

MOBILIZING THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE AGAINST VIOLENCE: THE NIGER DELTA EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIA

Chukwu, Ken Uche

Directorate of General Studies Unit
Federal University Of Technology Owerri
Imo State Nigeria

Abstract

Literature is a form of social reaction, where language serves as its medium. A writer maximizes the opportunities offered by the various modes of language use to effectively communicate his literary message. In this paper, we have appraised the language of the poems of Uche Peter Umez and Sophia Obi against the background of their reaction to Niger Delta experiences in Nigeria. The paper begins with a brief overview of the relationship between literature and society, dove-tails into text analysis and then draws conclusion.

Key words: Literature, Language, violence, social reaction, Niger Delta

Introduction

One of the prominent roles played by literature in a society is the propensity to oppose oppression and violence. Violence as used here includes all forms of physical and psycho-emotional assault against a person or group of persons. It constitutes dehumanization and brutalization on the psyche and personality of a person or people. Violence comes in different forms, and by virtue of its dimension, it has diverse consequences depending on the society that breeds it. The kind of violence that gave rise to the 18th century European Revolution was different from the violence of Afro-American experience or the violence of Apartheid South Africa. There was the colonial violence in African history. African contemporary societies also live with various forms of violence. This implies that, at every point in human history, there is always an effort towards shaking off tyranny, violence and any other thing which may be considered inconveniencing by a society. Thus the quest for freedom is a sacred part of human existence, which seeks to keep violence at bay.

Ngugi once identified two types of violence thus: "Violence in order to change an intolerable and unjust social order". This, according to him, purifies man. Another is "violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order which is criminal hence diminishes man. (Ngugi 1972). Iyayi (1979) also views violence as "when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting job, of feeding himself and family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly". Man is therefore caught in the constant web of dialectical contradictions of change and inconvenient status quo, a flux of change which paradoxically is the only permanent feature of human dynamism in society.

The unfavoured in every society would always seek what they believe could bring a solution to their social problems. Such solutions often come through social mobilization and education; exposition and criticism of the identified social ills; and on the extreme, revolution. One veritable mode of achieving these solutions is through literary creations.

Literature and the fight for social change have been in age long relationship. As identified earlier, many societies had passed through various forms of troubled history and social purgation, hence at these various stages of historical development, have evolved literary writings of relevant interests. Consider the likes of Booker. T. Washington and Malcom X in Afro ó American history, George Orwell in English Revolutionary history, Ngugi in African colonial experience, Alex Laguma in Apartheid South Africa and many others. The tempo has not waned, even after the so called African independence, as can be seen in Nigeria, from the works of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi etc. Relating this to Niger Delta experiences precisely, the voices of J.P. Clark, Ken Sarowiwa and more recently Uche Peter Umez, Sophia Obi and very many others have been so audible.

One may wonder how literature performs this odious task of violence confrontation, since it lacks the required physical power. Literature's greatest weapon is efficient language use. In literature is found, well equipped linguistic armory which exerts strong verbal haulage that carries great force, which often could be more ferocious than AK 47 gun. It is this force and potency that hallucinates those that rise up to physically change the society, having read through well created literary works. It is against this background that this paper seeks to evaluate the linguistic potency of some poems by two poets from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: Uche Peter Umez and Sophia Obi.

The choice of the poetic genre is informed by the assumption that in poetry is found, the form of language usage that is richly evocative and densely brief. Its nature therefore proves palpable for linguistic analysis.

Violence and Niger Delta Experience In Nigeria

Niger Delta is a region in the Southern part of Nigeria, from where the oil that forms the bedrock of the country's economy is explored and exploited. This region has been neglected for so long, leaving the inhabitants in a state of abject poverty and squalor. It is therefore not out of place to discover anti ó violence literary works springing up from an area like this. Writers from this area have engaged in one form of protest or the other against exploitation and neglect of the region. The selected writers in this paper and many others have chosen the path of literary mobilization as against other forms of social reaction and protest. Militancy, abduction of oil workers, kidnapping and ransom taking, pipe ó line vandalization, explosion of oil wells and installations are some of the other forms of expressions of grievance by the citizens of this region.

The selected collections of poetry contain poems of varied thematic interest, from neglect and deprivation, to youth restiveness, environmental pollution in the Niger Delta region. There are also themes of general concern, like the plight of the common man in the face of oppressive government, love, philosophy of life and so on. In this study, themes of Niger Delta experiences which also represent the universal experiences of every oppressed man elsewhere in the world shall be our central concern.

In his collection entitled *Dark Through The Delta*, Uche Umez explores the travails of a society, which by no means of its sins, has been raped and plunged into impoverishment and servitude. Most of the poems in this collection therefore move from a descriptive x-ray of the present state, to a prophetic projection into the would ó be future. The first poem is entitled ðEat of this Poemö. Its position as the first in the collection makes the remaining poems in the collection metaphorical food, represented in the poem as ðappleö.

eat of this poem I offer
like an apple.
filched from the tree forbidden
eat of it, swallow its sour wholesomeness. (1:1-3)

Also, notice the simile in the first sentence. The inherent properties of apple include ðsweetnessö. But, it is described as ðsourö in the poem, a form of semantic ambiguity. Therefore, better appreciation of the stanza could be derived from its Biblical allusion to the Garden of Eden and the fall of man, especially, where the consequences of the action of eating and swallowing the apple would be:

and your eyes will fast
shed scales and snakes moult (2:1-2)

Thus, the poet sees the poems which he offers, as liberating instruments from the ðforbidden treeö. He therefore calls for the awakening of the people to behold reality in its true colour.

awake to the evil contraption
that emasculates the many agonizing people
and empowers the few despoiling Lord. (3:1-3)

This stanza, through compound sentence structure, juxtaposes two social classes: ðMany agonizing peopleö that are ðemasculatedö on the one hand; and ðfew despoiling Lordsö that are ðempoweredö on the other. *Such* juxtapositioning is stylistically poignant, making the contrast sharp and immediate. Notice that the emasculated are many but the empowered are few. Furthermore, the imperative tone of the sentence invokes a call to action against slumber, it is the traditional revolutionary voice of a leader, the voice of authority signally a clarion call to action.

ðDark through the Deltaö is another poem in the collection. The language is descriptive, presenting a picture of the Niger Delta environment. This is effected through the use of concrete words and intensifiers.

The poem opens with the first personø singular pronoun ðIö, hence giving authenticity to the report, as the reader sees the environment through the personaø eyes.

I see the canoe all cracked
heaped up debris
like the scant ashy houses on the shore (1:1-3)

One notable feature of this poem is the symbolic use of words to create images. For instance, *ōcanoeö*, *ōshoreö*, *ōnetsö*, *ōaxesö*, *ōhoesö*, *ōcutlassesö* are used metonymically to suggest fishing and farming, which are the major occupations of the Niger Deltans. Therefore, the state of these features, as presented in the poem should be studied as the general state of the environment: *ōcanoes* are all crackedö, *ōnets* frayed and flung awayö, *ōaxes*, *hoes*, *sickles* and *cutlasses* neck-deep in mud and rusty with neglectö. Thus, the words *ōdebrisö*, *ōashyö*, *ōtatteredö*, *ōrustyö* should also be studied as contextual paradigms of abandonment and destruction.

The poem does not stop at presenting desolate and gory pictures of the area, it also identifies those responsible for the state of the region. They are presented figuratively thus: *ōpreying kitesö*, suggesting surveillance helicopters used by oil companies. Others include *ōnoxious flareö*, *ōburgeoning pollutionö*, *ōoil greedö*. Notice that in the face of this wanton exploitation and destruction, the people are helpless.

behold, it is the fortune
of my helpless kin
being eroded, stealthily erodedí í (7:1-3)

The people are unprotected and defenseless, while the exploitation stealthily goes on. Notice the use of elliptical foregrounding to suggest endlessness, thus making the tone of the poem lamentative.

In another poem entitled *ōNo Honey Flows Hereö*, the poet exposes the ungodly and inhuman treatment that man in society has been subjected to. Of stylistic significance is the structural patterning of the line of the poem.

First, the poem opens with a small letter, which if used in another genre would have been a syntactic oddity. Again, the poem has no punctuation mark through the twelve stanza of two lines each, except in the last stanzas where ellipsis and full stop are used. This makes for a continuous flow replicating uninhibited purgation of a disturbed mind. The poem opens in a declarative tone; a one line stanza that sounds so emphatic.

no honey flows here

The remaining stanzas are introduced using adverbial subordinators. For instance, the second stanza reads thus:

where children scavenge the streets
in search of mildewed bread in the bins.

Every other stanza, except the last, has this type of structure. Therefore, beginning from the second stanza, are subordinate clauses of the first line which is the main clause. In this manner, the stanzas are in syntactic apposition with the adverb *ōhereö* in the first line. This achieves a structure like this *SVA=A=A=A=A* etc. Also each stanza presents one unique feature of the area, thus making the features catchy and striking.

Another linguistic feature of the poem that is significant is the use of antithetical parallelism, where most of the two-stanza lines contain similar syntactic pattern. This gives musicality to the structure.

Again, the use of phoric referencing in the poem, to suspend and sustain the curiosity of the reader is noteworthy.

The various stanzas present different forms of social vices and deprivations without, mentioning those responsible, eg:

where schools lie gaping at shadow of trees
and teachers grumble ceaselessly for unpaid salaries
where darkness is electricity in our homes
yet we pay bills to fatten their paunch
where gutters swell with debris and diseases
while they blave out health for all projects

Furthermore, there is the use of shocking metaphors and mis-collocations to arouse the mind-set of the reader. For example, in *darkness is the electricity*, one wonders if this is ordinary metaphor or whether it transcends to the realm of paradox. Notice also the syntagmatic oddity in *undying bitterness*. First, the semantic properties of *die* include + living thing, but bitterness is not a living thing, it is abstract. So, what informs the choice of *undying* instead of *unending* which would have collocated easily with bitterness? The choice therefore retains the image of death which is also found in other words in the poem, like *ghost*, *languish*, *diseases*, *sickly*. Thus, the interest of the poem which is the presentation of the pitiable state of the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian nation in general, is sustained by the careful choice of words which is powerfully evocative.

In one of Sophia Obi's poems entitled *Oloibiri*, there is a lamentation over injustice meted unto the community, where oil was first discovered and explored in commercial quantity in Nigeria. Like Umez's poems, this poem is descriptive, socialist in tone, and revolutionary in philosophy.

Oloibiri in the poem is personified as she is allowed to speak and describe issues herself. This is achieved through the first person's singular pronoun.

At last I am free
Free from bondage
Yet,
Desolate like a wealthy whore

Apart from musicality in the alliteration *wealthy whore*, the expression creates a poetic picture of abandonment and desolation. Other lexical elements in contextual paradigm with this are: *gloomy attire*, *faded glory*, *oil tears*. Take note of the intensifying effects of the qualifiers in these phrases. However, what pains the persona most is that, the producer of the oil (wealth) is neglected while the proceeds are used to develop other areas:

I lay on the alter of faded glory,
Oily tears rolling through my veins
To nourish households in the deserts (1:6-8)

households in the deserts here, metaphorically refers to the northern region of the country. Thus, the stanza captures the major grouse of the Niger Deltans, who frown at the neglect of the region while the revenue from the region's oil is used to build and develop Abuja the Federal Capital of Nigeria and other Northern states. Take note of this political undertone as reflected in other stanzas.

Now they say my terrain is difficult
My inner recesses unreachable (8:1-2)
Yet I quench the thirst
of the desert dwellers (9:1-2)

Therefore, the feeling of injustice and regret runs through the lines and stanzas of the poem. The persona regrets that with the sound of the independence gong, she hissed a sign of relief, not knowing that it marked the beginning of another form of exploitation.

At last I am free
Free from bondage
Yet
Desolate like a wealthy aged where (1:1-4)
This is the coated freedom of torment
When anguish enfolds joy (3:1-2)

So the poem presents to the world the major causes of restiveness in the Niger Delta region: oppression, victimization and exploitation. Pathetically, no one looks at or listens to her complaints as captured in *ōyet*, brimful of unanswered complaints.

The persona ends her lamentation with a tone that suggests hope in the future

But I am awakened by the oily tears of the Ijaw Nation
And I hear the laughter
I hear the celebration,
The joyful uproar that comes.

Therefore, the tone moves from despair and anger to hope and optimism in the rising sun of Ijaw nation that will herald the actualization of Resource Control: *ōwith* controlling blessing// of my God-given inheritance.

One can therefore see that assurances of this nature carry great mobilizing effect. They are capable of moving a group into action or sustaining the spirit of revolution and resistance

Conclusion

The poems so far discussed have exhibited remarkable synergy between the mind and the verbal representations. They have shown strong exploration and poetization of human conditions in the most alluring satire and sarcasm. There are voices so urgent in the expression of the tragedy of a society, with diction so expressive of torture, agony, dehumanization, subjugation and regret; diction so promising and optimistic in the anticipation of freedom and liberation.

Thus, the poems themselves extensively speak, and the languages are such that can move the hearer, not only emotionally, but physically in the fight for emancipation. So, the literature of the Niger Delta experience, like other protest literatures has made a remarkable and poignant impact, not only in presenting the gory history and picture of the area but in lubricating the psychology of protest.

References

Iyayi, Festus. (1979) *Violence*, London: Longman

Obi, Sophia.(2006) *Tears in a Basket*, Ibadan: Kraft Books

Thiongo, Nigugi Wa. (1972) *Home coming*, London: Heinemann

Umez, Uche. (2005) *Dark Through the Delta*. Owerri: Eduedy