

The Poem as a Social and Linguistic Product: A Stylistic Investigation of Odia Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs'

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Abstract: *A piece of literature is not only a language act but also a social product. Put in another way, literature is creative use of language and a product of and for society. Odia Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs' commands interest in that it portrays a socio-political reality in a language that is striking and effective. This paper is a stylistic investigation of the poem with the aim of describing its features at the syntactic and lexical levels and how they contribute significantly to meaning. How successful Ofeimun is in manipulating language to capture the moral inconsistencies and hypocrisy of military rulers in Nigeria before the return of democratic governance in 1999 forms the crux of this paper. The paper is interested in the significance of functions that the stylistic features fulfill and the pedagogical implication of the choice of poetic texts for school children.*

Keywords: *Linguistic, Poem, Social, Stylistics, 'The Messiahs'*

I. Introduction

Poetry has always been a major component and the most intense of man's literary activity in ancient and modern times. In addition to making use of language in a unique and creative way, poetry, as a form of literature, often mirrors the social, political, economic or cultural context which produces it. Odia Ofeimun's "The Messiahs" commands interest in that it demonstrates these two peculiar characteristics of poetic discourse. In other words, Ofeimun's "The Messiahs" provides an illustrative example of poetry that reflects a socio-political event in a language that is lucid and striking. The poem captures the moral inconsistencies and hypocrisy of military rulers in Nigeria before the return to civil rule in 1999.

This paper is an attempt to analyse "The Messiahs" with the aim of demonstrating the linguistic strategies the poet adopts in the verbalization of the socio-political event reflected in the poem. The analysis directs attention to the syntactic and lexical means by which Ofeimun has sought to convey his message in a clear, succinct and effective manner. Finally, this paper considers the serious implication the poet's choice of language and social/political event has for the teaching of African poetry in English in schools and colleges.

II. Preliminary Remarks

The poetry of some early Nigerian poets of English expression – like Soyinka, Clark and Okigbo – has often been castigated as inaccessible and socially irrelevant owing to the poets' heavy reliance on foreign imagery and egocentric use of language. Their poetry, as Jeyifo observes, seems "... calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists"¹. It is such poetry that Osundare describes as a good example of what poetry is not: "... a clap-trap for a wondering audience, a learned quiz entombed in Greco-Roman lore"². Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike give the writers of such poetry the pejorative label, 'obscurantist poets'³. The tendency is for such poetry to push off the impatient reader because its message will not yield itself readily.

Of interest is the trend in modern Nigerian poetry which shows in varying degrees, a departure from the poetry of Soyinka and early Okigbo style to poetry that is public, social and relevant. Funso Aiyejina captures this trend in his observation that:

Young Nigerian poets were set to make poetry as relevant to the realities of their daily existence as possible, no more the pursuit of the clever, if esoteric line of Soyinka, the latinate phrases of Okigbo and Echeruo or the Hopkinsian syntax of Clark...⁴

These Nigerian poets include Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Harry Garuba, Molar Ogundipe-Lesile, Femi Fatoba, Afam Akeh, Uche Nduka, Jason Osai, Ibiwari Ikiriko, and Tess Onwueme.

Quite unlike the private and 'esoteric' stance of their precursors, the poets of Ofeimun's generation seem set to make poetry a vehicle for commenting on social and political issues in an aesthetically appealing manner. They appear to play down on the exploration of puny egos without sacrificing linguistic richness. "The Messiahs" typifies such poetry that is highly expressive and socially relevant.

III. Theoretical Framework

This paper is a stylistic study of Odia Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs'. Stylistics' claim to appropriateness in a study of literary texts lies in the fact, as Archibald puts it, that "all literature makes stylistic structure and carries stylistic relations through many sentences"⁵. Significantly poetry, the most sensuous of all writings, demands more stylistic attention than other genres of Literature. As Archibald further expresses:

Poetry, more than any kind of literature, develops and heightens stylistic structures; the figures and images of poetry are stylistic derives of content
6
...

As Hall noted, 'Stylistics is nowadays generally contextualised... focusing on issues of choice of style, register, genre, culture and identities in varying contexts'⁷. Stylistics, according to Kolawole has indeed 'served as a buffer between literary criticism and linguistics'⁸. The concept is, however, bedevilled by a multiplicity of interpretations, partly because of the different linguistic theories from which scholars draw and partly due to the vast, elusive nature of the term, 'style' from which stylistics is derived. Thus, while some definitions work for some purposes, they work less for other purposes. However, as Murana points out "The conclusion that could be justifiably drawn from the various definition of stylistics... is that its pursuit is linguistic analysis of texts"⁹.

The stylistic approach in this study aims at analysing the significant syntactic and lexical items in the literary text, classifying these items into categories according to their functions in the social context and explaining the possible reasons for the choice of the items. In other words, the stylistic analysis of the poem is concerned with grammar and lexis. Nonetheless, the word stock is the level of language system that offers the higher possibilities of choice to language users.

IV. Practical Analysis of Ofeimun's "The Messiahs"

The stylistic analysis of Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs' would involve a consideration of subject-matter and a scrutiny of the syntactic and lexical features of the poem.

4.1 Subject matter

As a prelude to analyzing the stylistic features of the poem, it is pertinent to identify the subject matter of the text. The poem, "The Messiahs" explores the socio-political situation in a country which has witnessed the overthrow of the corrupt civil government (rescued the dance from bar-jesuses lines 15 and 16) by the military men ("The Messiahs" line 2). The messiahs however, negate the attribute of true messiahs in their behaviour. Rather than salvage the populace from political oppression, economic strangulation and cultural subjugation, the military rulers 'hound' and "butt gun" the people. Their regime is characterized by callousness, deceit and dictatorship. Theirs is a mockery of the true Messianic mission.

4.2 Syntactic Features

Under syntax, we consider some ways the clause is organized to convey the message that the military messiahs have pursued anti-messianic missions.

4.2.1 The Clause

A close examination of 'the Messiahs' reveals the dominance of clauses of the straightforward declarative Subject(S), Predicator(P), Complement(C) and/or Adjunct(A).

Examples are

S P C
They are not doing a bad job

S P C A
The Christs are still performing miracles in the market place

Other examples can be found in lines 14-16, 17-18, 24-26 and 33-34. The choice of the simple, straightforward Subject Predicator Complement (Adjunct) SPC(A) type rather than complex transposition of elements of the clause helps to convey the poet's message in a clear and direct manner. In 'The Christs are still performing miracles in the market place', the elements of the clause are arranged in the simple normal order with the subject occupying the first position and the adjunct the last. There is no syntactic inversion to obscure the ironic message in the clause.

It is not in all cases that transposed elements of the clause obscure its message. Sometimes the transposition is deliberately done for the purpose of information focus as in bringing the object to the subject position in a clause; but the tendency is there for a clause with its elements in the normal order SPC(A) to achieve greater clarity than a clause with juggled elements.

4.2.2 The Nominal Group

The nominal groups in the poem are of different structures. They consist of headwords with or without modifiers(m) and qualifiers(q). Examples of nominal groups without modifiers or qualifiers are:

‘They’ in ‘They are not doing a bad job’

‘We’ in ‘We spread palm fronds on the road’

Examples of nominal groups with modifiers include:

m h

The Messiahs

m h

The Christs

m h

Scented alcohol

m m m h

The fervid winged horses

An example of a nominal group with a qualifier is

h q

tubers of plenty

The examples above show that most of the headwords are either preceded by modifiers (mh) or succeeded by qualifiers (hq). The modifiers and qualifiers serve to provide relevant information that throws more light on the message conveyed in the poem. For instance, the use of ‘the’ before Messiahs and Christs, shows that the poet is referring to particular, identifiable ‘Messiahs’ and ‘Christs’ in the society the poem reflects; not the Messiah and Christ of bible standard. In the same vein, the triple modifiers before horses in ‘the fervid winged horses’ supply a wealth of information that evokes the reader’s imagination of the extra ordinary horses.

4.2.3 The Verbal Group

According to Berry, there are three main types of verbal process which a writer can select from: action, relational and mental¹⁰. The choice of one or the other has clear linguistic implications. For example, the choice of verbs that are predominantly of the action type suggests that some activities are being performed by some animate beings. In ‘The Messiahs’, the dominant verb type is the action type. Examples are ‘doing’ in ‘They are not doing a bad job’ (I, 1 and III, 13), ‘rescued’ in ‘The Messiahs have rescued the dance from the jesuses’ (III, 14 and 15) ‘feed’ in ‘...as if we were born to feed on only harvest report’ (V, 28-29) ‘spread’ in ‘We spread palm frond on the road’ (V, 33-34) and ‘hound’ and ‘butt gun’ in ‘when the messiahs are with us/to hound us and butt gun us/into greater tomorrow’ (VII, 38-41).

A further examination of these verbs reveals the fact that most of them – doing, riding, rescued, hound and butt gun – convey the ‘wrong doings’ of the military rulers. Even their so called ‘rescue operation’ (III, 14-15) is a flagrant violation of the constitutional provision for a democratically elected government. Other verbs e.g. ‘feed’ and ‘spread’ indicate the resultant effects of the negative actions of the rulers on the ruled. The ruled are made ‘to feed’, in a metaphoric sense, on false harvest reports: a situation that would lead to famine and starvation. They are also compelled to worship ‘the tin gods’ by spreading palm fronds on the road, for the military rulers.

4.2.4 Thematization

The choice of clause themes plays a significant role in the information focus of the poem. According to Halliday (1985:39),

The theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message: it is that with which the clause is concerned. The remainder of message, the part in which the theme is developed is the rheme.

As a message structure, any of the four elements of clause structure – Subject, Predicator, Complement and Adjunct is capable of forming the theme. The theme is analysed in order to find out the information focus or emphasis of the poet. It is realized as the left-most constituent of the clause where it functions as the starting point of the message.

4.2.5 Thematic Analysis

Theme	-	Rheme
They	-	are not doing a bad job
The Messiahs	-	are still riding high
The Christs	-	are still performing miracles
Their harvest reports	-	say the barns explode with tubers of plenty
They	-	issue the word

We dance
We spread palm fronds on the roads...
...we must hire praise singers talking drums

The above shows that the clauses are about certain people – the ‘They’, ‘Messiahs’ ‘Christ’s’ who represent the rulers and the ‘we’ – the populace. Although any of the four elements of the clause can function as the theme, here, it is the nominal group which dominates. Thus, for most of the clauses, the information focus is on the rulers (they) and the ruled (we).

The theme in each clause provides the environment for the remainder of the message, the rheme. In the rhemes of the various clauses are expressed in detail the ‘Messiahs’ malaise – not doing a bad job (irony), riding high, publishing false reports, issuing out decrees etc. The catalogue of misdeeds is followed by a final part which tells the negative consequences of the nefarious activities on the ruled ‘forced dance’, ‘spread palm fronds’, ‘hire praise singers’. ‘feed on harvest reports’ etc.

4.3 Lexis

Within the context of this paper, the main concerns in lexis are collocation, irony and allusion.

4.3.1 Collocation:

Ofeimun makes use of some unusual collocations for aesthetic and communicative effects. An example is

Feeding the hungry with 21 gun salutes (10 and 11)

‘feeding’ and ‘21 gun salutes’ do not yoke together under normal circumstances but the poet has creatively ‘married’ the two so as to expose the rulers’ application of an awkward and wrong solution to a serious problem. To feed people with gun salutes is to compound the bad situation of hunger with fear arising from loud gun shots.

Feed on only harvest reports 29

similarly brings to mind a ‘solution’ which provides food for thought rather than food for the stomach of the masses. Harvest reports are no substitute for crop harvests which eliminate hunger.

Another instance of the use of unusual collocation is ‘all the trees are watered with scented alcohol’ – 20 and 21. This is another clear case of applying a wrong solution to a problem. Under normal circumstances, trees are not watered with alcohol as this may cause the death of the trees with negative consequences on agricultural output. The use of collocation helps highlight the wrong steps taken by the military rulers. Their intervention in government brought damnation rather than salvation.

4.3.2 Irony

Irony is the dominant tool used by the poet. The title of the poem announces “The Messiahs” but the content is an ironic presentation of the military rulers as pseudo messiahs; showing a clear difference between appearance and reality. The messiahs fail in their duty to deliver the people from oppression; rather, they deal with the oppressed with military brutality: ‘hounding and butt gunning’, which contrasts with the mission of true Messiahs.

4.3.3 Allusions

Most of the allusions in “The Messiahs” are drawn from the bible. Messiah, in the Jewish mentality, refers to a saviour or deliverer. ‘Christ’ is also a Jewish word for ‘the anointed one’. The ‘Messiahs’ and ‘Christ’s’ in the poem fail to perform the mission of an anointed people’s deliverer quite unlike the Christ of the bible who ‘preached the gospel to the poor...healed the broken hearted and set at liberty them that are bruised’. Luke 4:19.

Another biblical allusion is evident in ‘heroding the masses with imperatives’. ‘Heroding’ is a coinage from the tyrannical king Herod of the Bible. His method of getting rid of any potential threat to his barbaric regime was crude and diabolic. He ordered the killing of all male babies because he wanted to get rid of the holy child, Jesus. Herod was also responsible for the death of the fiery and effective preacher, John the Baptist. The aptness of this allusion lies in its ability to find a parallel in the atrocious acts which the military rulers unleashed on the populace they claim to be delivering from the ‘bar-jesuses’, the civilian politicians.

The pain of the disappointment becomes more striking when it is remembered that the ‘Messiahs’ were ushered in with jubilation: ‘We spread palm fronds on the roads for the motorcades’ 33-34. This allusion is also derived from the biblical account of the warm welcome given to Jesus Christ on the occasion of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All these biblical allusions thus relate to the subject-matter of the poem, ‘The Messiahs’ as well as project the message of oppression and insensitivity. While the biblical Messiah had a fulfilled mission, the military messiahs, as portrayed in the poem, had a failed, betrayed mission.

V. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate how the poem is a product of artistic language and socio-political reality. The paper has also attempted to show how the event described in the poem has reference in military interventions in African countries, especially Nigeria. The features of the poem are deliberately selected to enhance clarity and accessibility of its message without sacrificing art. For instance, its rich images and allusions are not far-fetched; they are either drawn from nature or from familiar stories from the Bible. In lines where there are unusual collocations, these are used to create striking effects within the grasp of most readers. The combination of these features is what gives Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs' its aesthetic and communicative import. Though written more than three decades ago, the message of the poem is still relevant and instructive for the civilian government never to give the military officers any cause to intervene in government. Democratic rule, in spite of its imperfections, is to be preferred.

The foregoing analysis also has some implications for the teaching of poetry in schools and colleges. Firstly, it implies that the teacher of poetry is required to have a good knowledge of the social, political and economic context in which a poem is situated. This is because, poetry, though a language event, is not created in a vacuum. Society often provides its context. A teacher who is in full grasp of the linguistic and socio-political dimensions of a poetic discourse is likely to be able to make his students understand and enjoy poetry rather than dread it.

Second, the teacher of poetry needs to be careful in his selection of materials for students' consumption. He is likely to arouse and sustain students' interest in poetry if in his selections, he includes texts to which students can readily relate. The example of our analysis of Ofeimun's 'The Messiahs' goes to demonstrate how highly expressive and socio-politically relevant poetry can be. If such stuff is dished out to students, it is likely to enhance rather than inhibit their love for poetry. It may also help correct the jaundiced view held by many students that poetry is always a mystification of language, an exercise in metaphysical, esoteric nonsense.

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