

# DISCOURSE TECHNIQUES IN AFRICAN POETRY

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## Abstract

The study of discourse techniques in African written literature not just limited to poetry is a crucial and important area of study in the fields of academic as literature is becoming more indigenized and localized to suit author's environment, language and culture and world view in multi-language society. The purpose of this study is to perform a detailed analysis of discourse techniques used in African poetry specifically examining the techniques used in two African literary works: Chants of Despair authored by Ngozi's Chuma Udeh (2010) and Omeile Vol. one authored by Asika Ikechukwu (2011). The study examines the use of language, proverbs, code mixing and code switching, and even nature names used. Furthermore, the findings will highlight some hidden and unfamiliar meaning as well as providing a clear-cut and detailed discussion of some of the discourse techniques that might enable individuals to understand and interpret the message in African poetry and other genres of literature. Generally, this study will provide techniques for analysis of some hidden thematic issues, critical and scholarly review of literature as well as paving way for future studies.

**Keywords:** African, Discourse Techniques, Literature, Poet

## Introduction

For African authors to be well understood, the need to understand their language, culture and worldview become necessary. This is where discourse techniques play crucial roles in the understanding and interpretation of the indigenized works of art that reflect on the African aliment. Discourse techniques help to unveil and unfold hidden meanings in the works of art and literature. The role of poetry in society can never be over emphasizes neither will its study and interpretation be exhausted. African authors are greatly influenced by the social, cultural economic, religious as well as political happenings in societies. According to Ofoegbu (2012), discourse techniques refer to the language techniques used by authors to

achieve an aim in a given piece and it is considered as the language of the writer in a work of literature. According to the author, these discourse techniques include (1) use of language, (2) local idioms, (3) proverbs, (5) code mixing and code switching, (6) unfamiliar terms and comic expressions, (6) transliteration and (7) use of nature names. The written literature we know today which consists of three genres of literature including poetry, drama and prose are part of the western acclimatization as a result of colonization and acquisition of the western education. The art of writing and literacy are part of African colonial heritage and Africans have over the time explored this gain of written literature to express the social –political, as well as economic realities around them. There was a great need for African literature through a colonial legacy to speak in African voice and these are part of the obvious reason that trigger African writers to search inwards for that which will help to elevate their literature and mark it out from the rest of literature produced in all parts of the world.

Olateju (1998) posits that discourse techniques are used to describe activities and various disciplines and human endeavors such as socio-linguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophical linguistics, computational linguistics and education. The analysis of discourse techniques in any work of art is very important. Style is the manner of linguistic expression in prose or verse and it is how a speaker or writer says things. The characteristic style of a work or a writer may be analyzed in terms of its diction, the sentence structure and its syntax (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). The concreteness of the details chosen, the diction, the images and figures of speech contributes to the meaning of a literary work (Nwoga, 1981).

African authors have to turn the oral tradition, folktale materials and other social-cultural elements around them to express themselves in a unique way; to speak in the typical voice of their people in such an artistic manner in which the quality of the message of their writing is not lost to the outside reader. The best African today is the writer who blends and experiments with traditional passion of his people and should make such sense to the outside world. The word ‘writing’ is clarified not simply to mean the graphic notation of language, but to include the unpleasant distinctions of language that are derived from an intricate historical intertextual process within which an utterance or a text is situated (Akingbe,

Ebede: Discourse techniques in African poetry

2014). This is what we witnessed in the works of many authors including the two volumes of poetry; *Chants of Despair and Omeile Vol. 1* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh and Asika Ikechukwu respectively which are the main focus in this study. The scope of this study is limited to the works of these African poets (Nigerian poets). Both poets are from the eastern part of Nigeria.

Asika (2011a) asserted that authors play a prominent and significant role in the social-reeducation, re-orientation, and re-direction of their societies. Literature functions and helps to shape one's attitudes and lifestyle. Poetry though one of the earliest genres of literature seems to be the most dreaded of all other. Abada and Ezenwa (2009) explored poetry from several related dimensions. The authors asserted that some people have considered poetry from the point of view of rhythmic articulation. Poetry has become one of the variable tools and writers articulate their perceptions and beliefs as it affects the society (Chukwueloka, 2011). Authors are greatly influenced by the social, cultural economic, religious as well as political situations in the society. In search of the message of authors hidden in symbols and languages, we attempt a study of discourse techniques in the works of two selected poets and their collections (*Omeile and Chants of Despair*).

### **Discourse Techniques in Omeile Vol.1**

Omeile is a poem that focused on the ranting, chants and travails of an uncivilized warrior Omeile, who has refused to accept the changes necessary in African's modern era rather would hold tenaciously on his cherished and idealized views of the primitive and ways of life that is fast breaking. The poet makes his collection of poetry a master piece by his use of language, code mixing and code switching, figures of speech, transliteration, proverbs and these have a much desired appeal on both readers and critics alike.

### **Use of Proverbs**

Proverb as a discourse technique used in Omeile by Asika Ikechukwu aid the readers in understanding and appreciating the message of the poem and enhances them for a feeling of change in attitude. Ofoegbu (2012) posits that the use of proverb in Omeile is very strategic as they capture and bound a reader, leaving the person

to wonder at the mastery and usage of proverbs by the poet. The author further suggested that the use of proverbs sometimes flow with the line of literary work because the writer structures them in such a way that one might think that the proverbs follow themselves. However, it is a discourse technique used by the writer to captivate the readers.

In Omeile, the first few proverbs used by the poet occurred when the main character Omeile summons and appeals to the spirit. In Asika (2011b), the proverbs read:

The mother goat knows on whose skin the drummer rattles  
(pg.8)

The leopard knows in his head whose skin adorns the  
shoulder of the of the mighty king (pg.8)

When the sound of the king's tusk is heard, the elephant  
remembers the voice of the lone brother lost (pg.8)

See the little bird perching on the Ngige, is full of dance  
(pg.8)

The old woman never grows old in a dance that she knows  
in heart (pg.9)

The above proverbs used in the introductory part of the poem did not only warn the African people about the danger of abandoning their culture but on the dangers of colonialism and the loss of African culture. Omeile tries to tell the readers his knowledge of the tricks and cunning of the white men who exploited African to build their own world of civilization and he tries to express all these in his heavily worded proverbs. The over-emotional proverbs exist to remind the African people about the beauty of traditional culture which they are at the very of abandoning totally. This is a culture that motivates and inspires him and he wishes us to see a culture as a traditional way of life. Another proverb reads:

Where a child cries and point, if the mother is not there, the  
father it (pg.10)

This proverb reinforces the seriousness of his message, for he knows why he is really crying about the loss of African traditional value. He believes that lack of culture robs ones his

Ebede: Discourse techniques in African poetry

dignity and personality and that is what Omeile believes that happened to many Africans including himself. He used to be a warrior, but his marriage to Ekemma, a symbolism of his acceptance of civilization robbed him of all his warrior pose.

In the proverbs of Ikenga, another character in the poem, the poet recounts how we went wrong and how African culture was abandoned in pursuance of foreign culture in the name of modernism and civilization. Ikenga used the following proverbs:

Forward.....forward is the movement of a monkey, once it jumps backwards, it will fall into the traps pf death (pg.13).

Remember it is the leaf that sweet a goat/that kills it (pg.14)

Omeile, the bush that detest the basket let it meet and produce mushrooms (pg.14)

He who wants to know all the Nsoala. Does he want to live in the sky? (pg.14)

Omeile, the hen that has a face should not lose its side gaze (pg.14)

The person whose elephantiasis of his scrotum is under cure, may his stomach not swell as well (pg.15).

The going of a war is not like the coming (pg.15)

The above proverbs were used by Ikenga to warn Omeile when they were going to war. Ikenga was warning him of his dignity and manhood. This is also a warning about Africans' negligence which brought about civilization and how their acceptance of it reduces us to mere mortals chasing after culture that is not theirs. The poet used proverbs as a discourse technique to strategically give way to hidden meanings and add values to the ideas and views expressed by Omeile. This will enable the reader to see a reality of the gains and losses of civilization.

### **Use of Code Mixing**

The use of code mixing refers to the mixing of two or more language varieties in a discourse or sentence strings (Ofoegbu, 2012). In the poem, each line goes with the presence of code mixing. The use of code mixing enhances the work and the message intended. The blood nature words from the Igbo language present the reader with

an environment of Igbo traditional scene. Code mixing was used to express specific ideas with specific terms.

I have a palm kernel smeared in Ukpaka and Mangala fish (pg.6)

Like the memories of Omarimma, my first love (pg.7)

Let the Yokiliyo sound be heard (pg.8)

We stood before the chief priest Ikenga, the great (pg.11)

I painted your eyelashes with Otengele dark as Indigo (pg.32)

May Amadioha... May Ngene... May Omaliko... (pg.63)

Let Ulasi... (pg.63)

It is all man for himself now, Onyenankenya (pg.84)

The use of code mixing in the above lines is very significant. The poet used code mixing as an escape hatch and as a means of expression of facts that Omeile is warrior caught in chains of civilization. The discourse techniques may not be peculiar to the poet alone. Ofoegbu (2012) asserted that code-mixing is the very foundation of Omeile because the names of the actors Omeile and Ekemma were also derived from Igbo Language. The author further stated that the poet would have gone for western names rather he chose to remain in Africa.

### **Diction and Placement of Words**

The diction and placement of words in Omeile cannot be overlooked because they are very significant. Ofoegbu (2012) defines diction as an author's choice of words while placement of words refers to the way an author arranges his words. The diction in Omeile is multidimensional because of the use of biblical passage as style of writing. For example:

Land, fame, ventures and things of the world. It was there before we come; they still will remain rooted to the earth years after our voices are hushed (pg.26)

No sunshine ever hurts you during the day nor the terrifying rainfall in the night (pg.34)

Let this hour be his last, let no breath come again his lungs, let him be cursed and blinded to death, let him drink from

Ebede: Discourse techniques in African poetry

the cup of their vengeance, let him die the death of a coward  
(pg.57)

The above lines look like that of the bible in the book of Ecclesiastes chap 1 vs 2 that talks about vanity upon vanity; Psalm 121 vs 6 that talks about “the sun will not harm you by day, nor moon by night”; and Psalm 109 vs 6-20. Omeile’s choice of words falls under the simple and everyday vocabulary. It is enclosed, concise and clear. The poet abided the use of high sounding and jaw breaking grammars.

The placement of words is done in such a way that meaning is not lost and the element of Igbo language is not lost too. The following are some of the examples used in the poem.

Ikenga stood before me, eyeball to eyeball we look (pg.13)  
When gbalagbala goes excessive, it becomes madness  
(pg.14)  
Red oil of blood (pg.15)  
But the precious liquids form the eyes of the goddess (pg.28)  
May your soul rest in peace (pg.54)  
Like hinge beaten dogs, they are (pg. 59)

The aforementioned examples show how the poet puts certain words side by side thereby creating word pictures in the minds of his readers. As a descriptive writer, the poet describe Ekemma in Omeile just as Ofoegbu (2012) asserted that description is the habit of Omeile and it has helped in adding flavor to the boiling pot of poetry. In other words, diction and placement of words are one of the basic foundations in poetry writing.

### **Discourse Techniques in Chants of Despair**

Chants of Despair is a poetry collection where the author tries to draw people’s attention to the monumental abuse, injustice, and poverty glaring in the society. The collection focus on the action and inactions of the government who are supposed to better lots of the people but they end up amassing wealth, depositing millions of Naira in foreign accounts and spelling out poverty and doom on the entire civilization. Ujowundu (2011) conducted in the collection just

as Ofoegbu (2012) did with Omeile. The study ranks among the pioneering efforts in interpreting the message that lay buried in the collection.

Ujonwundu (2011) asserted that *Chants of Despair* is a poem in three parts which portray the individuals' frustration. Chuma Udeh, is just as angry as the older poets who have lived to satirize the society through their creature as the protest is not the end an expression of hate for humanity. The discourse techniques entail a wide range of ideas and patterns. They include the use of language and diction which boils down to choice of words and sentence pattern. The use of foregrounding of imagery, proverbs, code mixing and switching, figures of speech, direct transliteration, allusions and symbols among many others. No single study can be able to critically and meticulously examine all these because it can amount a textbook of his own. A research can only select aspects of these techniques for a detailed discussion. Other researchers with similar interest will pick up several other areas of these discourse techniques all geared toward a holistic understanding of the message in a given work of art. The use of language and the use of proverbs in *Chants of Despair* as part of discourse techniques will bring the message to limelight and serves as a key to unlocking hidden meanings and inter-textual materials in the poem.

### **Foregrounding of Imagery and Use of Language**

Language is very essential to the understanding of any work of art and is a tool available for any writer. Authors use language in such a way that any serious minded reader will understand their message. Ofoegbu (2012) asserted that the use of language had remained a very important issue in the analysis of any discourse. Discourse involves language plus context according to some discourse analysts. It looks at how language can be used to achieve aims and objectives in human development.

Language is central to any work of art and can never be over emphasized. According to Umeh (1991), language is the medium for poetic utterances, the vehicle with which the poet transmits his message. The effectiveness or otherwise of this utterance of this message depends largely on the nature and quality of language used. In modern Nigeria, language has helped immensely in determining meaning sometimes. It has also helped to direct and clarify meaning

Ebede: Discourse techniques in African poetry

while at other times language has helped to impede and distort meaning.

The poet's success in her writing could attribute greatly to her use of language. She used language to give out message to the readers. She describes the level of poverty and actions of African leaders with passion and hatred. The poet also used foregrounding of imagery to draw imageries so close to the forecourt of the readers. The following lines analyzed the argument.

I was named Despair not because my mother had the good grace to know the commonest of English syntax; nor because of the stabs of bleakness swarming around me like our ever present neighbors, the green eyed houseflies; not because of the reality of the stark is because of the abject scarcity which has become my dearest companion....my status has nothing to do with the genesis of my name (pg.3)

I was named Despair because when I was born beside the putrid, shaking gutters, behind our rat infested, rickety shanty. Where my mother had no choice than to function as both doctor and midwife put together, my mother's strangled gnarls of pains, My mother's helpless labor screeching attracted the hand of fate, as she labored aided by hordes of flies (pg.4)

I was named Despair because Ikoro spoke out of Revulsion. Ikoro spoke out of frustration. Ikoro spoke out of cheer disgust. Ikoro spoke from the depth of his very demented soul. Ikoro spoke from the very profundity of his frenzied psyche. Ikoro expostulated out of cheer antipathy for wickedness before him. Ikoro summed up the episode in the scene before him in a phrase, a phrase that clinched accurately my fate and that of my mother (pg.7).

...little did she not realized that some other woman, just a few kilometers apart; in our mosquito infested ghetto was at the same time undergoing the paroxysm of parturition near the putrid maggot sewer. With swarm of flies as the doctors on call and the rodents as ever dedicated nurse, waiting to devour the afterbirth and god help the baby if it comes hitting the head by the edge of the gutter (pg.17)

I tell you my brother, poverty is not a disease. Poverty is far from affliction. Poverty is not a lack or want .... Real poverty is a fate worse than cancerous virus. It gives no chance but eats up everything. It is worse than a corrosive acid. It devours a man and leaves him a weakling carcass. It makes a man a shadow thing (pg.11)

The above lines point out the picture of poverty, want, scarcity, suffering, and oppression and bring them closer to the reader. One can argue that so many poets can do this enhance the beauty of their work. Ujowundu (2011) asserted that the poet's diction has rein structure as to reasons for naming her despair and the images portray depravity, such expression as the stabs of bleakness swarming around. The images are so everlasting and real. One could feel and imagine how the stench odor and hordes of flies could become part of situation of poverty and suffering. The description of the environment portrays abject poverty and want. Even the absence of medical professionals all epitomizes helplessness and deprivation. These were made possible by the foregrounding of imagery and choice of words employed by the poet. The words "strangulate", "gnarls of pain", helpless labor screeching", and hordes of flies" all expressed despair and decadent environment.

The poet with conscious and consistent use of language presents the living conditions of average citizens in Nigeria. The above words "revulsion", "frustration", and "disgust" are all expressions of anger disenchantment and frustration. The level of rise of imagery coincides with rise of anger in the voice and mind of the poet. In the poem, Ikoro is a picture of a wretched teacher who is highly intelligent but no money to justify his patriotism and excellence in knowledge. He is a stereotype of some forsaken teachers in Nigeria who languished slowly in various schools in rural areas. Poverty is being described with images of "mosquito infested ghetto", "swarm of flies", "rodents" and "gutter". All lasting pictures of poverty and deprivation yield the message of the poem to the readers through the use of language.

### **Use of Proverbs**

Another discourse technique commonly used in the poem is the use of proverbs. Proverbs were used in such a level that they become the backbone for the interpretation of the message of the poem. Proverbs did not give the poet an authenticity as an African poet but also helped and structured the pattern and flow of her poetic thoughts. Proverbs in this poem are so weaved together that one cannot easily separate the two elements (spoken words and proverbs).

Do not laugh yet at the old woman whose wrapper is torn at the bottom until you get to the root of her dilemma between her buttocks and the wrapper (pg. 1)

How can you attempt a guess of which fly is blind, when you have never cooked the garri paste? For if you want to know the fly that is blind in one eye, seek the help of the woman who cooks ogiri (pg.2)

How do you master the walking gate of the man with sagging waist cloth when you have never suffered from testicles hernia? (pg.2)

Perhaps soul brother, you may not understand the anguish of being Despair. It is only he who ate the meat knows the exact tooth its piece were stuck into.....Only he who wears the ant-infested trouser knows the exact place of the bites (pg.9).

It does not matter how long the chicken angles for the corn in the covered basket, it yearns in vain...Even if the rat does a hundred meters dash around a pot covered with another, in vain does it toil (pg.26).

If you want to understand the language of the sand, seek the counsel of the arts...if you want to decipher the whispers of the wind, solicit for the interpretations from the leaves...If you want to speak the language of the cloud, do not hesitate

to ask the birds....if you want to know the language of want, seek the true color of hunger....ask me (pg.37).

The use of some proverbs in a rhetorical form in the above lines captivates the reader to fully appreciate the message of the poem. These proverbs were series of warning, cautions, and appeals which allow us to put ourselves in the shoes of poor individuals. The poet narrated the suffering and excruciating situation of a woman giving birth which made Ikoro to exclaim after watching the sordid and heart touching scenario. The poet further suggested that we should feel the woman's pain suffering on amidst of plenty. These proverbs recommended that we are yet to understand the level of poverty in Nigeria and yet this is a country that has the capacity and economy to cater for the citizens. The rich are getting richer, the poor poorer and this boils down to inequality and uneven distribution of wealth in the society. The wide gap between the rich and the poor is glaring and no matter how much the poor strive, they can never escape the poverty level. This is what the poet expressed with the above proverbs, a situation we must rectify in the future. In conclusion, the poet used proverbs to bring the message closer to the reader and make her message more sensible and authentic.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As earlier discussed and examined, poets are the voices of their societies. They project societal norms, ills, and evils which they hope to win freedom and redeem their societies through their artistic visions and creative ingenuities. Literature has become the most viable way through which poets and authors, in general, express their individual's concerns, fears and worries about society and cast aspersions on several institutions of evil and vices. Through this means, they hope to achieve peace and harmony for societal growth. This is an idea that makes language an essential part of writers' work of art to be better understand the composition, construction, sentence patterning, presentation of imageries, use of figurative expressions and handling of some native issues.

This study examined the use of proverbs in Asika Ikechukwu's Omeile. There were many proverbs used in the poem were neither accidentally nor unconsciously used. One with a thorough mind or critical mind will discover how these proverbs

Ebede: Discourse techniques in African poetry

were weaved into various segments of the poem in order to heighten effect and achieve a desired purpose by the poet. These proverbs were structured in such a way that they combine effectively with the works of the poet and glued together that one anticipates a lot action, suspense and other series of event at the mention of any proverbs. The proverbs are so structured and well-tailored that when removed from the context will remain lifeless. In Ngozi Chuma Udeh's Chants of Despair, the poet used foregrounding of imagery to demonstrate her appalling for the failures of African leaders and politicians which has reduced the citizens to poverty by expressing her thoughts in such a way that one can feel the bitterness and disgusting ideas. In addition, the poet also structured proverbs to direct the flow of her poetic thoughts and used foregrounding of imagery and other discourse techniques to bring hidden meanings to limelight.

Conclusively, the discourse techniques used in this study will enable individuals to easily penetrate, bring out so many hidden meanings, and digest the truth in art as well as being mindful of discourse techniques that were used in other genres of literature. This study demonstrated how the use of language and techniques of good poetry provide us with an understanding of some hidden thematic issues in any given work of art.

Furthermore, the discourse techniques used in this study revealed many hidden truth and highlights how these poets used poetry to better the lots of African society. Future research are recommended to explore and analyze more discourse techniques in works that outcross other cultures and background for a more productive conclusion.

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