



A LINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S 'POEMS ABOUT WAR'

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ABSTRACT

The Nigeria's famous writer, Chinua Achebe, has popularized himself by his classics in novels. Not much has been written about his poetry, let alone the language of his poetry. This study chooses to examine some of his poems and more so, makes a full linguistic study of the selected poems, from the volume 'Christmas in Biafra and Other poems', using the parameters laid down by the all-embracing linguistic research on grammar, introduced by Noam Chomsky, known as, Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). This kind of grammar builds and improves on the structural grammar preceding it. TGG has its advantages over the structural type. This is because it examines language use in all its ramifications and so employs what he calls levels of linguistic analysis namely: the graphological, the phonological, the syntactic or grammatical and the lexico-semantic levels, in analyzing especially literary texts. This approach does not end up with the normal and casual remarks which the literary critic makes about the language use in a literary work, like, the language of this work is simple, lucid, accessible etc. Rather, this approach drives deeper into the language use of any piece of writing, describing the linguistic arrangements and stating what actually has made the language of the work lucid, accessible or otherwise. This linguistic approach complements the critic's work and therefore helps to produce a holistic study of the text in question.

Keywords: Transformational generative grammar, levels of linguistic analysis, embellishment, Biafran, literary.

Introduction:

Chinua Achebe has immortalized himself through his classics especially in fiction. The main focus of his works cannot be concluded without mentioning. *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and others.

He presented his experience in the Nigeria Biafra War in prose, entitled. *There was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, 2012. His two volumes of short stories, a volume of poetry, four stories for children

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and six volumes of critical commentary, are referred to by G.D. Killam (in vol. II of *African Writers* 1997 ed. Brian Cox), as 'other writings'. The 'second fiddle' position in which his poems are placed among his writings, has informed this research, in order to highlight their merits. Most of his poems were published in *Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems* in 1971. He incorporated other poems and later published them in the volume entitled *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*, in 1973.

Achebe put his thrust in 're-navigation' of Africa especially Nigeria's political cum social 'waters', which the early colonizers had bastardized through their writing about Africa. In his 1964 essay, "The Role of the writer in the New Nation", G.D Killam in *African Writers* p. 17 quotes Achebe:

As far as I am concerned, the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme – put quite simply – is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that African people all but lost, during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain.

After all the years of enormous task of re-establishing Africa and Nigeria in particular, the unexpected but unfortunate experience of the out-break of hostilities against the Ibos, (his own people) by their 'brothers' from the Northern part of Nigeria in 1966, led to Nigeria – Biafra war, which happened in his life time and those experiences, he has tried to write about in his collections of poem, 'Poems About War'.

Achebe in seven different poems in this section with different titles and themes, brings home to his readers his face to face account of the disaster of war. This linguistic investigation will explore the poems using the parameters of graphology, phonology, syntax and semantics, where each exists, in order to produce a holistic result and so make a better and more interesting reading of the poems.

The whole poems are examined at a stretch at the graphological level, commenting on the layout of them all, especially where the layout contributes to the meaning of the poems.

The First Shot

At the level of graphology, this first poem 'The first shot', is presented in a block form with six short lines, with practically no punctuation marks except the capital letter 'T', which starts the first line of the poem and the full stop which ends the poem in the last line. The use of a capital letter for the first line of each stanza, followed by small letters for each line of the stanza, is a regular occurrence in each of the poems. The dearth of punctuation marks represents the disorganized state of the people during the civil war. In the second poem 'Refugee Mother and Child', the poet makes a little change only with the inclusion of a full-stop at the end of each stanza and the introduction of some dashes and three dots in some places to allow the reader to participate by imagining what has happened and then to complete the information as he deems fit. This style is also present in the third poem 'Christmas in Biafra' e.g. distilling pure transcendental hate ...' (line 14). In some poems in this section the use of dots could also be, to express strangeness of situations e.g. 'motionless across her shoulder ...'

stanza 3 of 'Christmas in Biafra'. The fourth poem 'Air Raid', does not share in the embellishment of dots. It just comes in two short stanzas of 10 lines, representing the flash nature of air raids during the war. The fifth poem 'An If of History', has a stylized structural lay-out. It starts with a stanza of seven lines followed by indented four lines and after that, comes another stanza with seven lines normally arranged in poetic lines and finally has a block of stanza with fifteen lines. Here Achebe uses the World War II experience where Hitler was defeated, yet he committed untold atrocities. He imagines if he, Hitler, had had the opportunity to win the Second World War, it would have been unimaginable what the vanquished would have suffered. The world would have known chaos. He symbolically talks of the Nigeria – Biafra War and compares the evils that would have been meted to his country men Biafrans, if mighty Nigeria had been victorious. He endorses the war outcome of 'No victor, No vanquished' in the Nigeria – Biafra war. The first two stanzas depict the two warring parties, while the indented block depicts the war front and the last stanza of 15 lines represent the period of warfare and the verdict of no victor, no vanquished.

The sixth poem 'Remembrance Day' is presented as a block of one stanza containing sixty-three lines, closely following one another. Although there is a little improvement in the punctuation marks applied, they are still sparsely used. There are just two dashes, 7 commas, 5 full stops, 4 semi-colons which generally serve as full stops. Interspersed are, such marks as 2 question marks, 5 exclamation marks, a set of 3 dots which appears four times. These marks although varied, yet few, give insight to the subject of discussion and

also the mood and manner of utterance. The poet makes a mockery of the annual remembrance day, which is instituted by the Nigerian government to honour her fallen hero soldiers, who lost their lives during the world wars, especially in Burma, where majority of them fought in support of their British masters. He tries to compare the reality of remembrance day celebrations which had been celebrated many years before the Nigeria – Biafra war, with the very remembrance day which came immediately after the Nigeria – Biafra war. That is why there are dots which hoard unreleased information e.g. 'the peril on the edge of the chasm ...' (line 26). The poet withholds the nerve – wrecking danger that the soldiers went through. This is followed by the use of exclamation marks which the poet engages, to warn the soldiers celebrating remembrance day, that they are open to attacks by their fallen kindred, wronged to death.

On the other hand, the question marks have been employed rhetorically to show the enormity of the loss of the lives lost. 'But when, how soon, will they their death?' (lines 31 – 32). All the poet is trying to say is that brothers fighting their own brothers in a war, is futile.

The 7th poem 'After a War', is presented in four unequal stanzas with three dots (...) clustered in the midst of other few punctuation marks in the stanzas.

It is necessary to highlight a whole stanza of 8 lines without a punctuation mark used, until after the last word. It is one out of four such stanzas. Paucity of punctuation marks creates a problem of reading. Firstly, its reading will be breathless and the meaning will be diverse, according to where the reader opts to place a punctuation mark.

Let's examine stanza 4 of 'After a War',

After years of pressing death
and dizzy last – hour reprieves
we're glad to dump our fears
and our perilous gains together
in one shallow grave and flee
the same rueful way we came
straight home to haunted revelry
lines 29 – 36.

A war is not a pleasant experience and so the poet has no provision for rhymes, rhythms or embellishments. Therefore, not much can be retrieved phonologically from the poems, except that the dearth of punctuation marks makes its movement or reading fast and speedy.

Grammatically, 'The First Shot' actually shoots out a double – barreled compound sentence, which stretches over seven lines in one stanza with just a full stop at the end of the sentence. The compound sentence represents the force with which the first bullet escaped from the rifle and resounded in the ears of the non – expectant citizens. This sound is different from the sound of thunders which the suburbs are used to, 'at the break of season of thunders'. This has created an impact described as 'nervous suburbs' – a collocation that is very strange. The adjective nervous is rightly known to collocate with NP^s with semantic features / + concrete, + animate\ . Because of this breach of collocational rule, the poet says that the unprecedented noise will continue to linger in the memories of the hearers. This is true because, many generations of Biafrans had not for decades met war, let alone ones fought with rifles. They are used to clubs, and at most den-guns, which are only for hunting, and land rockets used during funerals of prominent men.

The comparative word 'than' is used to bring a sharp contrast between the different noises. thus:

That lone rifle-shot anonymous
in dark striding chest-high
through a nervous suburb at the break
of our seasons of thunders will yet
steep its flight and lodge
more firmly *than* the greater noises
ahead in the forehead of memory.

In the poem 'Refugee Mother and Child', Achebe in the midst of his war – stricken and ravaged populace, produced a live-picture of destitution and hunger, usually suffered by mothers and children. This is because the men were usually conscripted and taken away to war zones to fight, while women were left behind to cater for the children. The phrase mother and child always go together. In this poem the mother and child in question bear an oxymoronic expression – 'mother's tenderness for a son', should go with protracted joy and love but here, it is cut short by the clause 'she soon would have to forget' (line 3). That clause spells out doom and death. The poet applies heavy subordination and qualification, to enable him to produce exhaustively the picture of the children and their mothers who are refugees. e.g The air was heavy with odours of diarrhoea of unwashed children' (lines 4 – 5)

He goes further to qualify the children thus:

unwashed children
with washed – out ribs
and dried – up bottoms.

The above parallel structure also produces ellipsis of the preposition 'with' in the second line. The two lines also produce a pleasant rhythm which gives a regular beat. It can be stated thus.

with washed – out ribs
(With) dried – up bottoms.

Furthermore, the poet describes the children as

struggling in labored
steps behind blown empty
bellies lines 7–8

There is a picturesque imagery here. One can visualize tiny legs struggling to walk, and put before them are, blown empty bellies. There is an irony here because the bellies are said to be blown and at the same time empty. Some collocations are absurd like 'a ghost smile', 'singing in her eyes'. These depict the atmosphere of the time, where many children suffered from 'kwashiokor' caused by malnutrition. There is an array of hyphenated words which helps the poet to coin adequate adjectives to describe the child e.g.

washed – out ribs	line 6
dried-up bottoms	line 7
rust – coloured hair	line 13

This gloomy picture drawn of the child having the description above, prepares the reader for the child's finality thus, 'parting her child's hair this time, is like putting flowers on a tiny grave' (lines 20 – 21). The reader gets the message though not harshly, because there is an anticipatory final farewell from a mother to her son, because of hardship caused by the war.

In the poem 'Christmas in Biafra', the poet compares the way of heralding Christmas in an ordinary circumstance, with that of war time in Biafra. He draws the contrast using the cribs in the manger set by the nuns. The scenery of the manger bears evidence of good and healthy-looking creatures in plaster cast. These include the

infant Jesus 'plump, wise – looking and rosy cheeked, and one of the magi in sumptuous robes, and other figures of men and women looking well-dressed. On the other side of real life are the poor worshippers who have come to pay homage, looking wretched and making wretched offerings. These are refugees who are barely starving. Their description is worthy of note.

'poorer than the poor worshippers
before her who had paid their homage
with pitiful offering of new aluminum
coins that few traders would take and
a frayed five – shilling note ...
her infant son flat like a dead lizard ...
his arms and legs cauterized by famine ...
large sunken eyes ... lines 25–29.

The picture of destitution is drawn in this poem, using hyphenated words to describe the terrible condition of children represented by this singular case.

Grammatically, participial adjectives are used. They attract expressions like 'sunken eyed' (line 1) 'broken bones' (line 2), 'open eyed,' (line 30), 'stricken past boredom', (line 35), 'dead pan look', (line 44), 'gathering sorrows', (line 4), 'exploding inferno' (line 7), 'twinkling star' (line 9) 'crackling waves' (line 11) 'well-appointed distances' (line 21). These kinds of participial adjectives span the poem and they have helped the poet to give a good description of the situation at hand. The usual adoration of the newly born baby at the crib at Christmas in the churches, excites both the young and the old. The irony of this circumstance of war can not move the child of this desperate, destitute woman, as she turns her baby around and 'points at those pretty figures of God and angels and men and beasts' (lines 30 – 41.) This spectacle would ordinarily excite the heart

of a child but this exercise fails because the child is weak and tired, out of hunger. The poet describes the child's reaction as 'one slow deadpan look' (line 44.) The refugee woman who performs the traditional visit and adoration of the child Jesus in the crib at Christmas, hopelessly crosses herself, shrugs her shoulder in despair and walks away with her child whose hope for longer life is not assured. All he does is to 'mope often at his empty distance ...' line 47

The poem 'Air Raid' brings to our memory one of the numerous events which send people to untimely death. The swift speed at which the plane flies and the result of its venture make the poet metaphorically refer to it as 'the bird of death' (line 2). The irony created by the expression 'from evil forest' or 'Soviet technology', is unimaginable. Both words 'forest' and 'technology' are mutually exclusive. The presence of one, precludes the other. The forests spell out absence of technology, let alone 'evil' which brings in fetish ideas. The emphasis on air raid is its rapidity of movement. The poet compares it to the time a man can take to cross the road to greet a friend, with the havoc the air raid does by cutting into halves a human being just active a while before. It also shows that the air raid is not time bound. 'Air raid' is a war terminology which runs shivers down people's spines, especially at the time of war.

The fifth poem 'An "If" of History', considers the fate of various categories of people and their involvements in the war. The poet uses 'Hitler', to represent the war lord in Nigeria and if he had won his war, the course of history would have changed. Other bloodier wars are mentioned like Viet Nam war, where hanging would

have awaited people guilty of war crimes and those guilty of treason. In this form, 'Hitler' becomes a metaphor for absolute wickedness against defeated people in wars. On the other hand winning the war would have brought immeasurable gains for some people, like retaining their jobs, if the Nigeria's war-Lord had won his war. However, that is why the poet likes the verdict of 'no victor, no vanquished' in the Nigeria's war.

The next poem 'Remembrance Day' brings an array of fake and pretentious acts of celebrating the fallen heroes during the world wars. It has become an annual event introduced by our colonial masters. Achebe compares the intentions of the Remembrance Day introduced after the world wars, with that celebrated after the Nigeria-Biafra war. Their fallen kindred have been 'wronged in death' and they have malice in their graves for which they would rise one day and visit those celebrating Remembrance Day. The shallow sorrow for the dead includes

Your proclaimed mourning,
your flag at half-mast your
solemn face your smart backward
step and salute at the flowered
foot of empty graves your
glorious words, none, nothing
will their spirit appease. lines 1-7

The fallen kindred would have gladly done all those things had they the opportunity to be alive. Achebe brings comparison of the state of those survivors of Nigeria-Biafra war and the fallen kindred. While those kindred 'squashed back into primeval mud have greatly lost out, the ones alive, although they suffered much, now 'have a choice of a dozen ways to rehabilitate themselves like

shops stock again a variety
of hair-dyes, the lace and
the gold are coming back so
you will regain lost mirth and girth
lines 27 - 31

The poet asks 'But when, how soon, will they their death?' This is a rhetorical question to which nobody can readily give an answer. The poet does not hide his feelings in apportioning blames to the culprits in Nigeria – Biafra war. The affluent ones who have regained their losses should:

Fear their blood – feud
Tremble for the day of their
Visit! flee! flee! flee your
guilt palaces and cities! Flee
line 42

The grammatical structures above are parallel and underscore the act of remembrance, as the poet lines up with emphasis, actions which will also remind their fallen kindred who have been 'wronged in death', their wasted death. A pattern emerges from the structures thus

Your + { (Proclaimed) mourning
Flag (at half mast)
(solemn) face
(smart backward) step
(smart) salute ...
(glorious) words }

The possessive pronoun 'your' is syntactically related to the various NP^s which are qualified by descriptive adjectives put in bracket. The NP^s are 'mourning', 'flag', 'step', 'salute', 'words' and they are semantically related under the general feature /+ ceremonial/. Those activities are sham and showy. The syntactic and the semantic levels converge and reinforce each other. The poet carefully qualifies the

NP^s to show that the actions are practiced and not spontaneous e.g. proclaimed mourning, solemn face, smart step and smart salute and glorious words. The poet sounds a note of warning to the celebrants of Remembrance Day, using very powerful verbs connoting danger thus: The verb fear is repeated three times, flee repeated four times and tremble once. These come with powerful exclamation marks to demonstrate the reality of the reaction of the dead war heroes.

Attention must be drawn to the structural layout of this poem – one block of stanza containing 63 lines without any demarcation. This is a premonition to those celebrating Remembrance Day, that the occasion they purport to be remembering is green in the 'memories' of their dead colleagues because they feel wronged in death 'and their families might not have been compensated, while the survivors of the war have long forgotten about the war and its experience and have re-settled themselves.

Achebe advises them to pray that the dead kindred would not meet them still in their homes, to unleash their red – hot hatred on them. The only solution is that 'a new generation of heroes would rise and tender 'rites of reconciliation!

In the last poem 'After a war' the poet uses expressions and choice of words to show that one becomes the architect of one's destiny. He does this by purposely writing this poem with few or no punctuation marks such that whatever side one takes from one's reading, one is liable for it.

In stanza 1, he likens the return to normalcy after the war, to 'vines entering a hollow twig; its famished roots close on

rubble and every piece of broken glass.' lines 4 – 7)

The expressions 'hollow twig' on which the vines grow, and famished roots almost resting on broken glass, give a sign of all not being well – a keg of gun powder awaiting an explosion

Stanza II reminds the reader of the 'irritations' we used to cause, 'return to joyous tables like prodigals home from the city' (lines 9-11). In other words, we are back again to 'where the metre-man serving the bill brings a friendly face to a circle of sullen strangers, smiling gratefully to the door' (lines 14-16). The prodigal son now leaves his father's house and comes back when he runs into difficulty. This analogy explains how the Biafrans hardly allow the dust to settle before rushing back to where they call their 'homes'. In stanza III they not only come back to the very place they fled, they "clutch strongly at watery scum pulsating on listless eddies of our spent deluge (lines 18 - 20.) As if that is not enough, they reintroduce their circle dance even when their 'convalescent dancers' can only display half-remembered eccentric steps' (lines 25 – 26). These 'convalescent dancers' can be said to be wiser than those who have jumped soul and body back into the dance circle. Stanza iv states what has happened after years of 'pressing death and dizzy last – hour reprises'. They are glad to dump their fears and perilous gains in one shallow grave and flee ... home ...' (lines 27 – 32). This can be seen as a vicious circle for which the Biafrans will never learn their lessons and they forget too soon, their gruesome experiences in Nigeria's war.

At lexico-semantic level this poem summaries the war story and reaction of the people directly affected by the war. Such

words and expressions are as follows:

famished roots
irritations
sullen strangers
watery scum
circle dance
convalescent
eccentric steps
pressing death
dump our fears
one shallow grave
flee the same rueful way
to haunted revelry.

The expressions have been coined by the poet to describe the people's emotions and irrational behaviours even after the war

In conclusion, Achebe has stated his view of the Nigeria-Biafra war in poetry form. Most of the poems in this section fall in line with Achebe's characteristic writing. His words and expressions are accessible but the last poem which is 'After a War' is challenging because one will need to understand and to make one to one representation of reality with the proverbial expressions. The writer of this work is not surprised because Achebe has the reputation for simplicity of language use in his works. He can also pose challenges with his language. Both Fred Troller the jacket designer and Robert Andrew Parter, the cover jacket painter of this volume affirm: that

Achebe's poems are marked by a subtle richness of language
which blends simplicity and eloquence,
fierceness and tenderness ... and a
careful attention
to the minute – facial expression, a
wrinkled hand

a sunbeam-as a means of enlarging on the more perplexing aspects of life – death, suffering, life's strange inconsistencies and paradoxes.

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