

Modality as a Discourse Strategy in New Nigerian Poetry

By

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Abstract

A good number of scholarly criticism on both the thematic and linguistic engagements of new Nigerian poetry have been undertaken, revealing, in varied degrees, how the preoccupation of new Nigerian poetry can hardly be separated from the decadent socio-political environment that created it. Yet, the utilization of modality by new Nigerian poets in recounting and refracting the socio-political quagmire of their time has not attracted the attention of linguists, and this tends to undermine the elemental role of modal verbs in expressing a poet's thoughts. This paper, therefore, interrogates the use of modality as a discourse strategy in new Nigerian poetry and argues that the language of new Nigerian poetry is a reflection of the Nigerian socio-political predicament. In doing this, the paper examines four Nigerian poets who were purposefully and randomly sampled to cover the four geographical distribution of Nigeria: Joe Ushie's *Hill Songs* is selected to represent southern Nigeria and Musa Okpanachi's *The Eaters of the Living* is drawn from northern Nigeria. While Ademola Daslyva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* represents western Nigeria, Ifeanyi Ogbonnaya's *...and Pigs shall Become House Cleaners* is taken from eastern Nigeria. The analysis reveals that modality as a linguistic device is widely used by new Nigerian poets in questioning the abuse of power and office by the political class, as well as to incite the neglected masses to rise to the occasion of radically changing their humiliating socio-political situation.

Introduction

In Nigerian literature, "modern writers in English are grouped into three generations, namely the first, the second and the third which is composed of writers who were born after Nigeria's independence" (Egya 53). The present paper is concerned with the last group. This generation of poets, also known as new Nigerian poets or twenty-first century Nigerian poets, has been regarded as

lamentation poets who “lament the betrayal of political leaders and the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation” (Mowarin 125). According to Joseph Ushie, some of these poets include “Femi Oyebode, Afam Akeh, Onookome Okome, Uche Nduka, Chin Ce, Usman Shehu, Remi Raji, Joe Ushie, Nnimmo Bassey and Maik Nwuso” (22). As with most literary cultures, Nigerian socio-political development has presented highly political subject matter for these poets, and maintaining the tradition of their predecessors in terms of voicing their incenses with government’s lack of focus but with a difference in stylistic presentation, this generation of poets engages their poems as avenues to register their contempt with a system that makes them slaves in their own country. These poets’ thematic preoccupation revolves on the seemingly irresolvable Niger delta oil crisis, political betrayal, the widening gap between the extremely rich and the extremely poor, religious bigotry and political assassinations. Above all, these poets have continued to forge the link between the poets and their society; making their poems an outlet for the people’s socio-political expression. In a corollary, these poems are shaped by tension between the mass majority and those who clung to power against popular will.

While the demilitarization of Nigeria’s politics and public life led to literary “explosion”, the re-institutionalization of democracy in the country gave birth to a literary tradition that is thematically and linguistically blatant in its approach to socio-political realities of the country. These poets, whom unlike their predecessors that were hindered from expressing their views by military strictures and the dearth of publishing houses that characterized the military era, the present generation of poets, with the advancement in computer literacy as well as telecommunication, availability of private and corporate sponsors of literary scholarship and the birth of several publishing houses, do not only express freely their dissonance with oppressive regimes, but also have social medias that enhance the spread and publication of their works.

The literature that emerges from any culture can hardly be separated from its historical, political and socio-economic antecedents. The poetry produced in this period, like the preceding generations, can almost not be disconnected from the events of its time. These poets have artistically conveyed the ubiquitous social events of the Nigerian nation in a language that is simply down-to-earth. Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu views that “...virtually every Nigerian 21st century poet is being taken over by the glitterati of abstractions and esoterisms, or what some would rather euphemistically regard as linguistic sophistication (140)” seem an inordinate description of the linguistic simplicity of the new Nigerian poet. The new Nigerian poet has taken their quest for uniqueness of craft in reflecting the true state of the Nigerian society in a language that is accessible to their reader; a clear departure

from the high sounding grammar of the Soyinkas that impaired intelligibility. As the excessive “grammaticalization” of the Soyinkas gave preeminence to aesthetic values, the social function of poetry in refracting societal ills was almost relegated to the background. Conscious of the concomitant function of poetry, the Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, equates poetry to “the luminous ray”/ “the eloquence of the gong”/ “the lyric of the marketplace” and “harbinger of action” (3). Osundare sees poetry as not only having aesthetic and entertaining dimension but also a compelling function of social alertness thereby fashioning out the course of social revolution or social action that will lead to social change. The new Nigerian poetry therefore performs the simultaneous function of charting a poetic tradition of linguistic simplicity and poetry as a platform that can be calibrated along the axis of social change. The extant need for change owing to social decay has made this crop of poets more virulent in their approach to national issues as shall be seen in the later part of this paper. The kernel of this paper, therefore, is the investigation of modality as a linguistic strategy which the selected Nigerian poets deploy in addressing national issues.

Modality is an important feature of Critical Discourse Analysis, known as CDA by its proponents. Sue McGregor maintains that the tone of the text is set with the use of specific words to convey the degree of certainty and authority, this she calls ‘modality’ (6). The tone of doubt and surety is introduced by using modal verbs such as *may/might, can/could, will/would, it’s possible that*, etc.

Modality to Paul Simpson refers “to a speaker’s attitude towards, or opinion about the truth of the proposition expressed by a sentence” (47). It also explains a writer’s or speaker’s attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence. Modality can, therefore, be seen as a major exponent of the interpersonal function of language. The modal auxiliary in ideologically orientated context has perlocutionary effect on both the producer and the receiver of text. Modality has been used loosely in this paper to refer to ‘attitudinal’ features of language. Whenever instructions are given, a modality enters the relationship between the writer and reader of a text. The linguistic features employed in this paper borrow primarily from the functional perspective of language. In such a functional context, language can be detailed to perform particular social functions. To understand how modality as a linguistic concept is employed in this paper, one has to look at what language is doing beyond conventional practice. For the purpose of clarity, modality is presented as identified and described by Simpson (51):

Non-linguistic concepts represented

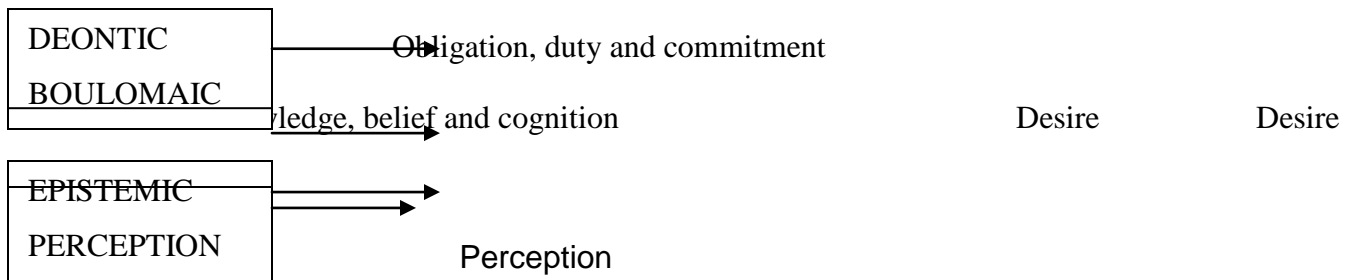


Figure.1: Modal System

Deontic modality is the modal system of “duty”, as it is concerned with a speaker’s attitude to the degree of obligation attached to the performance of certain actions. For example, “You may leave” the deontic modal auxiliary *may* performs the function of *obligation*. *Boulomaic* modality is extensively “grammaticized” in English; it is used to express desire. Modal lexical verbs that indicate the wishes and desires of the speaker are central in the *boulomaic* system. For example, “I hope that you will leave” expresses the desire of the speaker. According to Simpson, the *epistemic* modal system is possibly the most important regarding the analysis of a writer’s ideology. *Epistemic* modality is concerned with the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed. *Perception* modality, as Simpson points out, is best regarded as a subcategory of *epistemic* modality. It is distinguished by the fact that “the degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition is predicated on some reference to human perception, normally visual perception” (52). In discourse situations, modality performs pragmatic functions of illocution and perlocution. That is, in situations where power differential exists, a speaker’s intention can have certain illocutionary and perlocutionary effects on a hearer/reader.

It is from the perspective of the above-named pragmatic functions that modality is applied to examine how Ademola Dasylva’s 2006 ANA/Cadbury Award winning *Songs of Odamolugbe*, Joe Ushie’s bilious statement of Nigeria’s socio-political history, *Hill Songs* 2002, Musa Okpanachi’s 2009 ANA/ Cadbury Prize winning, *The Eaters of the Living* and an emerging poetic voice from eastern Nigeria, Ifeanyi Ogbonnaya’s ...and *Pigs Shall Become House Cleaners* 2008 have been selected to vividly convey the realities of their Nigerian society and ideology. Beside the fact that the poets were selected to cover the four geographical distribution of Nigeria, the poems describe the intense socio-political history of post-modernist Nigeria. While Dasylva’s *Songs of Odamolugbe* and Okpanachi’s *Eaters of the Living* have respectively won ANA/Cadbury Prize –the motivation for their selection–,

Ushie's *Hill Songs* was acknowledged by the then Cross River State government of Donald Duke as a symbolic contribution to the development of literature, a motivating factor for its selection and Ogbonnaya's *...and Pigs Shall be House Cleaners* is an emerging critical comment of Nigeria's socio-political development worthy of an appraisal. These poems reflect the eclipsed military dictatorship and the perilous democratic dispensation in which the poets compose. Hence, the concern of this paper is to examine the place of language in the expression of a people's socio-political dislocations and the sampled poets' reaction to perceived dominance by an oligarchic structure.

In Dasyilva's poetry, the use of the *epistemic* modal operator such as *must* renders the poet's commitment to the factuality of the propositions explicitly dependent on the readers' own knowledge. For instance, in the poem, "if the gods must be", *must* recurs four times. It conveys a message of unmistakable demand for reason, cooperation, and good sense to the poet's idea of the gods, which metaphorically refers to those who hold and abuse public offices. This is seen in:

If the gods, the gods I say, if they must be,
My people, the people must live.

The war is here: the war is now
You must tell it to Ogun!

Tell Sango Olukoso also
Through your evoking batakoto
He too must hear this!

That the masses must live or we stuff
Their months with ashes of our misery (33).

Though *must* may function as a refrain, its illocutionary force transcends its linguistic borders to work on the psyche of Nigerians on why the gods in power must make way for reason to reign. While "we" in the above example clearly conveys a sense of "togetherness", "must", as an instance of *epistemic modal* indicates compulsion or lack of choice. This understanding of the epistemic stance of the poet is also found in "The carrion", "Elephant and Tortoise", "Noble, fair" and "To emu" where the poet activates the modal "must" to drum support targeted at challenging the excesses of the ruling class and to change the abnormal social situations prevalent in Nigeria. The poet captures this in "Collective struggle it must be" (73). This sounds like the voice of a commander in a battlefield commandeering his men to assault their enemies. Bored by the inefficiency and the infertility of the rulers (metaphorically referred to as the gods), the poet calls for a total overhaul of the existing excruciating political reality. It

is either the gods must start to be productive or they cease to exist. The *epistemic* expression thus functions to distinguish the poet's categorical assertion that demonstrates his commitment to change the Nigerian society.

But in:

A sense of loss benumbed my bleeding heart:
'No, not now beloved, you must not die! (51)

The epistemic modal "must" provides a platform for the understanding of the pragmatic function of apology. The poet likens his love for his country to that of a woman. The poet is worried that if nothing is done, the country is going to die. Therefore, he begs her to stay. She is still needed and if she must die, it should not be now. Similarly, in the poem "To emu" the *deontic* modal "may" is used to appeal to the poet's maker *May I not be dammed* (102). Such an appeal is informed by the harsh socio-economic situation the poet finds himself. The assertive effect we find in "If the gods must be" is lacking in this instance. The absence of the evocative effect we find in "To emu" is symptomatic of the collapsing economy, an outcome of a crippled political system. However, in:

Mother Obai, do you ask why we are up in arms?
When true justice, equity are never a right,
But murdered media, imposed starvation, a rough?
Now we insist: patriotic and purposeful leadership
Must pilot to the Promised Land this colossal stateship! (54)

Though "must" appears only once, it carries a strong illocutionary force. The desire and emotion of the people, represented by the poet, is strengthened by the lexical verb "insist" in the preceding line. The epistemic *shall* and *may* are also found in Musa Okpanachi's *Eaters of the Living* where the poet strategically deploys them to inform the people of the doom that awaits them as politicians take public offices:

I shall give you
The precious ornaments of
Chains, handcuffs (14)

Since *shall* is deployed to express certainty and commitment, the poet assumes a prophetic role. In this light, the poet seems to unveil the self-driven goals of most Nigerian politicians, which is often pitched against popular opinion. Okpanachi succinctly castigates the barren ideas politicians in Nigeria parade as

manifestoes and confirms the fact that they become very oppressive once they assume power. So, what the politicians present as manifestoes are not their true intention. Rather, the manifestoes serve as smoke-screen that helps to blur their real intentions, which, according to the poet, is not to the benefit of Nigerians. To the poet, the manifestoes presented by Nigerian politicians are programmes directed at pauperizing the Nigerian populace. The use of *shall* and *must* modal items calculatingly present a confrontational discourse, an opposition to the excesses of the oppressors who camouflage as politicians. Without resort to linguistic engineering, Okpanachi openly attacks the inactions of some politicians that have helped to move the country several years backward in terms of human and infrastructural development. The poets activate *epistemic* modality to show their commitment to the truth of the propositions of the socio-political occurrences in Nigeria. They echo the people's insistence as their intent and aspiration for better governance is tied to the heavy-handed modal *must* and *shall*. The use of these heavy-handed modals amplifies as well as asserts the need for change. It calls for a critical examination of government antics and compels the masses to devise a means of revolting against the purported normal situation. The use of language is forceful, but then, it is revealing. The fact remains that improvement is contingent upon people being conscious of the social realities that exploit or dominate them, and then demanding liberation from these forces.

Hence, Daslyva in the poem 'Compatriots arise' makes a call:

...arise, arrest
Obai's enthralled dignity
As we watch her squandered prosperity,
Leaders in vain glory transgress,
And leaches the gamblers congress (54)

The lexical choice, "arise" and "arrest" is strategically compelling the "compatriots" (probably, those who are of the poet's ideological leaning, exemplified in the use of the inclusive "we") to rise to the occasion of rescuing the nation from being "squandered". *Obai*, which is used to represent Nigeria is being "squandered" and dominated by an oligarchic structure - "the gamblers congress"- and the poet calls for freedom, which can only be realized if the people take positive actions, such as rising and arresting members of "the gamblers congress". Similarly, in the poem "The will":

And with iron will
All barriers break
Where the will rules
The walls crumble (90)

Okpanachi urges the Nigerian masses to take positive actions that will lead to their being liberated from the choking grips of hegemonic barriers. Embedded in the poet's message is the idea that freedom is contingent upon people taking forceful action and that if the "will" is unwavering, the walls of oppression will surely "crumble". Explicitly, the masses are not only stirred to action, but they are also assured of victory.

Moreover, in the poem "Hill Song", Ushie uses the modal "must" four times. It recurs in the last four stanzas of the poem, one of such instances can be seen in:

If I *must* sing
Let my song not be on
Those gourmands whose
Gourd has dried up
The springs of my blood (11).

The modal "must", as used in the above text possesses the illocutionary strength of castigation. The poet becomes existentialist as he dissociates from the *other*, poets who pour accolades on corrupt authorities. From the poet's perspective, poetry must be written to uplift people, rather than use it to praise corrupt and brutal leaders. It also reminds one of Plato's famous statements about poetry:

...such poetry has no serious value or claim of
truth, and we shall warn its hearers to fear
them to adopt the view of poetry we describe (438)

For Ushie, poetry is a potent form of rebuke and purification. He therefore, draws a distinction between those who use poetry to support the excesses of government and those who use poetry to reflect and refract the ills in society. Unlike other poets, the poet rejects supporting visionless rulers, nor will he be blind to their excesses. The poet sees hope only when his fellow poets, whom he regards as embodying the conscience of the society squarely face their task of reprimanding bad governance in order to confront the screaming metaphor of pain experienced by Nigerians. The recurrence of "must" in the poem, supported by the "if" conditional adverbial clause brings to light the poet's collectivist orientation. The strategic position given to the adverbial in the subjective shows the link between cause and effect: that the poet's creation cannot be severed from the on-goings of his society. Invariably, the poet activates the *deontic* modal system and makes a clarion call (a duty, it expresses the poet's attitude to the degree of obligation that he attaches to the performance of the required action) to Nigerians to rise

to the occasion of rescuing the dying nation from corruption, sycophancy, hypocrisy and bad leadership. The call, which has an obligatory undertone, urges the masses to rise against the *gourmands whose gourd/ has dried up/ the springs of my bloom* (11).

This is also explored in Dasylyva's anthology, where the poet works on *deontic* "must" as an obligation on the part of the people to take required action. But in the subsequent line of the same poem, the *deontic* function shifts from obligation to explain the domination of the ruled by the rulers:

Must cook and serve the master's food
Must dance to the bastard's discordant tunes (68)

The strategic location of the modal shows the powerlessness of a servant that is left with no option but to do the master's bidding. Similarly, Ushie's use of *must* in "Well or weary, pay I *must*" (13) explains imposition on the part of the impostor and resilience on the part of the people. The poet and his people are compelled to do what they ordinarily would not. The persona is left with no alternative, but to do what is offered to him. The poem tacitly captures the emptiness of man's existence. The modal of domination is also explored in Ifeanyi Ogbonnaya's 'to become the best inspector':

To become an inspector
You must be lectured to
Welcome the returns
Assembled through road taxes (39)

In this four lines and four stanzas poem, the modal of domination and imposition occurs four times. The illocutionary intent is to demonstrate the poet's contempt for the illegal practices of men of the Nigerian Police Force. The poet depicts how senior rank officers subject officers of the rank and file to extort the masses of money, if at all they want to be promoted. But that does not appear to be the concern of the poet. It seems the poet is disturbed by the fact that it is the masses that bear the excesses of such greed. The masses, more especially motorists are constrained to pay for other people's welfare:

To become a good inspector
You must be tutored
To dispel the protesters
In anti- policy rallies.

To become a better inspector
You must learn to exhibit your mastery

Of vote stealing strategies
To enthrone the selected men.

To become the best inspector
You must be willing to conceal
The murderous deals of power drunk
Through a truth-hiding mission. (39)

By strategically drawing on the modal of domination, the poet creates a discourse that is empathic as well as effusive, as it brings to light the domination of the ruled by the rulers. Besides the expression of bitterness directed at the perpetrators of such bestial act, the poet pitches his tent with the masses as his poem becomes an outlet for the expression of the people's hopelessness. The poet decries a paradigm shift as the police that is suppose to protect the people have become instruments in the hands of the powerful that are used to intimidate the people, cause confusion and create tension in the poet's society. The lexicalization of "must" as a modal of domination depicts the conscious lexical selection of new poets in the Nigerian literary circle, who serve as the vanguard of the ordinary Nigerian people. It is obvious that Nigerian poetry is leaning towards protest literature where poets no longer have time for flowery expressions that will not have any impact on its readers. The language is simple, the choice of words down-to-earth and directly addressing the social situation in the country. Hence Romanus Aboh (89) argues that:

There is closeness with the society both in attitude and voicing of the emergent poetic tirade that is illuminating the Nigerian literary scene. Thus, the language of Nigerian poetry is increasingly protest. This is perhaps, necessitated by the dissolute socio-economic and political situations which have enveloped recent poets in Nigeria towards a revolutionary or populist disposition.

James Tsaaior had earlier noted that "this disposition tilt(s) to the oppressed and exploited masses, the marginalized majority" (130). It is therefore extremely difficult to separate the poet's poetic concern from the suffering of the oppressed mass majority. We can therefore surmise that Nigerian literature has grown in strict fidelity to its time and events.

The themes discussed in the poems are familiar issues that have bordered the Nigerian people. To use appropriate words that describe the everyday experience of the people is to pitch your tent with them in a language that is sympathetic (as when referring to the masses) and antagonistic (when apportioning blame to the ruling class). For instance, the activation of the superlatives (adjectives) in

good, better and *best* (in the poem above) narrates the fact that in the Nigerian Police Force, the more criminally minded a police officer is, the higher their chances of rapid promotion. Ogbonnaya poetry agitates for political as well as economic reforms.

There is also the linguistic manipulation of the modal “will” in Ushie’s poetry. In the poem “The hills will rise again”, “will” appears four times. As used here, *will* in the first instance can be equated with “must”. It carries the tone of certainty and surety as in:

The hills will rise again
The hills will march again
The hills will howl again (9)

Besides its assertive undertone, “will” reveals a humanist, who has a strong conviction as well as fate in mankind. This is also evident in Ogbonnaya’s ‘...and Pigs shall be House Cleaners’ where the modal of certainty and surety (*will*) occurs four times. Unlike Ushie, who deploys “will” to assure the masses of better days ahead, Ogbonnaya uses his to predict doom for Nigerians. Most probably, the poet is of the view that since the masses have failed to revolt against the morally decadent rulers, pigs, a metaphor that describes the filth of Nigeria politics will certainly hold sway. Ogbonnaya seems to believe that social change could come if the marginalized resists the domineering group. Moreover, Ushie’s use of “shall” in:

These silent hills whose
Sun shall rise again. (12)

performs similar pragmatic function with “will”. It carries the illocutionary force of assurance and possibility. The poet assures his people of good things to come. It appears the poet believes that in spite of the odds one encounters in one’s daily endeavour, one can get better. But “shall” in:

Shall your fall to the hunter’s sling
Shut the mouth of the forest forever? (24)

works up a different meaning entirely. Ushie invokes *epistemic* modality as it depicts uncertainty, bewilderment and alienation. There is a general reluctance to interpret events and actions. This poem that captures the political tension that enveloped the Nigerian nation owing to the annulment of June 1993 presidential election, and the subsequent imprisonment of MKO Abiola and the assassination of his wife, Kudirat Abiola, seems too atrophied a situation for the poet to explicate. It explains a person

lost in the socio-political quagmire of his country. It describes a citizen, who is unsure of what will happen next, owing to the political disturbance in his country. Moreover, the consistent repetition of “will” critically echoes the poet’s consistent effort to make things better and also fulfils the pragmatic function of establishing an implicit comparison and builds a contrast between two apparently conflicting decisions.

Furthermore, the use of “will” does not refer to a type of modal auxiliary verb; rather it refers to the “Will” of the people. The *deontic* modal employed here functions to reveal the people’s desire to lead a meaningful life, just as the way other people do. Apparently, Ushie’s *Hill Songs* is sandwiched between the eclipse of military rule and the emergence of democratic rule. This is seen in:

Sandwiched between
the blood – sucking boots
and the sugar – tongued chameleons, (15)

The *blood-sucking boots* metaphorically refers to the military and *the Sugar- tongued chameleon* a linguistic innovation with associative as well as evaluative connotations that describes the antics of the political class. He uses a narrative procedure that illustrates his humility, warmth and compassion for fellow Nigerians, to depict a period that uncalculated socio-political and socio-economic policies and programmes threatened the unity of the Nigerian nation. In “Silence of time” Okpanchi also lends his voice in recounting Nigerians horrendous military experience: *Shriek / Bones crushed / under the menace of boots* (10). The poet describes an era where “boots” (a metaphor for military tyranny) menacingly “crushed” Nigerians. In a similar way, Bete Besong in “Literature in the Season of the Diaspora: Notes to the Anglophone Cameroon Writer” in *Weka* stresses:

The power of the writer is not always strong enough to change the political and social situation of his time but his art can become a fighting literature. He can write works that are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be (18).

In Ushie’s poem, he directs his contempt at the military forces, their collaborators and agents of destruction. The poet does this by implying the agentless passive *those gods*. This has an impersonal and indefinite characteristic, as the poet does not specify who had threatened Nigerians to death (dust). The agent – *the military forces* is recoverable by exophoric reference from the historical context of military dictatorship in Nigeria, which lasted for over thirty years. So the poet hinges hope on the emerging democracy. Ironically, the politicians like their military counterpart are failing.

The recurrent strategizing of “will” creates an argumentative texture, which is achieved by associative moves and the situation of the Nigerian people is reinforced by means of reflecting the struggle of the entire nation as can be seen in:

From north to south
and east to west
the hills will rise again
each waving a tree as spear
each hurling rocks like sling
each tracing the streak of stench (51)

The poet activates his ideological position by activating linguistic items such as the *-ing verbs* in *waving*, *hurling* and *tracing*, showing a society that is progressing from passivity to the tendentious questioning of the rulers’ excesses. The poet’s extensive and recurrent allusion to the metaphor of “hill” and intonation derived from the use of “will” succeeds in creating a discourse that is effusive and emotional. His linguistic choices create closeness to the masses and establish his membership with the people. The poet also concurrently presents his ideological orientation and his set of cultural values, which are shared by poets of his school of thought. These poets see themselves as the representatives of the ordinary man. The perlocutionary mood is that of reassurance and control.

The lexical strategy employed by the poets (examined in this paper), as demonstrated in the use of “will” and “must” auxiliaries are also cohesive devices, in the sense that they link the poets’ creation to what is happening in the society. The discourse strategy is to activate a frame of background knowledge that the interlocutor (the poets) presupposes is shared with the masses. The discourse frame brings to mind the life threat from those who held power against those with a different ideology during the Late Sani Abacha’s military dictatorship in Nigeria.

Moreover, Ogbonnaya in “National question”:

If power shifts
From North to South
Will it shift from You
To the rest of us?

If the river of oil
That flows like the Niger
And resides off the shore
Is controlled in the Delta
Will its gain shift from You

To the rest of us?

If my tribe or yours
Is chanced to rule,
Will the rule shift from You
To the rest of us? (29)

The exploration of “will” categorically addresses three contentious issues that have intrigued the Nigerian state. These issues are rotational presidency, the question of the Niger Delta and ethnic rivalry/marginalization. These issues have become the cardinal content of Nigeria’s political discourse. It seems the poet is of the opinion that power shift/rotational policy will not solve Nigeria’s problem since the power will not shift to ordinary Nigerians. It also appears the poet feels that tribalism has hindered the development of his country (see stanza three). Such linguistic strategy invites readers to understand the agony of living under the pains of intellectually barren and morally decadent political leaders. These lines invoke serious political tension as well as inhuman treatment meted on the Nigerian people. The poet also addresses the pathetic Niger delta region that has plundered his country’s economic activities.

It is obvious that the new Nigerian poet is no longer a writer of ‘self’. This crop of poets avoids high sounding grammar, making their works accessible. This is a trend that was lacking in the works of preceding generations. The new Nigerian poets do not place themselves over and above the political realities of their country. Rather, they see themselves as an integral part of the struggle to survive in a degrading socio-political situation that confronts them as members of the Nigerian society. It seems this is what Chinua Achebe has in mind when he notes:

What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us. The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all...the sensitive point of his community. (44-45)

Achebe’s position seems to suggest that a creative writer should not just be committed to the creation of aesthetics, but should also use their literature as a tool in the representation of the people’s experience. Poetic rendition in Nigeria therefore, has to be involved in narrating, in plain language, the precarious situation of Nigerians. In the same light, Ushie argues for the need to weigh the writer’s work against the on-goings of their society:

In assessing their responsiveness therefore it is necessary to gauge their art against the actual physical conditions at the time they composed (16)

The time in which new Nigerian poets are “composing” is precarious and preposterous. In a corollary, their language is left with no option but to portray the unstable as well as despicable Nigerian socio-political dilemma. It appears that a study that investigates how grammatical concepts are deployed to mean in Nigerian poetry is inevitable. One could only access the basic ideas discussed in a work if one understands how language is used to mean.

Aiyejina quoted by Ushie argues that poetry should be made relevant. In his exact words, he notes:

...to make poetry as relevant to the realities of their daily existence as possible: no more pursuit of the clever and esoteric lines of Soyinka, the Latinate phrases of Okigbo and Echeruo or the Hopkinsian syntax of Clark (18)

This position looks as if it has meaningfully impacted on the way new Nigerian poets make use of language. While the purview of this paper might be too infinitesimal to survey Nigerian poetry from its pioneering period to date, it is expedient to note that one defining feature of new Nigerian poetry its stylistic simplicity. The simplicity and vividness employed by new Nigerian poets seem to portend that there is nothing beautiful to write about. Therefore, the need to embellish words appears superfluous. To Okpanachi, for instance, it seems his language must represent the agonies of the Nigerian people he writes about. This is seen in “The god we made”:

lord of lawlessness
And insane decrees.
This we pray:
Give us this
Night our daily
Freedom.
And forgive us if
We err with our
Tongues or pen,
My clay-footed god. (35)

In the above extract, the poet tries to extrapolate his personal feelings to represent all Nigerians. Such linguistic expression is quite remarkable in its critique of leaders who overnight turn themselves to lords,

My clay-footed god. Ademola Dasylva and Toyin Jegede insist that Nigerian poets “condemn the negative forces in their society in order to bring about improvement. They assume the role of spokesmen for their people; this is an extension of communal solidarity” (141). This is a technique most Nigerian poets utilize in informing their readers of their experiences and the need to work toward changing the status quo. This seems to work in tune with the position taken by Achebe cited earlier. In “Rage of age”, a metaphorical embellishment of the kind of poetry his age writes, Okpanachi’s tone becomes more bitter as he depicts the unequal power and economic situation in his country:

Hasten
For ash
Baptism
Before I close
My mouth
I will call, call
Again by visitation
The slough is
More deadly than the Snake (33)

This stanza seems to accomplish Okpanachi’s linguistic simplicity and straightforwardness in addressing issues that have bedeviled his Nigerian society. The poet’s linguistic selection is in consonance with the atrocious situation he describes. Okpanachi uses the modal “will” to describe a need for the socialist poet to be involved in questioning the excesses of the ruling class.

Conclusion

The poets examined in this paper are unapologetic about their dealings with the political class and the situation of their society. Therefore, these situations and the political class need to be addressed with no measure of indirectness. Where metaphors are deployed, they are not cryptic. These are easy poems to read, the poets present historical facts about the eleven years of democracy in their country, which have been used by the political class to widen the gap between the ruled and the rulers and between the rich and the poor. Evidently, in terms of thematic exploration, there is no clear-cut dichotomy among the three generations of Nigerian poets, but with the new Nigerian poet, there is a crystal difference in stylistic rendition and an artistic presentation that resonates with the socio-political quagmire of their time. This paper stresses the need for more studies on the use of language in Nigerian poetry given the fact that language remains an indispensable instrument which individuals depend upon

for the expression of their thoughts. The fact is that every writer engages themselves in the act of furthering the cause of the society through their creative utilization of the resource of language. The significance of modality has helped us to identify the populist orientation of the sampled poets.

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