

Christian idiom and style in Abam Arikpo's *The womankind of man*

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Abstract

Abam Arikpo, drawing heavily from the allusions of Christianity, nay the Christian religious liet motif of humility, meekness and long suffering, in a rather esoteric language, advocates the adoption of Christ-like qualities by people in all spheres of life and in all institutions - be it politics, religion, judiciary or traditional society. It is this quintessence of humanity and meekness that is, most times, pejoratively called feminity in popular macho idiom, hence the poet celebrates and eulogises "the womankind of man" and wishes that the feminine virtues, which are not popular in a male dominated society be adopted in the world to make it a better place. The paper intertextualizes this poetry collection and the Christian's holy book, *The Holy Bible*; another macrotext, paying close attention to language use and reaches the conclusion that both the Christian virtue and idiom, on the one hand, and the social milieu that favours patriarchal idiom, on the other, have immensely influenced the thematic concern and style of this poetry

Keywords: Allusions of Christianity, Christian idiom, style, social milieu, intertextuality.

Introduction

Every poet draws upon the general stock of words available in the language's repertoire of his time to create a literary piece. However what makes Abam Arikpo's style distinctive are his lexical choices, the manner or the patterns of constructions to create beauty, the creative, contrastive typification of the desirable virtues possessed by Christ and the pervasive qualities of manliness, which are the bane of a just and peaceful society. Arikpo is dissatisfied with this society's world view that treats with levity humility, tenderness and meekness which are characteristics of the female gender

and, in fact, the very qualities Christ not only possessed, but also charged his followers to cultivate and exhibit. Like Jesus Christ, the poet is encouraging the cultivation of these desirable qualities of the woman.

The womankind of man is a collection of long poems containing five sections namely, "Last of the Attributes", "Second to last of the Attributes", "Third to last of the Attributes", "Second to first of the Attributes" and "First of the Attributes". The poet writes in the metaphysical tradition characterized by high style writing, which according to Miles and Karns (1991), "aims at loftiness and grandeur" (p.3). This type of work "differs sharply from the style of ordinary conversation... by virtue of its solemnity, its resounding rhythms, and the elaborate structure of its sentence" (p.4). It also differs in sophistication of its wording. What this means is that clarity and simplicity in writing is not given adequate consideration in this type of work, making it assume a class consciousness garb.

Theoretical framework: Critical discourse analysis and intertextuality

Critical Discourse Analysis sees language use as social practice.

That is to say that this approach views language in discourse as a function of cultural, social and psychological framework in which it is produced. It explores the link between textual structures and function in interaction within the society" (Horvath). Fairclough (1993) conceives of it as an approach that:

aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practice, events and text, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (p.135).

CDA, therefore, concerns itself with the study and analysis of texts to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias (van Dijk

1998). Simply put, CDA “aims at making transparent the connection between discourse and discourse practices, social practices and social structures...which might be opaque to the layperson” (Sheyholisami, 2015, p.1).

CDA interfaces with intertextuality in that analysis of discourse practices, which handles linguistic analysis by “looking at traces of discourse practice in the text” (Fairclough, (1995b) echo other texts. “Intertextual analysis focuses on the borderline between text and discourse practice in the analytical framework.” Whereas pure linguistic analysis is descriptive, intertextual analysis is interpretative in that the latter draws upon other specific texts (Fairclough, 1992, p.85).

This approach of conflating CDA and intertextuality in the analysis is appropriate in that the poet reflects, across the poetry collection, the social practice, social structure and discourse practice in the society in which patriarchal society considers machismo actions and machismo parlance as the norm. Both the female characteristics and manner of speaking are pejoratively viewed as signs of weakness. Interestingly, it is these feminine qualities that are patterned after Christ qualities stipulated for better social harmony and cohesion as taught by the Christian Holy Writ, The Holy Bible. The overwhelming intertextual resonance of the scriptures and other macrottexts, even historical inform the choice of the conflated approach.

In all the poems, the poet, Abam Arikpo makes a conscious choice of lexical items that reveal distinctive patterning. He contrastively represents and celebrates the virtues he desires that the human society embraces and deprecates what is common and popular as he aims at promoting the woman-like qualities of Christ. As a result, interlacing the entire collection is a juxtaposition of the manlike qualities, which are by and large, undesirable, even villainous and the womanlike qualities, which are adulatory.

Lexical analysis

3.1 Contrastive description

In “Last of the Attributes”, which is “the level ground of compassionate”(p.3), words such as ‘staunch’ and ‘henched’ are used to describe the man’s attributes while ‘feeble’ and ‘weaking’ are used to describe the woman. In the same vein, the ‘fire and fury’, ‘fuming and fumbling’, ‘stagger and disordered language of a drunkard (p.13)’ are contrasted with the ‘calm disposition’, ‘cool temperament’, ‘low self-esteem’, ‘elastic patience’,

'longsuffering' and fixated faith' the intoxicating joy of the Pentecostal spirits of the villainous and the virtuous, respectively. Pentecostal spirit is the enabling grace and anointing occasioned by the Holy Spirit that descended on the 120 disciples and apostles of Jesus on the Pentecost Day. The spirit was and is still given to help Christians propagate the gospel and lead Christ-like lives. Unfortunately, the Pentecostal spirit associated with machismo idiom is fire and fury:

Havoc in the loiter

Of the air by the deodorant

Of gun powder

Their inspiration

Only reddens the eyes

And blurs their vision

With darkened eye-glasses (p.22, ll 2-8).

This intertext of Acts 1 helps us to understand how depraved manliness corrupts the spirit given to mankind. What becomes commonplace with the man kind of the man is carousal, drunkenness (from stale wine resulting in reddened eyes and blurred vision), debauchery, and flexed muscles. Interestingly but ironically, the cynical ignorance of the Pentecostal outpouring caused the Jews who gathered in the Temple for yearly Feast of Harvest which, incidentally became the Feast of Pentecost to accuse the disciples of being drunk with new wine.

Though Christ is seen as weak and demeaning, the poet upholds those feminine qualities of Christ against the masculine idiosyncrasy in the society. In "Second to the first of the attributes", he scathingly criticizes various segments of the society which wear the garb of manliness, which unfortunately, are celebrated: religious leadership, whose light wears "a translucent face" and whose "fires are secret" and are associated with all kinds of errors and vices; security outfit and the political class who are impudently tyrannical; and the judiciary which is typified people who pervert justice. Intriguingly, the cover page of the collection is embossed with the portrait of a stern-looking, wig-wearing lawmaker and law-interpreter, representing the machismo associated with the undesirable tendencies

counterpointed and that of a smiling, amiable nun, with the woman kind of the man, respectively.

Arikpo's *The Woman Kind of the Man* abounds in metaphors, coinages and extensive use of religious allusions. The Bible is the main source of allusions which has helped in shaping the overall style in the poem. The poet draws extensively from the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus Christ as he highlights the attributes that have made Jesus a gem of all time and a man to be celebrated. He, therefore, focuses on those attributes of Christ and how humans can imbibe them to foster peace and unity in the society.

In "Second to the First of the Attributes", the poet highlights the Christ-like quality of long suffering:

"Ikonna mgbai Wenn"

Your palms have clasped

The humorous for quite too long

But for what

Smooth and courage

Christ long-suffering is mistaken for weakness. On the contrary, this is the very quality that Christ wants all humans to cultivate.

The "First of the Attributes" advocated by Arikpo in his poem is faith. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the sins of men have been forgiven. The poem, therefore, calls on all who seek for eternal life to put faith in him in appreciation. This is in line with the biblical account that says "God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes might not be destroyed but have an everlasting life"(John 3: 16). The poet persona addresses Christ to help him have faith:

Eucharist!

Help my hand

Take and hold your faith

Wherewith to deflect

The dart (p.143)

a) Metaphors and Allusion

One of the major linguistic devices employed by the poet is allusion. The poet makes a lot of allusion to biblical accounts and interesting world history. A very pronounced example is his reference to “Emmanuel” or “Immanuel” which is Christ’s name meaning “God is with us”. Emmanuel is another name of Christ as is indicated in the gospel account of Mathew

Allusion is also made to Martha and Mary – friends and followers of Christ. As indicated by the poet, while Martha was ‘cumbered about things’ being on the lookout for the material needs of Christ, her sister Mary “had chosen the better part”, that of listening to the master’s discourse. She is described as “the faithful watch-word”. As different as they were in personal interest and outlook, the poet recognizes that they were followers of Christ.

The poet also draws our attention to the biblical account of Jesus’ death in which He was crucified.

The arms sideways stretched

Which crowned

Christ a knight

Whose crown was best

As thorned wreath

Was loosed

Here, the poet recalls graphically the suffering of Christ on behalf of humans. The death of Christ was followed by his being crowned and honoured like a knight. Yes, Christ was a knight or a warrior but for the right reason. Unlike ‘Okpebili,’ a war – lord in the poem who misleads the masses into unfruitful wars, Christ’s action saved mankind like a knight. Knights were known for fighting to defend both faith and the people. Another reference to crown is made thus:

help my head

Wear and strap

your crown

for a helmet (p. 143;)

This is the crown of salvation that is sought by Christians. Jesus is referred to as the Crown of life as shown in 2 Thessalonians 2:19. Our wearing the crown is an indication of our acceptance of Christ and a reflection of our faith in him.

The poet also alludes to Psalm 119 stanza 105. Instead of being a light that directs the people to the pathway of truth like Christ (the Word), the religious leaders of our time mislead the congregation with their misleading light of misinterpretation of Bible truth. The flame from the light is further compared to 'ekpemufuk' whose flame is easily blown away by the wind. We can, therefore, conclude that the religious leaders have failed in their duty to caution the people against their evil intentions.

Further metaphoric allusion is seen in the following verses:

You have drunken

A cup

Whose stuff

Has raised

You as high as a star (p.144, II 4-8).

The cup Jesus drank is the cup which exalted him to the highest authority in heaven and on earth. This cup is used in the Bible and by Arikpo as a metaphor for death. According to Roberts (2011), the cup is also a metaphor for God's judgement.

b) Coinages

The poet creates special effect in his work through formation of new words achieved by blending, compounding, and other means of word formation. To foreground the fact that machismo mentality and idiosyncrasy is awash with aberrations even in the judiciary, he coins the word, "Magiscrook" in place of "Magistrate". He says:

Ejukwa!

It rather has worn
the wig of magiscrook
rather than magistrate
and summoned
the council
of the lawless
or cold – blooded (pp. 7-8).

One of these unique words is “sheepdom”. This is an adaptation of the Bible’s use of the word sheep, which refers to humble ones who are willing to accept the Lord. The poet, therefore, through blending, adds the suffix – ‘dom’ to indicate a nation of sheep-like ones.

Another word coined which is of special note is ‘cowardime’ which is a compounding of the words ‘coward’ and ‘dime’. The final training ground is for those who are cowards or the weak in the society. According to the poet, the coward lacks the courage to stand up for himself,

“Ikonni Mgbai Wenn!

Your hear must be

Strong”

It is the done

Of titles and alms

This collection is unusual; regular collocation should be “it is the end” of titles and alms. However the use of the word ‘done’ creates images of completeness – complete removal of negative trait of showing strength through violence (war).

It is mankind’s

Death day

It is womankind’s

Birth day

These contrasts which are a refrain in all the five sections are also used by the poet to juxtapose the end of masculine trait and the birth of Christ like feminine qualities as upheld in the scriptures.

“Second to First of the Attributes” (pp. 71 – 136) begins with word “Ambrosia”, supposedly ‘the food of the gods’ in Classical Latin or something very pleasant to eat. This word of classical origin takes our mind beyond our shores to a foreign concept establishing the fact that the personae and other issues discussed about in the poem are Africa-based but carries a more universal import. Ambrosia! This is an allusion to Jesus Christ, womankind of the man, who though had a lot of spiritual power and strength, chose to be meek and gentle in spite of unwarranted assaults from the oppressors, both Jews and Romans. He is described as

companion to the great ones

advocate for the guilty

propitiation for the condemned (p. 72, ll 3 – 5)

This is in contrast to the attitude of the invaders of old – the Almoravids, poetically conceived as ‘Almorabi’ by the poet – who were marauders, destroyers, warriors, killers, plunderers and conquerors of the kingdoms in the past. The reference to the Almoravides (Almorabi) of old is to draw comparison between the modern plunderers of the Nigerian economy and the marauders of the then dynasty. The modern plunderers – politicians, plunder and pillage Nigeria of all her assets, that accrue from the sales of the oil. As highlighted by the poet, the plunders do not use these resources for the benefit of all but for their personal aggrandizement. The politicians are not scared of getting any opposition from the masses whom he observes are indifferent to their loots.

“Ikonni Mgbai Wenn!

Who neither levels accusation

against the sun

for the scourge of arson

nor sues the rain for acts of assault

and of battery

"Ikonni Mgbai Wenn" is an expression in Lokaa language for a sickly and powerless person. The poet adopts this as a metaphor for the womankind of the man, who is seen by the plunderers as weak and unable to react to any situation. They mistake her Christ like meekness for cowardice. In painting this image of the womankind of the man, the poet employs several literary devices as shown below.

"Your heart is flabby"

Its make is of flakes

"its tough is made of jelly" (p. 75 ll. 6 – 9)

– Oxymoron

This deprecation in the machismo idiom supports the low regard the society has for the humble, civil and patient person. It regards times spent with such a person as lethargic, hence:

"Its moments are dull".

"They are the scab's" (p. 75 lines 21 – 20)

– Metaphor

Because of his inability to react to the assault of the oppressors, the womankind of the man is compared to crab, known for its slowness and dullness. His blunt refusal to fight back is reflected in the following collocations: "blunt its edge", "blurred its vision", and "suppressed its pants" (p.76).

Your size

Is same with David's (p 115 ll, 8 – 9) – Simile

Their decision

Is as erratic

As the African rainy sky's (114 ll, 5-6)

The poet here compares the size of 'Atewurr', the false religious leaders to that of David. The stature of David did not do justice to his strength which was given to him by God, which means that without God, the false teachers, have no strength of their own. Again, the decision of the media in matters of national concern is compared to the erratic nature of the African weather. These devices help to create vivid images on the mind of the reader.

Their stand

Is always limply (p. 113 ll. 3-4)

Their vote

Is always without confidence (p. 113 ll. 5-6)

The poet here creates humour using oxymoron. 'Limply, is contradictory to 'stand' and 'vote' is in opposition to 'without confidence' or 'no confidence'. This contradictory usage generates conflicting emotions in the reader.

c. Codeswitching

Another language technique applied in the work is code mixing. The major code is English but there are avalanche of Lokaa expressions as refrains (the language of the Yakurr people). Expressions such as "Ikonna Mgbai Wenn" – meaning somebody who is sickly and needs warmth of the fire place, "urrwaukegurr" (a man who runs away from trouble but eventually lands in one), "Okpebili" (war lord or commander in chief of the armed forces), "Atewurr" (Priest associated with fertility who avoids anything evil), "Kokurr" (the big market day), "Okpogobi" (the small market day). "Ussani" (p.55), is a corruption of the name Husseni associated with people of Northern extraction in Nigeria. It represents the driving force called the military which ruled Nigeria for so long and plundered state resources mindlessly.

The poet further relates the strength and masculinity of those who have not embraced Christ to the 'big market day' and those who have embraced and accepted Christ to the small market day.

"It is yet Kokurr"

The big market day:

The genius

Of the mankind of the man

“It is not yet Okpogobi:

The small market day:

The gentry of the womankind of man

Interlacing the five poems is the obsession with the advocacy for the adoption of behavioural pattern of the woman kind of the man, what the Bible calls the weak, frail, the foolish things of God which are, in fact, stronger and wiser than the man kind of man. The former, he symbolizes with Okpogobi (the small market day which must take over from the later the kokurr – the big market day. The poet makes it very clear that the old order (macho mentality) must give way to the new one – the womankind of the man.

Allusion is also made of the Almoravides as is indicated by the corrupt form ‘Almorabi’. The Almoravides were a Moslem dynasty in part of Africa and Asia in the 11th and 12th centuries. They were marauders who invaded and plundered the wealth of the other kingdoms. This allusion is used to draw a comparison between the acts of the Almoravides and the political elites of the Nigerian society just like the Almoravides politicians plundered all the wealth that accrued from the sales of oil and other natural resources in the country. The proceeds which would have been used to develop the economy of the country is converted to their private use or deposited in Swiss accounts.

Conclusion

The Poet, Even Though Situates This Within His Immediate Social Cultural Setting, And Nigeria In particular, the fact that he draws allusion from all over the world suggests that he is concerned with a global message, the message that for the world to be at peace, it is the Christ like character which the world calls the frail and foolish ways of God, that are, in fact, the virtues the world should cultivate. They may be called the woman kind of the man. He lampoons the so called machismo idiom of talking down on those who may not show manliness in discursive practice, language and character. This actually is the villainous side of man, the man kind of man, while the desirable virtues which are pejoratively talked about in popular parlance are celebrated. The poet has copiously made allusions to Christian religion and the Bible in particular to pass on his message. One distinguishing style here is that ironically the poet’s language is esoteric and almost opaque and obscure

making the poems difficult. This is a reflection of the opacity of the social practice of the patriarchal society that prefers the villainous (the male dominated social structures and discursive practice) to the virtuous (the female paradigm characteristically Christ like qualities). In many instances sprawling the poems the poet resorts to calling many names and words in his native language, Lokaa and some other languages in Cross River state without marginal notes. This adds to the opacity of the poems. The opacity of social structures and discursive practice in the wider context is here reflective in the poetic idiom of Arikpo.

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