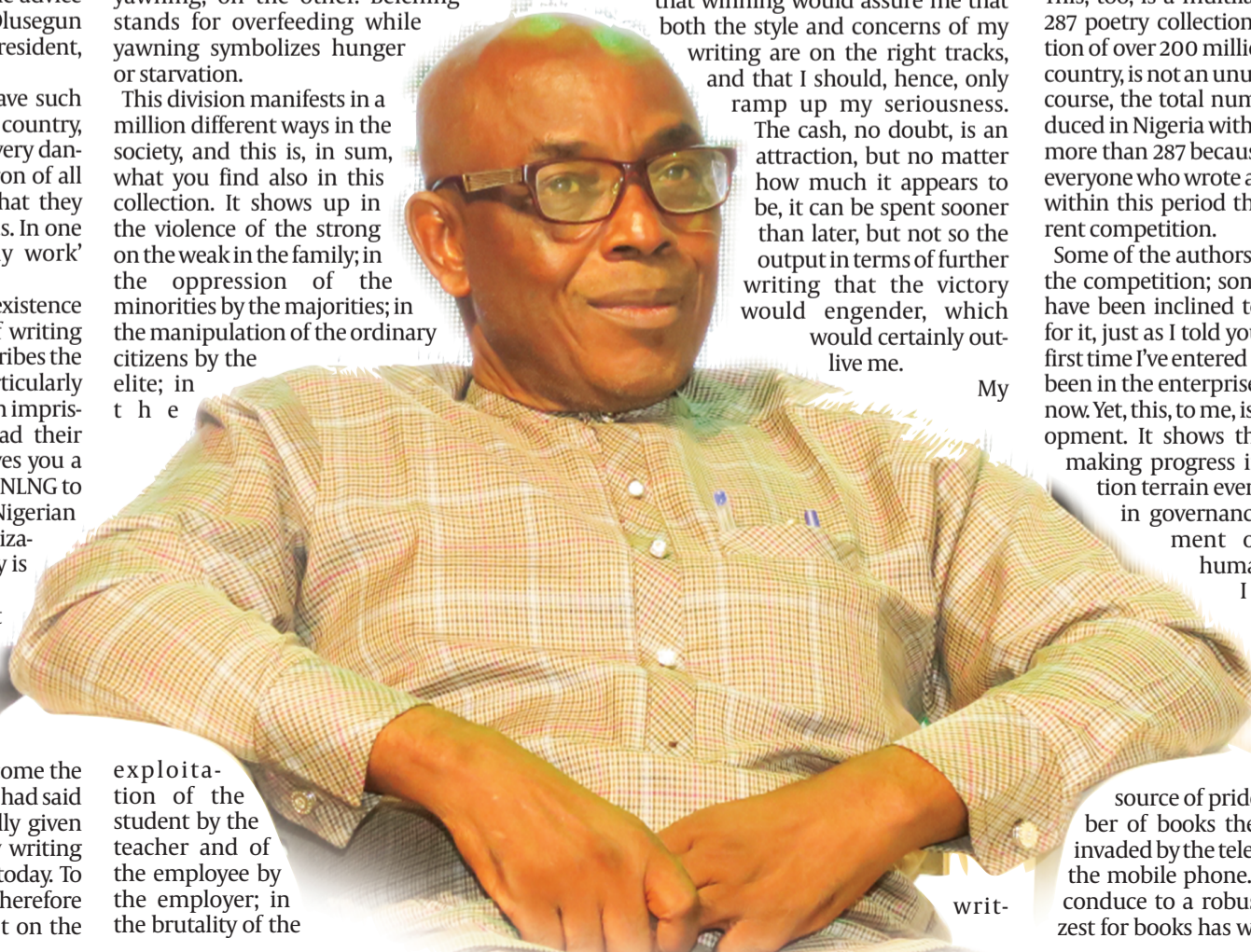
**Over 250 poetry collections in a span of four years in a country where reading habit is said to be low, with public universities shut for almost seven months. Who exactly are these poets writing for? How does this poetic effusion help the reading anomaly?**

This, too, is a multilayered question. Firstly, 287 poetry collections from a total population of over 200 million, as we are told of our country, is not an unusually large number. Of course, the total number of collections produced in Nigeria within this period would be more than 287 because it couldn't have been everyone who wrote a poetry book in Nigeria within this period that entered for the current competition.

Some of the authors may not have heard of the competition; some who heard may not have been inclined to entering their works for it, just as I told you earlier that this is the first time I've entered for it despite my having been in the enterprise for over three decades now. Yet, this, to me, is a heartwarming development. It shows that Nigeria is, at least, making progress in the cultural production terrain even as the nation is failing in governance and in the management of her material and human resources.

I agree that the inclination to reading is very low among most Nigerians. The reading culture, as we had it in the past when young ones considered it a

source of pride to showcase the number of books they have read has been invaded by the television, the Internet and the mobile phone. This condition cannot conduce to a robust reading culture. The zest for books has waned. I remember how



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# The Scholarly And Creative Realms'

much I had rushed to buy a book by my former lecturer, Rev Sister Eileen Sweeney. It wasn't that I had read the book and found it very interesting; I had never read it, but it was just the joy and the pride that I could show to the world a book by my own lecturer that propelled me to rush for a copy. These days, some lecturers have to go the extra mile, sometimes, indecently coercing their students to buy their books, what I often refer to as making a captive market of one's students. This is the sad situation.

Yet, the decline of interest in reading is relative and not absolute because even now we still have a few avid readers. I am a member of the popular Uyo Book Club founded and run by Dr Udemé Nana under the uncommon patronage of Dr Ekong Sampson. It's always a spectacle when the members, mostly our younger ones, meet. They read competitively and review books most wonderfully. It would, therefore, be unfair to these ones and others elsewhere to make a general statement that Nigerians aren't reading, which would unjustifiably include them. Indeed, under the auspices of Dr Nana, Dr Ekong Sampson and Hon Tony Abom Esuh, there's a quiet pro-reading revolution taking place in Akwa Ibom State, with the establishment of Reading Clubs in very many Local Councils of the state within a very short time.

Yes, it is so very painful to see how unconcerned our government can be about the education of the children of ordinary Nigerians. I have to streamline the victims because the men and women in government who have most callously and heartlessly kept these young ones at home for seven months now (beginning from February 14, 2022 till date, September 11, 2022) actually do know the value of education and understand its indispensability as a factor in the development of society.

That is why they spend millions of stolen money in funding the education of their own children and wards either in the expensive private universities here, or in universities abroad, built and properly nourished by those who are more altruistic about the growth of their countries. But inasmuch as this situation is most regrettable, it has somewhat helped to separate the chaff from the grain among our younger ones. The grain take to learning a trade, registering as members of book clubs and participating vigorously in the reading activities of the clubs, or engaging in other such activities that could enhance their positive development. These skills serendipitously could become handy for the young ones on leaving school. The chaff among the younger ones are those who simply take to crime and other vices, blaming their choices on helplessness. It follows that the strike's effect on reading may not be total or absolute but relative.

On the question of whom we are writing for since the students are at home because of the current strike, do understand that serious books are not written for a short season but for all time. That is why William Shakespeare's books, the scriptures of the various faiths and other world classics remain fresh and relevant today even as the material conditions of the societies in which the great works were produced are different or have changed over the seasons. But the great books always defy changes of time and clime. Indeed, rather than such books fading or becoming victims of change and time, they remain as testimonies to the material world in which they were produced. Thus, the material realities of the environments can often be discerned partly through reading how the realities were captured in the works of creative imagination.

On these bases, therefore, it is quite in order that Nigerians should be churning out works of cultural production even now in spite of the harsh realities of the day, in spite of the strikes and the fact that students are home,

and in spite of the poor reading habit. In the end, it is from these works of art that the coming generations will discern the kind of environment and times we had lived in. The works are thus fossils of our civilization or of our lack of it. They are living witnesses for tomorrow.

**You are among three senior university teachers on the long list. What does this mean for students of English and Literature Studies? How much of the literary works of these lecturers are literature students exposed to compared to older lecturers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, JP Clark? Do you see a gap in terms of relevance to socio-cultural and political realities?**

Firstly, it is healthy to have three senior university teachers on the long list. This means that Nigerian lecturers are actually walking the talk; in other words they are actively practising what they are teaching. A little elucidation might help here. It is not all teachers of literature that are also into creative writing; neither is it only university teachers of literature that can be into the art. Some of the finest critics and non-teachers of literature are not also into creative writing. This is why I feel good that we do have up to this number of my colleagues whose creative writing output has attained this level among the 287 entries. Even for our students of English and literature, it is a good development. However, sadly, unlike the situation with our forerunners such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, JP Clark and others of that generation, our own works are grossly under-exposed largely because of the inclement publishing climate and the consequent near absence of a healthy circulation network.

Also, the relatively poor reading culture often combined with the acute pecuniary challenges of the students do reduce patronage of our works compared to what had obtained in our time when the books were always available begging to be bought, and we had more access to money as students than these poor, criminally neglected and financially anemic coterie of students today.

Do I see a gap in terms of relevance to socio-cultural and political realities? The answer is not holistically true. I see a gap in the progressive disappearance of features or elements of the rich indigenous African culture from the works of this generation compared to what I find in the works of the older generation. This

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At the moment, the social, economic and political climate of the country is fertile for works of creative imagination. The empires of hunger reigning in our tummies, the human life falling with every passing minute like dead leaves from a blighted tree, the turning of our highways and high seas into hunting grounds by bandits and herdsmen and Boko Haram and insurgents and the militia in the Southeast and Niger Delta, the deadly hammer on university education by those to whom the sector is entrusted, the stark absence of health facilities and, on the contrary, the competitive looting of the treasury by politicians and government officials are all manure for the creative writing enterprise in our land today. These hellish conditions have become the low-hanging fruits of imagery for our writing today.  
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is because of the progressive deracination of many an African child who is getting disconnected from his mother tongue with all its wealth of proverbs, idioms, images, myths, folktales, songs, incantations and festivals.

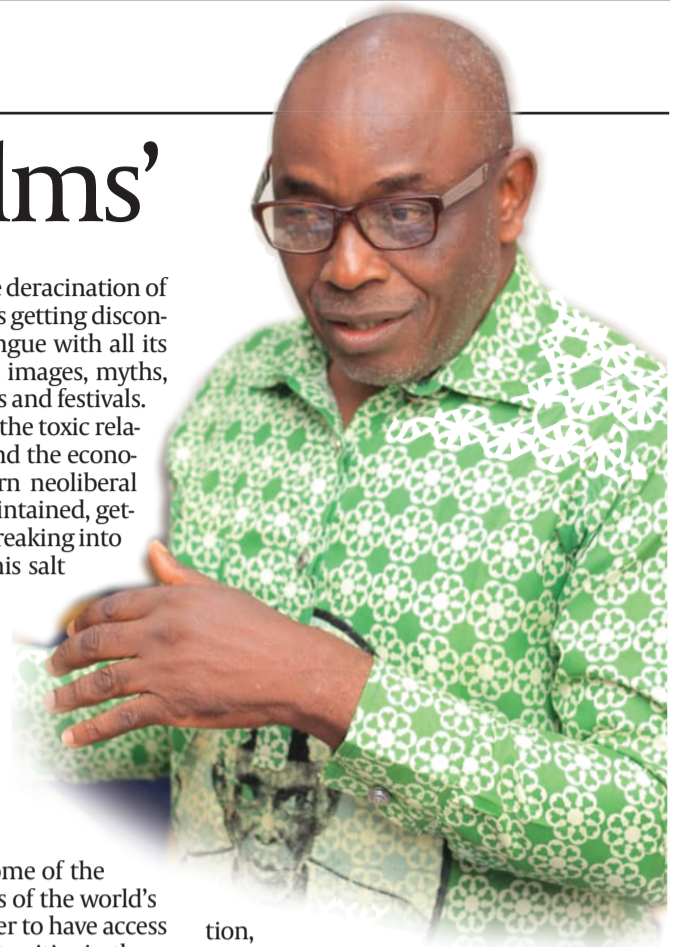
This is largely as a result of the toxic relationship between culture and the economy especially in the modern neoliberal setting. As I have always maintained, getting into a language is like breaking into a house. No robber worth his salt would labour at a door that opens into emptiness. But where the rogue is sure his target house has a cache of gold and silver and diamond, the rogue would take any risk to break into such a house. That is why our young ones today would labour at the cultural and linguistic doors of some of the languages spoken by natives of the world's advanced economies in order to have access to the jobs and other opportunities in these economies, almost always ignoring their own mother tongue whose economy offers them nothing but misery under the yoke of the blind and cerebrally sterile African tyrant.

This seems to me the ugly reality regarding the gradual disappearance of relics of our oral heritage from much of our modern writing. Perhaps more than anything else, Africa urgently needs a cultural rebirth as this is just what would bring back some order and our waning enviable pre-colonial value system.

However, the relative absence of these features from our contemporary literature does not entail that the younger writers' works are now disconnected from the socio-cultural and political realities of the day, especially the social component of the hyphenated term. In their own modern lingo, the contemporary Nigerian and African poet or writer remains enclitically committed to the social and political realities of the day, just as his forerunner did. Indeed, I would say that the very huge number of writers now compared to what we had in the days gone by is triggered largely by the prompting to react creatively to these absurdities in our social and political life. Many of the works therefore confront the disappearance of a healthy value system from the polity whereby sudden wealth and greed have ousted the old virtues of success coming only through hard possibly work garnished with prayers. Now, it is prayers and more prayers garnished with only sprinkles of hard work while our thoughts unceasingly await miracles. Like the generations before them, the younger writers' works actually do interrogate these many hues of our social and political vices as the material realities of their time and clime. As I said somewhere recently in an answer to a question, you cannot live in hell and write with authority and accuracy about Paradise or Heaven. So, it hasn't happened that our younger writers should deviate from writing about these disquieting social and political issues which the older generations had confronted in their own works.

**Three other poets on the longlist can be described as veterans having appeared at this stage and beyond before but haven't won it. Do you feel intimidated by such records?**

I certainly respect the achievements of all the writers who have appeared on the long list, and I am proud of them, both the younger ones and the veterans; but I am not intimidated. I have no reason to feel intimidated. I had published my first collection of poems in 1992. If I had been inclined to presenting my works for competitions, I would have been old at it, too. For instance, most of the times I presented my works for competi-



tion, they had not fared badly. *Eclipse in Rwanda* had received the Honourable Mention even when it was entered in manuscript form, *Hillsongs* (2000) was the runner-up for the ANA/Cadbury Prize in 1996 or so, and *Yawns and Belches* had won the ANA/Shehu Sani Poetry prize for 2019. Besides, some of my single poems had won global/international prizes, and my poetry has thus far been translated into Finnish, Italian, German and Spanish, and anthologized in books around the world including my readings in many places in and outside our shores, too. Besides, I had been a judge of ANA literary prizes at the national level and one of ten juries in a global competition in which there were only two African judges with me as the only Nigerian. The other African judge was the Ugandan poet, Susan Nalugwa Kiguli. Truly, I haven't really been inclined to presenting my works for competitions. *Yawns and Belches* may still not have been featured in the 2019 ANA/Shehu Sani Prize if one veteran of ANA had not read it and literally picked copies and entered it for the competition. It won. And it was mainly those who read it after that outing that insisted I should submit it for this competition, and one of them came to the house to pick the copies and physically took them to Port Harcourt. Given this background, it should be clear that not having entered for the competition is not out of a feeling of fear or intimidation. My humble experience and relatively long journey both as a writer and as a linguistic stylistics scholar would make such intimidation a waste since it isn't called for in my circumstances in this competition.

**What would you say is the state of creative writing in the country? Is it healthy enough? And how has it matched the socio-political space in terms of defining it for the understanding of future generations?**

I think the state of creative writing in Nigeria is quite healthy in spite of the dominance of negative things in the land. I am in the position to know because I think I was the very first scholar to do a full-length study of the poetry of this generation. That was the thrust of my doctoral thesis at the University of Ibadan in the late 1990s. When I read the works from the generation today, I notice that some of the infractions I had observed in my thesis have disappeared or have been minimized, though by that time most of even some of the big names today had yet only published in anthologies rather than having their own full collections of poems. Given that we cannot have all the works of a generation being on the same level of perfection or sophistication, I think the number of the really excellent ones has increased and with prospects for further improvement.

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