

Chapter Twenty Eight

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF EZENWA-OHAETO'S *THE VOICE OF THE NIGHT MASQUERADE* AND NIYI OSUNDARE'S *THE WORD IS AN EGG*^a

Uchenna Oyali

Abstract

*This paper aims at foregrounding the parallels in the styles of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's **The Voice of the Night Masquerade** and Niyi Osundare's **The Word Is an Egg**. Both writers draw a lot from their respective oral traditions, a phenomenon that is greatly manifested in the works under study. Thus, this paper holds that the striking similarities in the styles of the two anthologies, which invariably shows the similarities in the oratures of the authors' respective ethnic groups (Igbo and Yoruba), should be seen as an element unifying the two ethnic groups. And this realization should engender a more cordial relationship among members of these ethnic groups and indeed other ethnic groups in Nigeria who should see themselves as one people in spite of their surface heterogeneous characters.*

Keywords: *stylistics, orature, Nigerian poetry,*

Introduction

One of the problems faced by early African writers was that of expressing themselves in foreign tongues. But many of these writers have succeeded in giving a fresh rendering of the exoglossic language. As Chinua Achebe puts it in 'The African Writer and the English Language',

I feel that the English Language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

This indigenisation of English is well pronounced in the poetry of the so-called second generation of modern Nigerian poets. In the words of Toyin Jegede (in Ogundele and Adeoti 151) these poets 'use more of traditional folk literary techniques' in their poetry. They rely a lot on orature for their inspiration and style. And this symbiotic relationship between the oral and the written has given birth to a distinct, hybrid poetic style. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Niyi Osundare belong to this school. But they have different cultural backgrounds. While Ezenwa-Ohaeto is Igbo, Niyi Osundare is Yoruba. And this finds expression in their literary outputs. Despite the pan-human cultural and linguistic traits, as Osundare has noted, each culture as well as the language in which it is articulated, has a certain degree of uniqueness. In man's universal culture pattern, each strand is a significant entity. For instance, every culture has marriage rites, but details of these rites vary from culture to culture; every human language has phonemes, but it is common knowledge that each language has its own particular set of phonemes. (in Owolabi 341)

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Abuja, Abuja.

It is also true that each culture affects their writers' language and style differently in works written in another language. Bernth Lindfors has demonstrated this in his 'Characteristics of Yoruba and Ibo Prose Styles in English' (see Works Cited).

However, unlike Lindfors' which looks at the differences between the two prose styles, this study focuses on the parallels in the styles of Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Niyi Osundare in their *The Voice of the Night Masquerade* (*The Voice* henceforth) and *The Word Is an Egg* (*The Word* henceforth) respectively. Though the poetry collections appeal to the oratures of the respective writers, they still share a lot in common. The remaining part of this essay will concentrate on fronting those areas of convergence in the two works, starting from their motivations, through their structural patterns, to some stylistic features derived from orature.

Motivations

Both works were motivated by the desire to make society better. And this has informed the satiric nature of the poems. Their respective titles draw attention to this.

The Voice draws attention to the place of the night masquerade in Igboland. The masquerade in traditional Igbo society is a 'representation of deities or divinities' (Anigala 34). Onuora Nzekwu (quoted in Anigala *ibid*) adds that masquerades (ancestral spirits) 'are superior to mere mortals, and constitute an unusual phenomenon when they assume physical forms'. The night masquerade especially appears mainly to salvage a difficult situation. Ezenwa-Ohaeto himself, in the proword to *The Voice*, highlights the situations that call for the night masquerade's appearance.

It is a cultural tradition in my part of the world that when abominations become unbearable; when the truth must be told with great courage, the night masquerade appears ... Thus, in my part of the world, sometimes the womb of the night is pierced by the guttural voice of the night masquerade in order to set a senseless practice right; sometimes the night masquerade must confront the ruler in order to point out the nakedness of his utterances; sometimes in a time of extreme anxiety the night masquerade must appear to talk ...

The public and the private engage the attention of the night masquerade. The misdemeanour in the family, the deviances on the streets, the abnormalities in public affairs and incongruities of socio-political activities. It is therefore, appropriate that whenever the night masquerade appears, it deserves attention ... this is the voice of the night masquerade, I am only the medium ... (8)

Thus, *The Voice* draws attention to such ills in the society as corrupt leadership ('The Spirit Ties me to the Earth'), sycophancy ('The Dancing Bee Is About to Sting'), and prostitution ('On the Streets at Night'). It also identifies neglect of our natural resources as the causes of our youths' search for greener pastures abroad and then calls for concerted efforts to tap these resources and develop our country ('The Treasure at Home' and 'Planting Seeds in the

Womb of Time'). The anthology further eulogises some national literary icons, living and dead, to recapitulate their contributions to societal growth as well as to inspire younger artists to hold on to noble ideals ('A Chant for the Dead'; Songs for the Living').

On the other hand, *The Word* accentuates the creative powers of the spoken word. Derived from a Yoruba proverb, *eyin l'ṣṣrṣṣ*, *The Word* encapsulates the productive and destructive potentials of the word. Thus it calls for a cautious and positive use of words

The Word, the word
Is an egg:

If it falls on the outcrop
Of a stumbling tongue
It breaks

Ungatherably (14)

'Divining Words' appears to sum the thrust of the anthology:

I long for
The horizontal thrust of words

For a ethnic group of idioms germ-
inating towards the light

Marching flank to flank
Against the army of silence

Clamorous like anklebells
Serene like a water lily

I long for words
So careful about the company they keep

Words which cut a path
On the divination tray (15)

Here, the poet seems to call on the elite who should lead the people 'towards the light' to fight against complacency, '[a]gainst the army of silence'; the poet calls for intellectuals 'mindful of the company they keep', to guide the society aright.

Structural Pattern

Structurally, *The Voice* and *The Word* are not collections of unrelated poems. Both anthologies have the introduction – body – conclusion pattern, thereby giving the impression of completeness, wholeness. And both anthologies have signposts to mark these sections.

Against the background of the intolerable, unbearable, and alarming rate at which the ills in the Nigerian society blossom, the poets recognise the fact that only an extraordinary prophylactic measure can forestall the total breakdown of society. Thus Ezenwa-Ohaeto resorts to the masquerade motif. The anthology starts with an invocation of the masquerade in 'A Call at Dusk' and the masquerade's appearance in 'Raising a Chant'. The following poems, which constitute the main body of the anthology, then highlight the various ailing aspects of the society (as mentioned in 'Motivations' above). And after completing his mission, the masquerade has to leave for the spirit world. The masquerade's departure, the concluding part of the anthology, is signalled in the opening stanza of the last but one poem aptly titled 'A Chant at the Anthole'

Masquerades emerge from antholes
 Masquerades depart from antholes
 'The Fading Chant' then completes the cycle.
 Its last stanza reads
 Raise a chant for me
 Raise a chant for me
 Raise a chant – (97)

The dash gives the impression of the fading voice of the masquerade.

Similarly, *The Word* starts with an invocation of the word. The introductory poem fittingly entitled 'Invocations of the Word' appeals to the creative powers of the spoken word. It partly describes and partly exhorts the word. In fact, the poem paints the picture of an omnipotent force.

The Word is life
 The Word is death
 The Word is lifeanddeath (12)

Incidentally, only this poem occupies the first part of the anthology appropriately titled 'Abùùbùtán' (inexhaustible). The following four parts of the anthology with a total of forty-six poems then focus on the issues that bother the poet and his society. The last part of the anthology also with just one poem like the first part, marks the conclusion and prophesies a bright future.

Oh those palms scattering riddles in the Wind
 And squirrels cracking the nut of obstinate proverbs
 And the Word breaking, Egg with a luminous shell
 And new Dawns hatching, fortified with new wings,

Nous over noise, mind over matter,
 Tyrannies crashing: an eloquence of Wills
 Armed with Seven Syllables and Seven Silences (92)
 It is then not a coincidence that the same biblical echo
 In the Beginning was not the Word
 In the Word was the Beginning ... (10, 92)
 Is the first verse as well as the last in the anthology.

Stylistic Features of Orature

In no way are the parallels between *The Voice* and *The Word* more pronounced than in their reflection of the stylistic features of orature. Scholars like Gboyega Kolawole, Helen Chukwuma, and Nkechi Ukaegbu (see Works Cited) have identified repetition, lexical matching, structural parallelism, taboo words, rhetorical questions, sobriquets, proverbs, etc as stylistic features of orature. And the texts reflect these in varying degrees. The following examination of repetition and sobriquet is illustrative.

Repetition

Repetition involves saying or writing the same thing more than once and could be of individual lexical items or of larger constructions like phrases and clauses.

An instance of direct lexical repetition in *The Voice* is this from 'A Call at Dusk' where the lexical item 'call' is repeated fifteen times. The poem reads in part

The flute calls in the distance:
 Call out the masquerade
 Call the fearless spirit;

The drum calls in the distance:
 Call the ancient spirit
 Call the past, the present
 Call the future,

Call the spirit
 It is time to know
 Among the two tortoises
 The one that is a male

Call
 Call, call
 Call out the masquerade (14)

Another example is seen in 'The Treasure at Home I' where 'treasure' is repeated seven times. Similar lexical repetitions abound in *The Word*. In 'Invocation of the Word' for example, 'Word' is repeated forty-two times. 'Diplomataalk' also provides us with this example

And talks talks talks

Talks about talks

Talks before talks

Talks after talks

Talks between talks

Talks for talks

Talks against talks

Maybe talks

Probably talks

Can talks

Cannot talks (68)

It is interesting to note that these repetitions do not bore the readers. Rather they make more forceful the poets messages. The example from 'A Call at Dusk' portrays the urgency of the situation and the need for the night masquerade to appear and salvage the ugly situation, while that from 'Diplomataalk' makes more graphic the meaninglessness showcased in political talks.

But unlike Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Niyi Osundare also uses lexical repetition to mark transition from one stanza to another as illustrated in 'Daughter of the Word'

I invoke

Grief

Daughter of the Tear

Tear

Daughter of the River

River

Daughter of the Rain

Rain

Daughter of the Cloud
 Cloud
 Daughter of the Sea
 Sea
 Daughter of the Moon
 Moon
 Daughter of the Word (29)

That notwithstanding, both texts feature clausal repetitions. *The Voice* features this example from 'Raising a Chant I'.

Raise a chant for me
 Raise a chant for me
 Can you cast a spell
 Can you cast a spell
 If you are not a spirit
 Can you cast a spell? (16)

The imperative 'Raise a chant for me' is further repeated six times in part II of same poem.

Clausal repetition in *The Word* is usually at the beginning of stanzas. In 'Did You See the Word', for example, the interrogative 'Did you see the Word' is repeated at the beginning of each of the four stanzas of the poem (47). Also in 'Ọmọlétí', the declarative 'In the Word was the Beginning' introduces eight of the nine sections of the poem.

Apart from their use for emphasis, these clausal repetitions give the poems rhythm, thus adding to their musical qualities. They give the poems the structure of traditional folk-songs. But Osundare further uses his to mark off semantic units.

One special kind of repetition employed by both poets is the refrain, the part of a song that is repeated after each verse. Both anthologies feature such repetition in the poets' respective languages apparently to establish appropriate poetic mood. In *The Voice*, part II of 'The Mouth of the Night' has *Abali di egwu* (night is terrible) as refrain. The poem appeals to the connotative meanings of night as harbinger of unhappiness,

Can I recognise laughter
 In this womb of night
 Can I touch joy
 In this dark night
 as a period when strange and abnormal things happen
 Dogs grow horns at night
 Their barks are not swallowed,
 ...
 It is the water beneath the soil

That kills the tender yam tuber,

And which father to save
Seduces own dainty daughter, (26)

The refrain evokes the appropriate mood of fear and despair.

The Word features the same kind of refrain in 'Words Catch Fire'. Here, the refrain *OdaḘraḘ, máa gbá tiḘ woḘn lḘ OdaḘraḘ (OdaḘraḘ, pursue them to the end, OdaḘraḘ, OdaḘraḘ* being Esu, Yoruba trickster god and master of mischief) is repeated after each of the first two verses, and *OdaḘraḘ, máa gbá teḘ lé woḘn, OdaḘraḘ* after each of the following five verses. The different stanzas of the poem satirize the stages in a military *coup de tat*, starting from the general dissatisfaction with the present government to the highhanded nature of the military one. The refrain then shows the general disapproval of such situation.

Another special kind of repetition featured by both texts is the repetition of the structure of a verse, with a few words changed. Boulton (81) sees this form of repetition as 'a favourite of folk-song and other traditional songs that have developed in communities and been composed by groups rather than individuals'. Chukwuma adds that in 'a typical oral verse, repetition entails not only the structure but (sic) the words of the stanzas themselves' (in *JNESA*, 15-16)

The Voice features this example from 'The Treasure at Home'

It is the treasure at home
That is first forgotten,
...
But it is the treasure at home
That will bring us back,

It is the treasure at home
That made you call at dusk,

It is the treasure at home
That beckons the masquerade
It is the treasure at home
That brings the words of the night masquerade (19).

'A Harvest Too Soon' also features this example:

Memory is also
 fragrance from withered flowers
Memory is also
 the music from broken guitars

Memory is also

the embrace of wrecked hopes (44)

In *The Word*, 'Can-do' features this example:

I have seen rain-clouds gather

At the instance of a word

I have seen rivers walk uphill

On the order of a proverb

I have seen a sentence hand out

Penalties stiff as a rod

I have been lovers sigh pale

On the humour of a sonnet (16)

Seven of the eight verses in 'Aḗluḗpaḗyiḗdaḗ' have the same structural pattern. The first two are illustrative.

I stay very long in the river

And I become a fish

With a head made of coral

And fins which tame the distance

Of billowing depths

I stay very long in the fish

And I become a mountain

With a mist-cradled crest

And feet carpeted by grass

Which sweetens dawnbreath with jasmine magic.

(55)

This style further underlies the poets' indebtedness to orature for their styles.

Sobriquets

A sobriquet is an informal name or title given to somebody or something, more like a nickname. Kolawole adds that it is mostly based on the outstanding qualities of the said subject which tend to make the addressee blow his achievements out of proportion. Sobriquets are the results of lexico-semantic deviation resulting in nominal. Such nominals are either active or qualitative nouns (in *Research in African Languages and Linguistics* 40)

Sobriquets are mostly found in invocatory chants. *The Voice* features the following in praise of the poet-persona.

I am the fly

I never perch on one spot

I am the third eye
 the invisible one
 If you cannot see me
 Does it mean I cannot see you? (17)

I am the raffia straw that talks
 I am the spirit that talks
 I am the leopard that kills and devours,
 I am the fearful two-headed snake,
 I am knower of all things done in secret,
 I am mud without water
 Waiting in combat for the unwary,

I am something that is dead
 and yet talks,
 I am that which falls on the ground
 and burgeons,

I am knife used to kill a lion,
 I am rope used to pull an elephant (92)

These make the masquerade's aura reverberate and the masses shudder at it. They make the masquerade command more respect. *The Word* has this example

The Word, the Word, is an egg
 From the nest of hawk and dove

Its shell the sheath of anger's sword
 Its yolk compostbed of bile and boon

The Word, the Word, is the woodpecker's beak
 Which rattles the jungle of silence
 The cat's eye which pierces the garment of night (10)

The poet even resorts to Yoruba so that his Yoruba readers will have a first-hand feel of his message, undiluted.

Abùùbùtán Eja Òkun (Inexhaustible, Fish of the Sea)
 Abùùbùtán Eja Òsauᗪ (Inexhaustible, Fish of the Lagoon)
 Aduᗪunni lénu (A joy to have in the mouth)

Má dùnní loṣrùn

(Dreadful to have around the neck) (11)

The cushioning by the right assists the non-Yoruba, readers though the effect is not as forceful as that in the native language.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that in spite of the apparent surface differences between Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice* and Niyi Osundare's *The Word*, a lot of parallels run through the anthologies owing to some factors. In the first place, both poets write in an age that has been witnessing a fallback on orature for literary style and inspiration. But most importantly, the stylistic features of the oratures of their respective ethnic groups are similar, underlying the ties between the ethnic groups. This is reinforced by Luke Eyoh's identification of the similarities in semiotics across some ethnic groups in Nigeria, Igbo and Yoruba inclusive. This paper then calls on Nigerian writers in English to explore more vigorously the dynamics of our oral traditions in their works because this, apart from preserving and propagating our culture, will point up the unity among our various ethnic groups. The paper also calls on Nigerian scholars to explore other areas of similarities in our various cultures as this will engender a more cordial relationship among members of these ethnic groups who will then see themselves as one people in spite of their surface heterogeneous characters.

Note

- a. This paper was first presented at the fourth University of Uyo Conference on Languages and Literature, February 14 – 17, 2007. The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the paper for his/her insightful comments and suggestions.

References

- Achebe, Chinua, 'The African Writer and the English Language'. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975. 55-62.
- Anigala, Austine E. *Traditional African Festival Drama in Performance*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2005.
- Boulton, Marjorie. *The Anatomy of Poetry*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.
- Chukwuma, Helen O. 'The of Traditional Poetry and Language'. *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association* 8.1 (1976): 12-22.
- Eyoh, Luke. 'Cross-Ethnic Semiotics in Nigerian Languages as a Tool for National Unity'. Paper Presented at the First Faculty of Arts Annual Conference, University of Abuja, Abuja. August 22 - 26, 2006.
- Ezenwa-Ohaeto. *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1996.

Jegede, Toyin. 'Defining the Poetics of New Nigerian Poetry in English'. *ÌBÀ: Essays on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba*. Eds Wole Ogundele and Gbemisola Adeoti. Ile Ife: OAU Press, 2003. 151-160.

Kolawole, Gboyega. "Stylistic Features of Yoruba Oral Traditional Poetry". *Research in African Languages and Linguistics* 3 (1993): 38-51.

Lindfors, Bernth. "Characteristics of Yoruba and Ibo Prose Styles in English". *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*. Ibadan: Caltop, 2002. 153-175.

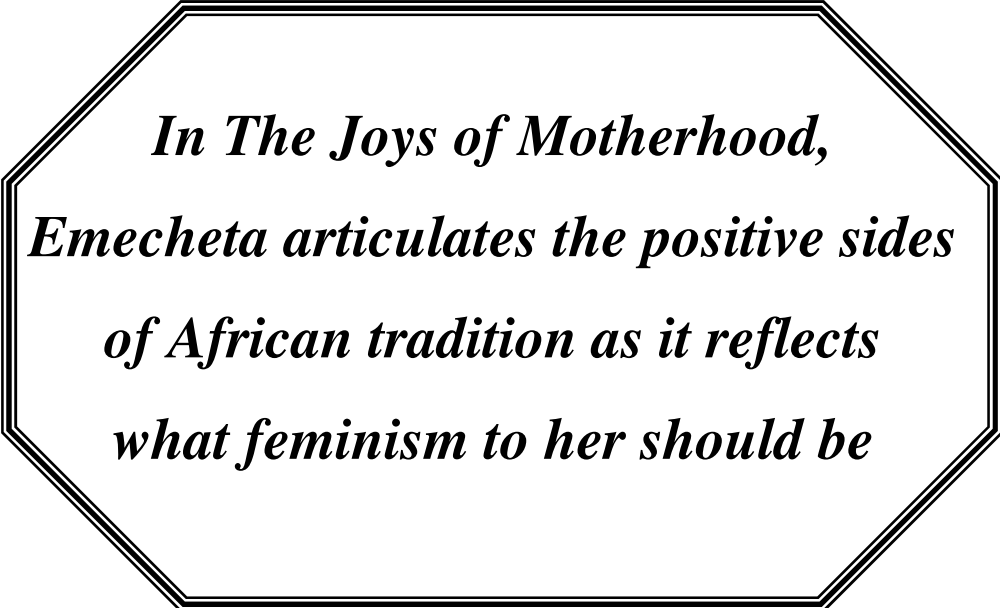
Osundare, Niyi. 'Caliban's Gamble: The Stylistic Repercussions of Writing African Literature in English'. *Language in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Ayo Bamgbose*, Ed. Kola Owolabi. Ibadan: Group Publishers, 1995.340-363.

_____. *The Word Is an Egg*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1999.

Oyali, Uchenna. 'Stylistic Features of Igbo Orature in Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*.' *Nigerian Languages, Literatures, Culture and Reforms*. Ed. Ozo-mekuri Ndimele. Port Harcourt: M & J Grand Orbit Communications, 2007. 327-341.

_____. 'Stylistic Use of Repetition in Niyi Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg*.' *DEGEL*. In Press.

Ukaegbu, Nkechi F. 'A Stylistic Account of Ngwa Igbo Hunting Poetry'. *Four Decades in the Study of Languages and Linguistics in Nigeria: A Festschrift for Kay Williamson*. Ed. Ozo-mekuri Ndimele. Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages, 2003. 415-424.



*In The Joys of Motherhood,
Emecheta articulates the positive sides
of African tradition as it reflects
what feminism to her should be*