



A CRITICAL STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *NARROW ESCAPES*

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ABSTRACT

Poetry, like all other genres where language is used to relate human experience, is not left out on the subject matter of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nigerian poets have contributed immensely to the discourse in this domain. This study aimed to examine selected poems in Tanure Ojaide's *Narrow Escapes*, which is on the Covid-19 pandemic. It adopted a stylistic perspective with a view to investigate how language is manipulated to convey the poetic contributions to the trendy subject. Three poems were purposively selected and analysed with the toolkits of critical stylistics. The analysis of the selected poems has revealed that not only the poet's intent on the pandemic but also the poet's experience is related through specific linguistic choices such as pun, personification, allusion and analogy which run through the lines of the selected poems. The study concludes that the deployment of the critical stylistic tools for the analysis of the selected poems has unravelled the underlying sense which the poet conveys in a melodious manner.

Key Words: Global pandemic, literary discourse, poetic perspective and critical stylistics

INTRODUCTION

Stylistics is a discipline that has generated a lot of controversies as regards its definition, scope and objectives. Among the numerous scholars who have contributed to the diverse areas of concerns in stylistics are Carter (1997), Harris (2000), Toolan (1996), and Widdows on (1992). However, a consensus of these scholars believes that stylistics can sit comfortably between language and literature because it contributes to the understanding of texts. Stylistics can work as a bridge between cultural, literary, and linguistic studies (Zyngier, 2001) since the discipline of stylistics generally investigates the effects of linguistic choices (Halliday, 1967).

In recent times, there have emerged new approaches to stylistics. These approaches shaped the discipline of stylistics. One of those approaches is the critical stylistic approach which introduces a method to achieve more rigour and replicable textual analysis (Jeffries, 2010). It is based on this trajectory that this study sets out to investigate selected poems in Tanure Ojaide's poetry collection *Narrow Escapes*

from a critical stylistic perspective in order to examine how the poet's language use reflects his ideological position, especially as regards the issues related to Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Many scholars have worked on the linguistic study of style (stylistics) in literary genres such as poetry, and linguistic materials such as obituaries, advertisements, technical reports, soccer commentaries, to mention a few. For instance, Al-Aadili and Salman (2019) carry out a study in Iraq and for the analysis of the data, they adopt a blend of the tenets of critical stylistics which incorporate the grammatical, semantic and pragmatic tools. The study reveals that the use of the tools of critical stylistics reflects the ideology of the poet which epitomises loyalty.

Also, Shatha (2019) employs the textual conceptual functions of Jeffries (2010) for the analysis of images of selected news articles. The study discovers that images reinforce meanings made by the linguistic text; it extends meanings made by the linguistic text and adds or suppresses meanings made by the linguistic text. The study also adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar

and draws on the notion that images are deployed as texts to create a model for the analysis of multimodal news texts based on the argument that even an application of critical stylistic approach to images needs an equivalent visual data analysis model which proposes a toolkit that can analyse meaning-making in non-literary multimodal texts.

Another related study is Mustapha and Khalil (2019). In this study, order and chaos in young adult science fiction are examined from a critical stylistic perspective. The major difference between this study and the present work is the data. While Al-Aadili and Salman (2019) examine dirge, which is a poem lamenting over the departure of Al-Imam Al-Hasan, Shatha (2019) studies non-literary texts. The present study examines selected poems on Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the two previous studies employed two and three of the ten tenets of critical stylistics respectively, this study sets out to analyse only the striking features of critical stylistics in the poem under study. This dictates the currency of data choice and research scope.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is critical stylistics. Critical stylistics simply studies how ideology and power relations can be decoded from certain linguistic choices in a series of texts, both linguistic and literary texts. The basis of critical stylistics lies in what the text does in representing the world in a particular way (Jeffries, 2010). The critical stylistics analytical toolkits are naming and describing, representing events/actions/states, prioritising; implying and assuming;

Naming and describing

According to Jeffries (2010, p. 20), naming and describing refer to how an entity is labeled. There are three main linguistic features of the textual conceptual function of naming and describing. These are choice of noun, noun modification, and nominalisation. In critical stylistics, naming refers to a number of linguistic practices that are used to structure the nouns and noun phrases which are usually the grammatical subject or object in the sentence (Jeffries, 2007; 2010).

Representing events, actions, states and Transitivity

Representing events, actions, states, and transitivity is a tenet of critical stylistics which is based on Simpson's (1993) notion of transitivity. According to Simpson, transitivity "shows how speakers encode in language, their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them" (p. 88).

Equating and contrasting

These simply describes specific linguistic markers that are used for creating equivalence and opposition. This is possible through the deployment of syntactic frames such as parallelism, semantic relations such as antonymy, synonymy, holonymy, and hyponymy.

Exemplifying and enumerating

These simply describes the place of pragmatic inferencing in a given text or a series of texts. They involve the indicative and comprehensive means of creating deductive reasoning in a potential audience for which specific linguistic structures are conveyed. Tools that characterise these aspects of the critical stylistic approach are apposition, anecdote, and analogical creation.

Prioritising

Prioritising is a textual conceptual function that informs the analysis of different ideological meanings resulting from foregrounding/backgrounding information in the clause structure (Jeffries 2014). Foregrounding refers to the art of making some parts of a sentence more prominent than others. Prioritising is realised through the three syntactic possibilities of information structure, transformation, and subordination.

Implying and assuming

Implying and assuming is the pragmatic perspective to critical stylistics. This describes the place of implicature and presupposition in social interactions or contextual monologues.

Negating

According to Jeffries (2014), this aspect of the critical stylistic approach centres on the portrayal of mental images of negated ideologies through the deployment of syntactic triggers of particles, 'not' and the verbs to do (does, do, and did). Other indicators of negative ideologies in texts are no, un-, in-, and im-. Specific verb choices also perform this function.

Hypothesising

This simply centres on the impact of specific linguistic usages on the target audience who can be the hearer/listener. The modality system is the most dominant means of hypothesising reality in a given text.

Presenting other's speech and thoughts

The speech and thoughts of other participants are usually presented directly or indirectly mostly through the deployment of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, euphemisms, to mention just a few.

Representing time, space and society

This aspect of critical stylistics, according to Jeffries (2014), concentrates on the significance of deixis and deictic expressions in a text or a series of texts. Even though there are ten tenets of critical stylistics of Jeffries (2010), these tenets are analysed based on their preponderance in the poems under investigation.

Data analysis and discussion of findings

This section contains the presentation and analysis of extracts from the selected poems. Three poems are selected purposively from the anthology, *Narrow Escapes*. Each poem is analysed separately deploying three of the tenets of critical stylistics highlighted in the foregoing discussion. Lastly, the deductions from the analysis of the data are components of this section.

The three poems selected for the study are 'When Love is a Palliative', 'Travels during a Pandemic', and 'My Hair in the Pandemic'. The first poem is a satire and it exposes certain moral decadences that are prevalent during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the poet employs specific devices, among which is an apostrophe to downplay the social misfortunes. The last two poems relate the poet's experiences during the lockdown period. Apart from being satirical, these two poems are also didactic as they emphasise the lessons which are derivable from the episodes of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Datum One

When Love is a Palliative

Don't behave as if there's nothing for me
as I waste helpless before your eyes.
You have in your heart something that nobody
Suspects holds anything that can revive a man.

Corona virus unleashed a war against all and with
every fiber each fight for life; drained or dying.
There are palliatives to survive pangs
of this pandemic like no other we have seen.

My love for you is a war fierce like no other.
You hide the key to where there is refuge.
I will break in and seize for myself your love,
since you behave as if there's nothing there.

Brimming warehouses and folks still dying of hunger!
You say my happiness is your prayer and task.
I don't know if you really know what hurts me so.
I'll have it from you if through looting.

Naming and Describing

The poem above is of a mixed genre, it has both dramatic and prosaic elements in it. This is discernible through the poet's style of composition. In the poem, there are linguistic choices that name and describe the characters/actors. In the first instance, there are three major characters in the poem. The linguistic forms used for describing the first character are the personal pronouns, *I* and *me*, which are deployed in the poem to refer to the *addresser*. The *referent* is described using hyponyms of body parts, *eyes* and *heart*, to emphasise its superordinate attributes. However, subsequently in the succeeding stanza, the referent is contextually identified as palliatives. Lastly, the third character is described using a noun, *Coronavirus*.

Presenting the Speech and thoughts of other Participants

The speech and thoughts of the thematic subject, *palliative*, is presented through the deployment of personification. This rhetorical frame runs through the first stanza of the poem based on the physical endowment *eyes* and *heart* that the poet bestowed upon this participant. This is informed by the poet's sense of humour which dictates his manner linguistic deployment to convey a very serious and sensitive message to the readers. Other attributes ascribed to the subject include happiness, love, hurt, and behaviour.

Datum Two

Travels During a Pandemic

(September 20, 2020)
I travel by way of dreams
to untold landscapes
to meet novel beings that hadn't come my way.
That's what social media does—
brings me to strangeness
of far places and what's been hiding beside me.
The lockdown didn't paralyze my legs
but offered me wings to cover more worlds
and another eyes to penetrate thick clouds.
I learned so much of distant places
From my restriction to stay put here.
I travel to undreamed-of places.

Naming and Describing

Naming in the poem is achieved through the use of the following linguistic components:

Pronoun: '*I*',
Abstract nouns: '*dreams*', '*strangeness*', '*lockdown*',
'*restriction*'
Proper noun: "*social media*"

Also, Descriptions are carried out in the poem through the use of visual imagery encapsulated in:

Verb choice: '*travelled*'.
Noun choice: '*dream*', '*landscapes*' 'beings'
Choice of Adjectives: "*untold landscapes*", "*novel beings*",
undreamed-of places,

Equating and Contrasting

In the poem, the linguistic trigger of equating and contrasting that abound is hyponymy. Hyponyms of body parts: '*eyes*', '*legs*' and '*wings*'. These words are used in the poems as follows:

... The lockdown didn't paralyze my **legs**
... but offered me **wings** to cover more worlds
and another **eyes** to penetrate thick clouds.

Hyponyms as used in the lines of the poem have connotative senses. *Leg* is used to describe the poet's level of exposure and his sense of adventure; *wings* represent capabilities, strengths, etc. while *eyes* used to describe phenomena such as foresight, outlook, and privilege.

Exemplifying and Enumerating

The linguistic element deployed in the poem is an analogy. Analogies, as evident in the lines of the poem, are illustrated as follows.

Analogies: “*what's been hiding beside me*”
novel beings *that hadn't come my way*
...*The lockdown didn't paralyze my legs*
but offered me wings to cover more worlds

Analogies are created in the poem through the use of the nominal clause, “*what's been hiding beside me*” and adjectival clause, “*novel beings that hadn't come my way*” to create mental images in the minds of the readers.

Presenting other's Speech and thoughts

The speech and thoughts of participants in the poem are presented through the use of specific rhetorical markers. The rhetorical marker that is preponderant in the poem is personification. Personification abounds in the following lines:

That's what social media does—
brings me to strangeness

The lockdown didn't paralyze my legs
but offered me wings to cover more worlds
and another eyes to penetrate thick clouds.

From the illustrations above, two entities that are being personified are social media and lockdown. *Social media* is presented as an accomplice of the poet while lockdown is identified as one with physical strength which is capable of assigning responsibilities to human beings. The significance of this is to stir the emotions of readers.

Datum Three

My Hair in the Pandemic

(June 4, 2020)

Each time I look at the mirror
I know I am under the spell of Covid-19
and how much the body can bear for life's sake.

My hair has gone uncut for months;
overgrown like a forest on a knoll and reminds
me of the Afro style I flaunted a long time ago.
Now hair spilling into nostrils, nose, and ears,
I am a caricature of what I used to look like.

I weigh the barber's shop and threats of infection
and no-one tells me not continue growing my hair.
Life doesn't owe the body maintaining all its parts.

There are so many cosmetics I can do without and be fine.
I know so much I can do without and still be happy----
happy about my health for which I can't risk going out.

Is my hair a patch of wiregrass, weeds, or even a nest?
Each time I look at the mirror, Covid-19 stuns me
with lessons I wouldn't have known without this threat.

Naming and Describing

The poem, like datum one is of mixed genre. However, two genres are involved, prose and poetry. The poet presents his thoughts from the first person point of view. Naming in the poem is achieved through the use of the following linguistic indicators:

Personal Pronoun: *I*
Noun phrase: *My hair*
Proper noun: *Covid-19*

I and *My hair* are repeated in the poem not only for accurate and precise description but for the purpose of emphasising the subject matter of the poem, for memorability.

Equating and Contrasting

The linguistic indicator of equating and contrasting is hyponymy. Hyponyms of body parts: *body, hair, nostrils, nose, and ears*. These words are used in the poems as follows:

...and how much the body can bear for life's sake
My hair has gone uncut for for months;
Now hair spilling into nostrils, nose, and ears,

Hyponyms are used in the lines of the poem for accurate and precise descriptions.

Presenting the Speech and thoughts of other Participants

The speech and thoughts of participants in the poem are presented through the use of specific rhetorical markers which are: personification, simile and rhetorical questions. These are exemplified in the following lines:

Personification I know I am under **the spell of Covid-19**

and how much the body can bear for life's sake.

...I weigh the barber's shop and **threats of infection**

Life doesn't owe the body maintaining all its parts.

Each time I look at the mirror, Covid-19 stuns me

....**My hair has gone** uncut for months;

overgrown like a forest on a knoll and **reminds me** of the Afro style....

Simile: overgrown **like a forest** on a knoll and reminds

Rhetorical question: Is my hair a patch of wiregrass, weeds, or even a nest?

The rhetorical features of simile, personification and rhetorical question are deployed to create humour. This serves as a means of lessening the impact of the global pandemic on the poet's persona specifically, and more generally, the potential readers.

Findings

This study has a number of deductions. Among the findings are that analogies are means of creating mental/represented images in the minds of the readers. Rhetorical features of simile, personification and rhetorical question serve as means of creating humour. Apart from its all-important

function of stirring the emotions of readers. Hyponyms are used in the lines of the poem for accurate and precise descriptions. All the devices, put together serve as a means of lessening the impact of the global pandemic on the poet's persona specifically, and more generally, the potential readers.

Conclusion

The poet's style of composition of the poems itself as mixed genres, is a means of exemplifying and enumerating. This has helped towards a better understanding of the poet's intents which are encapsulated in the lines of the poem. More importantly, the identification, description, and interpretation of the critical stylistic triggers that are preponderant in the poem have established the ideology of the poet as regards the phenomenon of Covid-19 as being a pain and gain voyage with its accompanying didactic experience. The use of the critical stylistic approach for the evaluation of the selected poems in TanureOjaide's poetic collection, *Narrow Escapes* has further established the significance of the discipline of stylistics as not just selection of a set of linguistic features from all the possibilities in a language and literature-oriented materials but as an approach to the understanding of the text as cultural practice.

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