

Aspects of Style and Meaning in Selected Poems of Niyi Osundare

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Abstract. The majority of studies on the poetry of Niyi Osundare has concentrated mostly on thematic aspects, keeping silent on how figurative and linguistic resources are utilized to create an identity for the poet and negotiate meaning in his work. This study, therefore, investigated the use of language in context-specific ways to explore the aspects of meaning and style in Osundare's poetry. The study is anchored on the theoretical underpinnings of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. The study revealed how figurative devices such as alliteration and assonance; imagery and its various types are deliberately deployed by the poet to effectively encode the meaning of the texts under study and to achieve aesthetic value, in relation to context of situation and textual function. The figurative devices identified in the study are deployed to convey the intentions of the poets, issues raised in the poems and they contribute to meaning clarification in the texts.

Keywords: Figurative devices, linguistic resource, osundare, style,

1. Introduction

Stylistics, Simpson (2004:1) states "is the study and interpretation of texts from a linguistic perspective". As a discipline, stylistics links literary criticism and linguistics. It has no autonomous domain of its own. Simpson explains that the preferred object of stylistic studies is literature. It also focuses on other forms of written texts such as texts from the domain of advertising, politics, or religion. Stylistics strives to establish principles which can explain particular

choices of language used by individuals and social groups.

It is further defined as the science of variations in language, including the effective values of different words, forms and sounds that constitute style in the literary and also the wider sense. It thus means the application of linguistic apparatus to the study of style. Several scholars have done works directed at guiding the linguistic or stylistic student on the procedure of linguistic analysis. Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short (1981) have provided a checklist arranged in four categories – the lexical, grammatical, figures of speech, context and cohesion. Crystal and Davy (1969) have also outlined the methodology of describing the linguistic features of a text.

Niyi Osundare is a frontline writer in Africa and beyond. Little wonder, his work has evoked volumes of criticisms across the globe. Also, the quality of his work and his encompassing accomplishments help to establish the fact that he is a frontline writer in Africa. Nevertheless, the bulk of the studies on Niyi Osundare focus on the literary and thematic features, thereby neglecting the linguistic aspects. This prolific poet has hardly been given due attention. Critics have paid little or no attention to figurative language and their stylistic value in his poetry, without which a detailed interpretation of their texts and appropriate characterization of the poets' idiolect may not be fully appreciated.

Niyi Osundare is a poet whose imagery, symbolism, and figures of sound convey their messages in their

poetry. This present study thus focuses on the above mentioned aspects with a view to unlocking hidden shades of meaning in his poetry.

2. A Brief Biography of Niyi Osundare

Niyi Osundare, a prolific poet, dramatist and literary critic was born in 1947 at Ikere – Ekiti, Nigeria. Osundare had his secondary school at Amoye Grammar School and Christ School, Ado Ekiti. He had his first degree at the University of Ibadan. He later proceeded to the University of Leeds for his M.A and York University, Canada for his PhD in 1979. Previously, a professor (from 1989) and Head of English (1993 – 1997) at the University of Ibadan, he became professor of English at the University of New Orleans in 1997. His areas of specialization are African literature, literature of the Africa Diaspora, literary stylistics, sociolinguistics and creative writing. The poet erudite scholar, intellectual and public commentator was recently made a distinguished professor of English at the New Orleans University.

Osundare has published over ten collections of poetry. He is a prolific writer, a media columnist, essayist, and critic. His poetry collections include *The Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moonsongs* (1984), *Waiting Laughers* (1990), *Midlife* (1993), *Songs of the Season* (1999), *Horses of Memory* (1999) and *The Word is an Egg* (2000), *Random Blues* (2009) among others.

3. Theoretical Framework

Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) sees language as a system network of interlocking options and a semiotic system, from which each choice is made against the backdrop of other available alternatives that could have been chosen but were not, and each selection serves as an entry condition leading to others in an intricate closed network. Thus, the process of making meanings is a process of choosing from the total linguistic system (Halliday, 1994, pp. xiv; Butler, 2003, p.169). Gotzche (2009) opines that SFG considers:

Language as a resource that is fundamentally shaped by the uses that people make of it; hence it aims to explain the forms of language in terms of the meanings that they express.

One of the aims of SFG is to develop a grammar which makes it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written (Halliday 1994:15). This explains why in SFG, a text is broken

into small constituent parts for close scrutiny of their functions. SFG has four basic categories that are systematically linked to one another. Unit, structure, system and class constitute the four categories. Unit is the category which corresponds to a segment of the linguistic material about which statements are to be made (unit comprises morpheme, word, group, clause and sentences). Structure refers to “the category set up to account for likeness between events in successitivity” (Halliday 1967) (for instance, a sentence contains a subject, predicate, complement and adjunct). System is set up to account for the occurrence of one rather than another from a number of like events. In other words, it is the choice made from alternative forms within a structure e.g choosing between a pronoun and a noun or a present and past tense in a predicate. Halliday (1967) describes class as the grouping of members of a given unit which is defined by operation in the structure of the unit next above. Put succinctly, it is the categorization of similar patterned words into distinct grammatical groups, e.g verb, adjective and adverb.

Proponents of SFG believe that style is studied from a functional perspective. Wales (1989: 198) opines that a stylistic analysis of a text focuses on “the stylistic function or effects or thematic significance of linguistic features” in the text. For the linguist of the London school, and specifically for Halliday, the goal in stylistic analysis is to show why and how the text means what it does.

Functional stylistics favours the style as choice paradigm. The ‘choice paradigm claims that the language user selects what he/she says or writes from the options available in the context of situation as well as the language. Halliday (1991:12) goes further to describe context of situation in terms of three main features: field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. The field of discourse “refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action taking place” (Halliday and Hasan 1980:12). The tenor of discourse “refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles” (Halliday and Hasan 1980:12). The mode of discourse “refers to what part the language is playing” (Halliday and Hasan 1980: 12). The channel of communication (e.g. spoken and written), the function of the text in context, and the “rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic and the like” are included in Halliday and Hasan’s discussion of the three features.

In this present study, our major concern is on the functional aspect of language. Therefore, we shall

adopt M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as our theoretical framework because it focuses not only on the structure of language, but also on the properties of discourse and its functions in specific social and cultural situations.

4. Methodology

The method employed in this study is a close reading of Niyi Osundare's *The Word is an Egg*, *The Eye of the Earth and Random blues*. Thirteen poems were purposively selected from these three collections of poetry. The selected poems were subjected to content analysis, using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as a theoretical framework.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Figures of Sound as a Marker of Style in Osundare's Poetry

Akinmade (2009) sees figures of Sound as "figures of speech that are capable of introducing some sound flavour to a poem." In the same vein, Balogun (1996) avers that they "are sound devices used by poets to reinforce meaning in poetry or to create auditory pleasure." The two scholars agree that, these devices include alliteration, onomatopoeia, repetition, assonance, consonance and rhyme. Osundare is meticulous in his deployment of sounds in some of the poems under study. Some of these sounds are suggestive of the thematic preoccupations of the poems in which they appear and they add to the musicality of the poems. In this segment, we shall be paying close attention to alliteration and assonance.

5.1.1 Alliteration

Alliteration is the occurrence of the same consonant sound at the beginning of at least two words that are presented near each other in a given text. It is a phonetic stylistic device which aims at imparting a melodic effect to an utterance. It is also used by an author to create emphasis, to add beauty to the writing style, and occasionally to aid in shaping the mood.

In the texts under study, repetitions of plosive consonants, glottal and sibilant fricatives are noticed. Leech (1969) describes plosives as those "consonants articulated by a sudden damming up and sudden release of the stream of air from the lungs". Definitely, there is a kind of explosion and violence in the sudden damming up that is followed by a sudden audible release of the stream of air.

5.1.2 The Voiceless Bilabial Plosives /p/

Some of the examples in "Words catch fire" (*The Word is an Egg*) include the following:

- (a) Pubescent proverbs glow into paragons of wisdom. (75)
- (b) Between prophets and profits
- (c) Prayers and preyers. (110-111)
- (d) Seeing plastic visions, proclaiming giddy phantoms. (115)

Then in "Transformations" (*The Word is an Egg*) we have:

- (A pigmy despot parades giant padlocks.(5)

In (a) above, there is a kind of explosion and force that fits into a rhetoric that smacks of the suddenness that accompanies the transition from childhood to adulthood. The same way that their hitherto "pubescent proverbs" has now come of age and "glow into paragons of wisdom." It nonetheless, adds to the melodic effect of the poem. Also in (b), the alliteration of the plosive consonant /p/ suggests chaos and disorder. The message the poet is passing across is that religion (prophet, prayers, preyers) and money (profits) are inextricably linked. This will inevitably lead to chaos because these "preyers" a word coined by the poet to mean hostile persons who are looking for a prey to exploit are operating in feigning temples under the guise of religious organizations. Sooner or later, the people will find out their true identity and this will lead to chaos. In (c) also, chaos, disorder and anger are suggested by the alliteration of the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/. It is still a castigation of these false prophets who hide under the big umbrella of religion and do all sorts of unspeakable things in the name of God. The alliteration of /p/ in (d) shows clearly a case of oppression, violence and suppression during the dark years of military dictators in the country. Metaphoric "padlocks" during this period signify silence. The people are suppressed and they dare not complain as that could lead to their end.

5.1.3 The Voiceless Velar Plosive /k/

The alliteration of /k/ in the lines below suggests a kind of anger and confusion. Our examples are drawn from "Random blues 8" (*Random blues*) and "Apocryphal thunders" (*The Word is an Egg*) thus:

- (a) Bribe – soaked cop once, now a shameless clown. (24)
- (b) Stained surplice, corrupted collar. (29)
- (c) The chameleon has lost count
Of the colours of tumbling edicts. (7-8)

The repetition of /k/ here evokes a kind of confusion that is really disturbing. In any society, the police force is expected to provide physical refuge for the people while religion is seen as a kind of spiritual refuge for the people. In the first example (a), a member of the police force is first rendered in an uncomplimentary term – “cop” and now “a shameless clown” as a politician. Similarly too, corruption is least expected from a man of God but here Osundare says that in the country religious leaders and politicians are birds of a feather; they dine and wine on the same table. In (b), he says their collar is corrupted. This suggests that just as an average cop and an average politician is corrupt in Nigeria, religious leaders too are equally corrupt. Datum (c) above is drawn from “Apocryphal thunders”. The repetition of /k/ in the line is a pure reflection of the confusion in the land. The poet avers that the successive military dictators talk more and do less when it comes to giving the citizenry the good things they deserve.

5.1.4 The Voiced Velar Plosive /g/

Like the earlier plosive sound discussed, the alliteration of /g/ suggests chaos, violence and confusion. An example is found in “Words catch fire” (*The Word is an Egg*). In the first stanza of the poem, we have this example:

The gag is grim; gallows groan from moon to moon.
The repetition of /g/ evokes some disturbing images in the mind of the readers and this is a cause for concern and confusion. This is not unconnected with the brutal killings of innocent Nigerians in the hands of successive military dictators that have ruled the country. The violence and confusion become more real, if one gives attention to the meanings of the alliterated words. “Gag” is a restraint put into a person's mouth to prevent speaking or shouting and “gallows” is an instrument of execution consisting of a wooden frame from which a condemned person is executed by hanging. The line claims that so much was the blood spilled on the gallows by these wicked leaders that the “gallows groan from moon to moon”.

5.1.5 The Glottal Fricative /h/

Gimson (1980) says in the articulation of the glottal fricative “air is expressed from the lungs with a considerable pressure causing some friction throughout the vocal tract.” From the above, it is clear that the articulation of the sound /h/ is associated with friction and pressure. The sound conveys a feeling of harshness and friction. An

example of this can be seen in Osundare’s “Words underground” (*The Word is an Egg*)

With the iron hand that hurls the whip

The repetition of the sound /h/ shows the harshness in the action of the dictator. It conveys to the reader the pain, misery, and suffering that military regime brought on Nigerians when the soldiers were still at the helm of affairs in the country.

5.1.6 The Sibilant /s/

The sibilant sounds are effective expressive device and when one or more of these sounds are prominent Leech (1969) says they are “capable of suggesting certain classes of sounds (hissing, sighing, whispering)”. Instances of the alliteration of the sibilant /s/ are many in our data, but we will be using two instances. The first instance is from “Random blues 2” (*Random blues*) and the second is from “Words catch fire” (*The Word is an Egg*). They are:

(a) The Senator squirms
in a sewer of sin. (37-38)

(b) Skeletons swarm and swagger in the palace square. (23)

In the first example, the repetition of the sound suggests hissing of disapproval from the people towards the senator who is described as a liar, a thief and a shameless leader. In this same vein, example (b) also reflects condemnation and disapproval for what is happening in the emperor’s palace.

5.1.7 Assonance

Assonance involves the repetition of the same vowel sounds in words, but with a different final consonant. It is much used in poetic language as an aspect of sound patterning and cohesion. Assonance is used for a variety of expressive effects. It can be used to enforce the link among words in a stretch of utterance and it can also be used to transmit and reinforce the message in the text.

5.1.7 /i:/ and /i/

Many examples of these vowels are found in “Words catch fire.” They include;

“Disintegrate”, “twinkling”, “grim”, “hinges”, “thin-legged dreams”, “hyena”, “fragility”, “foetus – eater”, “dream – killer”, “chilling”, “glittering”, and “sting”. The long and short vowels are repeated to show the cry of dissatisfaction and pain against tyranny and oppression in the land. In addition, they add to the musicality of the poem.

5.1.8 /æ/, /ʌ/ and /ɔ:/

Examples of these vowels are found mostly in poems that deal directly with corruption, oppression, poverty and authoritarian regimes. The poems where the examples are drawn include, “Random blues 2” (*Random blues*), “Words underground”, and “Words catch fire” (*The Word is an Egg*). Instances of the vowels in the poems include; “fang”, “wand”, “bang”, “bag”, “rag”, “bust”, “hunger”, “crumbs”, “prop”, “country”, “touch”, “tongues”, “blood”, “dog”, “God”, “law”, “orgy”, and “jaw”. These two vowels /æ/ and /ʌ/ remind one of the bleating of the sheep and the goat when these animals are in distress or when they sense danger. /ɔ:/ also reminds one of the grumbling like noise made by frogs. The bleating of the sheep or the goat and the croaking of the frog ultimately reminds one of the grumbling of the masses who are being oppressed and who are suffering in the society.

6. Imagery as a Marker of Style in Niyi Osundare Poetry

6.1 Agricultural Imagery

The following lines from “Ours to Plough, Not to plunder” (*The Eye of the Earth*) represent some of the agricultural imagery in the texts under consideration:
The earth is ours to plough and plant
the hoe is her barber
the dibble her dimple

Out with mattocks and matchetes
bring calabash, tray and rocking baskets
let the sweat which swells earthroot
relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous burdens..

Our earth is an unopened grainhouse,
a bustling barn in some far, uncharted jungle
a distant gem in a rough unhappy dust.

Here, the images of “hoe,” “dibble,” “mattocks,” and “matchetes,” are used to show that the earth potentials can still be realized if we utilize these farming implements well. The poet says that the “hoe is her barber.” When a man goes to a barber’s shop to cut his hair, he usually comes out more handsome. Osundare avers that the same thing can be achieved with the earth. These implements are employed for clearing land of weeds, for grubbing and for loosening the soil and also for breaking up clods of earth. He also likens the burdens of the people to a tuber, and maintains that if the earth is properly taken care of, the people “tuberous burdens” will be relieved. This means that the people will be able to provide food for their upkeep should they help save the earth from ruination.

Our beautiful earth has the capacity to produce amply for the needs of all those now living and many more. The poet refers to the earth as an “unopened grainhouse.” The earth is still like a virgin girl despite the level of degradation that man has brought on the earth. This earth is marvelously designed for sustaining plant, animal and human life. If it were not for man’s mismanagement of resources and the unequal distribution of food, humans everywhere could really enjoy life. In fact, the poet is saying that if earth’s agricultural potential were maximized, there would be enough food to sustain everyone on earth and those yet to come. The images of “bustling barn and uncharted jungle” support the above claim.

6.2 Sexual Imagery

These lines from “Words catch fire” (*The Word is an Egg*) portray sexual imagery that will be useful for our analysis:

Words catch fire on the wings of
blissful moments
As I stalk my way through
The forbidden territory between
your legs
The beckoning petals of your eyes
The succulent eternity of your
warm, obliging lips...
Touching legs, tangled tails
Delicious softnesses, desires so
divine!
My will is a whisper, your moan a
method
I, your sin,
Committed between two holy
mountains
And a valley of carnal angels.
(175-185)

Here, Osundare talks about sexual matters in a way that shows he understands the limitations imposed on him by the Nigerian social conventions. Osundare is a product of the Yoruba society and culture. The Yoruba culture allows users of the language to mention sex organs only of animals or in allegory with material things. Little wonder then, the poet refers to the female sexual organ as “the forbidden territory between your legs”. Sex is rigorously restricted in public discourse among the Yoruba. Further, lexical choices describing sex and sexual organs are expressed only in periphrastic and euphemistic terms. In referring to the breast, Osundare calls it “two holy mountains” and refers to the virginal as the “valley of carnal angels”. All these sexual imageries refer to sexual intercourse between

a man and a woman, but they are rendered in such a way that they do not offend our sensibilities.

7. Conclusion

The data for this study were analyzed using M.A.K. Halliday's three metafunctions of language – ideational, interpersonal and textual as analytical model. Working with the model, we revealed that figuration is an important feature of poetry. Specifically, we examined the use of figurative devices such as figures of sound like alliteration and assonance; we also looked at imagery and its various types. These figurative devices are deliberately deployed by the poet to effectively encode the meaning of the texts under study and to achieve aesthetic value, in relation to context of situation and textual function. The figurative devices identified in the study are deployed to convey the intentions of the poets, issues raised in the poems and they contribute to meaning clarification in the texts.

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