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Of Kristevan Intertextuality and Obu Udeozo's *Cyclone*: Modern African Poetry as a "Mosaic of Quotations"

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Abstract

Using Obu Udeozo's poetry collected in *Cyclone* as source of reference, this study critically explores modern African poetry in the light of Kristevan intertextuality which sees the text essentially as a "mosaic of quotations". The study briefly examines Kristeva's view of intertextuality as a concept which defines the intricate nexus among texts ennobled by several means among which is quotation or citation. A reading of *Cyclone* is then executed with a special focus on the plethora of quotations embedded in it. The study demonstrates that the text of our focus is deeply influenced by other texts from which citations are extensively made. The poet employs this intertextual tool to highlight his views and drive home his points on contemporary events in Nigeria. The conclusion reached is that the Kristevan intertextuality which sees the text as a "mosaic of quotations," as a distinctive hallmark of Udeozo's poetic oeuvre, enables him to historicise the dilemma of the postcolonial society.

Key words: Kristeva; Intertextuality; Poetry; Quotation; Postcolonial; Influence

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Africa, writers have, from the inception of the literary canon, continued to evolve different thematic and structural media in their quest to apprehend and (re)present the human condition in their works. These aesthetic media could be linguistic in nature, with its own diversity of approaches; it could also be thematic, or even technical in nature, in which case the writer exercises the liberty to employ specific aesthetic devices, tools, or forms such as satire, suspense, allusion, allegory, irony, or humour, to achieve his specific goals in the creative enterprise. Of course, this diversity of thematic and structural approaches in African literature is manifest in the differences encountered in the works of writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka or Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Christopher Okigbo and Dennis Brutus, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Okot p' Bitek, and so on. The Nigerian poet, Obu Udeozo, who is much younger than the writers mentioned above, and thus belongs to a different generation of writers, has nevertheless endeavoured to carve out an identity for himself by intentionally appropriating the Kristevan idea of the text as a "mosaic of quotations" in a manner that stands him out in the corpus of African poetry. In other words, the distinctiveness of Udeozo's poetry, this study argues, derives from the poet's quest to register and underscore the appalling, regressive human condition in postcolonial Nigeria through extensive references by means of direct quotations from other texts and sources. It is in view of the foregoing conjecture that this study is a critical exploration of Obu Udeozo's fifth published volume of poems entitled *Cyclone* in an attempt to distil the "mosaic of quotations" embedded in it. As this study amply demonstrates, the use of this aesthetic feature in the text enables the poet to invoke earlier writers, statesmen, creeds, principles, and ideas, in his dialogues with humanity.

As an exploration of the plethoric volumes of quotations in Udeozo's poetic text, *Cyclone*, this study is inevitably influenced by the concept of intertextuality. The term intertextuality does not lend itself to a straightforward

definition. It is for this reason that Graham Allen (2000) submits that intertextuality is "a concept with a complex history" in the sense that it is characterised by "a plethora of definitions and redefinitions". This study is however not interested in the complex polemics of "definitions and redefinitions" associated with the concept. Since Julia Kristeva, the French poststructuralist scholar and theorist, is perhaps the most prominent proponent and theorist of the concept, her perception is considered most germane, and therefore adopted as the critical lens for this study. To begin with, then, it is necessary to note that the term intertextuality was first used by Julia Kristeva in 1966 in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics. In her theorisation of this concept, Kristeva repudiates intersubjectivity, a term which Stephen Heath defines as "the reading of a text… as a subject-to-subject exchange between author–source and reader–receiver" in favour of intertextuality, "the performance by author *and reader* of a multitude of writings that cross and interact on the site of the text" (Michael Payne & Jessica Rae Barbera, 2010). For Kristeva, therefore, "the notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity" (Moi, 1986). This is so especially in view of the assumption that textual meaning – that is, the meaning of a text – is not transmitted directly from the author to the reader as held by traditional criticism. Instead, meaning is mediated and determined by a series of "codes" which have been synthesised or "absorbed" by both the writer and the reader from their previous encounters with other texts. This synthesis or "absorption" of meanings from texts would lead to what she calls the "transformation" of other texts. It is Kristeva's conclusion, in view of the foregoing, that intertextuality should be understood as a concept in which "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*" (Moi, 1986). This view is quite interesting and is, more importantly, germane to the understanding and appreciation of Obu Udeozo's poetic offerings in *Cyclone* as "a mosaic of quotations." This is the focus of this study.

2. THE POETIC TEXT AS A "MOSAIC OF QUOTATIONS"

Obu Udeozo is a contemporary poet from Nigeria. Born in Jos, Plateau State of Nigeria in 1956, Udeozo belongs to the generation of African poets who began to write in the late 1980s and early 1990s and attained creative maturity at the turn of the twenty-first century. In Nigeria, most of the poets of this generation had their first contact with the public through the publication of Harry Garuba's edited anthology of poems titled *Voices from the Fringe* (1988) which was sponsored by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). This group of poets, otherwise known as the third generation, follows closely the second generation of African poets comprising Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Kofi Anyidoho, John Atukwei Okai, Jared Angira, Tijan M. Sallah, Jack Mapanje, and Frank Chipasula. Trained by these older poets most of whom double as scholars, it is not surprising to see that most African poets of the third generation are heavily influenced by their forebears, including the likes of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Okot p'Bitek, and Kofi Awoonor, of the first generation. Yet, they cannot be said to be tied to the apron of the earlier generations, as younger poets like Obu Udeozo, Remi Raji, Musa Idris Okpanachi, Moses Terhemba Tsenongu, Maria Ajima, Denja Abdullahi, Promise Okekwe, Ogaga Ifowodo, and Toyin Adewale-Gabriel have individually demonstrated considerable levels of maturity in their poetic crafts.

Indeed, the emergence of a new generation of poets in Nigeria from the 1980s through the turn of the twenty-first century is traceable to the persistent and prevailing climate of social and economic dislocation on the continent as a whole. The implication of this is that the new poets continue to grapple with the same old problems that their predecessors encountered. These recurring problems include maladministration, injustice, corruption, poverty, political and social instabilities, with fresh challenges such as banditry, kidnapping, militancy, and terrorist insurgency all assuming a life of their own. The fact that these problems have continued to defy solution in spite of commendable efforts of preceding generations of writers underscores the necessity for a fresh envisioning of society and change of creative strategies. To this extent, the emergence of the new poets is a welcome development in the canon of Nigerian poetry given their determination to try something new by deliberately attempting to maintain an aesthetic distance from any kind of ideological standpoint or commitment in their works. This is the background that shapes Obu Udeozo's artistic vision. Udeozo has published eight volumes of poems, a novel, and several books of literary criticism. His collections of poems include *Excursions* (1993), *Stimulus and Other Poems* (1993), *Palmwine* (1998), *Compassion* (2005), *Cyclone* (2005), *Udala* (2009), *Asaa* (2018), and *God* (2021). The plethora of quotations in Udeozo's poetry makes him a subject of interest to this study. Although this aesthetic feature runs through most of his poetic works, *Cyclone* is however the collection which most illustrates this trend. It is for this reason that it is adopted as the source of reference in this study.

As if bearing in mind Julia Kristeva's conception of intertextuality as a "mosaic of quotations…" (Moi, 1986), and Roland Barthes's perception of the concept as a "tissue of quotations…" (1977), Obu Udeozo's *Cyclone* relies heavily on quotation (or citation) as a defining aesthetic

trope. By way of definition, a quotation is any statement or a part thereof, extracted, taken, or borrowed by a speaker or writer, from another writer, speaker, source, or text, for the purpose of repetition for emphasis, to enhance the meaning of an utterance or a text, or for any other reason(s) that the speaker or writer may find germane in a specific context. In *Cyclone*, Udeozo uses this aesthetic device to great effect. In other words, the poet deploys quotation as a vehicle of creativity to bring to the fore his familiarity and indebtedness to a range of ideas, works, and sayings of several statesmen, other writers and artists, as well as scientists, and the holy scriptures. The collection is thus crowded with words lifted directly from personalities such as William Shakespeare, Leonardo Da Vinci, Christopher Okigbo, Edgar, Stephen Crane, Andrew Wyeth, Nweke Udeozo's diary, the oral tradition, and above all, the Holy Bible. For example, the extract from Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*: "And extreme fear can neither fight nor fly / But coward-like with trembling terror die …" (Udeozo, 2005) is a typical illustration of intertextual quotation which the poet uses to set the threnodic tone of his poem, "Maj. Gen. J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi."

In the poem entitled "Right Hand," the poet admonishes his Igbo kinsmen – Igbo is an ethnic group in Nigeria – not to exploit the less privileged people among them in the name of tribe, trade, or business. He offers this admonishment by relying on a powerful allegorical statement from the famous Italian artist of the Renaissance period, Leonardo Da Vinci, which he said has been ignored by the Igbo people in their blind quest for profit. This is graphically captured in the following lines:

> But now, you employ shovels
> to tear your brother's flesh apart for profit
> now you use bayonets
> to harvest the widow's crop
> and smash the orphan's lamp
> by your genius
> in combing every cell of the city
> with greed in trade.
>
> You forsake Da Vinci's counsel:
> "wood nourishes the fire that consumes it." (Udeozo, 2005)

The underlying impulse of the above extract is the thought that if the people continue to exploit the poor, they are, like wood, feeding the fire that would eventually consume them. It is in the light of this that the poet admonishes his people to eschew every form of cheating, dishonesty, injustice, and falsehood, and return to God and the ancient creeds of honesty, truth, love, and justice, as panacea for their survival and advancement in a nation that has become an "amalgamation of treachery." This argument is reflected in the verse which goes thus:

> but when you listen
> to your kolanut and the cross
> and share your mythic success
> like a glass of love
> with every face of earth
> which nourishes your sweat
> yours will be the sunshine
> which no amalgamation of treachery will ever scratch. (Udeozo, 2005)

Having admitted in an interview with this writer that foremost Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, exerts the greatest degree of influence on his creative consciousness, it is not surprising to find echoes of Okigbo's work in Udeozo's poetry collected in *Cyclone*. These echoes come mostly in the forms of allusion and direct quotations of words, phrases, and lines of Okigbo's verse. The extent to which other writers and texts have influenced Udeozo's poetry through his reliance on direct citations is the focus of this study. In the poem, "Torso," for instance, this influence is palpable as the line: "And he said to the ram: Disarm" is lifted directly from Okigbo's "Initiations," the second sequence of the series of poems entitled "Heavensgate." It is however not clear what Udeozo is making out of this expression because it's meaning, if at all there is any semblance of it in the poem under consideration, remains as unclear, vague, and obscure as it is in the original, Okigboean context. The only explanation that can possibly be advanced for its invocation in Udeozo's poem is the poet's near-fanatical fascination and liking for Okigbo's verse. In a similar vein, in the poem titled "Stimulus," Udeozo borrows the image of the "he-goat-on-heat" from Okigbo's poem, "Siren Limits." The image of the "he-goat-on-heat" is deployed here as a figurative device to reinforce the extent to which the poet-persona desires intimacy with his lover. In this context, the extent to which Udeozo's persona desires intimacy with Fatima, his lover, is comparable to that to which Okigbo's persona seeks reunion with Idoto, the water goddess. In another poem titled "Divine Cup of Wrath," the fifth sequence of the poem, "Agbaja: for My Mum," Obu Udeozo engages in a more detailed citation from one of Okigbo's political poems titled "Come Thunder." In this vein, he openly acknowledges Okigbo by quoting him profusely as follows:

> and Okigbo said:
> "*The drowsy heads of pods in barren farmlands witness it,*
> *The homesteads abandoned in this century's brush fire witness it:*
> *The myriad eyes of deserted corn cobs in burning barns witness it: […].*" (Udeozo, 2005) (Original emphases)

Although the verse quoted above is not italicised in the original, Okigboean context, Udeozo decides to impose this graphological device on it to give it some measure of prominence, not just as a borrowed text, but as a significant contributor to the overall thrust and meaning of the poem. In the light of this, Udeozo's "Divine Cup of Wrath," like Okigbo's "Come Thunder," can be read as a poem that is intentionally concerned with the political predicaments of the postcolonial nation, Nigeria. Each

of these poems succinctly historicises the dilemma of the postcolonial nation by pointing, from different angles, to the crises of the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970. In this connection, Okigbo's poem is preoccupied with the events which precipitated the war while Udeozo's poem simply highlights the horrific consequences of the war. Thus, each of these poets has a valid justification for invoking the images of "the drowsy heads of pods […]," "the homesteads abandoned […]," and "the myriad eyes of deserted corn cobs […]," as witnesses to the gory realities shortly before and long after the Nigerian civil war. By supplying such terms, concepts, ideas, images, and idioms by which the contemporary nation can both be described and assessed, Okigbo continues to influence the thoughts and creative enterprise of contemporary African poets such as Obu Udeozo.

A further look at Obu Udeozo's poetry on the civil war reveals that the poet has developed the habit of searching for information from every available medium or source including the personal diary of his own father, Nweke Udeozo. As a result of this, Udeozo's poetry is loaded with quotations from his father's diary. An instance of this fact is the lavish citation of the names of some of the casualties of the 1966 ethnic massacre in Vom, Plateau State, and its environs:

> ignore the fallacy
> of *holocaust fatigue*
> after Ironsi, Onwuatuegwu, Nzeogwu, Christopher Okigbo… Gabriel Okoh, Theophilus C. Okeke, Daniel Nwaefulu, Rowland Nwangene, James Osimene, J. Nwachukwu of St. Andrews Primary School, Chukwu of St. Joseph's Primary School, S. I. Ikenwe, Richard Onyemah, M. C. Ogalue, William Nwabueze, J. Nwokolo, Jonathan Chukwueke, Okoye Ibekwe, Mathew Amakuru, James Obinna, "*Mallam*" Isaac of NEPA fame, *et al*. All are the casualties of 1966 pogrom in Vom environs alone in Plateau State, Nigeria. (Udeozo, 2005) (Original emphases)

This register of casualties is followed by a footnote which gives the reader an insight into the source of the data as the "fragile diary of one witness, Nweke Udeozo – the poet's dad". The above quotation is the intertextual trope which conflates *Cyclone* and Nweke Udeozo's diary.

The verse "*anya di kwa unu*," the sixth sequence of the poem titled "*Oji*: for Batholomew Nnaji" also embodies a series of quotations. "*Anya di kwa unu*" is an Igbo expression which means "to be wise, to be wary, and very cautious about whatever is the cause of action being embarked upon" [trans. Obu Udeozo]. In this poem, the poet freely quotes from several sources including Lord Kevin, Ernest Rutherford, Henry Morton, Hans Thirring, and Lee De Forest to show the struggles, doubts, pessimism, and failures which characterised early scientific and technological inventions. The poet-persona admits that, like every other aspect of human endeavours, the roots of modern scientific theories and developments "sparkle with failures, shame and hubris". In other words, the beginnings of most of the great technological breakthroughs the world is enjoying today are fraught with pessimism and failures as successes were not achieved without much sweat and bitter accounts of failures. This point is succinctly expressed in the lines below:

> beware all soul brothers
> in science
> from telescope to video phones
> the cantilevers undergirding
> your theories and laws
> are not the saints you claim
> the roots that sired you
> sparkle with failures, shame and hubris
> akin to all flesh. (Udeozo, 2005)

The fact that early explorers and inventors eventually succeeded in spite of their initial failures underscores the need for wisdom, caution, determination, and perseverance in the pursuit of life endeavours. This is the idea implied by the title of the poem.

The poet would go on to quote from some of the people mentioned above to highlight their initial scepticism and doubts. These borrowings, some of them from a series of prose writings, and some perhaps from the diary entries of those early explorers and inventors, eventually gives the poem a distinct prosaic outlook or form. It is necessary to quote this borrowed part of the poem at length here. Writing on scientific and technological innovations, the poet enthuses, in a verse loaded with quoted extracts:

> and as heuristics
> of oracles
> your pioneers exhaled:
> "*Heavier than air flying machines are impossible*".
> Lord Kevin, President of the Royal Society 1890-5.
>
> And for a man who first conceived the idea of the atomic nucleus:
>
> "*The energy produced by breaking down of the atom is a very poor kind of thing. Anyone who looks for a source of power in the transformation of the atom is talking moonshine*".
>
> Sir Ernest Rutherford 1923.

On Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb: Henry Morton, President of the Stevenson Institute of Technology said:

> "*Everyone acquainted with the subject will recognise it as a conspicuous failure*".

On Lasers

> "*In the early 1960s there was much talk on lasers; it was said that lasers were the death rays of science fiction… that the problems of destroying missiles in flight could be solved using an intense laser beam… All such speculations can, however, be dismissed as pure nonsense when a rigorous scientific analysis is applied to them*".
>
> Professor Hans Thirring 1963.

On space exploration

> "*But to place a man in a multi-stage rocket and project him into the controlling gravitational field of the moon, where the*

> *passenger can make scientific observations, perhaps land alive, and then return to earth – all that constitutes a wild dream worthy of Jules Verne*".
>
> Lee De Forest, the 'Father of electronics; quoted in Readers Digest, 1957'. (Udeozo, 2005) (original emphases)

The footnote to the poem shows that these statements are extracted from *The Book of Heroic Failures* by Stephen Pile. By implication therefore, Udeozo's *Cyclone* intertextually conflates with, and thus advances the arguments presented in Pile's work.

If there is any single text which continues to exert a profound degree of influence on Udeozo's work, it is the Holy Bible. It is the Nigerian poet and critic Uduma Kalu who discerned this creative trait in Udeozo's poetry in his apt submission that "God [is] the core of Udeozo's craft" (1998). In an interview with this writer, the poet confirms the validity of Kalu's observation in his insistence that his own work, like John Milton's, is driven by the great need to "justify the ways of God to men." To underscore how central and serious a factor God has become in Udeozo's artistic vision, his latest volume of poetry is curiously and tellingly titled *God*. Owing to the fact that God has been central to his artistic vision for a long time, and more so from *Cyclone* onwards, the poet exercises the liberty to quote generously from the holy scriptures in order to speak to human conscience in an attempt to engineer moral and spiritual renaissance both at the societal and national levels. For instance, the poem, "Maj. Gen. J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi," ends with a long quotation titled "Anatomy: The Foundation Stone" taken from Romans 12:3-21 of the Holy Bible. In brief, the poem, "Maj. Gen. J. T. U. Aguiyi Ironsi," is a grim chronicle of the tragic fate which befell the Igbo ethnic group in the months before and during the Nigerian civil war. The poet recounts the horrors of those dark days in the following lines:

> -dead Igbos
> were dumped in decimals:
> left femurs, three-quarter trunks, cracked clavicles,
> crushed girdles, limping ears, yanked genitals,
> flying heads
> precursors of the Gideon Akaluka arrogant show
> unscratched cadavers
> putrid and wet
> mutilated bodies, babies, foetuses
> which fanatical axes split
> waves, upon waves, upon waves
> of dead Igbos
> saturated a season
> and Nigeria's soil was drunk
> but these they labelled flies
> void census and statistics
> for their revenge is aflame […]. (Udeozo, 2005)

The above verse follows a list of over three hundred and twenty names including the poet's grandmother, Mankwocha Udeozo, who are among the victims of the "1966 pogrom and 1967 to 1970 civil war." The footnote to the poem states that the list "does not include children and adolescents, whose memories have curiously been swallowed by time" (Udeozo, 2005). The poet realises that his Igbo kinsmen would, as is natural to any man or any group of people who have been unduly wronged, seek for opportunities for revenge. Being a devout christian, the poet obviously does not want that to happen as it would increase the chain of violence, brutality, and death in the nation. But knowing his inability to prevent the Igbo people from seeking to take their pound of flesh on their oppressors, the poet assumes the voice of the preacher by resorting to the Holy Bible as a tool for plea and persuasion, quoting extensively from Romans chapter twelve verse three to twenty-one.

As a corollary to the picture of the grim experiences of his Igbo people in the country of their nativity, the poet uses the above scriptural extract to preach the noble tenets of love, patience, respect, tolerance, peace, and justice to his wounded and oppressed people. To him, "the foundation stone" to lasting victory, peace, justice, unity, and prosperity is a return to the Bible – the Word of God. In another instance in *Cyclone*, this position is reinforced as illustrated by the verse below. It should be noted that in the middle of the verse is an extract from Romans 8:38-39. This extract of the holy scripture duly professes an irreversible commitment to the ways of God. To the poet, therefore,

> […] God fearing slavery
> is safer than Christless wealth […]
> "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God..."
> So reverse your culture to the righteous path
> by listening to your kolanut and the cross. (Udeozo, 2005) (Original emphasis)

In addition to the above, the poet also spares some thoughts for the oppressors of his Igbo kinsmen. He continues to use the Holy Bible to speak and appeal to the conscience of the ruthless oppressors, and also quoting profusely from it to warn them of God's impending judgement unless they desist from perpetrating acts of inhumanity against fellow men. Some of the poems such as "Catharsis: for Igbos" and "*Oji*: for Batholomew Nnaji" are suffused with quotations from old testament prophets like Isaiah, Amos, and Zechariah, warning the oppressors of an imminent pay day. After recounting the genocide against his people, the Igbos, in the poem titled "Catharsis: for Igbos," the poet warns the oppressors that, by their action(s), they have fully bargained for the wrath of God. He quotes from the holy scriptures – Amos 1:11 – to stress the inevitability of such an unpalatable eventuality for the unrepentant oppressor: "For the three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. / Because he pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because / his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked […]." (Udeozo, 2005)

In the biblical account, the people of Edom are the descendants of Esau, the twin (and elder) brother of Jacob (Israel). Esau paid the price for his light-heartedness with his birth right and paternal blessings which he lost to Israel. He could not forgive his brother, Israel, for taking the birth right and paternal blessings. This unforgiving and vengeful disposition may have precipitated the perennial stretch of hatred the Edomites have for the Israelites till today, as exemplified by the scripture quoted above. The crisis between the two brothers finds a curiously symbolic parallel in the Nigerian context where members of the Igbo ethnic group see themselves as the "Israelites" who are persecuted by other tribes. The fact that the same verse of the scripture quoted above is repeated on page 107 of *Cyclone* is suggestive of the seriousness with which the poet is applying himself to his conviction that vengeance belongs to God who would arise to execute judgement on the oppressors at the appropriate time, no matter how long takes.

CONCLUSION

In the study conducted so far, Obu Udeozo's *Cyclone* has been read through an intertextual lens as a "mosaic of quotations." The study shows, through copious textual illustrations, that the text of our analysis is deeply influenced by extensive borrowings by means of direct citations from other sources such as the Holy Bible, William Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Stephen Pile's *The Book of Heroic Failures,* Christopher Okigbo's poetry, and Nweke Udeozo's diary, among others. In the light of the above discourse, it is stressed that Udeozo's *Cyclone* is extensively shaped by the Kristevan intertextual idea of the text as a "mosaic of quotations". It is further demonstrated that the text from which illustrations have been drawn here, being a selection of poems from Udeozo's previously published poetic works including *Excursions*, *Stimulus and Other Poems*, *Palmwine*, and *Compassion*, inevitably occupies a central and unifying position in the corpus of his poetry as affirmed by Francis E. Ngwaba in the introduction to the volume. Consequent to the above discourse, this study concludes that the aesthetic feature evaluated in this study, that is, the Kristevan concept of intertextuality which sees the text as a "mosaic of quotations," is one of the most distinctive hallmarks of Obu Udeozo's poetic oeuvre. The poet deploys Kristeva's intertextual idea to invoke views by earlier writers, scholars, and statesmen to warn and admonish his people while discussing contemporary history and events. This he does in the pursuit of societal rebirth, growth, and development.

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