

## SEMANTIC READING AND DECONSTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE IN CLARK BEKEDEREMO'S THE RAFT

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### Abstract

*In African Literature, words and language play major roles in the understanding of the texts. The reason for this is not far-fetched, given the rich and diverse language resource that exist in the African societies. In Nigeria, older writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo have artistically expressed their individual ingenuity, mastery, and dexterity in this wise. Therefore, this study aims at deconstructing meaning in The Raft by Clark-Bekederemo for easier understanding of the play. This has become necessary in view of the connotative expressions which the play is replete with. The paper is intended to demystify the use of language by Clark-Bekederemo in The Raft, in order to deconstruct the veiled meaning of the play, occasioned by the use of literary, rather than literal language. Literary Stylistics was adopted as the theory for this article. This theory explores the manner in which readers of literary works understand the use of language by creative writers in their texts. The theory was propounded by Leo Spitzer in his Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 1950. The focus of this paper is to interpret the play under review by according attention to the issue of meaning. The study notes that Clark-Bekederemo deploys African wise sayings which he sourced from the vast unwritten lexicon of his Ijaw community to foreground his story. The study also shows how successfully the author is able to reminisce on, and document his childhood experiences while growing up in a riverine environment.*

**Keywords:** Semantics, Imagery, Deconstruction, Language, Clark-Bekederemo

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### Introduction

Semantics has to do with meaning in language study. It includes words and sentences. However, in literary discourse, meaning is deduced from the context of usage, be it written or spoken. On the other hand, imagery is about what a thing stands for, or how a thing is made to represent something that it shares the same attributes or quality with. It is the use of words or language to paint a picture about a thing or create an impression or mood about someone or a thing. For instance, tortoise is regarded as a trickster in Ikwerre, as well as most African cultures. Therefore, making reference to a person as a tortoise confers such attributes on the person. The works of literature aren't devoid of semantic ambiguity, and *The Raft* by Clark-Bekederemo is no exception. This is necessary for progress to be made

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in interpreting the meaning of literary texts. The context unveils the semantic nuances of the text. Deconstruction is the use of words or language to analyse or offer literal explanation to something or someone. For instance, the ambiguity of understanding a literary work of art is made simpler, and meaning found through deconstruction. Lastly on keywords, literary language is different from the literal language wherein meaning is superficial. In literary language, on the contrary, meaning is deep and context-based. Examples of literary language include: proverbs, idioms, metaphor, and imagery amongst others. These have more than one meaning; the surface, and the deeper meaning. In other words, connotative and denotative meaning.

The complexity in understanding *The Raft* has sharply divided critics over the issue of classifying the play as a tragedy or otherwise. For instance, Chinyere Nwahunanya quotes Femi Osofisan thus: “The four lumbermen isolated by Clark-Bekederemo are not surrounded by a background of a stress, anguish or sin which could be called profound, Clark cuts his characters adrift without profound motivation” (173).

From the foregoing, it is clear that Osofisan perceives no danger or tragedy in the thematic preoccupation of the play. On the contrary, Nwahunanya avers: *The Raft*. .... One would insist that the kind of complaints which the lumbermen in the play articulate and the circumstance surrounding their precarious existence make it doubtful whether these men are not surrounded by a background of anguish and profound sin (173).

By his understanding of Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* as a tragedy, Chinyere Nwahunanya state as follows: In his concern with the state and fate of man, J.P Clark opens *The Raft* on the rather fearsome note that points almost inevitably tragedy. The lumbermen discover that the moorings on their raft have disappeared and they are adrift (179).

Still on meaning, Ngwoke Omeh Obasi cites J.O. Okome as being of the opinion that *The Raft* is a dramatization of the stifling socio-political, economic situation in Nigeria from the 1980s up till date and that Okome identifies the clear class distinction between the poor and the rich, the resignation of the exploited to their own fate as the major issues (54).

The paper agrees with Okome's view that *The Raft* embodies the themes of: politics, economy and class disparity, using lyrical device. But he also adds that it explores such themes as: his rootedness, culture, identity and the effect of colonialism. These manifest in the names of his characters, village names, use of local imagery, amongst others. However, of sincere concern is the theme of colonialism wherein the character, Olotu enquires from his crew members in the play, the meaning of 'bowl-spinning' by the locals in the community of the text. He is told that it signifies danger in the sea. This is a widely held belief amongst the Ijaw nation which the play represents. The above term means that the embattled lumbermen are at the mercy of 'Osikoboro' whirlpool. However, Olotu's obsession with colonial mentality makes him not to only disbelieve them, but he insults, scorns and ridicules them thus:

“You are all gone soft and possessed” (101).

*The Raft* by Clark-Bekederemo is a play written in verse form. This style, however, isn't completely out of place, as the writer's creative works also traverse the poetry genre. In fact, Clark-Bekederemo is better known as a poet than as a playwright.

## **SEMANTIC READING OF CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S *THE RAFT***

*The Raft* is the story of three lumbermen onboard a raft on a fishing expedition on the Niger River. The identified lumbermen include: Kengide, Obobo, Ogoro, and Olotu. They deploy their experience and expertise to have a firm grip of the raft. Somehow, forces of nature set in, and they are asleep in the course of their journey. Things deteriorate as the raft disconnect from the logs, causing the raft to sink. It is a metaphor for the greed, selfishness, bribery, corruption and lack of vision of the Nigerians in leadership position.

The use of the word “adrift” in the text stands for stagnation, directionlessness, and inactivity by the four lumbermen group who are the main characters in the play. This imagery appears most times in the play perhaps to serve as emphasis to the human sufferings, frustration and failure which humanity, represented by the lumbermen suffer in the world of the text. Also, the word “dark” in *The Raft* represents bleakness, invisibility,

helplessness and despair which the lumbermen go through in the play; they always look for matches to light up, as a temporary remedy for their darkness in the course of an adventurous journey which appears fruitless, bad, and unending. It also means either *moored* or *steered*, while not being able to get to one's target. For instance, Ibobo first uses this imagery in his dialogue with Ogrope, popularly known in the text as Ogoro. Shortly after that night, the lumbermen were awakened to the reality of the loss of a boat. On this occasion, Ibobo says:

“And when you were seen in time  
And asked whatever you were up to, didn't  
You say you were simply sounding the stream and  
In that stagnant dark too” (93).

In other words, the term “swamp bank” in the play is used for stagnation, immobility and in fact, inactivity and frustration in the course of a journey. This term was first used in the text by Kengide when he tells Olotu: “I simply explained that in rivers with muddy floors and swamp banks like this one, it is not always safe to make boats fast” .... (94).

Also in *The Raft*, the use of the term “fishing post” connotes a designated fishing area. . “Dog” as used in the play, stands for an animal with a pricking eye for details. This is in contrast with the European tradition of an “eagle” as in the saying “eagle-eyed”. For instance, in the course of their expedition on the sea, the lumbermen are confronted with darkness in the boat, prompting Ibobo to suggest that someone should turn up the lamp for them to see. Kengide has a doubt on the possibility of turning up a lamp solving their darkness problem and declares thus;

“No, that will only serve to create  
A pale of light. From inside that pool even  
A dog will not see” (95).

Like the phrase, “swamp bank”, there is also the use of the term, “sand bank” in the text by Clark-Bekederemo through the character, Kengide. This term like the “swamp bank,” means stagnation, standstill, a halt, retrogression and frustration in the course of a journey.

“Wash back” as used in the play has to do with the image of odour, stench, offensive smell and unpleasant situation or circumstance which the lumbermen undergo in their expedition on the sea which becomes fruitless. Rather than pay off, they die one after the other. This term is used at the peak of Kengide's petty-quarrel with Olotu. On this occasion, Kengide has accused Olotu of always picking on him at the slightest provocations and sometimes, unprovoked. In his response, Olotu avers:

“I don't pick at you; it is you  
Who always put your nose in the air, saying  
You smell some wash back from the gutters  
Of Lagos” (96).

The use of the word “forces” in the play means the gods of the land. Ogrope uses the word while expressing his disappointment with Kengide and Olotu whose incessant bickering and no love lost engagements help to aggravate issues rather than proffer solutions to their plight as he declares:

“You'll break each other's skull before  
We are through (97).

Also, the term “ebb tide” is used in the play as a representation of tidal-flow to the position of the right flank. “Skull-breaking” used in the text evokes the image of violence, fight, conflict, and injury. This could be seen in Ibobo's admonition to the quarrelsome duo of Kengide and Olotu when he says to them: “you will break each other's skull before we are through” (97).

The noun “cock” in the text connotes the image of productivity and numbers. This is seen in the character, Ogrope's expression:

“I wish there were some village  
About. It would have some cock whose greeting  
Of the rising sun all the world can recognize” (98).

Ogrope is referring to the squabble between Kengide and Olotu which is escalating on a daily basis. Again, Clark-Bekederemo through Ogrope, uses the word “cock” as an imagery for time and time-keeping in the text. This as in most African countries, not foreclosing the parable where the crowing of the cock heralds a new dawn. Ogrope doubts the effective time-keeping of Olotu's antiquated and rickety watch as he declares: “it would have some cock whose greeting of the rising sun all the world can recognize (98).

Ogrope's assertion on this occasion angers Olotu who in an outburst says: “why can't you rely on my watch? (98).

Rather than yield to Olotu's call for him to rely on his watch which he says he purchased in Lagos, Ogrope extends his further reliance on birds for accurate time-keeping to the bird, “cockerel” as an accurate time-keeper. Ogrope says,

“I said I want to hear the crowing  
Of a cockerel, welcoming in the dawn  
Of another day” (98).

Again, the insertion of the indigenous word, “

*Oyin* by the author means the imagery for God Almighty. For instance, Ogrope in the midst of adversary talks of being hungry and food in particular. This, to Olotu, is trivial because of the predicaments they are faced with. It is diversionary and amounts to laxity for anyone to think of food as Olotu declares here:

“Talk of food, and forget  
You are adrift, I really don't know how  
Oyin molded you of this part of earth” (99).

From the quotation above, it is obvious that only God in heaven has the attribute to create mankind. The author in his wisdom chooses to represent God in this light. From Olotu's words above, the reader of *The Raft* is awakened to the realization of the fact that the word “molded” as used in this context stands for created.

The term “flood inheritance” as used in the play means flooding, and de flooding of households. Consequently, “frogs singing” portends flood forcing frogs out of their natural habitat. This is seen in the text when Ogrope declares:

“Why not? When flood has inherited all  
The earth, don't the frogs sing?” (99).

The word “tide” is used in the text to reflect danger, extinction, viciousness and gloom. This is seen in the context of the tide always rising as Kengide says:

“The tide was turning you know they always  
Do that when it's rising (100).

The expression, “tales tampering with the stars” as used in *The Raft* means doubt, incredibility and illogicality. The playwright unveils this in the text at the scene where Ibobo calls the attention of his fellow lumbermen to the fact that the bowl is spinning. Olotu was unable to understand the meaning of the term in traditional terms. He asks what the meaning is and he is told that “bowl spinning” in a boat means that the boat crew members are in danger. This is in consonance with the representation of *Osikoboro* whirlpool as dangerous, as the people believe. Olotu dismisses this cultural belief as he says:

“Is that all? I think  
You are all gone soft and possessed. Even  
Kengide's head seems to have filled out  
In fear of some undisclosed metropole

Supposed to inhabit the place. But you wait  
And see: we'll row ourselves out of here  
Quick enough, will punt the raft free as sure as the sun  
Suck up the morning mist – yes, you wait  
And see! (101).

'Sucking morning mist' in the quote above means vision, light, reality and clarity.

The secondly, and ridicule that Olotu exposes the cultural belief of his people is predicated upon his ardent belief in the ways of Europe which he not only cherishes, but has long imbibed. Utterly dismayed by Olotu's attitude, Kengide's voice resonates:

Now I see why we of the Delta  
Never will make good. You believe all  
That tales tampering with stars  
That are told you abroad, but never any one  
At home about your own rivers. Truly  
We are a cast away people (101).

Apart from this imagery, the expression “our own rivers” used in the above quotation my “our people”. The author's use of “dried-out” portends the image of inactivity desertion, emptiness and non-functionality. Also, the term “Human rats” is use in the play to stand for theft, and thieves. The writer uses to represent poverty, hunger and famine by the lumbermen who no longer have food to eat, but rather, rely on sucking the starch in water to serve as food for sustenance while they journey on the boat.

“Osikoboro whirlpool” as used in *The Raft* is imagery for danger. This is because it a spot or point in the sea where the wave is intense. The many references to the term in the text serve as points of emphasis for the numerous dangers, turbulence, and uncertainties that the lumbermen have to encounter as impediments and encumbrance in their laborious, adventurous, and tortuous journey that appears not to have an end in sight.

In the same vein, Clark-Bekederemo uses the term, “drain-back” to mean recede, run off, among other things., whereas he uses “on-rush” to mean continuous, steady, and uninterrupted flow.

Clark-Bekederemo's Delta Ijaw imagery further unfolds when through Ogrope, he uses expression like, “born in the laps of nine rivers” and “still suckling on their breast”.... (106).

The first expression announces to the readers that the character in question is proud of himself. This is because, he prides himself on being a full-blooded Ijaw man, core riverine, and a complete delta indigene whereas the second expression announces the tenderness, loyalty, and submission which the speaker has subjected himself to, for the love of tradition, cultural heritage, cosmology, and worldview of his people.

The expression, “many floods back” as used in the play means many years back or many seasons back. This is largely because, flooding is seasonal, as it is being expected once in a year. The riverine Ijaw people of Niger Delta use the flood as an age-long device of heralding or bidding good-bye to succeeding seasons of the year when floods occur.

The term: “upriver people” is used in the play to mean or stand for the core riverine people. In the case of the text, it means the Ijaw people that inhabit the Atlantic coast, ocean and deep water bodies with a forest of swamps with little or no land mass. The playwright describes such people as upright when compared to other riverine inhabitants with less water. Kengide casts himself in this light as he proudly tells Ibobo in the cause of their discussion:

“But we upriver people are more upright” (113).

The words “washed out” in the play used on one occasion for Olotu means: “drown” or “to drown”. Also

used here is the term, “picked up” which means rescue, safety, taken out of water. Kengide's mischief, mockery, and insensitivity towards his rival Olotu's plight resonates when he says of Olotu who is feared to have drowned thus:

“if he was fool enough to leave the sail  
On, he still will in all likelihood hit the bar  
Before wind or tide carries him out. I tell  
You he's already been picked up by fishermen  
From the settlement of Age which is right  
On the sea's brink” (115).

The expression: “python crossing the stream” is used in the text to portend danger, dangerous situation, or circumstance, gloom, doom, extinction, death.

This is used in reference to Olotu, who is drowning in the play as, “a real fish” means that he is a good swimmer. Ibobo who makes these remarks also says of the drowning Olotu:

“... He has surfaced, right against the ship's flank” (118).

The later statement by the speaker in this context suggests that Olotu is being tossed around dangerously by the tidal wave which is a sad story for someone in his condition.

Like most African cultures, Clark-Bekederemo uses tortoise in the play to stand for a trickster. The term, “unbeaten breast” is used by Clark-Bekederemo to portray such words as: unfeeling, unconcerned, uncaring, wickedness, and hate for another. This comes to the fore when Ibobo berates Kengide over his wrong attitude towards Olotu, his wit rival even in death.

“Sometimes I want to knock you overboard!  
You sit there, your breast unbeaten, while Olotu  
Is swept out to sea and Ogrope, like an animal  
For sacrifice, is chopped to pieces by  
That terrible stern-wheeler” (119).

The expression “collapsed over my calabash of palm wine” by Clark-Bekederemo, through Kengide, evokes the image of merriment, drinking to stupor, and so on. Also, the expression “no man wants to stew in the pot,” (120). Means not wanting to be left out of an action, active participation, and involvement. This is underscored when Kengide tells Ibobo:

“Who told you so? In this game  
Of getting rich, it is eat me or I eat  
You, and no man wants to stew in the pot,  
Not if he can help it” (120).

In *The Raft* Clark-Bekederemo uses such terms as: “one bag of money” to mean earning a fat salary. Whereas, “apply the rope” is viewed from the standpoint of law enforcement on the part of the police. The term “feeding so fat,” connotes compromise, corruption, and corrupt practices by public officers.

This is captured by Kengide when in a dialogue with Ibobo, his voice resonates:

“There you are right. For all their Khaki  
And sashes, you green folk don't get paid  
One bag of money a month. But who will arrest  
Their sway? The police who should apply the rope  
Are themselves feeding so fat”...(121).

Consequently, the expression, “it is all one burial place,” used by Kengide in *The Raft* evokes the feeling of necessity of death, the inevitability of it, unfeeling, unbothered about someone's death, and in fact, mockery of

the dead. Kengide uses the term when he describes the drowned Olotu as an idiot, prompting Ibobo to invoke a curse on him for having no respect and speaking evil of the dead. This practice negates the essences of African culture, value for the sanctity of life, and the African worldview:

“You will come to no good end  
Yourself, the evil you speak of the dead” (122).

Ibobo's response to Kengide's attitude here smacks off further comments from Kengide as he tells Ibobo:

“Off to the bad bush or under the eaves,  
It is all one burial place to me. Boy, whether  
You die of tuberculosis or  
Of a cold and at a ripe old age with many  
Behind to wail you end, the fruit is fallen  
Anyway. And the family will not wait till  
The next market day before they gather it up  
For the sharing out. Accordingly, your loss  
Is the gain. But the young man as a fool anyway.  
Look at how he rushed forth like a beast  
Long held up for slaughter” (122).

Also in the play, the author's use of the phrase, “shut your eyes,” (123). Serves as imagery for sleep. This is seen in page 123 when Kengide advises Ibobo not to “shut your eyes”.

The writer's reference to “seven market tides” in the play signifies three weeks. This follows Ibobo's regret that he hasn't had an affair for as long as “seven market tides” which to him, means sex starvation. He therefore, craves for an opportunity for him to make up for this loss. Confirming that the period under review is three weeks according to the Ijaw traditional calendar. Clark-Bekederemo through the character, Kengide responds to Ibobo's claim by saying to him:

“Surely, you add much water to wine.  
Three weeks without a woman is not such  
A terrible feat” (125).

In this scene, Clark-Bekederemo, through Ibobo, uses the expression:

“Seven market tide adrift  
On a raft  
Watching over wood going to rot. I almost  
Forgot my manhood except for those brief periods  
I had to pass water” (125).

The above expression means that Ibobo has not had an affair with the opposite sex within a period. In *The Raft*, Ibobo berates Kengide for eating too much kola-nut. Kengide's response to him is that kola-nut is not as bitter as life (126).

In this context, kola-nut not being: “as bitter as life,” is an indirect reference to the difficulties, turbulence, predicament, and the hard times encountered by the lumbermen in their journey which leads them to death. Also, the term: “breast-sucker,” used in the play by Kengide to refer to Ibobo his colleague means that Ibobo is a flirt, womanizer. The expression, “two faces to one counterfeit coin,” is used in the text to stand for insincerity, doubled-edged sword, and not being straight forward.

## Conclusion

As a hallmark of their efforts towards fostering the literariness of a creative piece of writing, literary artistes across the genres of prose, play, and poetry intentionally leverage on language resource that are more figurative

than literal. In the light of the above assertion, the semantic analyses of a given piece of literature becomes inevitable. Since an essential aspect of the semantic theory is to characterise the meaning of words and sentence structures in a language, its usage in a work of literature helps to elevate the use of language. This differentiates literary pieces from other forms of writing.

In the play under review, the playwright has intentionally adopted the poetic format for dialogue engagement rather than the prosaic format as a style marker. He also uses other features such as the use of imagery, symbolism, proverbs amongst other forms of figurative language to convey his message to the audience. The focal point of this paper is to semantically demystify the use of ambiguous language. This will easily lead to the reader's understanding the veiled meaning of the text. The adoption of literary stylistics as the theoretical framework for this paper becomes desirable because it is the aim of literary stylistics to unveil the meaning and style of a literary text. The reason for this is not far-fetched. After all, stylistics connects literary criticism with linguistics because it is easily applied to our understanding of literature and literary works. However, no literary work can be understood without a proper semantic deconstruction. It is important to note that the technique which J.P. Clark-Bekederemo adopts in writing *The Raft* impacts more to the understanding of the play. It is only when the reader gets to know the meaning of the language that he understands the work. Speaking on technique and meaning in a literary work, a literary critic: Mark Schorer avers thus:

Technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally, of evaluating it (90).

From the foregoing quotation, of interest to this paper is that Mark Schorer has stated that technique helps to convey meaning to the work of literature. Lastly, it is instructive to note that works of literature are different from the following: Newspaper, history books, magazines and other forms of writing where plain language is used to write. Suffice it to say that a work of literature could say something, yet mean the opposite. The work of this paper is to unearth the veiled or hidden meaning in J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft*.

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