

Elements of Intertextuality in Selected Poems of Tenure Ojaide

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Abstract

Globally, the practice among literary scholars and critics is to interrogate a literary piece from an acceptable point of view. It could be from the Marxist, historical, psychoanalytical etc. This paper has carefully selected intertextuality which is a post modernist literary theory to interpret the artistic creation of Tanure Ojaide. The choice of this theory is remarkable — it marked the end of an author-centered criticism and the beginning of Reader-centered criticism. The researcher attempts to see how a western perspective literary theory can be employed to dissect or interpret black aesthetics as we have in Ojaide writings. Finally, Ojaide's commitment and consistency to the yearnings and aspirations of the Urhobo people of the Niger delta in Nigeria strongly inform the choice of his works for this academic exercise.

Keywords— Intertextuality Tanure Ojaide Urhobo Niger delta

Introduction

This paper is an attempt at using the literary theory of intertextuality, a western ideological framework, to interpret black aesthetics. This is because Ojaide's works are basically rooted in the Udje oral performance of the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta region in

Nigeria. This is an artistic display of the tradition, values, norms and belief system of the Urhobo people. The essence is to celebrate their cultural identity in Nigeria.

A pertinent question that a critical mind may want to ask is why Ojaide? Why not other poets from the shores of the country? The reason is

simple. Ojaide belongs to the younger generation of poets after the likes of Soyinka, Okigbo, and Clark. Among his peers, he is about the most prolific. His commitment and consistency is reflected in his over twenty publications that cut across genres. For instance, he has about fifteen poetry collections, four prose fiction, one autobiography and four critical works to his credit.

Theoretical framework

What is Intertextuality?

Intertextuality refers to the way in which texts gain meaning through their referencing or evocation of other texts. Originally, the term was conceived and used by an avant-garde critic as a form of protest against established cultural and social values

(Plett 1991, p3). The term was originally explicated by the post structuralism school of thoughts in France.

On its most basic level, intertextuality is the concept of texts' borrowing of each others' words and concepts. This could mean as much as an entire ideological concept and as little as a word or phrase. As authors borrow pro-actively from previous texts, their works gain layers of meaning.(Allen, 2000,p.2).Also, another feature of intertextuality reveals itself when a text is read in the light of another text in which case all of the assumptions and implications surrounding the other text shed light on and shape the way a text is interpreted.

According to Klages (2012, p.44)

Intertextuality means the interaction of texts coined by Julia Kristeva in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia; intertextuality posits that a text (literary or non-literary) never exists in isolation. Rather, all texts are made up of references to or quotations from

other texts, and are always in conversation with other texts.

Intertextuality is not restricted to the idea of one author being influenced or informed by another author but rather encompasses the idea that each text is engaged with preceding texts.

A replica of an ideological concept can be cited in Achebe's (1958) novel – *Things Fall Apart* which can be described as a reaction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2012) editions. The latter projected Africa as a Dark Continent without civilization until the coming of the Europeans who eventually liberated the Continent, whereas, the former took a retrospective look at the African continent from the worldview of his Igbo tribe of Eastern Nigeria. His work was a master stroke as it

encapsulates the essence of black aesthetics. The political, economic, social, religious and cultural lives of the Africans were adequately projected in its rich form and grandeur as against the jaundiced Eurocentric perception of Conrad.

Also, another aspect of intertextuality in Achebe's first novel can be viewed in the choice of title – *Things Fall Apart*. This happens to be a sentence extracted from a poem of an English poet W.B. Yeats.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

W.B. Yeats: 'The second coming'

Achebe (1958, p1)

This aptly depicts the aftermath of this intrusion of the West and the destructive nature to the serene, rich fecundity of the African space.

In essence, the coming of the West was a rude shock, a distraction and at best, brought retrogression to the emerging black value system.

‘What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?’ asked Okonkwo. The white man’s court has decided that it should belong to Nnama’s family, who had given much money to the white man’s messengers and interpreter ‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’ ‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart’.

Achebe (1958, pp.126 –127).

Relevance of Intertextuality to the African Context

Hence, the appropriateness of the title – ‘Things Fall Apart’ as reflected in the conversation between the protagonist, Okonkwo and his friend, Obierika on the predicament of the natives while Okonkwo was on exile at Mbanta.

At the tail end of the above citation, the concept of intertextuality is

reflected as we see an echo of Yeats' expression in Achebe's text. However, the issue of intertext in the work of Tanure Ojaide can be depicted first from our understanding of text. It must be all forms of artistic creation whether written or oral performance. For example, the socio-

political milieu that informs his writing relies heavily on oral tradition. Thus, most of his writings follow that pattern. For instance, the opening poem in his first book of poetry titled *Children of Iroko* (1973) takes the form of homage paying to an ancestral worship or deity.

MAP OF TIME
NATIVE, SERVE YOUR river-god

A river-god he gets reverence

He gets reverence because of nativity

A sacrificial kid at the crossroads

A basket of cowries at the outskirts of town

'My days are like evening twilight

Tell my ferryman not to come'

Ojaide(1973, p.1).

It is common knowledge among Africans that local singers, poets and entertainers usually begin their performance by giving respect to whom respect is due by

acknowledging or paying homage to superior authority. A similar example can be cited in Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate*.

The Passage

Before you, mother Idoto,

naked I stand;

before your watery presence,

a prodigal

The metaphor depicted by ‘watery presence’ and ‘mother Idoto’ serves as eloquent pointer to the religion, belief system of the Africans at that point in time.

Similarly, at a public lecture, Ojaide was reputed to have said, ‘in

Turn the tortoise back, O Waters,
Bring him back
Spare him mishap on the way
Bring him back to me;

He broke not only my hands
But also my legs and ribs;
Bring him back to me
Spare him mishap on the way here
And let the villain taste
What he inflicted on me
From my own hands

Here the Urhobo characterization of the turtle becomes the symbol of exploitation and oppression for which the speaker seeks revenge and restoration. It also signifies the influence of oral tradition, folktales, proverbs, songs etc in the writings of contemporary African literary writers

Soyinka (Ed) (1975, p.295).

Labyrinths of the Delta, the title poem of the collection, when I write about the turtle/tortoise, I am in fact building a poem on an Urhobo folktale’s song. (Kalipeni and Zelelea (Eds)) (1999, p.240).

Ojaide (1999, p17).

to which the poet is not an exception. Importantly, the poet does not only engage on issues of cultural dimension alone but also matters that affect the nation for example, the coup de tat of 13 Feb, 1976 that brought about the sudden death of the youthful and dynamic Head of state,

Gen. Muritala Ramat Mohammed *Warrior*".

necessitated the poem "*Death of the*

The storm blew away the stars from the sky
and drowned us in our own tears
The son who gave us direction
Is forever gone
He did not live to walk with a stick
But covered more than a lifetime strides
The storm blew away the stars from the sky
and drowned us in our own tears

Ojaide (1999, p21).

The poem takes the form of a lamentation. Each line alludes to a positive attribute of the departed leader. The repetitive use of the refrain: The storm blew... shows the sense of loss of the persona in the worldview of the poem. It is pertinent to state that the poem re-echoes the opinion of the generality of the masses when they heard the news of Ramat's death.

In another poem, Ojaide showcases his commitment as a social crusader when he laments the dastard

The butcher of Abuja
dances with skulls,
Ogiso's grandchild by incest

killing of the nine Ogoni leaders led by another fellow 'singer' Ken Saro Wiwa. This was as a result of their agitation for a revisit of the resource control formula operating in the country under the late Military dictator, Gen. Sani Abacha. It is a legitimate right of a bonafide member / citizen of a country to demand for justice and equity. But in return, 'the Ogoni Nine' were condemned to death by hanging as reflected in 'Elegy for Nine Warriors'.

digs his macabre steps
in the womb of Aso Rock.
To get to his castle,
you would stumble over skulls,
stumble over jawbones.

In this poem, the image of 'Abuja' and 'Aso Rock' reveals that the work is in reference to the military dictator at the time. He is aptly described as 'butcher of Abuja'. The intertextual aspect of this poem is that it reflects the situation depicted, adequately. Also, the symbolic representation of Ogiso, a wicked ruler at a point in time in the history of the Urhobo Kingdom and how the military ruler is described as 'Ogiso's grandchild by incest shows the disdain with which

Ojaide, (1999, p162)

the public views this leader. Also, is the African perception of incest. In other words, his birth was an abomination hence, his actions. So there is an ideological correlation between Ogiso and Abacha.

On a global view, Ojaide shows his resentment on the issue of 'mad cow' syndrome that was the concern of the international community at the time. He projected how for the love of their nation the hostess on board British Airways patronized him:

Dinner, onboard British Airways

They surely knew that any day chicken would beat a
British cow.

But predictably, they wanted to break the sanctions. and
come out of the dark hole to which they had fallen with, of
all companions, mad cows.

Ojaide (1998, p21)

Instances of Intertextuality in the Works of Ojaide

The intertext in this poem is the public outcry about the health hazard of the mad cow syndrome in Britain at that time. The international community sanctioned United Kingdom to destroy their cows and save humanity of the resultant health

implication. But their beef was still served as menu on British Airways. Still on the international scene, the poet in the poem “On the World summit for children at the UN, 1990” reiterates his displeasure at the lack luster attitude of politicians and political office holders to the plight of youths generally across the globe.

Warriors raise colonies of orphans
to celebrate their prowess

Players score cheap goals
through bridges of infant bones

Hyenas abolish spontaneous laughter
and make deserts of childhood

Carry no babies, hug none
you legion of summiteers

Ojaide (1999, pp. 89 – 90).

The persona’s choice of images of diplomats as ‘warriors’, ‘players’, ‘Hyenas’, ‘legion of summiteers’, and further down the poem as ‘politricksters’, ‘masked beasts’

serves as eloquent marker of his distrust of them because of their insensitivity to the agony of children. Hence, his submission that:

‘Children know their worst enemy’

‘Disband the cult of masqueraders meeting in New York’.

The disposition of the poet is that if our leaders are sincere and alive to their responsibilities, why do we have civil wars, sectarian violence, succession disputes that lead to civil unrest, religious crises, etc. In all of these, the innocent children end up as the sufferers of the actions. The same can be said about funds allocated to children and youth development from international donor agencies. Such money ends up in private accounts of the political elite.

Language Use and Placement in African Literature

Language plays a significant role in the life of an African. This

explains the importance attached to its usage as we notice in one of the famous proverbs of Achebe that “proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten” Achebe (1958, p.5). It also asserts the fact that orature has always been part of our everyday lifestyle, long before the advent of western education and written literature. Of course this is a deconstruction of the Conradian concept of the continent as a jungle. Characteristic of African traditional folklore, language is used to depict incantation or invocation as we have in this poem by Ojaide.

Invocation

Birds entertaining the sky with melodies

add your voice

to my anthem of communion

Trees buttressed in the earth's bosom

give depth

to the crier's questing voice

Hurricanes of the storm season

sweep from everywhere
a labyrinth of notes
for again I must sing.

.....

Ojaide (1991, p.31)

The expression ‘for again I must sing’ shows the determination of the poet as a voice for the voiceless to do what is expected of him in the society.

Elsewhere, Ojaide has argued in support of the utilitarian nature of language of African literature.

There is, culturally speaking, no art for art’s sake in Africa. Every literary work has a social function. Songs, prayers, praise chants, and abuse are placed at the service of the community. This utilitarian function of orature is imbibed by modern writers.

Ojaide, (1996, p2)

It is in the light of the above therefore that we can adequately appreciate lines like the following:

For I must sing
rainsong to fructify the desert
fishsong to revive dying streams
harvestsong to fill the body
matingsong to multiply lovers
war song to arm the threatened.

And if this voice must be heard
above the tinsel prattle of slick tongues,
if this cry must register whole
in the mindscape of men,

O mentors and masters,
weave me the utterance
to foil the fiercest face;
let my words bristle, a beehive
with honey and stings
to dispense
according to the season's needs
for again I must sing
and I sing the endless lifesong
with tutored lips.....

(From invocation) Ojaide, (1991, p.32)

In this poem, images, and symbols like 'sing', 'voice', 'tongue', 'utterance', and 'invocation' serve as eloquent indicator of the oral nature of the African worldview. A subtle repetition is made to 'song' as we have in 'rainsong', 'fishsong', 'harvestsong', 'matingsong', and

Listen Ocol, my old friend,
The way of our ancestors
Are good.
Their customs are solid
And not hollow
They are not thin, not easily breakable
They cannot be blown away

'warsong'. This shows the limitless and multidimensional approach the song mode could be made to address in African cosmology. Similarly, Okot p'Bitek, a celebrated East African poet identifies with his African tradition thus:

By the winds

Because their root reach deep into the soil.

p'Bitek (1966, p.41)

What we have in this poem is a tacit juxtaposition of the West and Africa. This is most remarkable because it emanates from supposed naïve, illiterate, village woman “Lawino” to a western, trained intellectual man “Ocol”. In another poem by another

reputable scholar, Niyi Osundare we can see a refraction of how the English language is employed to project the Yoruba cosmic world in the poem “Earth” from the volume *The Eye of the Earth*.

Temporary basement
and lasting roof

first clayed coyness
and last alluvial joy

breadbasket
and compost bed

rocks and rivers
muds and mountains
silence of the twilight sea
echoes of the moonsome tide
milk of mellowing moon
fire of tropical hearth
spouse of the roving sky
virgin of a thousand off springs
ogeere amokoyeri

Osundare (1986, p.1).

This poem, like most of the poet’s works is distinguished by its sustained lyricism and the use of rural imagery,

both of which are reminiscent of the oral tradition of Africa. “Indeed, contrary to Osundare’s belief that the

urge for written culture escalates into an obsession as oral skills are blissfully allowed to wither and die (“from Oral to Written”) Dasyuva and

Jegade emphasized that, oral skills die not blissfully but agonizingly....”Dasyuva & Jegede (2003,p124).

Conclusion

From a cursory look, the poet may be accused of ethnic bias in favour of the people of the Niger Delta. But, after a critical examination, it becomes clear that he has simply applied the theory of education that advocates that you start from the known to the unknown. Hence, Ojaide in his works, attempts to interrogate happenings across the globe from his Urhobo native culture perspective. His submission is that irrespective of the size of your tribe, ethnicity, creed, etc. every human being is entitled to a decent living condition to have fulfillment in life. This gives his works universal acceptability. Hence, the array of awards both locally and internationally.

Finally, the paper has been able to examine from the perspective of intertextuality the poetry of Ojaide. His works shows his advocacy for the emancipation of the Niger Delta region from the shackles of oppression of the multinational oil companies and their collaborators. Also, his Marxist approach to issues has not gone unnoticed. He believes this will bring about an egalitarian society.

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