

AESTHETICS IN MODERN NIGERIAN POETRY: THE USE OF PROVERBS IN AKACHI ADIMORA- EZEIGBO'S *SHEART SONGS*

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Abstract

The place of oral tradition or orature in modern Nigerian poetry cannot be over emphasized. The prominence and acceptance which the third generation of Nigerian poets enjoys are attributed to their 'appropriation of oral and traditional linguistic elements grounded in their social cultural milieu (Akingbe: 237)'. This paper studied how the poet (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo) adapted the oral form (proverbs) in some of the poems in her collection of poetry- *Heart Songs* to create poetry that is perceptibly and aesthetically African. The study showed how she stylistically deployed proverbs as a means through which the ills in her society were criticized. She decried these ills in proverbs. This study is predicated on the Formalist critical theory (New Criticism) because of its stance on the literary work (poetry) as the sole source of evidence for interpreting it. Thus the researcher based the analyses of the collection of poetry studied on the evidence provided by the poems analyzed. The paper analysed only one of the genres of orature (proverbs) incorporated in the work. The research is qualitative as it showed the ingenuity of the poet studied in creatively adapting the oral elements (proverbs) in the written environment in such a way that it added to the aesthetic quality of the work. This study concluded on the note that the oral forms are varied and could be adapted into the written environment. Poets are

encouraged through this research to employ them (oral forms) more as they device novel ways in which they could be harnessed in their poetry.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Nigerian poetry, proverbs, Orality.

Introduction

Poetry is one of the genres of literature through which comments and criticisms are made in the society. In Nigeria, it exists in two modes: the oral and the written mode. Oral poetry in Nigeria predates Western colonization and it is used to perform different functions in the society (pre-literate Nigerian society). One major characteristic of this poetry is that it is performance based. Finnegan maintains that it ‘... depends on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion ... there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product (2)’. Thus, there is a correlation between the very existence of oral poetry and its transmission because without oral realization of this poetry, and its direct rendition before an audience, an unwritten literary piece (poetry) cannot be said to have any continued or independence existence at all. Oral poetry or orature is very important in Nigerian literary canon. Chinwizu, et al posit that:

... it is the incontestable reservoir of the values , sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination outside the plastic arts. Thus, it must serve as the ultimate foundation, guide post and point of departure for a must draw sustenance. (2)

Orature in modern Nigerian poetry has helped in creating poetry that is both accessible and acceptable to greater percentage of the people. The inclusion of its genres into written poetry and its manipulation in analysing issues that pertain to the poet’s society is an instance of imaginativeness and experimentation to

which oral poetry has been put to use in Nigerian poetry. Prominent poets who explored this in their poetry include Niyi Osundare, Femi Fatoba, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Tess Onwueme, Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo, Nnimmo Bassey, Harry Garuba, Obiora Udechukwu and a host of others. They actually bring poetry closer to the people by removing the garb of obscurity associated with the previous poets. This could be seen in Osundare's definitional statement in his poem '*Songs of the Marketplace*'. He sees poetry not as 'the esoteric whisper / of an excluding tongue/but as 'man/ meaning /to man/' (3-4). According to Ushie, their thematic preoccupation remains 'the desperate situation of Africa, the stylistic hallmarks are clarity and directness of expression, formal experimentation and a deliberate incorporation of African literary modes'(19).

Also, orature helps poets in making abundant use of local settings and imagery which help create poetry that could be accomplished with drums and other musical instrument. As a result, their poetry resonates according to Asika 'with chants and ululations of masquerades and griots alike. We pluck in the lines of poetry ripe fruits of proverbs, riddles, folktales, incantations and praise names of deities and heroes alike which once prided the coastal fringes of Africa prior to the coming of the Europeans (101)'.

This paper studies how the poet (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo) adapted the oral form especially the proverb in her poems which makes them distinct and aesthetically African.

African Aesthetics

African critics have made attempts at defining aesthetics from the African point of view (as regards to literature) yet an acceptable definition eludes them. Some of them have despaired and concluded that it is not possible to have African aesthetics

and have resorted to Western aesthetics as the only and universal aesthetics. Nwankwo citing Nwoga agrees with him on the limitations of universal critical criteria because the African mode of aesthetic perception is different from the European mode. In addition Chinwizu et al maintain that universal critical criteria tilt towards eurocentrism ‘...with little or no relevance or validity for African people’ (4). African aesthetics (in African literature) brings to mind those ideas that are constant and peculiar to Africa that make it unique, beautiful and distinct. One of such ideas is orature. The importance of orature to the development of African aesthetics in Africa’s literary canon cannot be overemphasized. In his definition of African aesthetics, Nnolim says that it is ‘the way modern African creative writers view and express their universe and the result of what they have viewed and so expressed’ (86). He identifies seven categories in which finished African literary works of African literary writers usually fall. From these categories emerge three issues on which African aesthetics is hinged and one of them is oral tradition/orature. Nnolim goes further to say that orature/oral tradition ‘utilizes its many conventions like songs, song-tales, riddles, beast fables, parables, jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, legends fables, epics, myths, folktales and short stories to instruct, to amuse and to warn each generation on how to handle human situation’(90). These find their way into the literary canon of African writers and feature permanently as African aesthetic in literature. Chinwizu et al retaliate their stance over the need for African writers to decolonize African literature through a detailed study of the Africa’s orature and an effective implementation of same in literary works.

Formalism

Formalism has the distinction of having more names than any other recently developed School of Criticism. The two major

Schools that metamorphoses from it are New Criticism (the model defined by American and English critics) and the Russian Formalism (which lays great emphasis on form and techniques and also shares some fundamental characteristics with its Western cousin). This paper concerns itself with New Criticism, which may be referred to as Formalism as the case may be. New Criticism is a critical theory that is concerned with how readers understand and value a work for its own inherent worth and not for its metaliterary matters. It insists on close reading of a literary text, particularly poetry, in order to discover how a work of literature functions as a self-contained and self-referential aesthetic object.

‘The text itself’ is one of the basic principles of New Criticism. This is because the New Critics focus our attention on the literary work as the sole source of evidence for interpreting it. Also, the formal features of a literary text are products of its literary language. Literary language depends on connotation: on the implication, association, suggestion and evocation of shades of meaning. Literary language also communicates tone, attitude and feeling. It organises linguistic resources into a special arrangement, a complex unity, to create an aesthetic experience. Therefore, the literary language of a given text is inseparable from the content and the meaning of that text. This is because the form and meaning of a literary work develop together, like a complex living organism whose parts cannot be separated from the whole. Thus the work’s organic unity -the working together of all the parts to make an inseparable whole-is the criterion by which New Critics judged the value of a critical work. This makes it apt for this paper as the researcher analyses the poet - Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s use of proverb in her collection of poetry (*Heart Songs*) and how it contributes to the aesthetic quality of the poems.

Use of Proverbs in *Heart Songs*

Proverb has been and has remained the most powerful and effective instrument for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another. The reason behind the efficacy of the proverb is that it is an aphorism, a wise saying based upon people's experience as well as a reflection of the social values and sensibility of a people. Proverbs at the level of individual units of aphorism (a short phrase that says something true or wise) fits into the syntax of speech as a figurative expression, and a stylistic device with the desired semantic force. When considered collectively, or in a more general sense, proverb can be said to represent a people's philosophy. They function as literary forms which offer the traditional artist, speaker, and philosopher/priest a veritable medium for the projection and fulfillment of a variety of socially desired goals. According to Finnegan, 'in proverbs, the whole range of human experience can be commented on and analysed, generalizations and principles expressed in a graphic and concise form, and the wider implications of specific situations brought to mind (416)'. Whenever there is doubt about an accepted pattern of behaviour, about a stipulated line of action or whenever traditional norms are threatened, there is always proverb to vouch, illuminate and buttress the wisdom of the traditional code of conduct. Also, proverbs sum up a situation, pass judgment, recommend a course of action or serve as secular past precedents for present actions.

In view of the above, we see the poet (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo) in *Heart Songs* tapping the rich resources contained in African proverbs. Being the first poetry collection of the poet who has worked extensively and excelled as a novelist, according to the Punch reviews, the work projects the writer as a poet who has a deep mastery of the art of traditional African

poetry making. Her use of proverbs as a literary technique is quite prominent in the poem, 'Ram Syndrome'. Through it, the poet sums up the abuse of democracy in Nigeria and the world at large. She uses the proverb to explore the implications of falling out of favour with the political leaders. The proverb:

He who consumes the testicles of a ram
owes *ibia* debt.... (*Heart Songs*14)

The above proverb brings out the imagery of the victimized. Elephantitis of the scrotum or *ibi* in the poet's local parlance is an incurable and abominable disease. Anyone diagnosed of it is often ostracized. The analogy in the proverb totally sums up this precarious situation faced daily in the poet's political environment. The same analogy continues throughout the poem as the poet makes allusion to some political victims in the world (represented by Russia and Nigeria) like Alexander Litvinenko, Anna Politkovakaya, Dele Giwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Bola Ige, Moshood Abiola and his wife, Kudirat Abiola and Chudi Okadigbo. These proverbs do not only create analogy of these victims' fate but digs deeper into the different situation /environment that led to their demise. For instance the proverb:

Who does not know that jackal does
not forgive an affront? (HS 15/16)

The proverb above shows that the names of the politicians (Moshood Abiola, Kudirat Abiola and Chuba Okadigbo) mentioned as instances must have died as a result of daring the powers that be. It is a well-known fact that Moshood Abiola, the undeclared winner of June 12th, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria under the platform of SDP (Social Democratic Party) died in detention in 1998, fighting for his mandate. His wife Kudirat Abiola was equally assassinated for declaring her support for her husband's struggle while Chuba Okadigbo was rumored to have been assassinated due to the nature of his death

(he died of breathing problems caused as a result of tear gas he inhaled and died of before he could get medical attention).

Also, the case of race victim, Amadou Diallo in the United States of America (USA) shows the evil of racism. Thus the proverb employed by the poet to buttress that is very apt:

grasshopper keeps some distance when it
hears the raucous music of the Okpoko
bird: (HS 15)

Through these proverbs, the poet beams her searchlight into the kind of government that prevails in Nigeria and the world at large. The much touted democracy breeds insecurity, suppression of freedom of speech and individual liberty. Thus, the poet describes it as:

...demon-crazy spearheading relentless
attack on individual liberty on genuine
freedom (HS 16)

Again, the poet in the poem 'The 'ism' of Race' uses proverbs to show the manifestation of racism and xenophobia; the two major challenges faced by immigrants. People usually migrate for different reasons but central to all these is the desire for a good and comfortable standard of living. Unknown to migrants, this desire is more or less a utopia for no matter how enticing and promising a host country appears, the tendency to be unaccepted or to feel unaccepted is usually there. For instance, Aljazeera news reported cases in 2015 of xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals in South Africa. Also, the United State of America (USA) and some European countries according to BBC news have institutionalized racial practices that make it difficult for immigrants, especially migrants from Africa and other Third World countries to be treated fairly and equally with the Whites. Therefore, the poet's use of the Igbo proverb, "a hen that stands

on one feet in a strange land (HS 20) ” captures the predicament of Nigerians who go ‘abroad’ in search of greener pastures in the poem. The incidence of racism and xenophobia is too concrete to be neglected. These appear in the countenance and body language of the host communities. These immigrants are frowned at and despised for being strangers and as such, fear, uncertainties and rejection assailed them daily. They find it difficult to look at the faces of those who should understand their plight and make them feel welcome. Towards the end of the poem, we see that eventually they were able to blend and achieve the purpose of coming to these foreign lands. They actually survived the hardships and rejection to earn the name, ‘...Atakata agbuo... (HS 21).’

The poet equally incorporates proverb in the poem ‘Fallen Tyrant’, to vividly show that tyranny has its own consequences which is often fatal and tragic. It is important to state that most African states and some other countries across the globe has had their share of tyrannical leaders who rule with iron fist without regard to the fundamental human rights of the people. Thus, we see the expression of mockery and happiness over the demise of the tyrant by the court guard.

A court guard chewed gum and
laughedBlew bubble and flicked his
tongue like a lizardMocking the fallen
tyrant with shaky legs.... (HS 22)

The tyrant did not just fall (died a normal death) but was toppled in an insurrection against his rule by the people. Allusions to this effect were made of dictatorial leaders like Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko and Pinochet whose tyranny were challenged and their government brought to an end. This goes to show that there cannot be /...a sting without an antidote/ and that /... no tree can populate a forest? /

In view of the foregoing, the poet deployed the proverb:

Those who thrive by sword will not
escape its sharp-edged justice. (HS 22)

The above proverb paints a clear picture of what awaits tyrants at the end. The truth embedded in this proverb extends to the last stanza of the poem where its justification is elucidated. The poet could not help but pray that:

Would all tyrants be damned
Before their flood drowns everything in sight? (HS 23)

Conclusion

African proverbs as can be seen from the poems analyzed using Formalistic theory has a rich source of imagery from the African environment and they give poets room to express their views on burning issues in their environment. As one of the genres of orature, proverb has survived from its existence in the oral mode into the written mode. Its beauty lies in the universality of its meaning in that everyone can relate to it. As a result, the poet couched her criticism of the ills in her society in these proverbs as they can be easily interpreted no matter the ethniclinings of the person reading the poems. In employing them in these poems, the poet has succeeded in creating a work whose aesthetics is truly African.

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