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2

## THE STYLE OF DENNIS OSADEBAY'S POEMS: A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF 'A SONG OF HOPE' AND 'TO WOMEN OF NEW AFRICA'

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### Abstract

In recent times, it has become expedient to evaluate the approaches to and methods of teaching literature, first at tertiary institutions and then at the foundation level of secondary schools. In many decades now, educators in the literary studies have adopted a lopsided approach in favour of literary with little or no attention to linguistic angle. This situation needs to be revisited. Students of literary and language studies in our tertiary institutions need to be re-oriented to adopt a linguistic approach which involves using the levels of language namely graphology, phonology, syntactic and lexico-semantic to examine globally the success or otherwise of any literary work. This paper attempts to radically inject this approach into the selected two poems of Dennis Osadebay's 'A Song of Hope' and 'To Women of New Africa' to prove that this approach can also be successfully applied on African writers' works.

### Introduction

Dennis Osadebay, among few others who had been categorized as African pioneer poets and who had dared to speak out their minds using the medium of their poems at those early years of African people's intimidation, need to have their poems excavated from the ruins and oblivion of literary studies. In refuting the assertions made by Nwoga (1967:39) which state that:

In appreciating the poems of Osadebay, and indeed of other poems in this section, you must be cautious. Indeed the simplicity and directness appeal to us, but if we judge the language critically, we cannot fail to see, much of it is not original. A figure of speech might be fitting but it could also be worn out and trite because it has been used for so long by others that it no longer gives satisfactory service. Not only does it show that the writer was not thinking hard enough, it removes the element of exact personal expression which is essential for poetic satisfaction...

I would highlight the issues raised in this excerpt. That in appreciating the poems of Osadebay, one must be cautious. One would have loved Nwoga to describe what could have led to the above warning. Is it the simplicity and directness of the language used? After all some critics agree with others that judged by any standard, the language of Soyinka's literary texts is relatively difficult<sup>2</sup>. Is Soyinka's more preferable? Is it then a crime to use simple and direct language in poetic expression? One may ask- what makes Achebe Chinua a celebrated literary colossus both in Africa and the Diaspora? Is it not the simplicity and accessibility of his literary language?

'That critically examined we cannot fail to see much of Osadebay's poetic language is not original; the figure of speech might be fitting but could be worn out because it has been used for so long by others'.

The inference which could be drawn from this, is that the learners of English as a second language had so much gained proficiency in its use within so short a period of its introduction by the erstwhile colonialists, that the expressions have become clichés. The questions generated by this inference are:

1. Who are the others that have used English (in a second language situation) for so long in Nigeria's setting?
2. For how long have these expressions been used? In what environment have they been used for so long?
3. How is original measured in the learning of English in Nigeria's situation?

Until these questions are aptly answered. Nwoga's critique in my own thinking cannot stand.

That the language displayed in Osadebay's poems shows that he (Osadebay) was not thinking hard enough and his language removes the element of exact personal expression which is essential for poetic satisfaction".

What are the laid down parameters for assessing satisfaction in poetry?

Global aesthetic assessment include among others, phonological, syntactic lexical, semantic consideration.

This paper attempts to refute the assertion by Nwoga that Osadebay's poems are devoid of expected satisfaction a poem can give. Nwoga perhaps forgets that Osadebay like other learners and users of English as a second language draws from the same linguistic repertoire available to him at his time. Viewed from all angles the poems communicated to their target audience; the poems possess aesthetic qualities- rhymes and rhythms and other phonological displays care accepted and the lexical items are selected in consonance with the educational level of the majority of their readers at the period in question. The writer of this paper believes that had Osadebay been able to continue producing more works, his works would have metamorphosed and competed favourably with these works that are being used to assess his poems.

### **The Themes in the Poems**

'A Song of Hope' explores the theme of impermanence of circumstances of existence and so advocates prudence on the part of wealthy and highly privileged in the society while he inspires hope in the down trodden and less fortunate ones. This admonishment has a biblical background because the virtue of hope should be the watch ward for all sojourners on this physical planet.

On the other hand, in the poem 'To the Women of New Africa', Osadebay defined the status quo of male chauvinism in African social setting and emboldens the women who, through educational pursuit and political involvement hoped to favourably change the lot and image of traditional African

*The Style of Dennis Osadebay's Poems: A Linguistic Study of 'A Song of Hope' and 'To Women of New Africa'*

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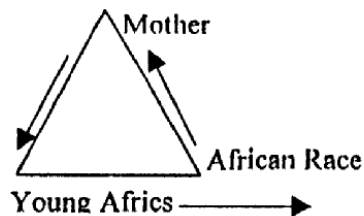
women. While a greater majority of writers negatively paint a picture of servitude for the African traditional women, Osadebay would be said to have pioneered feminism, a concept that was and is till date regarded as a taboo and vehemently resisted especially by the men folk. Osadebay however eulogizes the pioneers and pacesetters for the new breed of African women who were derisively nicknamed 'ACADAS'. Osadebay admires their achievement and that as a plausible course for the development of the African.

**Graphological Arrangements in the Poem**

In the poem 'To the Women of New Africa', there is paucity of punctuation marks – a total of three commas, two semi-colons and three full stops scattered at the end of each stanza. This gives a fast movement to the poem and evidently shows the speed with which the women pursued their goal of bettering the lot of women, consequently, building a new Africa.<sup>^</sup>

The contraction 'Tis' in lines 2 and five 'Africa's in line 7 were deliberately used to maintain a regular rhythm. These enhance the fast speed of the poem and tally with the wave of women liberation in Africa which results in the overall development of Africa.

The graphological foregrounding shown in the use of capital Y for young in line 7, 'M' and 'R' in line 9 is meant to underscore the vital triangular involvement of mothers, youths and African race in the overall development of Africa diagrammatically put thus:



That shows that new African mothers would influence the youths positively and the youths in turn would be beneficiaries of the exposure and knowledge given by the mothers, so that they in turn would be bright and enquiry-oriented, to make a new and progressive race. In the same way the poet foregrounds fortune by his use of capital 'F'. This attention to itself as the main substance which can steer people's course to comfort, improved lifestyle and happiness.

Both poems have three stanzas each. While the first and second stanzas state the crux of the matter, the final stanza blends conclusively the issue.

A Song of 'Hope' is dominated by the use of polar questions – 7 in number all of which do not need any response. There are a few commas interspersed in the stanzas. It is striking to note that there is no full stop but rather two semicolons occur in the last stanza. The preponderance of questions point to

the slow movement of the poem because the questions are searching types which require deep thought because the issues border on human condition.

Phologically the poet strove to maintain the features of traditional English poems i.e. selection of words to give and rhymes, a style which many modern poets skillfully avoid. In 'A Song of Hope', 'cruel' rhymes with 'fuel' in alternative lines, cold with hold, born/torn, door/floor etc. This creates a harmony of sounds and gives aesthetic value. Some of the lines fail to maintain a regular rhyme. Although it is not a flaw, it rather shows the openness of societal strata where destiny can land any one at any given time i.e. the wealthy can become impoverished and join the wretched of the earth while on the other hand, the down trodden can 'resurrect' into a comfortable economic position. That is why the poet advocates hope'. Let us exemplify the rhythm with some lines of the poem.

Is thy weather rough land cruel  
Charged with thunder, dark and cold?  
Does thy fire lacking fuel  
To thy heart great misery hold?  
(lines 1-4)

The rhythm is regularly presented as stressed followed by unstressed in lines 1-3. The fourth line changes to unstressed followed by stressed, clustered in three to four words in succession. This underscores the unsteadiness of human condition which is the theme of the poem.

There is the use of the co-ordinating conjunction *and* to glue words together in order to intensify the situation being described. Such words joined are either noun + noun or adjective + adjectives.

Rough and cruel	line 1
Adj. + adj	
Dark and cold	line 2
Adj + adj	
Great and rare	line 20
Adj + adj	
Soul and body	line 10
Noun + noun	
Men and stars	line 15
Noun + noun	
Weather and life	line 17
Noun + noun	
Dust and clay	line 24
Noun + noun	



*The Style of Dennis Osadebay's Poems: A Linguistic Study of 'A Song of Hope' and 'To Women of New Africa'*

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This regular pattern makes beautiful musical pairs which not only give joy to the reader but also enlivens the despondent heart. The rhythm is further enhanced because all the words in the pattern are monosyllabic. *And* stands for the cohesion of both natural and human elements.

In 'To Women of New Africa', there is a consistent end rhyme which many modern poets do not stress themselves to achieve. Osadebay gives end rhymes for aesthetic effect. Such end rhymes are:

Age/engage line 1 and 4  
Raise/days line 3 and 4  
Part/heart (lines 6 and 6)  
Soul/goal (lines 7 and 8)  
Race/face (lines 9 and 10)  
Crave/brave (lines 11 and 12)

Syntactically in 'A Song of Hope' Osadebay patterned his structure on traditional English poems where distortion of normal order of English abounds making the verbal element lose its positioning e.g.

Woman's born for born of a woman      line 5  
Sorrow torn for torn with sorrow      line 6

The purpose of this distortion is to produce rhymes and to reinforce the theme of the poem.

Sentences in the poem are either simple, complex or compound. Example of a compound sentence,

Full many a soul/by sorrow/torn/

From happiness and heavens door/

Is/worse than thou on fortune's floor/      line 6-8

The two verbs 'torn' and 'is' show two sentences but ellipsis have been applied to give the sentence a poetic feature. Example of simple sentences:

Men and stars/have fallen/low      line 15

Thou/art not/the first to gain-

Health or wealth or power or brain/      line 21-22

Varied sentence patterns reinforce the theme of, variety of line experiences.

In 'To Women of New Africa' the poet mostly employs the use of simple sentences.

It<sup>S</sup> gives<sup>V</sup> young Africa's throbbing<sup>O</sup> soul/ a glimpse of  
a bright and<sup>O</sup> glorious goal/ line 7 and 8

God<sup>S</sup>/bless<sup>V</sup>/you<sup>O</sup>/mothers of our race

The whole of the third stanza is a wish to the mothers, God's abundant blessing to guide them through.

This forms a repeated pattern of:

God bless you...

God cause (to shine on) you

And (God) give you strength

God + verb + pronoun.

All these give beauty to the poem. The verbal elements have present aspect, showing that the theme is a topical one whose actions are still in progress using such words as: 'Is', 'engage', 'gives', 'bless', 'crave'. There is inconsistency in the choice of question markers and statements basically drawn from biblical pool e.g.

Is thy wealth...?	}	(for question)
Does thy fire...?		
Dost thou...?		
Art thou...?		
Thou art...?	for statements	

Because the theme borders on morality which takes its origin from religious or biblical ethnics, the poet had to employ the register moreso as he conscientiously strove to maintain the pattern of the old English poets whose works stood as his (Osadebay's) literary background.

There is contrasting imagery of failure and success, which the poet uses to dichotomize human condition and he effectively matches them with adequate caution.

The words 'rough, cruel, dark, cold, lacking, misery, sorrow, bemoan, undone, 'ceased', all are related under the general semantic feature (+ failure) while such words as 'wealth, fortune, learning, rare, great, health, power, brain' relate under the general semantic feature (+ success). Those that have misfortune have been reminded that some great people have had similar experience.

Men and stars have fallen low (line 15) and therefore they should have hope of a better future.

On the other hand, the affluent are warned not to be conceited in their wealth, but should share it with their neighbours by helping the needy.

*The Style of Dennis Osadebay's Poems: A Linguistic Study of 'A Song of Hope' and 'To Women of New Africa'*

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In 'To the Women of New Africa', words of praise admiration and encouragement abound. The poet put under check his selection of words to make it simple and to reserve epithets for their consolidated achievement. For their beginning, the poet uses 'proud, good, bright, glorious, brave, strength'. Majority of these words are monosyllabic which carries force of utterance.

The regular pattern of participles used as adjectives in 'To the Women of New Africa' is employed example:

Coming age.  
Bye gone days.  
Undaunted heart.  
Throbbing soul.

This puts a force of modification just as the society puts a force on the woman to improve their position for a better and a new Africa.

**Lexic-Semantic Choice:** 'To catch a monkey' say an adage, 'you must behave like a monkey'. The choice of words here may be responsible for the criticism of non-originality cited by Nwoga. Nevertheless, the poet has a target audience and his primary concern is to be perfectly understood in order to take home the message.

In 'To the Women of New Africa', the employment of such words as coming age (line 1) suggestive of a new era (line 12) bring forth, bye gone (a corruption of bygone in line 4) are noteworthy. The corruption of bygone used is to say a permanent goodbye to the old dispensation in the lives of the traditional African women. It is a coinage by the poet.

'Coming age' is used to show a new life and age altogether when the poet hopes for a positive transformation of the African women to have been recorded.

'Throbbing soul' could be taken ambiguously because throbbing soul could be out of fear and anxiety. It could also be out of joy. The next line, line 8 disambiguates the word by stating a glumic of a bright and glorious goal. The word 'crave' shows a strong desire of the women to change their lot. 'Undaunted' gives the picture of acquired boldness and determination by the women to succeed against all odds. Line 3 has stated that the women engage their minds, time and lives. The words minds, time and lives are not only syntactically related to the verb engage, they all share the same semantic feature /+determination and also share the same medial diphthong /ai/ and all of them are monosyllabic words. This feature is known as semantic coupling where all the linguistic levels converge and reinforce each other.

In 'A Song of Hope' words of admonition are given to remind the rich of the ephemerality of health, wealth, power or brain and to draw their attention to the inevitability of death because 'thou art only dust and clay (line 24). Both words dust and clay relate under the semantic feature (+ morbidity).



**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to refute the comments advanced by Nwoga, about Dennis Osadebay's poems and has made a case that the poems are successful literary works by both linguistic and literary standards.

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