

The Textual Analysis of Wole Soyinka's Poem: A Formalist Approach

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ABSTRACT

Literary appreciation, an organized use of non – literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into the genres of literature, has taken literature beyond the elements of pleasure and enjoyment derivable from merely reading literary texts. Fundamental skills of reader's ability to discriminate, judge and make comments can best be derived through textual analysis of literary works. However, the approach employed by a critic determines the literary achievement of the expected effect. This work therefore attempts a textual analysis of Wole Soyinka's "Abiku", using the formalist approach that studies a text outside the notions of culture, societal influence or authorship but focuses on the forms of poetry. The study examines the concept of formalism, its proponent's insight and its link to stylistics. An application of the aesthetics approach or 'art for art's sake' is then made in the analysis of the 32 – line "Abiku" written by Wole Soyinka. In conclusion, Soyinka showcases a proven mark of eclectic creativity with elements similar to Aristotle's traditions and change.

Key words: Formalism, verisimilitude, literary form, literary criticism, literary stylistics

INTRODUCTION

The choice of poetry in this study is a confirmation of its popularity as well as its universal form of public expression in words. Soyinka is undoubtedly celebrated for handling 'all the genres' with ease but some scholars believe that he is best in poetry. Some think that Soyinka's

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greatest works are his poems but Etherton (1987) says that Soyinka is 'primarily a poet'.

It has been discovered that Soyinka comes out as a product of conscious thought. It is in the light of this that Soyinka's "Abiku" is chosen for textual analysis using a formalist approach.

Concept of Formalism

Formalism has been described as a theory of art for art's sake, which indicates that literature should assert autonomy, devoid of politics or history. The idea of 'formalist' originated in France in 1833 when critics insisted that art must not teach morals (Adetuyi, 2004).

The theory of "art for art's sake" later became a movement that appealed to a pure aesthetic element of form. The formalists evaluate literature through its formal characteristics, paying attention to style, language, structure of text and rhetorical devices. In essence, formalist criticism is intrinsic criticism, rather than extrinsic for it concentrates on the work itself, independent of its writer and the writer's background. Thus, it is not out of place to say that formalism is the opinion that formal structure should be projected or represented rather than the context structure.

Cain (1999) writes that "formalism asserts that the text stands on its own as a complete entity, apart from the writer who produced it" it is therefore the peculiarity of formalist criticism to adopt an explication form, which is the unfolding of meaning line-by-line or even word-by-word or analysis which is the examination of the relations of parts. The aims of formalism generated by scholars in the school of Russian formalism are very relevant to this study. They include:

- To produce "a science of literature that would be both independent and factual..."
- Literature is autonomous from external conditions in the sense that literary language is distinct from ordinary uses of language...
- Literature has its own history, a history of innovation in formal structures, and is not determined by external material history.

- What a work of literature says cannot be separated from how the literary work says it hence the form and structure of a work is in fact part of the content of the work (Jim Hanseh, 2004).

Some of the major proponents of formalism include Rene Wellek, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, Shklovskys, Austin Warren, I.A Richards and John Crowe Ransom who rose to prominence through their literary works. In Africa, Ben Obumasele, Solomon Lyasere, Dan Izevbayo and Charles Nnolin belong to the school of thought of formalism. The school is concerned with evaluation or elucidation of the formal structure, primarily from over content, sequence of events and their casual – chronological connections or organic unity.

Application of formalist Aesthetic approach to the Analysis of Wole Soyinka’s Poem, Abiku

Since evaluative notions are very essential in aesthetic approaches to literary criticism, distinctive features that make up form in Soyinka’s poems are foregrounded in the analysis of the texts. Such features will include diction, symbolism, imagery, graphology, rhythm and other observed literary styles in the selected poem (Adetuyi and Olatayo, 2015). Soyinka’s ‘Abiku’ is a poem where we have *abiku* impudently and mischievously boasting of his power to overcome all attempts to hold him. Bangles sacrifices of goats, cowries, palm oil and sprinkled ash, markings with snail – shells – all these are in vain. This 32 – line poem presents the elusiveness of the *abiku* instead of sympathizing with the mothers. The poem therefore carries a feeling and theme beyond the traditional *abiku* myth.

Soyinka’s exploration of the narrative lyric mode is evident in “Abiku”. The emotion and passion of the characters has been profound; in content and form, the poem’s themes centre on the interplay between individual predicament vis-a-vis social responsibilities.

*In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet;
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time (L.1-4)*

Going through the lines of the poem, narrative mode has been explored by the poet to even suggest the tone of the poem.

In the lyric, "Abiku", Soyinka treats a mythical – cum mysterious figure by the name, Abiku. In the southern part of Nigeria, the word "Abiku" connotes different things. Some view it as a reality or an evil spirit – child while some see it as a weapon of punishment for a wayward woman. Such a child dies and is reborn in successive cycles of birth and death matrix to torment the mother. Osakwe (1995) in her comment on Soyinka's poetry says:

the poet's personality: a multifaceted literary colossus; a man of the world – steeped in Yoruba culture, washed in western culture and rinsed in the culture of the entire modern world ...in his broad vocabulary spectrum as well as the way lexical items are granted freedom of occurrence and co-occurrence (P. xvii).

Osakwe's observation is evident in Soyinka's title "Abiku" which can be ascribed to the influence of Yoruba poetry on him. His experience undoubtedly functions as part of his daily life. It should be observed that Soyinka deviated from Yoruba's conventional pity for the mother of abiku in this poem. He presents abiku as a spirit being that chooses to hire a life according to its principle and nature. The elusiveness of abiku hence calls for admiration.

It is also noteworthy that Soyinka exploits literary stylistics to embark on syntactic modification of his poetic lines in "Abiku". This study only plays up lines or stanzas of the poem that either breaks existing linguistic rules to create new ones or those that modify and utilize conventional rules for specific stylistic effects.

Once and the repeated time, ageless (AHQ)
Though I puke. And when you pour (NWG)
Libations, each finger points me near (CSPCA)
The way I came; where (NWG)
The ground is wet with morning (SPCA)
White dew suckles flesh-birds (ASPC)
Evening befriends the spider, trapping (SPCA)
First flies in wind-froth (CP)

Although, not all of rank-shifting (r/s) have been indicated in the brackets. It is obvious that it is significant in the quoted lines of the poem. The simple sentence analysis of SPCA and the advantage of the

elasticity of the noun phrase or nominal group (NWG) have been effectively exploited by Soyinka in his poem "Abiku". This corroborates Chinweizu and Maduburke (1980) that

*The language is a formidable barrier and even after you
have hacked your way through it, you still cannot
understand what if any is supposed to be going on...*

Soyinka exploits his artistic craftsmanship to create a uniqueness of form in literature which makes it difficult for whoever cannot read beyond the lines to lose the beauty of his poems.

Soyinka's craftsmanship enables him to device poetic style that makes him distinct in poetry. For instance, there is a kind of countercurrent going through the inner consciousness of abiku: he acquires the freedom and power to do and undo as it pleases him. This is done through the use of **imagery**.

Image of desperate wickedness is presented in line 1-4 because he boasts of his ability to thwart every sacrifice offered to placate him. The images of death are so strong in line 29-32. The ripest fruit should be happiest because it has reached its maturity – but in keeping with the tone of the poem, it is sad because it will first drop and die. The *abiku* in the womb is shaping death out of the material life

The complexity of the poem is evident in Soyinka's language, with the poem arranged into quatrains... Highly technical and sometimes making his verse rather obscure and incomprehensible. Osakwe (1995) quoting James Booth (986) says that:

*Clarity of statement frequently seems less important to
Soyinka than faithfulness to the complexities and
ambiguities of his apprehension of life (P. xiv).*

The abrupt opening of the poem with structural Inversion: "in vain your bangles cast charmed circles army fear;" is signal to his style of language complexity.

The poet also adopts the use of rhetorical questions to bring out the theme and meaning of the poem. "Must I weep for goats and cowries, for palm oil and the sprinkled ash?" (L. 5&6)

It presents the cosmic power of abiku on the viction (mother) and even the society. The questioning eventually introduces the narrative lyric and dictates the sad tone of the poem. All the images in

the poem create a picture of horror and abiku appears to flourish in this nightmare world of death and impossibilities (L. 32).

Exophonic reference which explains some noted obscure collocations and absurdities is also of note; it is a signal that reference must be made to the context of situation.

*I am the squirrel teeth, crackled
The riddle of the palm, remember
This, and dig me deeper into
The god's swollen for (Soyinka, 1988).*

This is a Yoruba poetical riddle meant for entertainment. It has distinguishing stylistic features of question and answer pattern, recondite metaphor, segmental sentence form and the sparing use of connectives. This stanza can be called 'Alo Apamo Rhetorics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the beauty of any poem is found in its formal elements which have been extensively examined in Soyinka's "Abiku", using the formalist approach. Senanu and Vincent (2005) conclude that "Soyinka's writings are sophisticated", "obscure allusions", and an "abstract" and "esoteric language". The poem showcases Soyinka's lyricism which encompasses the narrative and descriptive modes. Finally, Soyinka is viewed through this poem, a profound human poet with devices ranging from rhetorical questioning, imagery, sad tone, effective language use and influence of indigenous culture.

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