



The Language of Satire: An Exploration of Stylistic Devices in Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the artistic use of language for satiric purposes in Tanure Ojaide are *The Fate of Vultures*. In many of the works of contemporary African poets, the language of satire creates both humour and a shock of recognition through the linguistic foregrounding of situations, character and events in the content and from. Satiric language therefore becomes a tool for exposing human frailty, institutional (or social) vices and corruption. It is our aim therefore, to explore the stylistic devices in the text, thereby highlighting the satirical effect he achieves in the collection and the meanings derivable.

INTRODUCTION

Language is basically a medium for human interaction, an instruction by which people communicate with one another, exchange thoughts and ideas, and understand each other. People use their linguistic abilities to communicate knowledge, skills and information (Yule: 6). The concept of Language calls to mind the idea of society or social group, which uses it to communicate and to disseminate its cultures.

J.R. Firth sees language as "a system in which all the constituent units are held together in function by the whole" (180). To him, the usefulness of any language relies solely on its social function. This therefore stipulates that it is not possible to analyze any linguistic utterance or literary discourse, which is isolated from socially determined functions. Every utterance occurs in a "culturally determined context of situation" and its meaning "is the totality of its contribution to the maintenance" of the speaker's "pattern of life" as well as social ideals and conditions (Firth:224).

Language thus, is an aspect of human behaviour that is symbolic, arbitrary and of social significance in communication. It is a symbolic means through which man is able to communicate and interact with others, and by so doing create, control and preserve in a most economical manner all that

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embodies community aspirations and life in general. Put succinctly, people use language to exchange ideas through shared conceptions of word meanings, and through a shared understanding of how meanings are combined. This shows that language constitutes shared meaning potential.

Language and literature are interconnected; language is, for instance considered the vehicular expression of literature. It is the means by which Literature or literary discourse and ideas are widely disseminated. Ali Mazrui corroborates this fact when he asserts that “language is the most important point of entry into habits of thought of a people. It embodies within itself cumulative association derived from the total experience of its people” (86). Language then is the means by which ideas (literary, social, political e.t.c) are transmitted to the community.

In *The Fate of vultures*, while satire affects form, context and influences thematic thrust, it also manifest itself as a literary (device), which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institution and humanity may be improved” (Thrall, et al 436). In Ojaide’s creative imagination, the entire essence of satire is to expose, condemn and attempt to correct shortcomings in both man and society.

Ojaide is a renowned and prolific second generation Nigerian poet, whose poetic vocation is committed to the exposition of the intolerable gap between the rich and the poor. His poetry also evokes other dire political cum socio-economic travails, which have engendered disillusionment in post-independent Africa. His thematic concern portrays a detestation of tyrants combined with an obsessive commitment to social justice. He employs the resources of language available to him as a weapon through which he confronts, criticizes and condemns the political “charlatanism” and the unpatriotic role of some African leaders. This is in line with Tayo Olatioye’s claim that “an individual is sometimes best defined by the cultural personality he or she wears, more importantly so, a writer whose works near such cultural outfits”. According to him, this is the portrait that imprints itself on the creative landscapes of Tanure Ojaide” (1).

Stylistics studies recurring and striking features in a text so as to make generalization on the nature, form and function of such text. To this end we will examine some stylistics features in Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures*, which enable him to achieve satirical effect in his text

Satire in the Fate of Vultures.

Gbemisola Adeoti and Elegbeleye see satire as “an acceptable expression of anxiety felt by the satirist at the encounter of deviation from norm and a means of coping with it” (310). To them, the satirist confronts the society with its stark shortcomings, amidst disguises and artistic veils. This implies that satire is a means of avoiding unpalatable consequences of interpersonal relationships. In the following extract, Ojaide, presents himself as a concerned poet committed to a social cause, with the intent of reawakening social conscience of his people:

1)... blazes an ash-trail to the hands that buried mountains in their bowels
lifted crates of cash into their closets...

You can tell when one believes freedom is a windfall and fans himself with
flamboyance.

The Chief and his council, a flock of flukes gamboling in the veins of
fortune Range chickens, they consume and scatter....They ran for pocket –lift
in the corridors of power and shared contracts at cabals.....Shamgari,
Shankari, shun gari staple of the people and toast champagne.....[‘The Fate
of Vultures’ , 11)

In the above extract, Ojaide criticizes political leaders and blames them
for the economic set back in the country, which is as a result of their self-
centeredness, spendthrift attitude and mismanagement of public funds. Here,
satire is very prominent. Ojaide’s use of satire in this case is based on
persisting moral sentiment, which has a better chance for immortality, than
satire based on fluctuating ones. The extract above is typical of a satire,
which strikes roots in the soil of vices commonly envisaged in the Nigerian
society and Africa at large.

Ojaide perceives these political leaders as ‘a flock of flukes’, who live
empty flamboyant lifestyles, portraying lack of sincerity to self and others.
The poet uses ‘disarming humour’ and obvious exaggerations that appear
ridiculous in order to guide the reader into a realization of the enormity of the
political abnormalities.

‘blaze an ash-trail to the hands that buried mountains in their bowels lifted
crates of cash into their closets’ (11)

The above excerpt is indicative of obvious exaggeration where the poet
equates the corrupt political leaders with ‘vultures’. The satirical undertone,
portrays these leaders as ‘self gratifying’, which is typical of vultures. The
exaggerated satiric lines communicate the extent of the corrupt acts of these
leaders – ‘mountains in their bowels’. The poet skillfully uses poetic
licence, which is evident in the unusual collocation clash (foregrounded
irregularity), to portray his message of extravagance. For instance, the lexical
items ‘mountain’ and ‘bowel’ have the following distinctive features:

Mountain

- animate
-living
+big
+static

Bowel

+animate
+living
-big
-static

From the above, it is obvious that both lexical items cannot co-occur.
However, the poet succeeds in using this restricted collocation amidst
achieving humour and ridiculing effect, to drive home his message of
corruption.

Again the poet employs the devices of poetic pun to highlight his
message of want, lack and deprivation. He satirizes to expose the high rate of
corruption under the leadership of Nigeria’s former president Alhaji Shehu
Shahari. He writes: ‘blaze an ash-trail’

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In this case, he plays on the word ‘‘ash-tray’’. In another instance, Ojaide plays with the name of the former president ‘‘Shagari’’ to portray the deprivation of Nigeria’s staple food-‘‘gari’’. ‘‘Shamgari, shankari, shun gari’’ This is a form of neologism, indicative of a nonce-formation. Here, the poet criticizes corruption in the allocation of exorbitant contracts, which the leaders consider more important than the provision of commodities like food and the like. His intention here is to mirror those ‘‘corrigible frailties’’ of the human condition in the hope of alerting those in government to do something about it. Thus, the poet’s humorous projection of the lyrical ‘‘Shamgari, shankari and shun gari’’’, induces laughter, which reduces the intensity of anxiety that the misconduct portrayed can arouse in the reader, since the leaders ‘‘shunned gari’’ for unproductive public projects.

In another instance. Ojaide directs his linguistic venom on political officers or politicians, who fail to fulfill their electioneering promises. These politicians or ‘‘players’’ as he calls them, pretend not to remember their oaths of office. He writes.

If your king is a born actor,
he will prefer his stage costume to the crown;
he will show up in every theatre
make a theatre of every day
because he loves his gestures applauded,
relished the flourish of set drums.
You’ll pour all the stinking insults on him,
a failure even by the barbaric standard of a king
but a leading actor won’t mind
since he knows that like burs on a fowl
they’ll fall off when he stretches himself.
he’ll not remember his oath;
it was mouthed, he will argue,
to fulfill the inauguration ritual..... (‘Player’s’, 15)

Ojaide’s interest in the political affairs of his society, portrays him as an active participant (though in the literary sense), who aspires toward good governance. He tries to distance himself from the activities of these so called politicians with his use of the possessive ‘‘your’’ against ‘‘our’’. From the above extract, the poet employs the actor-theatre image to bring his reader to his thematic preoccupation. The poet affirms his moral superiority over these ‘‘players’’ who care less about what people say or think about them, but who would rather engage themselves in self-praise.

‘‘You’ll pour all the stinking insults on him.....
but the leading actor won’t mind.

Ojaide’s tone, though sarcastic, has a comic relief undertone. At this point, the reader is expected to relax and ease himself of the political, social and economic pains caused by the actions of these so called ‘‘players’’. These politicians, who are filled with pride and self-righteousness, project themselves as people with high demanding portfolios:

“...congratulate himself in the royal media on superbly acting the demanding role of king.

The poet’s tone here could be attributed to the fact that his people, (the people of the Delta), have once lived under tyrannical kings, who cared less about the well being of their people, but who rather “choked” and robbed them as represented in *Labyrinths of the Delta*.

The poet’s use of theatrical image(s) has the stylistic significance of projecting to the reader his thematic concern, which is centered on the unrealistic lifestyle and nature of politicians

Also in a bid to further ridicule the activities of politicians, the poet employs the device of rhetorical question. Here, the question which is of the wh-type is used by the poet to portray the fact that all politicians are the same irrespective of their standing in society or status: “what is he no matter his rank not to live like his own kind, players?

In this case, the question is structured in such a way as to convey information rather than seek for it. The poet is affirmative of the actions of this ‘actor’, who he perceives must behave like his own kind. In other words, politicians are conceived by the poet as players who live pretentious lives-pretending to be who they are not, and pretending to have done what they did not do. ‘‘Players’’ becomes a connotative term for political actors.

In another poem ‘‘When Tomorrow is too Long,’’ Ojaide lashes out at politicians and at the same time warns his beloved people of their deceptions.

3). And if a juggler ever arrives in town
with an eagle in a glittering cage,
beware of gifts and numbers.
beware of the season beware.
of twilight and worse..... his closed fist presses
a honeyed cake into ashen loaf
With his gap-toothed shine for a wand
he throws out one thing
with one hand
and with the same five
takes in more than seven
I have been a victim of inflation.....
(‘When Tomorrow is Too Long’, 28)

The above is indicative of a political satire. Here, Ojaide’s focus is particularized. His allusions are better understood by those sharing the same historical and social background. His use of the lexical items ‘‘juggler’’ and ‘‘season’’, concretises his message. He likens politicians to a juggler in a circus who after performing his act (using gimmicks), disappears only to appear again when there is another show to be performed. In like manner, politicians during electioneering campaign (‘‘season’’), toy with the emotions of the masses with a view to persuading them to cast their votes for them. After winning the elections, they disappear only to show up during another campaign. The poet’s use of symbolism here conveys his intended message.

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Ojaide, through this poem conveys the wide gap between politicians and the masses. He writes:

‘His attendants, poster-pasters, frolic in the loot of a flood the rest of the world live in a drought of denials!’ (18)

The above excerpt shows two contracting sections of our society—the haves and the have nots. As a result, the poet warns his people to ‘shun all the trappings of democracy’ resist the falsehood of these politicians, since if they are allowed to carry on with their evil acts they are ‘bound to be the beneficiary of all accounts’, while the people will be the victims. Thus, Ojaide plays out the role of an engaged poet committed to a social cause. His choice of lexical items in this poem tactfully depicts corruption. The poet though using a satirical tone, succeeds in conveying his intended meaning to the reader. In this case, he acts as the town crier who warns his people of an imminent danger.

In ‘I Too,’ Ojaide moves from criticizing corrupt leaders to criticizing the people. In this poem he tries to point out the fact the leaders are not the only ones that are corrupt. This therefore is a call for self-analysis.

(4). I too have my sin.....
Who has no birthmark on his body?
In what tropical year have birds
not smudged the sky’s blue sheet
with their droppings?
in what country has the earth not warped
from the leaden steps of leaders?
I coloured a familiar bird into a forest star
and reduced the storks skills
with the one-sided rule of prejudice;
I built an idol out of an ebony stock
how am I better than the sorcerer if my song is his spell.
and I stab the air to salute a sick god
(‘I Too’. 26)

In this poem, the poet preaches a sermon of repentance. He employs series of interrogative forms to drive home his point. He does not expect any linguistic response from the reader, However, he expects the reader to ponder on the issues at stake and take a decisive step. He skillfully uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ indicating speaker inclusive-‘I too have my sin...’ So before anyone starts pointing accusing finger, he has already made himself clear. The poem is a strong indictment of the hypocrisy of people who do not practice what they preach, and who stand on the ground that the leaders are corrupt to misbehave:-

‘They have not drilled me to the market place
because they do not see the stolen the drum I beat;
They have not harassed me with arrest
because the exhibit is vaulted in my heart’ (26)

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The poet achieves excellence in this poem with the array of interrogatives he deploys to convey his position to his reader. As moral issues continue to occupy his anguish he asks:

‘How am I better than the sorcerer?’

Ojaide’s tone here is sarcastic, he questions the craze for materialism, which has its grip on the citizenry. From the greedy politicians to the suffering civil servants, all have become active participants in the ‘unveiling culture of national greed’. He successfully carves out his message with his choice of lexical items and his satirical tone. The poet therefore makes a call for re-examination, because he sees the individual’s integrity as important.

In a similar vein, Ojaide employs the features of traditional Urhobo poetry (there is traditional Urhobo saying that every indigene of Agbarha is a king) to portray certain peculiar self-defeating attitudes of some Africans. The poet uses the term ‘Agbarha’ (an Urhobo town) to symbolically represent any city in Africa.

5). Come to Agbarha
 Where everybody is king
 and nobody bows to the other.
 Who cares to acknowledge age, since
 power doesn’t come from wisdom?
 And who brags about youth
 When there’s no concession to vitality?
 You just carry your head high....

 When you come to Agbarha
 Mind you, the town of only kings,
 there are no blacksmiths, no hunters;
 you will not find anybody
 doing menial jobs that will
 soil the great name of king...
 nobody ever climbs the oil palm
 nor taps the rubber tree.
 everybody is as bloated
 as a wind-filled bag...
 (‘Where Everybody is king’ 58)

In the above poem, Ojaide minces no words in projecting his message of foolish pride, which becomes self-destructive. Again his tone here is sarcastic. He projects a land where there is no respect for culture and tradition. The aged are not respected and the people do not accept insults. The cultures of handwork and artisan activities have given way to flamboyance. Here people would rather ‘eat’ and not ‘work’ since they regard themselves as kings: ‘where everybody is king and nobody bows to the other’. Ojaide laments the affairs of his society. The satiric thrust of the poem is geared towards making the society better. In a land where there are no blacksmiths,

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no hunters, no labourers, no rubber or palm-wine tappers, people live only on pomposity and self-importance: "Everybody is a bloated as a wind-filled bag".

The use of simile here aptly captures the poet's intentions. He portrays a social message and a social conscience. The imagery and the humour all succinctly convey the poet's message of dangerous craving for pride and flamboyance.

The poet continues to bemoan the activities of his people as he lashes out at those who do not want to see others as being better than they are: "No king is safe or sees himself as really great in the presence of others" but who would rather use diabolical means to destroy the other: "and they try diabolic charms on each other, dying like outcast without horn-blasts". Thus rivalry becomes the order of the day. Ojaide condemns outrightly foolish pride, which cannot be a substitute for humility. He employs the use of invective language, which he directs against the individuals in his society perpetuating these vices. His use of satire intends to make better for society that which is wrong. His language though harsh and abusive, he humorously laments the affairs of society in a denunciatory way. He therefore inspires a reshaping of the society.

In the poem "The Funeral of the Hyena", Ojaide again focuses his searchlight on the leaders whom he regards as "scorpions", "hyenas" and "Vultures".

6)....if you catch *Ogiso* On the raw side of the throne stealing into you with malice thirsty for blood-draughts patient for your death and you cry out that he's not composed for the likes of scorpions hyenas vultures they aren't street salt. Nor their rule of refuge... (The Funeral of the Hyena', 72)

In the above poem, Ojaide in a bid to actualize his mission of exposing and ridiculing the outrageous acts of political leaders, which is aimed at correcting them, employs the resources of language of satire replete with harsh, violent and abusive linguistic markers. Such linguistic markers include: "beaten monkey", "face-guts" "mountain of filth" e.t.c. He qualifies these corrupt politicians with carnivorous traits of "hyenas" and vultures". His creative impulse takes him back in time as he recalls the murderous acts of "Ogiso" (Urhobo tyrant and wicked god-head) and likens such acts to those perpetuated by present politicians. Ojaide's contextual relevance is worthy of note. He constructs his message from his localized society and this portrays literature that is of great social significance. This is line with fact that literature is a product of society, since the writer and his or her subject matter do not exist in a vacuum. Thus, Ojaide through the use of language reflects on the life of people who live in his society.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have examined some instances of Ojaide's use of the language of satire to convey his intended message. He employs invective language in

clinging his observation, and without restraint, he lashes at corrupt leaders, politicians and other citizens. He mirrors the society and challenges it to look at itself. Hence, the satire is geared towards making better for society that which is wrong.

He combines the linguistic tools available to him with those of the Delta to structure his poetic forms and message. Both with other artifacts become major cultural signals with which he reaches out to his audience.

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