

Demystification of Poetic Language as a Style in Niyi Osundare's Poetry

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Abstract

The language of poetry remains one of mystic which requires deep imaginative ability for its analysis. This is based on the poet's medium of interaction with the audience in terms of diction. Environment, culture and tradition, sometimes, if not most of the times, play dominant role in accessing a literary discourse. Osundare uses the oral sources to lay bare his message thus exploiting the traditional mode to define nature, by so doing reducing the stress on the mental intuition in accessing the meaning of a poem. His literary artistic innovation appears to be the most distinctive among the new generation of poets because of his peculiar choice of diction.

Keywords: *esotericism; demystification; deviation; aesthetics*

1. Introduction

Literary language has been chosen and manipulated by its user with greater care and complexity than the average language –user either can or wishes to exercise. If this distinctive use is recognized, it may be possible to discuss intelligently a writer's individual style Modern literary study does not presume to dictate to poets, rather it examines styles that are already formed. Style is the dictate of the writer himself – the expression of his personality. It may also refer to all or some of the language habits of the poet – his linguistic idiosyncracies – just as we talk of Osundare's style, Achebe's style, Soyinka's style and so on. Enkvist describes it as “an individual's deviation from norms for the situations in which he is encoding...”(25).

Nigerian poetry has been categorized into three generations. Each category has its own artistic features that further its development. The first generation is represented by such names as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and J. P Clark-Bekederemo while the second generation of Nigerian poets has Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeinum, Tanure Ojaide, Catherine Acholonu and Harry Garuba. The third generation and emerging group has artistic features which constitute an uncharted terrain in Nigerian poetry studies Nigerian poetry has been categorized into three generations. Each category has its own artistic features that further its development.

2. Categorization of Nigerian Poetry

The first generation is represented by such names as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and J. P Clark-Bekederemo while the second generation of Nigerian poets has Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeinum, Tanure Ojaide, Catherine Acholonu and Harry Garuba. The third generation and emerging group has artistic features which constitute an uncharted terrain in Nigerian poetry studies

Niyi Osundare appears to be a prominent poet of a new generation of writers in Nigeria, and has made an overwhelming contribution in a relatively short time in the literary landscape. Osundare's poetic language generally contrast with the language practices of the first generation of Nigerian poets. Chinweizu, Jeyifo, and others have referred to the “undue eurocentricism, derivationism, obscurantism and private esotericism” of the older poets as they often “deploy a diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists”. (Osundare, 3160 In contrast, many critics have referred to the process of “demystification of the language of poetry”, in the practices of the new poets. The process, according to Funsho Aiyejina “had been started irrevocably by the pre-coup crisis in the country”(13), which forced new public obligations on the new generation of

poets.

3. Style as a Literary Element

Style involves the manipulation and variation of all the aspects of language available to the speaker, at a particular time, to express himself optimally as possible. For this reason, the definition of "style" by Hill is quite apt in this regard. "Style" according to him, "is the sum total of choices, which the language offers to the individual speaker at each point within the sentence" (Fowler,14). Style is rooted in author's personality and his choice of words is regarded to some extent subject to choice. Hence, given a certain personality and thus a certain, as its expression, the characteristic properties of style can be described in terms of statistical law. For example, the richness of vocabulary is characterized as a constant relation between uniformity and diversity of expressions which is the nature of choice (Herden, 1964).

Hence, a person's writing style contains many features that reveal an individual's uniqueness including vocabulary usage, use of function words, and the length and structure of sentence. But literary texts especially poetry could be said to reside more in the manipulation of variables in the structure of a language, or in the selection of optional features. Every linguistic element in poetry is a contributor to the overall meaning of a poet. Osundare's interest in innovative style is conveyed in his ardent interest in the use of language. The avalanche of critical response to his style, and the diverse conflicting stances, as well as the influencing factors of its brilliance, relevance and success in part necessitated this discourse.

Attempt is thus made to sample some of the literary and oral devices the poet employs in his poetry. Osundare has in his own special way imbibed a stylistic feature which is a characteristic of sound and drums employed in most of his poems hence reducing their complexity. In being engaged in literary stylistics criticism, one may choose to view stylistics as the study of various styles foregrounded in various language uses. African literature is message-oriented. Osundare is a poet who is quite sensitive to language, who is prepared to exploit even the seemingly insignificant of forms to achieve stylistic significance. Stylistics, is "the phonology, in the analysis of the texts. (Berry, 5) This is why it is quite expedient that the linguistic dimension to Osundare's creativity be closely examined for proper interpretation of messages and evaluation of his artistic style. This study does a holistic stylistic criticism of selected poems in order to project the artistic aesthetics in Niyi Osundare's poetry.

Osundare's poetry is a radical departure from poetry of the 70s in both language and style imbedded with social ideology. The African writer's position is a complex one. His culture is of a very complex nature. It is no longer simply African but has been "penetrated by influences from the west." To be an African writer, according to Osundare, is to "carry the burden of history." This is especially so, given the appalling level of the disruption of daily life in contemporary African society. Osundare locates the complexity of language in modern African literature within the context of the lingering colonial problems.

Biodun Jeyifo reveals the dialectical vision as the nucleus of Osundare's poetry. He locates Osundare's position within the new poetic in his tradition "Introduction to Songs of the Marketplace". He describes him as "the most distinctive voice among our new poets" because in his poetry one encounters "both poetry of revolution and a revolution in poetry" Jeyifo further argues that Osundare's poetry "demonstrates the unique values of mature revolutionary poetry, for the social implication of his work is never obscured by mystifying artistic technique". He hails Osundare for "his distinctive voice", which he says, announces by the sheer quality of its originality, the weaning of African poetry "from the womb of colonial society". His works, he adds, demonstrates the severance of African poetry's "umbilical ties to the metropolitan European tradition". (315) He acknowledges an inherent energy and enthusiasm in the poetic voice, which he likens to the later day of Christopher Okigbo.

Osundare's social perception transcends the Romantic conception of nature because his vision from the evidence of *The Eye of the Earth*, one can also raise the issue of the destruction of the agrarian culture by an implanted capitalist structure. Jeyifo notes Osundare's style of systematic demystification of the language of poetic delivery, which he says makes the poet evolve "a defining aesthetics" and writes "a revolutionary poetry and poetry of revolution".

In his "Niyi Osundare" which is part of his earlier review "Message in Voices and Songs" Biodun Jeyifo (314-320) assigns to Osundare a pre-eminent position among the new Nigerian poets. Like in most of the new poetry, there is, according to him, a demystification of the poetic language as well as the resolution of issues in favour of the masses.

Most of Osundare's works of poetry is metaphorical because of their oral nature. Osundare uses different and elaborate sentence patterns in most of his poems. And because he wants to pass a lot of information to his readers on his subject, he engages more on narration. He uses declarative sentences more often. In *Waiting Laughters*, one can

see in the last stanza;

Seconds drag their feet
 Like lazy eons,
 the clock jerks up both hands
 like a felon spread-eagled
 against a luminous wall. (9)
 A luminous intimation leaps off the trestle
 through the barricade of the board, before joining
 sky in the fringes of the canvas. (78)

In *Songs of the Season*, similar story-telling patterns are used in most of the poems. In “Crying hyena,” the most traditional pattern of narration is used in an elaborate manner:

Once upon a time
 When ears were far from the head;
 Once upon this amazing time
 A kind there was who owned a thousand thrones
 And slaves numbering all the sands ... (102)

In *The Eye of the Earth*, one of Osundare’s foremost publications it is observed that his choice of words is based on the information he intends to pass on to his readers. In “Forest Echos”, the use of consonant in successive position gives a pictorial idea of the landscape of African rainforest, and the animals inhabiting it.

A bevy of birds, a barrack of beasts.
 A school of truant antelopes
 Obey my head masterly steps. (7)

With the use of the consonant /b/, one can also observe the association of non-human entities with the collective nouns that are meant exclusively for human; ‘bevy’ and ‘barrack’. Also in “farmer-born”, more of consonant in their alliterative patterns are used.

This pattern runs through most of his poems. In *Songs of the Season*, the poem “when dead and gone” reflects elements of internal deviation. The 5-stanza poem is more of an epitaph which indicates what could be described as the “death-will” of the persona. The first four stanzas clearly state what should be when the persona passes on:

When I am dead and gone
 When these fingers have carried
 Their last morsel to the altar
 Of the mouth
 Let no wailers drench the pall
 In blinding tears
 When I am dead and gone
 When these knees no longer bend
 And the gallant carrier is carried
 Like one yoke of lumpen clay
 Let no moneyed mourners drown me
 In tabloid tears. (145)

This parallel pattern runs through the four stanzas but there is a complete deviation from the expressed idea in the fifth stanza. The image of death is not mentioned and the preceding parallel pattern is not also used:

Into the blue of the sky

The green of the meadow
 The transfiguring luminescence
 Of a moonlit lake
 The unfading brown of earth
 Let me be-
 come
 the lip of a lasting drum. (146)

There is a celestial transfiguration from the various images of death such as, “pall, “lumpen clay”, “mourners” and “bury”, to the beauty of the “transfiguring luminescence/ of a moonlit lake”. The focus of the text suddenly changed from death to life which gives the impression that though the persona be dead, he will continue to be heard as “lasting drum”. There is a contrast in the first four stanzas of the poem; the fifth stanza is a frustration of expectations as established in the poem itself.

There is a unique organization in the text which is the creation of the poet based on the use of language in order to arrest attention and create awareness. It is this unique organizational aspect of literary texts that Wellek and Warren also refer to in their *Theory of Literature* when they write:

Poetic language organizes, tightens,
 the resources of everyday language,
 and sometimes does even violence
 to them, in an effort to force us
 into awareness and attention...
 every work of art imposes an
 order, an organization, a unity
 on its materials. (14)

Osundare’s organization of his literary works of art can be viewed in the words of Wellek and Warren as an organization of the “resources of everyday language that creates awareness and attention”.

4. Conclusion

Meaning permeates all the levels of language description, I have shown how Osundare exploits some aspects of the phonic and the graphic substance of language to achieve some thematic and stylistic effects in his volumes of poetry. The main concern, as stated in the foregoing, is to show that studying Osundare’s poetry from a stylistic point of view would enable one to understand and appreciate the aesthetics of his poetry from the various stylistic perspectives to fully grasp his ideological stance. Shaped poetry or graphic method of writing poetry has its aesthetics and meaning. Osundare skillfully uses it to achieve and enhance the meaning of his concept of life in a contemporary society. As the initiator of the “Alter-Native Poetic Tradition”, his use of graphic style has added some uniqueness to his style of poetry by way of deviating from the normal poetic tradition and composition. It is also observed that the beauty and the uniqueness of Osundare’s works lie in his use of language that is familiar in everyday communication.

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