
AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 2 (1) February, 2013:117-122

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

A Semantic Analysis of Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*

Enighe, Jenno-Mary (Ph.D)

Centre for Continuing Education

University of Jos, Jos

Plateau State, Nigeria

Abstract

*The ubiquitous role that language plays in the existence of man cannot be denied. All around him man sees languages spoken; he hears, speaks, feels and interprets language. But as all-present as language is, it is useless without meaning for it is meaning that defines man's relationship with language. Meaning is therefore what this work delves into, attempting to uncover the underlying meaning embedded in the language of Ferdinand Oyono in *Houseboy*. Because semantics is basically the study of meaning, the author attempts to bring out how semanticity is employed to delineate the themes of this novel. The work concludes that through the effective use of language, Oyono succeeded in letting us catch a glimpse of the African world view and the African personality which is simple, rich and calculated.*

Introduction

The work examines or evaluates Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* with a view to establishing the extent language is employed to delineate the themes in the novel. Truth is that language is the vehicle through which the writer conveys

his feelings, thoughts and sentiments to the reader. It is language that creates reality and establishes authenticity of events in the minds of readers. Effectiveness of language use therefore makes “eye-witnesses” of the readers to the events of a novel and provides the pleasure or pain reaction that comes after interacting with a novel. These facts about language and language use form the basis for focusing on language use in Ferdinand Oyono’s novel, *Houseboy*.

The Evaluation

In the novel *Houseboy*, the author, Ferdinand Oyono, uses the mind of a small boy to reflect on the evils of French administration. The novel is written in the first person narrative in the form of a diary by the hero – Toundi, this enables Oyono to be somehow detached. The theme of the novel is the evils of imperialism or foreign administration and the exploitation of Africans by the whites.

Like Meka in *The Old Man* and the *Medal*, Toundi watches with his childhood eyes the development of events and thus his eyes become gradually opened to the realities of French imperialism. The boy’s sufferings in the hands of his ‘superiors’ reveal the brutality and wickedness of the imperialists.

Houseboy therefore could be read as ‘the most passionate denunciation of French colonial rule in African creative writing’. The hero, Toundi is a naïve person who says “my ancestors were cannibals” (p.9). This shows that whether the statement is true or false, it is true of the evaluation of his people by the imperialists. This is however a narrative irony.

The novel begins with Toundi saying, “My name is ToundiOndoua... my ancestors were cannibals, since the white man came, we have learnt other men must not be looked upon as animals” (p.9). The irony here is that Toundi is eventually treated like an animal. He is kicked about by the same whites who preached universal brotherhood. Toundi is at first naively attracted to the white man and his values because of his greed for the white man’s ways but he is later to see the white man in his true colours.

Oyono satirizes the “evangelists” that advocate a Christianity that will entice young children to their religion by giving them lumps of sugar. Oyono also tactfully pictures the whites as the cause of family estrangement because it was the greed for the white man’s lumps of sugar that led Toundi away from

home. Toundi runs away from home on the eve of his initiation, “when I should have met the famous serpent who watches over the men of my race” (p.10), thus symbolically turning his back on the traditional life of his ancestors. Rather than returning the run-away child to his home, the white man received him, tearing his home apart and breaking the blood line of family relationships.

Father Gilbert as an antagonist to the African culture encourages Toundi to remain estranged from his family and also humiliates Toundi's father in front of him. When Toundi gets to the mission, Father Gilbert exploits him and in addition to serving mass, he did all the housework for no pay at all except that “now and then, he gives me an old shirt or an old pair of trousers” (p.15). This is very much in contrast with what Toundi had expected and that which attracted him to the white man in the first place.

As Toundi grows up however, his eyes are opened to certain realities. He notices that Father Vandermyer shouted obscenities when he was ill, thus contradicting his position as priest. On Father Gilbert's death, Toundi notices that all the people that were there were pretending. Toundi's being handed over to a new master at Father Gilbert's death is also symbolic as it marks the turning point of events in his life. His perception of life grows and he realizes that from then on, his life would not be the same again. Nevertheless, he accepts his situation and comforts himself by saying “... The dog of the king is the king of dogs”.

It is ironical too that Toundi describes the commandant on initiation into his household as “the type of man we call mahogany-trunk because the trunk of the mahogany... never bends”, because the commandant bent from time to time. “The king's dog” is also symbolic for latter on in the novel, Toundi is eventually kicked about like a dog by the commandant. Thus his calling himself “dog” was not just prophetic, but a prophecy fulfilled.

When Toundi discovers that the commandant was uncircumcised, his attitude towards him changes, he loses all fear of him and begins to see him as literally and figuratively naked. Oyono also uses lyrical songs to show Toundi's happiness at the arrival of Madame Deccazy. Toundi's welcome song is ironical because Madame eventually begins to treat him brutally, and the purity he associates with her greatly contrasts with her dirty affairs with M. Moreau. Oyono thus carefully points out that the whites are not really what the Africans thought they were or what they presented of themselves.

When Madame's flirtation with M. Moreau becomes open, Toundi is no longer a child; he begins to understand a lot of things. He interprets the various signs dropped by Madame and her lover the way an adult would because he now understood a lot of things. The language of the novel at this point assumes a new elegance to match Toundi's sophisticated comments on Madame's sordid affair. The mistress' use of Toundi as a go-between in a dirty love affair marks the beginning of his corruption which has horrible consequences for him especially when he lay on his death-bed, a bundle of rotten flesh. Madame Decazy is a portrayal or picture of the imperialists as deceptive, unfaithful and insincere. When Madame eventually realizes that Toundi knows her operations, she becomes openly hostile to him. Toundi's moral sense however, remains strong; he disapproved of his mistress' infidelity and sympathizes with his master. He also disapproves of the cruelty of the administration and the hypocrisy of the church in divorcing practice from precepts. He says:

I thought of all the priests... who came to save our souls and to preach love of neighbours... who can go on believing the stuff we are served when things happen like I saw today...? (p.87)

We find a similar thing in Peter Abraham's *Wild Conquest*. It is a situation where the whites who came with the Bible in one hand and the rifle in the other show conflicting allegiance. The Bible is humanistic and the rifle is destructive – yet they carry both. Toundi is to be destroyed because he is not only the eye that has seen the white man's nakedness, but he also scorns the white man and feels morally superior to him. He is therefore looked upon as a threat to the white man's superiority.

Eventually, Toundi is arrested on the grounds that he was an accomplice of Sophie who had run away with the agricultural engineer's money. Oyono clearly attacks the church by denouncing its hypocrisy in aiding the imperialists. He makes it clear that Toundi's first corruption was as a result of his being seduced away from his traditional environment. Oyono uses the penetrating eyes of the growing child to reveal the absurdities of religion. The discriminatory attitude of the church is also denounced, for where as the Europeans are comfortably seated in chairs with cushions, the blacks sit on trunks in the nave.

It is clear that the only place the whites unite is in their hatred for the blacks; among themselves however, there is envy, malice, intrigue and rivalry. This

is in contrast with the fellow-feeling, humanity and solidarity of the Africans. Kalisia, warns Toundi of his danger and Mendim thinks up a clever scheme to save Toundi some torture. In spite of all of these, Toundi becomes like the Biblical Joseph whose brothers deceived his father by soaking his coat in ox blood for Toundi's clothes are dipped in goat's blood to deceive the whites and save a fellow black – Toundi.

Madame Decazy is a representation of filth, immorality and infidelity. She throws her used contraceptives under the bed and asks her houseboy, Toundi, to sweep them, she also asks the laundry man to wash her sanitary towels. Oyono thus uses her to show the moral bankruptcy of the French civilization. The brutality of the white imperialists is also shown in the death of Toundi who cannot be treated because the white doctor collaborates with his fellow whites to let him die. It is also reflected in the engineer's degradation of Sophie, M. Janopoulous's cruelty and the commandant's violence.

The language and tone of this diary novel is matter of fact and masks real anger and bitterness. Like the Biblical Joseph, Toundi is somewhat a dreamer. He has a vision and he is bent on actualizing it even if he would die in the process. His dream however does not come true. Oyono's language attains satiric force when he describes the white man's sermon. Father Vandermayer's sermon is obscene because of his incorrect use of the local language. Oyono therefore suggests that other Africans do not go to church for the sermon but for the vulgar statements which are entertaining. Toundi symbolically begins to decay even before he dies. He also symbolically tears M. Moreau's bribe note to show a sense of moral superiority. As he dies, he asks the central question: "what are we blacks who are called French?" (p.4). Unlike in Achebe's novels, the characters in this novel are not stereotyped. They are real people who use language to reinforce their feelings, their convictions and their faith. Toundi's question therefore is the heart of the novel. Are black Africans French or Africans? The identity confusion that arises from an inability to answer this question is possibly the reason for our loss of Africanness and an insatiable crave to be like the white man – French or otherwise.

Conclusion

The use of language in this book has been portrayed as elevated, satirical, lyrical and reflective. In each circumstance or situation, language plays a

window role, letting us in on the internal musings of the African mind and the double-tongued deceit of the white imperialists.

It is through the use of language in this book that we understand that even though the African may be less “civilized”, he is more morally upright and value addicted than the white man who even though he preaches from the Bible, is very far from Bible-recommended sanctity. Oyono’s language is simple and direct, yet “rich” and “calculated”. Since one’s language is a reflection of his personality, we may therefore conclude that Oyono’s language in this novel is a reflection of the African personality – simple, direct, rich and calculated; a case of semanticism at its height.

References

- Abraham, P.C. (1974). *Wild Conquest*. Heinemann (African Writers Series): London
- Achebe, C. (1968). *Arrow of God*. Heinemann (African Writers Series): London.
- Achebe, C. (1970). *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Heinemann: London.
- Aire, V. (2002). *African Literature and Criticism*. St. Stephen BookhouseInc: Jos – Nigeria.
- Aylward, S. (1998). *African Literature: An Over View*. Pauline’s Publication: Africa, Nairobi-Kenya.
- Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, J. &Ikechukwu, I. (1980). *Toward Decolonization of African Literature*. Fourth Dimension Publishers: Enugu, Nigeria.
- Oyono, F. (1975). *Houseboy*. Heinemann (African Writers’ Series): London.
- Oyono, F. (1981). *The Old Man and the Medal*. Heinemann (African Writers’ Series): London.