

SEXUAL DISCOURSE IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S POETRY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC READING

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ABSTRACT Osundare the poet reads about sexual issues which inevitably employ those lexical items socially regarded as repugnant. His poetry and the accompanying linguistic choices are however controlled, indicating that he is conscious of the limits imposed on him by the Nigerian social conventions. One such control is the attempt to conform to the Yoruba convention which allows users of the language to mention sex organs only of animals or in allegory with material things. This is not a completely effective strategy, since he employs periphrastic statements which end up more repugnant than those unmentionable items. Periphrastic euphemisms are the chief method by which the Yoruba and English traditions avoid the employment of the socially unacceptable linguistic expressions, but when periphrases are without euphemisms, as they are in Osundare's poetry sex is made even more explicit than otherwise.

Key Words: Niyi Osundare; Language; Sex; Periphrasis/Euphemism; Poetry; Yoruba.

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I. Sex in Public Discourse

Sex and related topics are tabooed in public discourse in both Western and African cultures. Britain, for example, has been very severe in its censorship of obscenity, legally coded as "obscene libel" or "matter tending to deprave or corrupt" (McArthur, 1996: 187). On the grounds that they depicted sex luridly and explicitly, D.H. Lawrence's novels, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) as well as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) were officially suppressed (McArthur, 1996). Salaciousness was the principal focus of the trial of the unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Regina V. Penguin Books Ltd) in 1960 (McArthur, 1996).

The free expression of sexual matters exercised by Obesere (whose self-proclaimed sobriquet is "the master of lewd jokes") and many other Nigerian musicians in the popular entertainment has quite expectedly elicited opprobrium and disdain from a large section of the public. The public's squeamish taste has been fostered as much by religious experience as by the traditional culture. Artists who violate the propriety placed on the subject as do Obesere and others are castigated not just for being coarse or uncouth but also for lacking originality. Although this disdain applies to all violators in all sections of the society, it

would seem that commercial drivers in Nigeria take liberties with obscene jokes when they are in the lorry stations. (This deviance is typical of the uncertain morality with which the trade is identified. It is interesting that outside lorry stations or outside business hours, drivers usually tend to conform to the social expectation.)

One particularly interesting exception to the rule of conformity to the social norm is the occasion provided by the annual Oke'badan festival. Oke'badan, (literally the Ibadan Hill), is an annual festival observed by the worshippers of the deity of the hill in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State of Nigeria. This freedom is probably predicated on the society's recognition of man's need for catharsis following a whole year of bottled up emotion. The passion and vivacity that usually attend the outbursts during the Oke'badan festival attest to the obsession with which sexual matters are held by men and women of all age-groups. Freud has said that sex occupies a core area of the human psychology, which was controversial then, and now in Nigeria, may be difficult to ignore (cf Kaplan, 1990: 61ff; Forte, 1996: 20-21, 26-27).

Not only is sex a subject severely restricted in public discourse, lexical choices in direct reference to sex and sexual organs are allowed to feature only in periphrastic and euphemistic terms. In Yoruba language, the "penis" is referred to as "nkan omokunrin (the thing of a man or the thing of manhood)." It is also humorously referred to as "eketa itan (the third thigh)." Vagina is described as "oju ara (the body's opening/the point of entry into the body)." Similarly, sexual intercourse is presented in euphemistic descriptions: "o ba sun (he slept/lay with her)," "o ba lo po (he interacted with her/he related with her)," and "won ni ajosepo (they had mutual dealings/relationship)." Similar periphrases are found in the Judeo-Christian literature: "And Adam knew his wife" (Genesis 4:1) where "knew" is a euphemism for having sexual intercourse.

In great economy of language, Paul in the following passage refers to sex:

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence:
and likewise also the wife unto the husband.
The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband:
and likewise also the husband hath no power of his own body,
but the wife.
Defraud ye not one the other,
except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give
yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again,
that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency.
(I Corinthians 7:3-5)

The word "benevolence" here speaks of being physically available to each other; the word "body" is used synecdochically (in reference to the penis and vagina). Contextually, the verb "defraud" is the antithesis of "come together," a phrase mediating the idea of sexual union.

II. Sexual Discourse in Osundare's Poetry

Before the examination of sex-related matters in Niyi Osundare's poetry, I need to note that Osundare's is the clearest, loudest and most heard poetic voice from the Anglophone Africa today. A "new generation" poet, following the earlier established poets such as Okigbo, Soyinka and Clarke, Osundare has through enormous productivity, elegance of style, and currency and consistency of thematic concern, succeeded in drawing attention to himself. Some of the works published by this celebrated poet are *Songs of the Market Place* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *A Nib in the Pond* (1986), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moonsongs* (1988), *Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Songs of the Season* (1990), and *Midlife* (1993).

My exemplification of the poet's handling of sexual issues comes from *Midlife*, *Waiting Laughters* and *The Eye of the Earth*, three of his works I rate as most mature and vintage Osundare. In the analysis that follows, I note that Osundare uses words and expressions that are severely tabooed in public discourse. Examples are: penis, cunt (or vagina), testicle, hips, orgasm, and breasts. There are even periphrastic expressions in his poetry that may be considered more abrasive than the items listed above.

Given the severity with which the Christian, Yoruba and English traditions that produced Osundare view the featuring of sex and its linguistic indices in public discourse, how has the poet saved his lines from being an embarrassment to his readers? First, rather paradoxically, the Yoruba tradition freely allows people to mention sex organs of animals or in allegory with material things. For example, it is permissible to talk of the penis of a horse, the breasts of a cow or dog, the "penis" or trigger of a gun (i.e. "oko ibon," the trigger), the scrotums of a ram, as contained in the proverb, "Epon agbo n fi ni ko ni ja. (The scrotums of the ram are merely swinging, they will never drop off.)" It is remarkable that in no context is the "vagina," whether of a human being or an animal, allowed to be mentioned.

At any rate, Osundare seems to take advantage of this "loophole" in the traditional restrictions in presenting and managing the otherwise offensive items. That fact explains the employment of such descriptive expressions as: the okro penis / penis of okro, earth breasts, and testicles of the ram. However, to suggest that this is the only means by which Osundare saves his poetry from being a piece of salacious literature is to ignore the fact that he fails to employ that same means to "cushion" the offensive effect of "cunt," for example, in "the tireless cunt which swallows a log." Indeed, it would seem that the poet deliberately creates a textual crisis for himself by fashioning some euphemistic periphrases whose imports are far worse than the notoriously offensive items relating to the human anatomy. The next section demonstrates the extent to which Osundare succeeds in containing the sociolinguistic crisis.

ANALYSIS

The following lines represent some of the obscenities in Osundare's poetry:

The okro penis which irks the hungry wife,
 The tireless cunt which swallows a log,
 Still craving a pestle for an itching corner,
 The whistle and baton under the warder's baggy shorts,
 The hidden treasure in the school mistress's
 Chalk-encrusted skirt. (*Midlife*, p.12)

The first noun, "okro," deceptively prepares the reader for food and feeding especially with the adjective "hungry" pre-modifying "wife." However, the word "penis" intimates that the issue of sexuality is involved. In fact, the word "okro" seems to evoke an image of erection, the state of the excited phallus. The adjective "hungry" which the noun "okro" initially tempts the reader to see in terms of the alimentary or nutritional desire, does in fact accentuate the sexual tone of the text. The hunger in question must be construed in terms of libido. The "hungry wife," then, is one that is aflame with libidinous passion. The word "cunt," belonging of course inalienably to the "hungry wife," is said to be "tireless," even though it has "swallowed" a "log." The verb "swallows" and the noun "log" (referring to the penis) help in creating an absurd and facetious hyperbole.

But that hyperbole is not the most ludicrous of the images: the tireless "cunt" is still "craving a pestle for an itching corner." In other words, "a pestle" is the instrument that can satisfy the opening! It should not be difficult to see "the whistle and the baton under warder's/baggy shorts" as standing for the male genitals of enormous proportion. The "hidden treasure" located in "the school mistress's/chalk-encrusted skirt" is an extended metaphor for the "cunt" and the value it represents for the "penis" or its owner!

The poet continues:

Gboo-gbaa labara labara
 Gboo-gbaa labara labara
 Testicle of the ram
 The ewe's feast, the shepherd's pride
 Swinging in the wind
 Swinging swinging swinging swinging
 It's swinging in the wind
 Gbo-gba labara labara
 Testicle of the ram

The Yoruba words are merely an attempt to capture in ideophones the pendulous and cumbrous movement of the "testicle of the ram." The focus here is on the generative organ and power of the ram. The idea of generation and copula-

tion is not just conveyed by the juxtaposition of the “ram (the husband)” and “ewe (the wife).” The vivacious swinging in the wind” seems to celebrate this state of affairs. Perhaps the clearest hint that we have of the fruitfulness that follows the consummation of love between the “ram” and the “ewe” is contained in the phrase “shepherd’s pride.” First, the “testicle of the ram,” and then the feasting on it by the “ewe,” give the shepherd joy and swell his pride with the prospect of increasing his flock. The lexical and syntactic repetitions reinforce the idea of copulation and generation.

In a tone almost confessional in nature, Osundare informs the readers that he is “human in every sense.” This “lover of life without regret” writes:

I am human in every sense
 lover of life without regret
 ample hips, the bouncing bosom
 handsome lips alive with joy
 tongues which twist and tangle like exultant vines
 a tickle in the armpit, a tickle in the groin
 the cool-hot hearth in the valley of the legs
 the pestle finds its mortar
 the mortar finds its pestle
 legs touching legs in a dance beyond the drum
 a gentle sigh, a sticky moan
 hard and soft is the legend of the flame (*Midlife*, p.37)

The rather extended quotation is intended to present a full picture of the fleshly pleasure Osundare indulges in. The first three noun phrases, ample hips, bouncing bosom and handsome lips, each having a part of the human body evoking a tactile or visual image in its adjectival modifier, not only enlivens the remarkable freshness with which the passion is being recalled by the poet, they may excite a lascivious desire in the reader. Another three nominal phrases, each having a locative adjunct pointing to a sensation spot in the human body:

m h q
 a tickle in the armpit
 m h q
 a tickle in the groin
 m h q
 the cool-hot hearth in the valley of the legs

The noun, “tickle,” a word signifying pointed, sudden pleasure, is repeated in the first two nominal phrases. The structural and lexical regularities increase the pointedness of the pleasurable experience. The paradoxical adjective, “cool-hot,” the modifier in the third phrase, similarly conveys an attempt to characterize a first-hand experience of the ineffable fleshly pleasure. The entire noun phrase

is a euphemistic reference to the genitals. With alarming lexical, semantic, and syntactic regularities, the poet presents an image of pounding in the following lines:

the pestle finds its mortar
the mortar finds its pestle

The structural reversal of the first construction in the second, as well as the verb "finds" presents a picture of automatic or reflex attraction. The euphemism in those two lines is neutralized into explicitness in:

legs touching legs in a dance beyond drum

I can almost hear and participate in:

a gentle sigh, a sticky moan

which, with the adjective "sticky" provides audiovisual texture to the lines.

The adjectives "hard and soft" enter into the harmonious pattern of paradoxical sensation initiated in "cool-hot." But for the poet's masterly euphemisms, this would be a despicable piece of pornographic literature.

The lines I shall quote convey intimations of the processes of childbirth, which are presumably to be taken as autobiographical. But there are linguistic indications as well that the poet goes beyond parturition and locates the mother on the bed where she was adequately prepared, nine months ahead for the bringing forth of a child. Writes the poet:

And the bitter-sweet clamour of initial beds
when dawn led me through the portals
of my first legs;
the swish of the hinge, the sticky wilderness
of reverent valleys
And my swollen pride, and her murmuring mercy,
the sepia helmet of stubborn tendons,
the concert of hips, moistening motion
the oblivious moments...

the deed was dawn
and we watched a tutored childhood
slip off in ripples of purple noons... (*Waiting Laughters*, p.8)

As already suggested, these lines contain ambivalent shifts from childbirth to the exhilarating pleasures known nine months previously. The paradox conveyed by the compound adjective "bitter-sweet" echoes the form and meaning of "cool-hot" and "hard and soft" in the section quoted from *Midlife* (p.37). Yes, "the bitter-sweet clamour of initial beds" may be taken as ambiguously pointing to the bed on which the marital love was consummated and that on which the mother delivered her baby. It is not unusual that what was a connubial bed nine months prior is now a parturitional bed. The "clamour," the noise on a bed under pressure can be produced in both cases. Is the plurality of the noun "beds"

totally unrelated to sex or love affairs. These items are only employed as “figures of speech” in the context in which they are found.

CONCLUSION

Defying the dictates of all traditions that produced him, Osundare introduces to his poetry sexual issues which inevitably employ those lexical items socially regarded as repugnant. His handling of the issues as well as the accompanying linguistic choices is not totally without control, an indication of the fact that he is conscious of the limits imposed on him by the social conventions that impinge upon his writing.

One such control is the attempt to conform to the Yoruba convention which allows users of the language to mention sex organs only as they are related to animals and material things. This is not a completely effective strategy, since he frustrates himself along the line by bringing in periphrastic statements which end up being more repugnant than those items that are socially stigmatized. Periphrastic euphemisms, I have noted, are the chief method by which both the Yoruba and English traditions avoid the employment of the socially unacceptable linguistic expressions, but when periphrases are without euphemisms, as they are in the case of Osundare, they succeed in making sex more explicit than do the offending words!

The principal strategy that shields Osundare’s poetry from the charge of containing instances of pornography is his masterly use of ambiguities and ambivalences, where his ability is employed to make people doubt whether their textual experience involves purely sexual matters or whether sex is a metaphor for something deeper and of higher value. It is arguable, however, whether this is a totally successful strategy. One thing is clear, however, and that is that a less endowed poet who ventures into such treatment of sex will produce a definitely despicable piece of salacious literature.

It may be noted, finally, that poets are not linguistic or stylistic outlaws or islands, although they enjoy an uncommon liberty in their linguistic choices, a situation made possible by that phenomenon called “poetic licence.” Poetic licence is about creativity, defeated linguistic and stylistic expectations, production of fresh and refreshing literary values. Poetic creations, achieved chiefly through the instrumentality of the verbal language, jolt us delightfully, pleasantly, and not offensively or unpleasantly. When an issue involves public morality, as does the issue of sex and its linguistic intimations, the poet is “rebellious” at the expense of the respectability and acceptability of his works, for all literary creations are made with the expectation that they will be read by the public. Where the public’s sensibilities are offended, the consumption of the products is necessarily restricted to the poet and possibly a few of his brethren in rebellion. It can be seen, then, that “censorship” is not just a government’s action. It is often self-imposed by artists who are aware of the grave implications of lack of it.

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