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## From tragedy to triumph: a critique of selected poems in Idris Amali's *Generals without War*

**Abstract:** This critical analysis tagged *From Tragedy to Triumph: A Critique of selected Poems in Idris Amali's "Generals without War"* is best understood in the context of Nigerian literary history. Barely five years after independence from Britain, a few soldiers from the Nigerian army headed by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu staged the January 15, 1966 coup. Since then, it was a tale of one military regime toppling the other. The democratic government of President Shehu Shagari was inaugurated on October 1, 1989 only for General Muhamadu Buhari to displace him in the December 31, 1983 military putsch. General Babangida toppled Buhari and later conducted an election in 1993. Moshood Abiola won a landslide victory, but Babangida aborted the process and installed the puppet civilian regime of Ernest Shonekan. General Sani Abacha displaced him after three months and later died in June 1998. General Abdulsalam became the new ruler and purposefully restored democratic rule in October 1999. On the whole, each military regime that displaced its predecessor claimed a "Messianic" role of coming to salvage the nation from ruin, restoring order and setting Nigeria on the right course of economic prosperity, peace and progress. Yet with a few notable exceptions, most of the military regimes plundered the nation, were despotic, lacking in discipline, and entrenched a culture of impunity that is at the centre of corruption in Nigeria today. Thus, the military liberators proved to be an affectation of who they actually claimed to be. It is in this context of dictatorship and maladministration that Idris Amali's poems were written.

**Keywords:** Nigerian literary history, dictatorship and maladministration, Idris Amali, *Generals without War*.

### Introduction

Poetry as a literary art form has its own distinctive features. Some of these components of poetic expression include rhyme, form, sound, metre and rhythm. Furthermore, poetry has a tight structure and is written in verse (or

stanzas, if set to music). This creative literary genre is enriched with a vast array of images, symbols and a variety of literary leitmotifs, allusions, and repetition, among other elements of technique. In recent times, and especially in the Third World, many poets prefer using the free verse style devoid of conventional rhyming schemes, and some other formal features.

The rationale for this artistic deportment is that a person in distressful agony does not have time for such luxurious contemplation and leisure to write a poem such as Jane Taylor's (1783–1824), popular nursery rhyme: "Twinkle, twinkle little star, / How I wonder what you are; / Up above the world so high, / Like a diamond in the sky." Indeed, the reality of life in many developing countries under tyrannical rulers is such that the poet, articulating the sensibilities and plight of his beleaguered compatriots, is left with hardly any choice than to lament and denounce the miseries of the nation. This is because of the dashed hopes and betrayed expectations which were the dreams of many nationalists at the threshold of independence. The given social background readily leads us logically to an analysis of specific poems that lend credence and concrete substance to the above assertion, as demonstrated in the selected poems of Idris Amali.<sup>1</sup> While most of the poems lament the tragedy of a nation, an affirmative tone of triumph is achieved at the end.

## Analysis of Specific Poems

In analysing the twelve (12) poems selected for this study, they are categorized into five (5) groups based on their themes and related contents. The

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<sup>1</sup> Idris Amali was born to the family of Ali Onche Amali in the 1950s in Upu village of Otukpo in Benue, Nigeria. He attended St. Andrews and Wesley Primary schools in Upu-Icho in Otukpo. Then he proceeded to Bristow Secondary school, Gboko (1968-1969) and Wesley High School, Otukpo (1970–72). After his secondary education, Idris Amali worked in Ibadan, translating materials from Idoma to English for Professor R.G. Armstrong of the institute of African Studies. He then went to the University of Jos (1975–1979), and worked with the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). In late 1980 he was appointed a Graduate Assistant at the University of Maiduguri. He rose through the ranks and became a Professor of Oral Literature in 2000. His administrative experiences are as follows: he became Head of Department of English (1996–2002), Dean of the Faculty of Arts (2004–2008), and Director of Academic Planning (2010–2012). He later relocated to the Federal University, Lafia in 2013 where he was appointed Director of Academic Planning (2013–2015), and Director of General Studies (2015–2017). Professor Idris Amali has published widely in local and international journals, and has served variously as member or Chairman of the Nigerian Universities Commission accreditation team to different universities. He has assessed many academics to the ranks of Associate professor or full Professor. He has edited and published many other works, including his celebrated volume of poetry titled *Generals without War*, which is the immediate text of discourse in this essay.

first set, consisting of two poems have both literal and figurative layers of meaning. Thus, category (i) *The rain has not come* and *The new broom* can be read as allegories about military rule. The second (ii) group of poems consists of direct indictment of failed military rule and its consequences. In this class are the following five poems: *Generals without war*, *The generals*, *Don't you see*, *Contractor generals and field-marsals*, and *walking corpse*. The third (iii) group focuses on the theme of social class disparity between the rich and the poor. The poems in this category are *Our neighbours* and *Summit*. The fourth (iv) group centres on the poem, *Our surgeon*. Its main theme is on a professionally competent but incapacitated professional. He is pathetically ineffectual because the necessary medical consumables and operational tools of his occupation are virtually non-existent. The tone of triumph is, however, evident in the fifth (v) set of poems, titled *A week of broken pains* and *Will*.

The first category of poems with both literal and metaphorical layers of meaning in the collection, *Generals without War* is titled, *The rain has not come* (p. 11). While the poem focuses on a literal situation of drought in a Sahel and semi-desert environment and the tragic toll such aridity has inflicted on mankind, as well as the flora and fauna, the poem equally has a metaphorical layer of meaning. At the literal level, the 25-line poem, consisting of five verses, provides ample ocular evidence that life in the given drought-infested social setting is absolutely unbearable. This claim is corroborated by ample visual images of death and decay which confront our sight. We see portrayed in graphic imagery carcasses of dead camels and their bones lying on sand dunes over which blows the hot, dry desert wind, and the parched vegetation with its cracked and dry muddy surface around the oases. Even where we see the little quantity of water remaining around the many oases, symbolizing hope, the water is not pure or fresh for anyone to drink. On the contrary, swarms of flies besiege the area feasting on dead organic materials. The sustained repetition of the phrase, "The rain has not come" at the beginning of the first four verses, and its being stated as a rhetorical question in verse five, all go to emphasize the intensity of the drought, as well as the hopelessness of survival in such a harsh and inhospitable social milieu.

At the figurative layer of literary interpretation the rain, symbolizing a refreshing life sustainer, points to the failed leadership model that has betrayed the aspirations of the citizenry of the land, whereby "Swarms of flies besiege / Our oases of hope." Furthermore, even when officially constituted committees go to proffer solutions to the sterile environment, these people turn out to be opportunists who are simply embarking on programmes of advancing their own selfish interests. That is why they are described in derogatory and bestial imagery as "Brutes, leeches and heroes of unfought wars / Parading as members / Of anti-desert and flood committees." The al-

lusion to soldier ants combined with “Heroes of unfought wars,” is a blunt indictment of Nigerian soldiers who have largely misgoverned the nation for decades, and the overt criticism of them provides the overall title for this collection of poems being analysed. The assertion, “Soldier ants / Blossom into baobab size” further accentuates the claim that these soldiers in government are mainly within the corridors of power for self-aggrandisement, hence the direct reference to their sudden grotesque and enlarged physical sizes.

Along with civilian politicians, these soldiers in politics constitute a privileged class of traitors and betrayers of the people’s hopes, thus subverting the people’s yearnings for a better future. Yet these freebooters have insulated themselves in a world of luxury and privilege, while being oblivious of the sufferings and anguish of the impoverished teeming masses. Indeed, they are motivated by self-interest as the “Only select reeds / [that are] nurtured in our desert of hostile faces”. In essence, this desolate physical landscape is allegorical of contemporary Nigeria as a failed state because of corruption and leadership incompetence. It is then that the poet concludes by asserting that the role of the military-cum-politicians within the nation is chiefly predatory, rather than serving the people and offering welfare provision to the generality of the citizenry.

The poem tagged *The new broom* (p. 25) is a satire laced with sarcasm against an emergent new military regime that was initially highly esteemed and heralded with fanfare. From the given content and its attendant allusions, it becomes clear that the regime in question happens to be that of General Ibrahim Babangida, spanning August 1985 to 1993. No sooner has the new régime held the reins of power than its lapses begin to manifest themselves. This is the reason behind the rhetorical question: “Show me the one who says new brooms / sweep more than the aged? / Our new brooms are too tender to sweep / Our debris of mounting heights”. In the given context, the repeated idea of the new broom becomes a mockery of the concept. That is why one literary critic has referred to the administration rather tersely as “Long on promises and paperwork, but pathetically short on performance and progress.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when it comes to actual performance on the job, what we have is a charade of our expectations. Indeed, the “New broom they ventured has arrived: / to sweep clean debris / on our ways / Construct boulevards to our bedrooms / (where not more than a soul shall walk the way) / Erect hospitals every kilometre / (Where the lizards shall mate and make a home) / Construct new schools in every hamlet / (Where a teacher mans thirty classes) / Import millions of gadgets / (Where the corrosive tropical rains and suns / Shall be

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<sup>2</sup> Femi Ojo-Ade, *Ken saro-Wiwa: A Bio-Critical Study* (New York: Africana Legacy Press, 1999), xviii.

site engineers to assemble parts).” The implied sarcasm and irony in the quoted lines are glaringly discernible to the morally sensitive reader.

If there is insufficient corroborative evidence that the whole poem is an overt indictment of the Babangida regime, verse three provides ocular proof to substantiate the claim. The specifics are as follows: “From his soiled stool / the people’s general proclaims orders: / Only four seeds / A man’s long life shall sprout / (Where we hang our manhood and watch / Our dear ones ripe unvisited/as cuckolding shall be our doom).” Here, the metaphorised four seeds is an allusion to Babangida’s encouragement of each family to maintain a fixed number of four children. The authorial indictment of the administration implied in the morality of the decision is the dissolute moral decline that will be witnessed in the society. Without a doubt, the concluding verse underscores the morality of the poem and categorically brands the regime as evil, consigning it to hell when it states as follows: “My friends! / my chant is no chant of the trembling heart / but a chant that takes its owner to where / Those you call evils dwell.”

The second category of poems with themes that are a direct indictment of failed military regimes and the attendant consequences are the following five poems. The poem, *Generals without war* (pp. 14, 15), which forms the eponymous title of the book, is loaded with meaning. Beyond the title of the poem is the terse pictographic representation of the given message of the poem on the cover page. There, a gigantic soldier’s leg wearing a boot is depicted crushing a group of miniaturized people, akin to the Lilliputians in Jonathan Swift’s novel, *Gulliver’s Travels*. These people are emblematic of the pauperized and neglected masses of the nation who are ruled by insensitive despots.

Outside the picturesque coded message of the given poem on the cover page is the textual content of the poem itself. Here, the delineation and indictment of the failings of the ruling military elite are further enumerated without mincing words. Structurally, the nine-verse poem is divided into four broad segments. The first two verses stigmatize the military hierarchy for failing to live up to expectations. They are presented as mere desk soldiers who wear well-starched ceremonial uniforms decorated with medals, even though they have prosecuted no war, except to convert their official roles as defenders of the people and protectors of the nation’s territorial integrity, to that of pillaging the resources of the land and intimidating unarmed civilians.

This contradictory outlook of the Nigerian generals is captured in images of unrealized expectations, juxtaposed with their highly decorated and impressive uniforms, even though they are depicted as professionally incompetent, theoretical and ineffectual. Verse two goes further to prove that the

military high officials governing the nation have equally perverted their calling and job description. While it is a well-known fact that “No leopard feeds upon the flesh in cold”, the Nigerian generals, also portrayed in images of eagles, prosecute “Home-made wars... Even upon the dead and dying”.

The second section of the poem covers verses three to five. Here, the charges levelled against the generals in authority are expressed in rhetorical questions: “Where is the era.... Where is the face of grim time... Where is the dawn of the bloody sun...?” The point of emphasis in all three verses has to do with the good old days when soldiers, cast in the imagery of “Leopards [that] faced leopards”, prosecuted wars against foreign aggressors, daring death as gallant warriors in defence of their own people. In the given raw armed confrontation of those heroic times, the warriors of the past era deployed charms and other supernatural means to win battles. That was the time when soldiers fought against external malevolent troops in order to liberate their own people from oppression and tyranny.

The third main segment of the poem, captured in verses six to eight, deals with events of the moment. The given verses further sustain the tragic tone of the entire poem. The appeal here is to the reader’s sense of sight, and the evident contrast between expectation and failed hopes that are expressed in graphic imagery. The tragic situation is cast in repeated statements as follows: “See now my brothers what greed has done... See now my sisters / what the rusty beaks and claws have done... And daily / these eagles of marshal dreams...” The main charges against the military officers at the highest echelons of society indulging in politics have to do with the monumental failure and social disorientation that they have introduced in the art of governance.

Their very sleek and bloated outlook occasioned by luxurious and privileged living make “These generals shapeless as the baobab / in glittering faces fail the obstacle test”. Yet these ineffectual officers have the temerity to “Discharge the underfed privates / who defect from the raging battles of death”. These same generals who should be identified with boldness and courage to sacrificially serve the national good have, shamelessly, subverted these ideals. On the whole, the generals are known largely for giving themselves undeserved accelerated promotion in a context of “unseen wars”. The ultimate resultant effect is the rapid increase in the number of generals “Like mushrooms wither / at the peak of noon or doom.”

The fourth and last segment of the poem is the last verse, which serves as a conclusion about the sorry involvement of the generals in the political life of the nation. Here, the narrator calls on his own very young son to stand as a witness, observing the travesty of standards and justice in the land. Using a caustic ironic tone, the narrator portrays an unlikely scenario whereby

“Eagles de-feather and elephants retreat.” Knowing that the eagle and the elephant dominate all other creatures in the sky and the jungle respectively, it is virtually impossible for these creatures to cede ground for other creatures to take over. Indeed, it is in this context of an ironic role reversal that the narrator deploys a hyperbole to accentuate the son’s mood of disbelief at the abysmal failure of this political class to serve their own people acceptably. That is why the boy’s “Streams of stubborn tears / erode granite boulders down the valleys of shame / as his gaits crushed into fragile dust / thousands of hard earth-worm casts / which the cannon wheels could not crush.” By reversing roles and ensuring that the child succeeds where adults have failed woefully, the satirical message of indictment against the military for their involvement in politics is obvious. Soldiers should focus on their traditionally assigned role of defending and securing the nation rather than dabbling into governance for pecuniary reasons and making a mess of it.

It also needs to be noted for the record that Idris Amali’s indictment of the military is not a new issue. Wole Soyinka’s play, *The Metamorphosis of Brother Jero* (1966) equally criticizes the ruling Nigerian soldiers for granting accelerated promotion to military officers, among other reasons for which he satirized Nigerian rulers of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, just before the book could go into circulation, Soyinka was already airborne as he jetted out of the country for fear of arrest. Indeed, the same military government, at one time, held him in detention without trial for his one-man demonstration against the then ongoing crises in the nation that later culminated into the Nigerian civil war. The given one-man protest saw Soyinka taking a pistol and holding a radio station operator hostage for some minutes. In the case of the outspoken Umaru Dikko of the Shagari presidential era, he cynically branded the December 31, 1983 to 1985 regime of General Muhammadu Buhari as one of “Coup-star generals”; thereby inferring that these officers had neither intellectual ability to pass examinations or any capacity to govern. Indeed, the claim is that it is only by toppling democratically elected politicians that such men could award themselves undeserved promotion and go scot-free.

The other poem titled, *The generals* (p. 17) further catalogues the woes of soldiers masquerading as rulers in the political affairs of Nigeria. Their greed, selfishness and insensitivity to the plight of the masses in their quest for self-advancement is captured in the following lines:

As you climb the hilltops individually / on the backs of others / you fulfil your greedy plans and forget/that many are dying below uncared for/where patients lie in pains / in the window dressing wards. / School teachers and civil servants / sing dirges of unpaid wages / as university dons survive on their failed shadows / from the decisions of our home-made generals.

Apart from the litany of woe which goes with military regimes, the governing military authorities also plunder the national treasury only to stash such stolen funds in coded Swiss accounts and in other western banks. And in contradistinction to these ruling officials who go abroad under flimsy pretexts for medical checkups and shopping spree, the hospitals back in the country are stocked with fake and sub-standard drugs. These are the medications which the narrator has tagged as "Government expensive but stale drugs / dumped from the west [that] litter our street stores / where government greedy hospital prescription cards / fulfil their dreams."

Beyond the deployment of irony, figurative language and sarcasm in this poem to denounce the high level of corruption in the country, the author also points to a day of reckoning when the rulers must have an encounter with destiny. It will be when "The generals [shall] bleed / it's the day many shall bleed / honest blood unattended." It is then, according to the poet, when "We shall exhume them all / their bones, the bones of those generals / to be given second burials / in our ocean of perpetual anguish / their bull-dozers have made." And on this note of balancing the structure of the artistic piece, the writer brings the poem to a satisfactory end.

The poem, *Don't you see* (pp. 18, 19) is a lamentation on the general collapse of the economy and failed social infrastructure because of heartless and self-serving rulers. The poet commences each of the nine verses of the poem with the rhetorical question: "don't you see..." in order to underscore the gravity of the issues at stake that the rulers have chosen to ignore, focusing only on their own immediate interests. The tenth and last verse of the poem focuses on retributive justice in a revolutionary war targeted at the ruling class because of their failure to serve their own people. That is when, they are told, "You will see and hear / only / when our blood charges: / with daggers, swords and drums / of war victories."

Meanwhile, the specifics of verses one to nine are as follows: the social injustices meted to the people are rendered in the metaphor of military "Sturdy boots / trampling our reeds of life." Next is "The naked raping of hopes / as prices of essentials / daily defy your threats / and empty public hospitals / shut their doors on the faces / of casualties of your home-made war." The negligence of the educational sector has also resulted in teachers embarking on strikes because of unpaid salaries, while university lecturers are seen "Touting for passengers in motor-parks / in dilapidated cars of humiliation / as pay packets starve their wards."

In verse four of the poem, the question "Don't you see..." provides a sharp contrast in terms of poor people's children being turned to beggars and "Defying the baking sun in want / as generals now and then speed pass / in tinted glasses of the ruling class." Next is the shocking realization that, rather

than dealing telling blows to criminals and other lawbreakers, Nigerian soldiers and the police tend to run for their lives as outlaws operate brazenly during daytime, defying the law. In the same vein, farmers do all the hard work only for middlemen to dispossess them of the farm produce through crafty bargaining. Oil spillage and the loss of domestic animals arising from Rinderpest outbreak are other painful national disasters that Nigerians must contend with, even as creatures of ill-omen such as vultures, "The nocturnal *atetrekwu* and *owuna birds*" appear during the day.

The poem, *Walking corpse* (p. 16) sustains the sad tone of bitter resentment against the military. If the failure of soldiers in administration seems excusable because it is not their primary duty, the lapses observed in non-performance even in the area of the primary assignment of the Nigerian Army is quite appalling and unwarranted. This time the denunciation of the military is framed as an address to the narrator's mother. The central issue in contention is the dissolute way of life of certain soldiers who cannot perform their duties because of uncontrolled indulgence in sex, alcoholism and cigarette smoking. In specific terms, the soldier in question, a stock representation of a category of the defence force is described as "A walking corpse drained / by barrels of home-made gin, *burukutu*, and women."

As a consequence of this soldier's reckless lifestyle, he "Cannot be close to the tremor / of angry charging cannon / as the lifting and carrying of Mark-Four / dismember his fragile being." The deployment of hyperbole evident in his drinking barrels of alcohol is further sustained and extended to his gulping "A sea of alcohol daily / at the break of dawn / and daily drowns in the smoke of his own smoke / a military medical officer / cannot tell the dead from the living / as casualties perish in his clinic of war."

As if this objectionable image of a soldier ruined by a depraved existence is not enough, the reader is shocked by the revelation that this soldier is rewarded, contrary to the evident charges that should earn him instant dismissal. The shameful facts are stated in the last verse of the poem as follows: "Today / he is a major after two years of service / a General made through intercourse / with *burukutu*, napoleon and women / to head a nation / where vermins rule as heroes." This unfortunate military perspective in the narrative is at the centre of corruption in Nigeria where nepotism and religious bigotry make the nation's rulers deliberately overlook or condone the glaring faults of fellow compatriots who belong to their ethno-religious affiliations. This truth partly explains why Nigeria, with all its abundant and promising human and material resources, is basically a failed state on account of rulers who are bereft of vision, focus and direction. Thus the sarcasm and bestial imagery deployed in the last verse of the poem is quite apt and germane to the overall message of the poem.

The poem titled *Contractor generals and field-marshals* (pp. 23, 24) is equally a mordant satire directed at the Nigerian army when soldiers were the governing authorities. Here, the training they received is being turned against the ordinary citizens of the land, whereby "Our men-at arms / have turned our guns on us,...to be cocked at one who knows no intrigue of guns. / Yet we see our barrels and bayonets pointed / daily at us". Apart from the daily harassment of the citizens who have done no wrong, these policemen and soldiers are armed with obsolete weapons. That is why they cannot withstand terrorists and other outlaw groups operating within the Nigerian territorial space.

Completely disenchanted with the breed of generals and field marshals, the narrator says his generation will change the national anthem and flag because the current generals have met no obstacle tests, yet are regularly given accelerated promotion. The final verse changes the narrative from the past tense to the future tense. It will be a time of nemesis for the failed rulers that Nigeria has had to tolerate for so long. During that future time of reckoning, there will also be a new generation that will insist on installing a righteous government. From the given new perspective, "We will be generals and field marshals / when no single battle-charging dust / shall rise to defy our cataract vision / to be generals and marshals of contractors / when we abandon arms for those in want..." During the new epoch when evil will have been dethroned and a righteous, people-oriented government is in place, then law and order will reign supreme. It will be at that time that the idea of generals and field marshals bidding for contracts and also abandoning the ordinary people to the autocracy of bandits and fanatics will be an issue of the past.

The third (iii) cluster of poems is concerned with the theme of social class disparity between the rich and the poor within the same society. The poem *Our neighbours* (p. 29) is mainly concerned with the theme of contrastive social class disparities between the elite of the society and the poor, tagged "The other side" and "Our side" in the poem. While the rich, privileged elite live in luxury, baking cakes and preparing popcorn, the poor hardly have anything substantial to eat. Indeed, the sweet-smelling aroma of the delicacies of the rich simply assail the nostrils of the poor and cause them to salivate, yet without any food to whet the robust appetite that the mouth-watering smell has aroused. The fact is stated in verse two as follows: "The children of our neighbours / who stray to our side / Under the watchful eyes of their salaried dogs / And numerous servants call that one 'popuu-corn' / My son tells me the unfired corn / Comes in through special delivery from Amerika." The explicit illiteracy of the narrator, as evident is his wrong pronunciation

of “popcorn” and “America” is sufficient proof of the social class disparity between the poor masses and the ruling class.

Added dimensions of privileged and luxurious living amongst the elite, in direct contrast to the poverty of their downtrodden neighbours, are loud, blaring music that grace the nightly parties of the rich along with fireworks to celebrate different occasions. These noisy occasions go on as the rich are oblivious of the inconveniences and havoc they inflict on their less fortunate fellow citizens. In a mournful tone lamenting the agony of the oppressed, the narrator uses discourteous language to describe their unfortunate plight when he says: “Our neighbours make no room / For us to scratch our anus / As we cannot hear each other talk. / They say the daily celebrants / Imported that sound from Japan.” The poem ends on a pathetic note whereby the poor find themselves helplessly compelled to endure the tantalizing smell of food they crave from the rich, but which they cannot have. In the poem, the poor eat their own wretched food without knowing its true taste because the sweet-smelling aroma of privileged meals from their rich neighbours usually eclipses the smell and tastes of their own dejected meals. The facts are captured in these words: “Here we must bear the aroma / that daily feeds our compounds / overshadowing our known tastes.”

The poem designated, *Summit* (p. 31) is concerned with work at a building construction site. The poem operates at the literal level of building, talking about the erection of a grand edifice. Metaphorically, the poem also critiques the social class differences between the rich and the poor. From the hard work of ordinary citizens, the nation is built. But once the national edifice is completed, the toiling masses of the nation are ignored and relegated to the background. This is the supreme irony of the poem. Beyond this story line is the painful reality at the initial stage when the work has to start. At that material time, the narrative voice says, “Daily / Like ants / We collected the minute red earth / We filed in lines / Mouthful with red earth / Water in our reservoir / Bit by bit, day in day out / We wet the basement / As female ants build the roof.”

The deployment of the imagery of ants at a work site is a deliberate artistic strategy, pointing to the enthusiasm and self-motivated disposition of the ants which make them work without a coordinating leadership. The given scenario is reminiscent of the struggle for independence. That was when the writer, civil servants and all sectors of the economy came together as one and secured flag independence for all. At the attainment of political freedom from the colonial masters, the next stage envisaged during the fight for national liberation was being awaited.

Indeed, the anticipated dividends of political emancipation being awaited with bated breath is captured in the second verse of the poem. The

facts are as follows: "Now the hill towers / After the last touch. / Now the hill stands / In the red earth of my generation / Of mouthful films of water." But political freedom soon proves to be the antithesis of the people's high hopes. The contrastive reality is asserted in verse three, where it is stated thus: "The harmattan wind blows / Blows across our hill / And pays us back in dust, deep down / And the occupants seal up the openings / As fire pursues us." The evidence that there is a deliberate social gap that has been created between the governing authorities and the generality of the citizens is manifest in the use of "they" versus "us". The estrangement of the rulers from the people has become obvious at this point. The leitmotif of alienation is further demonstrated in verse four.

The fifth verse brings the theme of the class war between the rulers and the citizenry to a climactic conclusion. Here, the facts are brusquely stated as follows: "The hill we built with our minute / Red earth has hardened / And those it houses have left us alone / For the winds to blow us through." There is a deliberate *double-entendre* in the use of the word "hardened" here. At the literal level, it means the red earth has dried up. Metaphorically, it means those in authority are hard-hearted and rule with iron hands, hence their insensitivity to the wishes and aspirations of their people. The repetition of the contrastive notion of "us" versus "them", or other variants of the word in verses three to five, go further to reinforce the growing divergence in the vision and hopes of the rulers as opposed to those of the nation's teeming masses.

The fourth (iv) thematic classification in Idris Amali's selected of poems from work titled, *Generals without War* is the one designated *Our surgeon* (pp. 36, 37). Here, the poem shifts the authorial focus from all other issues to the concern with the work of a competent professional surgeon and the hardship he suffers because he is working within an asphyxiating socio-political environment that has limited his capacity to serve humanity optimally. The surgeon is evidently well-trained and quite professional in the performance of his duties under normal circumstances. Nonetheless, he is constrained by the non-availability of medical consumables and other essential medical equipment. This unfortunate state of affairs reduces his professional competence to a cipher. Even the agitated relations of the patient lying "Face-up / groaning in pains" see the helplessness of the situation and watch in agony as the condition of the casualty deteriorates.

Subsequently, the patient passes on to the next world, even as "Rumours have filtered home / as the patient witnesses the last lap / of a life-long struggle. / Yes, a column of sympathizers / and mourners have been thrown into frenzy / far away at home / as they file past/through the footpath / to the narrow gate that gave way / as they flood the hospital, a killing house." The

metaphorical description of the hospital as “a killing house” is quite ironic, because the hospital in the given context now serves the opposite of function of saving lives.

In specific terms, the poet creates a dramatic scenario in retrospect, whereby we witness first-hand the practically impossible situation in which the surgeon carries out his duties. The third verse of the poem conveys the truth in detail as follows:

Yes, / a killer it is / as the trained surgeon directs: / bring me the stethoscope / bring me the anaesthesia / the ringer solution for I.V. infusion / clinical thermometer / a pint of blood donated on his behalf / from the blood bank / for an emergency surgical operation. / Yes, the directive fills the ears / of those who eavesdrop and multiply / the message to other ears. / Yes, it went as they say with short-lived smiles / the healer's hands are at work / as the student-nurse left to cater / for twenty other patients / returns to treat our surgeon with the usual song: / no this, no that, and the blood bank bankrupt.

The picturesque scenario represented above communicates very vividly the painful situation in which the surgeon works in the failed state that Nigeria has become. The incapacitated surgeon has been reduced to a passive witness of the vicissitudes that befall the patients entrusted to his care because of the lean budgetary allocation to his ministry, like all other ministries. Meanwhile, the political class, making up only one percent (1%) of the population is completely insulated from the pains and agony of the vast majority of other Nigerians. The ultimate resultant effect is that “Our trained surgeon stands armless / not more than the pathetic sympathizers / in a hospital well equipped on paper / watching another soul passing away.” The repetition of the idea of “A trained surgeon” exculpates the surgeon of all guilt and responsibility for the death of the patient, and at the same time putting the moral responsibility squarely on the politicians for betraying the public mandate entrusted to their class to serve the people. Furthermore, the irony of the statement about “A hospital well equipped on paper” is also obvious to the morally sensitive reader because he can discern the contrast between the bloated sums of budgetary cash allocated to the health sector on paper and its virtual absence in reality. And on this sad note, the poem comes to an end. It is, however, a pity that the service of the efficient surgeon, incapacitated by the absence of working tools and equipment, has been ridiculed and debased to roles similar to those of witch doctors, traditional diviners, priests and priestesses who manipulate the people for personal self-advancement.

The fifth (v) and final social constellation of poems sets a distinct and refreshing tone of triumph over the bleak and tragic poems analysed so far. Indeed, the short poetic piece tagged “A week of broken pains” (p. 26) balances the structure of Amali's literary script. In fact, it is at this point that

the tone of triumph is glaringly noticeable. The two verses of the poem capture in terse language the quintessential truth about good governance based on goodwill, fairness and granting social justice to all. The facts are presented below:

If those who govern / climb the ladder / of a greater mind to rule, / rule with people in mind / our world would have been / a greater place / to live in". The second verse affirms a related idea as follows: "The respect / for human existence / is the root / of universal peace.

As a matter of fact, the enormity of the youths' hidden creative and inventive prowess lies in the will to excel. This truth is envisaged in Amali's four-line poem that is seen at the opening of Section V: "The Will to be Free", titled *Will* (p. 64). It goes thus: "The harder the turbulent wind / presses against the will of life / the stronger still / the will to greatness." It is indeed the upcoming generation that has the resilient willpower and determination to sustain its quest for greatness in the face of all odds that can bring about a transition for Nigeria to rise to a glorious era as envisaged by the nationalistic founding fathers of Nigeria. As a matter of fact, the release of the creative and inventive potentials of the young generation will be the time when the tragic shame of Nigeria will be turned into an era of triumph over mediocrity and a visionless ruling class.

## Conclusion

The discourse encapsulated in this critique has demonstrated convincingly the central thesis of this treatise. The work has also proved the failed state ranking of Nigeria during the period of military rule. This truth is conveyed by the painful reality and tragic tone of almost all of the poems. Indeed, the woeful depiction of the harsh circumstances of Nigeria at the time of writing the poems seems to have worsened, given the unfolding deteriorating situation of the contemporary scene. Nonetheless, not all hope is lost. Beyond the hue and cry concerning the woeful situation of today's Nigeria are the great creative and innovative potentials of the young generation of Nigerians. Their great worth can only be measured by their to release their given great innovative potentials and creative talents in order to bring about a new era of maximum national economic growth and social progress previously unimagined in the annals of Nigerian social life.

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## Von der Tragödie zum Triumph: eine Kritik ausgewählter Gedichte *Generals without War* von Idris Amali

**Abstract:** Diese kritische Analyse der ausgewählten Gedichte von Idris Amali ist ohne die Kenntnis des Kontextes der nigerianischen Literaturgeschichte kaum zu verstehen. Fünf Jahre nach der Erlangung der Unabhängigkeit von Großbritannien inszenierten einige Soldaten der nigerianischen Armee unter der Führung von Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu den Staatsstreich vom 15. Januar 1966. Seitdem stürzte ein Militärregime das andere. Die demokratische Regierung vom Präsidenten Shehu Shagari wurde am 1. Oktober 1989 eingesetzt, bis General Muhamadu Buhari sie am 31. Dezember 1983 durch einen Militärputsch ablöste. General Babangida stürzte Buhari und führte 1993 Neuwahlen durch. Moshood Abiola errang einen erdrutschartigen Sieg, aber Babangida brach den Prozess ab und setzte die zivile Marionettenregierung von Ernest Shonekan ein. General Sani Abacha löste ihn nach drei Monaten ab und starb später im Juni 1998. General Abdulsalam wurde der neue Machthaber und stellte im Oktober 1999 zielstrebig die demokratische Herrschaft wieder her. Im Großen und Ganzen nahm jedes Militärregime, das seinen Vorgänger ablöste, eine „messianische“ Rolle für sich in Anspruch, um das Volk vor dem Ruin zu retten, die Ordnung wiederherzustellen und Nigeria auf den richtigen Weg zu wirtschaftlichem Wohlstand, Frieden und Fortschritt zu führen. Doch von einigen wenigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, plünderten die meisten Militärregime das Land aus, waren despotisch, disziplinos und führten eine Kultur der Straflosigkeit ein, die eine Grundlage für die heutige Korruption in Nigeria war. So erwiesen sich die militärischen Befreier als eine Verstellung dessen, was sie eigentlich vorgaben. In diesem Kontext von Diktatur und Misswirtschaft entstanden die Gedichte von Idris Amali.

**Stichwörter:** Nigerianische Literaturgeschichte, Diktatur und Missstände, Idris Amali, *Generals without War*.

## Od tragedii do triumfu: krytyka wybranych wierszy *Generals without War* Idrisa Amaliego

**Abstrakt:** Do zrozumienia przedmiotu niniejszej analizy krytycznej konieczny jest kontekst historii literatury nigeryjskiej. Zaledwie pięć lat po uzyskaniu niepodległości po panowaniu Wielkiej Brytanii, żołnierze dokonali zamachu stanu 15 stycznia 1966 roku. Od tego czasu historia to opowieść o jednym reżimie wojskowym obalającym drugi. Demokratyczny rząd prezydenta Shehu Shagari został powołany 1 października 1989 roku, a generał Muhamadu Buhari zastąpił go w wyniku wojskowego puczu z 31 grudnia 1983 roku. Generał Babangida obalił Buhariego, a następnie przeprowadził wybory w 1993 roku. Moshood Abiola odniósł w nich zwycięstwo, ale Babangida przerwał proces zmian i wprowadził marionetkowy cywilny reżim Ernesta Shonekana. Generał Sani Abacha wyparł go po trzech miesiącach, a następnie zmarł w czerwcu 1998 roku. Nowym władcą został generał Abdulsalam, który celowo przywrócił rządy demokratyczne w październiku 1999 roku. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, każdy reżim wojskowy, który wyparł swojego poprzednika, rościł sobie prawo do "mesjańskiej" roli polegającej na uratowaniu narodu z ruiny, przywróceniu porządku i skierowaniu Nigerii na właściwy kurs dobrobytu gospodarczego, pokoju i postępu. Jednak, poza kilkoma godnymi uwagi wyjątkami, większość reżimów wojskowych plądrowała naród, była despotyczna, pozbawiona dyscypliny i zakorzeniła kulturę bezkarności, która leży u podstaw dzisiejszej korupcji w Nigerii. Wojskowi wyzwoliciele okazali się być zaprzeczali temu, co głosili. W kontekście dyktatury i złego administrowania powstały wiersze Idrisa Amali, satyrycznie opisujące rządy wojskowe w konkretnych wierszach poddanych analizie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Nigeryjska historia literatury, dyktatura, Idris Amali, *Generals without War*.