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Rhetoric Techniques: A Study of Ezenwa Ohaeto's *The Chants of a Minstrel*

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Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of poetry is its ability to generate multiple meanings and interpretations. While the orality of Ezenwa Ohaeto's poetry and performance have received more positive criticisms by critics as well as acceptance, his deployment of rhetoric strategies as a potent amour in poetry seems to have been neglected by critics. This paper aims at investigating Ohaeto's use of rhetoric techniques in his poetry using qualitative research methodology. Significantly, this work attempts a textual and sub-textual analysis of Ohaeto's conventional language in poetry that leads to his literary and poetic effectiveness. Building on the ideologies of postcolonialism, Ohaeto's select poems from *The Chants of a Minstrel* as primary data are studied and analysed with a view to examining his reliance on rhetoric as discursive strategy to question socio-cultural and socio-political issues in Nigerian context and by extension, Africa and the world in general. Motivated by the scanty scholarly studies on rhetoric in Ohaeto's poetry; the paper identified some rhetoric techniques in the versifier's poems using postcolonial theory and qualitative

research method. It also demonstrated that rhetoric plays contextual role such as being interactional tool in the hands of poets. It is found out that Ohaeto deployed rhetoric techniques as poetic armouries to question and address socio- cultural, socio-political and socio-economic issues in order to bring a radical change in his society. This work revealed the effectiveness of Ohaeto's style and dependence on rhetoric as an oratory poetic technique. Rhetoric to a very large extent is Ohaeto's favourite device in writing.
Keywords: rhetoric techniques, postcolonialism, interactional tool, society, qualitative research.

Introduction

Rhetoric is regarded here as the use of language for persuasive purposes. As a classical term, "rhetoric'' derives its root from the Greek word *rhetor*, meaning "speaker,'' and originally referred to as the art of public speaking. This art embraced the techniques whereby a speaker could compose and arrange a speech that would be persuasive through its intellectual, emotional, and dramatic appeal to an audience. Over the last two millennia, rhetoric has been important in a number of spheres: the political sphere, where this art was born; philosophy, which has often placed rhetoric below logic and metaphysics; theology, which has used rhetoric for its own ends; education, where rhetoric has often assumed a pedagogical central role, extending into our own composition in classrooms; and, of course, literary criticism, which continues to draw upon rhetoric, grandiloquence and metaphor in its focus on language, tropes, and audience.

Therefore, controversy over the language of poetry (whether it should be obscure and difficult or simple and accessible and the composition of poetry that can be truly called Nigerian and by extension, African has raged over the years. One thing however appears to be gaining acceptance with majority of Nigerian poets, and that is the need to incorporate socio-cultural and socio-political

issues into oral literary materials and turn same into written poetics in order to make poetry people oriented. This is a new trend and a kind of rebirth in Nigerian poetry. This practice in poetry is scantily detected in a few poets of the first generation, though much prominently in the late Okigbo who though belonging to the euromodernist inclined generation poets, abandoned the earlier path of his poetic trajectory, and, in his *Path of Thunder*, made a sharp turn from his earlier aestheticization of obscurity to compose poems that are African people oriented and rooted in the African traditional value system while addressing the problems of his immediate environment.

The advocacy to return and create poems that are African oriented has received ground-breaking impact and eminent practice as well as prominent attention in the poetry of the post-colonial African minstrels who made it a point of concern to return to their roots in matters of style, language and poetic orientation, and as such employed oral forms, particularly, African rhetoric profusely in their poetry. In effect, their poetry is a radical departure from the compositions of the second-generation poets with their exaltation of obscurity and delight in forming a language cult decipherable only by a little coterie of experts.

To this end, the radical departure of the later poets from the Eurocentric tradition to seek new means of expressing their art in traditional lore explains the rise of a new poetry composition that has been here referred to as a poetic renaissance. Consequently, these poets have sought to explore and revive the African rhetoric and oral cadence of their indigenous people as poetic forms of their rich diverse cultures. Again, while they explore and employ these traditional poetic forms, they have simultaneously carved out distinct voices and poetic traditions for themselves and their people so that their poetry is not a copious transfer into English traditional poetry but a kind of rebirth of their people's folkloric forms. To this end, the oral materials have been transmuted or incorporated in

such an artful manner that we have a poetry that is not overly inundated with folklore to the detriment of universal understanding, but does indeed exude an African flavour and aura at the same time has both a local and universal allure. Oral literary forms, rhetoric in particular have become indispensable ingredients in the hands of many African writers.

Literature Review

Nigerian poetry in English underwent an evolution in the seventies and eighties that tilted it to the prevailing realities of the African society, and a people-oriented creativity. The first and second generations of Nigerian poets were largely influenced by the West and western traditional poetic compositions. Having studied under the tutelage of the colonial masters, it is not surprising that the early poets imbibed the Eurocentric tradition in their poetic rendering. Their poetry is "distinguished by an undue eurocentrism, derivation, obscurantism and private esotericism" (Aiyejina, 1988). The critical trio, Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, (1980) describe their poetry as being inundated with old fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction; "a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic traditions, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism." This kind of poetry in no small way alienates many people from reading and enjoying poetry not to mention that it largely fails to address the public concerns, the societal tragedies and triumphs, the poets being excessively preoccupied with their grief and emotions.

In continuation, right from the primordial age, emphasis has been placed on the inevitability of spoken language. To ensure adequate communication with the audience, the ancient Greek classics for instance, invented the "Onkos" to aid projection or audibility (Brockett, 1995). During the medieval period, the official language of the church, Latin was the language of poetry and this impeded communication on the side of non-Romans. This explains why the

first innovation into the poetics once drama got out of the church premises was the invention of vernacular religious performance. Furthermore, Brockett opines that the French Neo-classicists in their bid to ensure the manifestation of truth (verisimilitude) insisted on the use of appropriate language for appropriate effect; "lofty and poetic" language for tragedy and "everyday speech" for comedy. These types of instances run through all ages in the history of global literary art form. To this end, prominent critics and critical documents did not over simplify the use of language in the verse form. This suggests that rhetoric in its broadest sense, is the theory and practice of eloquence, whether spoken or written. Spoken rhetoric is mostly regarded as oratory. In a narrower sense, rhetoric has to do with a consideration of the fundamental principles according to which oratorical discourses are structured, which include: creation, arrangement, style, memory and delivery (Duckworth, 2007).

From the foregoing, it is obvious according to Ogene (2010) that rhetoric started from the oral tradition before it developed to the written. The early Greece scholars started from the oral tradition before they evolved a system of the written text. Socrates for instance did not write his dialogues down but the world got knowledge of him through Plato (Ogene, 2010). The different phases of development of the scientific method equally affected the development of logic as the classical scholars did not benefit much from the scientific knowledge. Hence, rhetoric has become polysemous over the years. The resultant effect is that African poetry exudes a local flavour that gives it an African peculiarity.

Nwachukwu-Agbada observes that this conscious rebirth is as a result of the vast application of African orality which is African writers' attempt to project and differentiate African literature from English literature. Thus, they chose to emphasize oral consciousness in their works considering that Africa is still largely an oral culture. These writers as Agbada (2000) opines, somehow

believe that "oral form (cadence) is probably Africa's greatest contribution to world literature". Owing to the complexity of meanings rhetoric has, it is often difficult to attempt a working definition. Relevant to this discourse is the notion of rhetoric as the use of language for persuasive purposes. This is imperative here since the essence of the verse form is to persuade the audience to see from the versifier's perspective things they ordinarily would not have seen. While elucidating the persuasive nature of rhetoric, Nicholas sees rhetoric as "a means of ordering discourse so as to produce an effect on the listener or reader" (qtd in Habib, 2011). In the same vein, it is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing co-operation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Corbeth, 1971).

Traditionally, the study of rhetoric was concerned with those instances of formal, premeditated and sustained monologue in which a single person sought to exert an effect on an audience. The earliest mention of rhetorical or oratorical skill was in Homer's *Iliad*, where heroes like Achilles, Nestor and Odysseus were honoured for their ability to advise and exhort their peers and followers in wise and appropriate action. Therefore, Duckworth (2007) traced the setting up of democratic institutions in Athens in 510 BC to have foisted on all citizens the necessity of public service, making skill in oratory (spoken rhetoric) essential. Hence, a group of teachers known as Sophists arose and strived hard to make men better speakers by observing and outlining some rules of the art. Protagoras, a member of the first group of sophists made a study of language and taught his pupils how to make the weaker cause in a speech or discussion appear the stronger argument. He believes that the Greek Philosopher, Plato satirized the more technical approach to rhetoric, with its emphasis on persuasion rather than truth, in his work *Gorgias*, and in *Phaedrus* he talks about the principles constituting the essence of the rhetorical art. While Plato's condemnation of rhetoric is clear in *Gorgias*, he seems to suggest in the *Phaedrus*, the possibility of a true art of

rhetoric based on the knowledge produced by dialectics. Aristotle, in his work *Rhetoric* regarded rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic. Owing to the fact that man is a linguistic animal that uses language to overcome barriers and bridge gaps, all human actions can be conceived in spoken words which are considered persuasive and consequently rhetorical. Therefore, the study of rhetoric has shifted to all that we hear and say that involve someone influencing someone else to make choices.

Postcolonial Literary Theory

Postcolonial Literature could be said to mean literary works that aim at resisting the colonialist perspectives as they give expressions to the colonial's experiences. Postcolonial writers attack and neutralize power myths and race as well as classifications that support colonialism and colonial influence. It is basically the literature written by writers of countries that have gained political independence from a colonial power (Okoye, 2013). This suggests that such literary works portray the sentiments, culture and cultural behaviour as well as perceptions of the colonial power's characteristics, culture, norms, worldview and the subsequent tensions and mixes that manifest as a result of the colonial encounter.

Postcolonial Literature according to Chike Okoye (2013) is basically the literature written by writers of countries that have gained political independence from a colonial power. This suggests that such literary works portray the sentiments, culture and cultural behaviour as well as perceptions of the colonial power's characteristics, culture, norms, worldview and the subsequent tensions and mixes that manifest as a result of the colonial encounter. Most times, such works aim at resisting the colonialist perspectives as they give expressions to the colonial's experiences. Whenever possible, postcolonial writers attack and neutralize power myths and race as well as classifications that support colonialism and colonial influence. Postcolonial literary theory

therefore, grew much in the 1970s and its philosophy shapes or affects much of the Nigerian and African writers and beyond. Its theorists and critics seek to promote the voice of the colonized peoples. Postcolonial writers over the years have sought to re-establish and assert their (marred) identity which the colonizers negatively represented in their writing. Lye (1998) observes that post-colonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries, or literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized peoples.

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their seminal work *The Empire Writes Back*, a major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with "place and displacement which engenders both the crises of identity and the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (qtd in Okoye, 2013). This means that the issue of representation and resistance which actually entails how a text is judged based on the degree to which it reacts to postcolonial operation, form the crux of the postcolonial literature. To this end, postcolonial literary theory helps us to interpret literature. It identifies the topics and marks the characteristic of writers shaped by colonial and postcolonial life. This suggests that among other things postcolonial writers focus on, and try to counter the push to marginalize the native culture of a people in favour of the colonizing culture.

Indeed, Said sets the background for postcolonial studies when he highlights the negative representations of the East by the West which portrays the East as *other* of the West, and in essence, whatever the west is not, the East is. Said considers the term "Orient" as an imagination or invention of the West, who for their colonial purposes divide the world into two, creating such binary opposition structures as orient/occident, civilized/uncivilized, East/West, etc (Said, 1978). The Europeans thus consider

themselves as the superior race that has the mandate to civilize the uncivilized and inferior orients. Khalid (2010) argues against such a creation of boundaries that undermines one race to the advantage of another. He is of the view that orientalism is a creation of the West with the aim of achieving their political end, and as such, it is partial, subjective and unfair in its representation of the orients.

Therefore, *Orientalism* becomes influential in postcolonial studies because of its encapsulation and confrontation of the key issues that form topics of discourse in postcolonial studies: misrepresentation, political subjugation, cultural repression, and its challenge of the inherent assumptions of the colonizers against the colonized. Consequently, Allen Brizee and Case Tompkins (2012) assert that the "postcolonial criticism also takes the form of literature composed by authors that critique Euro-centric hegemony."

Therefore, the critical nature of postcolonial theory entails destabilizing Western way of thinking, thereby creating space for the subalterns, or the marginalized groups, to speak and produce alternatives to dominant discourse. And since it has been widely recognized that the space must first of all be cleared within the academia, Nigerian or African poets generally, find justification for their return to oral poetics which is much a voice, if not a subaltern voice, that has been silenced by the Euromodernist domination of African poetry. And orality proves to be a suitable alternative (voice) to the Euromodernist poetic ideology.

Rhetoric Techniques in *The Chants of a Minstrel*

Language forms acquire new meanings other than their formal meanings in social context, thereby making interpretation indispensable and inevitable in determining what people say and mean. Every poetic work has a subject and if the voice that echoes through it is that of human being, then it is most likely to have within its ambit a repetition of certain human situations. The way

these situations are presented may cause someone to have a rethink on the way he or she lives his or her life. Therefore, the analyses will be based on the use of boast and curse as well as magic as rhetoric and conversational tools by Ohaeto.

Boasts and Curses as Rhetoric Devices

Boasts and curses as human speech genres share certain common language traits. They are persuasive and as such function as good tools for rhetoric. As poet in alter-native tradition of contemporary Nigerian (African) society, also identified as postcolonial and sometimes a neo-colonial generation poet, Ohaeto's poetry composition is marked by a distinct stylistic shift from the obscurantism and eurocentricism of most of the first generation of modern Nigerian poets. This assertion portends a stylistic shift in subject matter as well as focus on general communicative language that thrives on simple diction and direct addresses. This stylistic shift has not only branded a new identity for him as a poet, but has bolstered the whole argument of post-coloniality towards achieving what Achebe terms "other" perspective in the "story of the hunt." In line with some of these new trends in post-colonial dialogue, the griot explores the use of the linguistic genres of boasts and curses as rhetoric stylistic devices in his poetics.

One fundamental argument of post-colonial theorists like Bill Ashcroft et al and Chinweizu et al is the idea that the colonized now resist the very instruments of colonialism, especially language. By delving into a study in uses of boasts and curses, Ohaeto therefore identifies new areas of linguistic resistance through the conscious attempt of the colonized to create a hybrid language, or what Achebe terms "domestication of the English Language." In many human societies, boasting or cursing is seen as negative social practice (Emezue, 2014). This implies that such practices are not usually permissible within normal language usages. Yet people still engage in them more frequently now than ever. Cursing on one hand, is seen generally as the use of taboo

words, usually followed by invocation of greater power (God, devil, diseases, animals, elements) to visit evil on the object of curse (Andersson and Trudgill, 2007). Some scholars opine that human beings have been using swearwords since the emergence of language and even propose that all modern languages have developed from primitive linguistic utterances that were comparable with curses (Montagu, 1967). Boasting on the other hand, is also frowned upon as a bad social practice bordering on untoward self-exhibitionism. In many societies, boasting is interpreted as being immodest. But just like cursing, boasting is an integral part of human language and is gradually gaining widespread usage even in earlier restricted places like written media and the internet.

The versifier presents a madman persona in "the tongue of a mad minstrel" through whom reflective sentiments on the state of African nations after colonialism are uttered. The wandering mad man with his weird "wisdom" is a popular sight in Nigerian society. Indeed, the "wisdom" of the mad man who talks and wanders endlessly is very well known in Igbo land. The idea of madness offers immunity to the garrulous nature of the mad man in Igbo land. Thus, like the masquerade, he is the only person in the society that may openly criticize other people without being held accountable for his words and actions. Ohaeto's madman begins his boasting about his tongue as a result of his steadfastness to truth found in his mother tongue that will eventually murder the "postcolonial murder tongue" and "erase all historical memory" (Ohaeto, 2003). As the post-colonialist truth sayer the persona, throughout the collection, succeeds in exposing the foibles and corrupt practices of colonialism and its attendant evil influence on the ruling class as well as negative cultural implications. The method of boast here follows traditional Igbo African format where the boaster identifies himself/herself with the object of his boast. Boast here serves as a form of self-identity, while introducing an element of suspense for the reader-audience who

awaits anxiously for these "truths" the persona will reveal. For instance, in the select poem "the tongue of a mad minstrel," the persona boasts that;

I have a tongue
A tongue for a tongue
A tongue within tongue,
…
The universal murder tongue
We are not in the same world.

The civilized murder tongue
We are all human but there is a BUT,

The subaltern murder tongue
I serve better than the others. (Ohaeto, 2003)

The feature of self-praise as part or element of boasting is also taken on by the persona in above excerpt. Similarly, boastful utterances here help us situate the identity of the persona by his use of the term "subaltern." These boastful affirmations about "self-identity" albeit an African and post-colonial practice. This is further witnessed in the Ohaeto's persona's appropriation of the role of his tongue and indeed his mother tongue will play in the index for self-identification. This is portrayed by the use of pun in juxtaposing of some words like "mother tongue and murder tongue," thus substantiating the identity as well as the role of his "tongue" through which we perceive the events in the poem.

Cursing and boasting are "manly" acts inspired by "testosterone poisoning," since women boast and curse as much as men (Johnson and Lewis, 2010). Curses as well as boasts are seen as by-products of human emotion. Furthermore, many scholars see the processes of linguistic socialization as the major factor that aids human acquisition of these language sub genres. Hence "an individual's knowledge depends on personal experience, psychological makeup and on the culture in which he or she is

raised" (Jay, 2000). This makes the rendition style of these two speech genres deployed by Ohaeto as the product of both shared and private experiences.

To this end, some linguistic elements of some curse sentence-structures are so flexible that they could be shifted to other parts of the curse sentences or dropped entirely. One observes that this flexibility of curse sentence-structure, observable in Igbo language, is also applicable in other world languages. Further, there is great possibility that modern expletives and swearwords are survivours of some previous curse sentences. Similarly, this sentence feature is also observable in boast sentence-structures, some of which have metamorphosed into present day praises that are seen in some African (Igbo) societies. Linguistic items of boast utterances contain elements of exaggeration as well as an anchorage on some presumed achievements. While these are possible areas for future researches, we hasten to add that these exaggerated features, transform these linguistic elements to imagistic forms like in;

The tongue of a mad minstrel:
When actions become actionable
When deeds become misdeeds
The tongue becomes a murder tongue.

I have a tongue
I have a mother tongue

I also have a murder tongue
A tongue for your tongues. (Ohaeto, 2003)

The excerpt pinpoints the importance of personality traits while emphasizing contextual influences as determinants on performances of cursing or boasting. Therefore, people curse or boast depending on the context or situation in which they find themselves. If they find themselves in a situation that is deemed inappropriate, like a student standing before a lecturer, it is more difficult for such student to utter curse words no matter how provoked he would be. However, if one is in the midst of one's

colleagues, there is greater tendency for such a person to use curse words. Conversely, it is easier for the lecturer to place a curse on the younger person (student) if the lecturer is so provoked. But then, the condition of a perceived mad person is always different. As can be said of the versifier as a contemporary African poet, Ohaeto has become a major achiever as he serves as a tool for dismantling neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist strangleholds in many African countries like Nigeria by the strong instrument of his tongue.

Ohaeto on Magic as a Rhetorical Device

Ohaeto's "the destiny the minstrel did not choose" is highly magical in nature as the form is a mode of rationality or thinking pattern that focuses on invisible forces to influence events, and effect change in material conditions, or present the illusion of change, hence, this is a destiny the persona did not choose but perceives as a divine call as seen in most African traditional culture. To this end, the persona asserts that;

> I did not choose this destiny
> the destiny chose the minstrel
>
> I did not ask for the gift of prophecy
> The prophecy came unbidden,
>
> I did not request to chant
> The chant gushed of its own accord
> ---
> The mind of the one chosen by destiny bubbles
> Thwarted the destiny unleashes madness,
>
> Let no one demonstrate my vulnerability
> By binding these chants with indifference… (Ohaeto, 2003)

In the above poem, there are aspects of divination, incantations, mediation and necromancy which are practices and aspects classified as magic. Ohaeto in the poem above, like every other magician, seeks to acquire knowledge, power, meditation, and dominance in order to reveal information, to obtain the truth and to prove a tradition. The condition and performances of the magician persona speaks volume of his knowledge and mastery of the unseen forces and his ability to make use of the services of those forces. Consequently, he warns thus;

Do not put God in a difficult position
Take the chant where you find it
Do not turn ordinary errands into risks (Ohaeto, 2003)

The invocation of "God" in this regard is to keep the performer company. This is an art believed to help the magician draw power from the spiritual agencies to accomplish his art. The use of "chant, people and no one" in the above poem indicate a performance and proves the presence of audiences required of magic performance. These include the spiritual forces addressed, the patient – client, and the community required for magic to take effect. In the above lines, the community required the ancestors (ndi iche), the diviner, the client and the practitioners directly or indirectly related to the diviner and who might have been faced with one difficulty or another. The magical realism so far portrayed in the poem changes the hierarchy of values. It takes control of the natural world by the supernatural and making it a centre of value of the human sphere or scope. This is shown in the transcendental values, such as invincibility that is contained inside the mortal world in accordance with the preceding argument. In close observation, the magic works for the poet persona his people and their connections as a trigger. This is depicted as the development of the powers of the persona involves supernatural growth, while the magic operates in contradiction to the final reality. The persona rejects to pursue nasty supernatural entities who contradict their inherent ties and therefore their growth hence the warning "Do not turn ordinary errands into risks" (Ohaeto,

2003). As it is always the case, those who come for consultations will either go with good news or sad one from the necromancer hence the use of "the multiple layers of chants/is there anything kind about mankind?" Still on this, the persona states that;

I have a soothing chant
I have an irritating chant,

If I give the next angle of vision
Will you walk that far to see?

If I convert the people perverted
Are you going to adopt a new guise?

The powerful oratory magical invocation in the excerpt creates vivid imagery and symbolism drawn from African traditions. This rhetorical creativity generates a sense of connection to heritage. This poetic form serves as a medium for voicing the struggles and triumphs of the persona in his experience, blending personal narrative with collective history. Ohaeto frequently employs elements of ritualistic language, invoking a sense of mystique and power in this regard. To this end, magic in Ohaeto's poetry has roots in oral traditions and is influenced by African traditional practices. Through this medium, he highlights the importance of black culture and power. Carefully considering the excerpts above, the griot challenges societal norms and expectations by confronting themes of identity, power dynamics, and social justice through a lens of spirituality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this discourse examined some of Ohaeto's select poems from *The Chants of a Minstrel* in the light of his deployment and configuration of oral poetics conceived as rhetoric techniques. In his quest to making his poetry carry African blood, he potentially responds to the prevalent African and the world existential issues. In every single verse of the griot, a special effort goes into the building of language. Within this framework appears

various registers of rhetoric. This ranges from daily-life's informal talk to formal speeches framed on models of African folklore and imagery. He supports the idea that in traditional Africa, the art of speech-making serves as an illustration of cultural vitality. This underscores the great value the Igbo people attach to the art of speaking well.

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