

PATTERNS OF PARALLELISM AS TROPE OF MEANING IN OSUNDARE'S POETRY*

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ABSTRACT

Creative words arrangements and their meaning possibilities animate Osundare as a poet. One of the ways in which this is established is the obtrusive deployment of the stylistic device of parallelism found in his poetry. There is an effect of grace and impact of meaning to be felt in Osundare's poetry as licensed by the poet's construction of parallelism. This device only enjoys a passing mention in Osundare criticisms and this has tended to undermine an important dimension of meaning in his literary corpus. In this paper I provide a stylistic analysis of the device as a style-marker in Osundare's poetry, focusing on its patterns and exploring how meaning is encoded and delivered.

Keywords: Parallelism, Meaning, Patterns, Stylistic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Niyi Osundare is about the most prolific poet in written modern African poetry and his emergence is often tied to what is described as “new generation African poets” or “new African poetry” (Ojaide et al 2002) in which a “re-evaluation of folklore and oral tradition” are appropriated with “an unmistakable degree of audience-consciousness” (Osundare 2002:6) informing poetic practice. With over eleven poetry books and highest honors in Africa and around the world (BBC Arts award, ANA/Cadbury Poetry prize, Noma African Award and Commonwealth Prize for Poetry) as a performing poet, Osundare is unarguably “the people's poet” as he is often fondly called. No doubt the influence of oral genre pervades Osundare's poetic oeuvre (Okunowo 2010) and in most cases the poet tries to use traditional cultural speech and the language of the poet's speech community (Yoruba) in a stylistic manner that transposes Yoruba semiotics into English expression. In this respect the poet says this much: “I try to accommodate one culture in the rhythm of another culture and language”*. Indeed what Osundare harvests and manipulates into English expression in his stylistics of parallelism could be linked to Yoruba poetry in which parallel repetitive structures are juxtaposed with persona/poet-chorus mode of rendering. According to Ajolore (1972), noted by (Okunowo 2010), this is a mode heavy in *Ijala*, *Rara*, *ofo* and *Ifa* poetry/chants. These are features found in linguistically measured structures and phrases in parallel frames and in lexico-semantic equivalent compositions of highly diverse variation. This type of influence, which engenders transfer of semiotics into the frame of contact zone of languages and cultures, suggests a functional perspective in which linguistic organization in texts assumes the communicative uses of a speech community and subsumes the individual construction of language structures as constituting that individual's reality and purpose of communication (Weber 1996).

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♣ From an interview conducted by Ogoanah, N.F. *West Africa Review* (2003). WAR is an online journal.

Parallelism

Parallelism as a trope of literary discourse has a long history of critical examination in different texts. The Bible and texts of different cultures and literatures have benefitted from its critical investigation. See, for a few examples, (Isaacs 1919; Kornodle 1930; Jakobson 1966; Finnegan 1980; and Gasparov 1996). What may be made new is how writers engage the concept in the aesthetic pleasure they can create and the thematic purpose they can convey. Parallelism is a linguistic phenomenon, which explains the relationship that may be understood between units of linguistic structures, which are constructed parallel to each other or related in some other ways. Literature exploits this relationship to create ideas in the units of language that are composed as parallels. Our understanding of the concept as a linguistic phenomenon enables us to interpret its heuristic uses in literature in which meanings are suggested in order to argue a point of view and convey a message. In this, Short (1996), opines, “Stylistics is [...] concerned with relating linguistic facts (linguistic description) to meaning (interpretation) [...]”. In parallelism, there is always a relationship in the structures and ideas so juxtaposed generally in the form of synonymy, repetition, antithesis, apposition and other forms. All level language categories- a word, phrase, sentence, units of sound and meaning etc- may be engaged to function as parallelism. When these parallels achieve perceptual obtrusiveness, the deployment may be described as foregrounding- a means by which a particular idea or meaning or structure is made overt and most recognizable in the world of the text under consideration. Again in this, we follow Short (1996) that

[...] parallelism has the power not just to foreground parts of a text for us, but also to make us look for parallel or contrastive meaning links between those parallel parts. This may well involve us in construing new aspects of meaning for the words concerned, or in searching among the possible connotations that a word might have for the one that is most appropriate in particular structure (15).

Consequently, meaning abstractions and interpretive connections can be made from these elements as they occur in parallel constructions. Take for example as we have in this extract from Osundare’s *The Eye of The Earth* (1986: 46):

Text 1:

I have seen
 Labouring mouths famish like desert basins
 I have seen
 Factorylords roll in slothful excess
 I have seen
 Backs creak on heartless machines
 I have seen
 Lungs powered with asbestos death
 I have seen
 Lives snuffed out like candles in the storm.

(“What The Earth Said”)

The power of parallelism in this piece lies in the repetition and sameness of structures. The parallelism is further foregrounded by the graphological arrangement of protrusion of the subject-verb (“I have seen”) constituents of each of the clauses in the extract. Basically, each clause in the poem carries the structure subject/verb/object, with the object element being qualified in different structural make-ups. This parallelistic formulaic of repetition and structural equivalence provide the rendering of the poem a certain rhythmic power that cascades into a somewhat crescendo mood of sadness in view of the *listing* of what the protagonist has witnessed in the landscape of social inequality of the laboring

masses. This list makes us to perceive a “listing effect”, which is provided by the juxtaposition of the units in each clause and the fact that all the clauses in parallel relationship have the same thematic orientation that implicate a paradigm of negative working life in contradistinction to “Factorylords [who] roll in slothful excess”. Each line contains noun phrases, which are in relation of conflict as we have, for example in the following: “labouring mouth” imbued with “desert basin” (metaphorical relation of poverty). “[creaking] back” Vs “heartless machines” (heard labour). The theme of hard labor without reward and diminishing agonizing existence while a section of the society “roll in slothful excess” are, therefore, implicated.

Parallel Patterns and Meaning

A pattern of parallel construction most noticeable is ‘listing’. This style cuts across other patterns of parallelism in Osundare’s poetry. It is generally characterized by two or three lines verses in which a central theme is provided and other ideas in the units that are juxtaposed are made to affirm it. The ideas are usually presented as ‘evidence’ in which the central idea must be affirmed. We are then invited to abstract and construe other meanings within the premise of the central theme that is affirmed in the context of the parallelistic construction. For illustration, the power of the next two poems lies in the force of the ‘natural’ evidences listed and piled up in the list. The parallel juxtaposition, while helping to propel the rhythm of rendering, brings to bear the “listing effect” in which the relationship of the content and meaning of each lines in the verses are construed.

T 2:

And laughing heels so fugitive
 In the dust of fleeing truths
 Truth of the valley
 Truth of the river
 Truth of the flame
 Truth of the ash
 Truth of the sole
 Truth of the palm
 Truth of the sun
 Truth of the moon
 Truth of the liar
 Truth of the lair
 Truth of the castle
 Truth of the caste
 Truth of the desert
 Truth of the rain (Waiting Laughters: 3)

First, in T2, we observe the inundating repetition and the fact that all the lines have the same structural composition of nominal group, and only different in terms of each set of the words in each verse. The repetitive parallel is drawn across and within the lines of the verses. The repetition seems to suggest ‘incontrovertibility’ of the referent of the “truth” rhetoric in the lines, which we construe on the basis of the inundating insistence of the repetition of the subject matter “truth”. It is in this, then, that all the parallel lines are first linked. Secondly, each pair of lines is related in a major interpretive way. This is the relationship that can be construed between each of the last word in each pair of lines. This is the

perception that these words are somewhat related in terms either pragmatic opposites as we have in “castle and caste” (poor and rich), “liar” and “lair” (secrecy) or in one being the consequent of the other as we have in “flame” and “ash”, and “valley” and “river”. These relationships are forms of “truth” and they seem ‘incontrovertible’, being what the protagonist referenced in order to suggest that “liar” as against “truth” has no such time-tested rootedness.

Similarly, in T3, we have repetitive parallel structure with the semantic “patience” to implicate a panacea for success at an implied agenda. The poignancy of this theme, which finds significance in “patience” to overcome socio-political iniquities cuts across all the parallel structures. The parallel clauses are the same in structure; verb/object(indirect)/object(direct). The theme “patience” is engaged with abstractions from a list of logical occurrences in nature. The meaning that we can construe can only therefore be in relation to the relational parallel that is drawn between the nominal unit of the first part of the clause and the second one in the rankshifted clause. Thus we have: “patience of the sand” in relation to “cradle of the river”, “patience of the branch” in relation to “seasons in dappled cropping”, “patience of the rain” in relation to “the rock” etc. While the idea in each parallel structure may not be similar, they point toward the central theme of “patience” which engenders the structural parallel employed in the poem, bringing to perception the “listing effect”, in this case, of persuasion, as I have previously explained.

T 3:

Teach us the patience of the sand
Which rocks the cradle of the river
Teach us the patience of the branch
Which counts the seasons in dappled cropping
Teach us the patience of the rain
Which eats the rock in toothless silence
Teach us the patience of the baobab
Which tames the rage of orphaning storms
[...]
(WL:7).

T 4:

My land is a desert
Waiting for seminal fury quiet
Of uneasy showers,
Waiting,
Like the corpulent clergy
for his tithes
Like the white-wigged judge
for his turkey
Like the hard-faced don
for his chair
Like the policeman
for his bribe
waiting.
(WL: 48)

In T4, from *Waiting Laughters* (WL) while the structural sameness of the lines and the repeated simile “like” which instituted the nominal phrases drive the rhythm of the poem, the construction of the ‘head clause’ and the deletion of “waiting” intensify the “listing effect”. Majorly, there is a semantic relationship and affectation to be understood in the juxtaposed pairs of words which function as head

nouns in the repeated nominal phrases as we have in “clergy” and “tithes”, “judge” and “turkey” “don” and “chair”, and “policaman” and “bribe”. The parallelistic structure in which the words appear would seem to have no semantic relationship, however they are pieced together by their pragmatic construal in the context of the semiotic where their hermeneutic /representation reside. By this antithesis of the semantic content of the juxtaposed nouns in each unit of the NPs, we are invited to infer the dirt in each segment of the society. Thus “tithes” and “turkey” are inferred as images of bribery and corruption while “don” without “chair” signifies academic poverty or ineptitude, as the case may be. For variation, consider this extract for comparison to the above:

In the same manner is the nominal group construction and lexical relations in the following lines:

T 5:

And waiting,
still waiting,
like the mouth for its fiery tongue.

Waiting

Like the pothole for its po(r)tion of blood
Like the smart General for his umpteenth million
Like the idle bugs for their nightly feast
Like the prattling tongues of parliaments of ruse
Like Blaise for a trusting Thomas
Like Imelda for her shoes. (WL: 51-52).

Again, nominal phrasestructure is constructed with the deletion of “waiting” from the immediate constituent NPs. In addition, for the purpose of semantic focus and meaning abstraction, each of the head nouns in each of the pair of NPs is relatable by semiotic felicity in the social milieu of reference: “pothole” and “portion of blood” are suggestive of broken roads, engendering accidents in a dysfunctional society. “General” and “umpteenth million” is suggestive of corrupt, treasury-looting military junta rulership in the polity. “Bugs” and “feast” is suggestive of unsanitary condition. “Prattling tongues” and “parliament of ruse” are suggestive of political lies and deception for self-aggrandizement. Finally, “Imelda” and “shoes” recalls the misappropriation, pillaging and squandering, for the personal pleasure of an individual in position of authority, of the resources of a sovereign nation Philippines. Here we have a catalogues of ills- corruption, broken down public utilities, lawless and deceptive parliament, communicating an orgy of ineptitude and lawlessness in a dysfunctional society.

Here, again is another form of repetition and parallelism as a style that give rise to density of lyricism and evocative markedness of thematic essence:

T 5:

Let Earth’s Pain Be Sooth
Let it rain today
That parched throats may sing
Let it rain
That earth may heal her silence
Let it rain today
That cornleaves may clothe the hills
Let it rain

That roots may swell the womb of lying plains
 Let it rain today
 That stomachs may shun the rumble of thunder
 Let it rain
 That children may bath and bawl and brawl (Eye of the Earth).

The repetition and parallelism in this poem takes after the evocative command language structure of Yoruba mode of incantation (*ofo* poetry genre). It is a mode that institutes and generates its force of command from parallel linguistic structure of repeated phrases. "The enchanter [of *ofo*] employs repetition, with the belief that it has magical powers to elicit an answer to his request from the incantatory agent" Olajubu (2001:175). This poem reads into the ecological imagination of the poet. In it we are confronted with images of dryness instituted by the lack of lubricating rain. A long spell of absence creates imbalance and fruitlessness for which the command language of repetitive parallelism of "let it rain today" and "let it rain" seek amelioration. Thus, we relate the desire in "let it rain today" as being parallel to the expectation and the relationship that can be drawn between the objects of the relative clauses and what the "rain" can incite and restore in them as in, for example, "parched throats" Vs "sing", "earth" being healed of "silence", and "children" being able to "bath" and play etc. This demand is reflective on the eroding of Earth because it is as if the protagonist's cry in the form of the repeated phrases is nostalgic of a lost agrarian balance caused by unusual long absence of an element "rain" which soothes.

Sometimes, one finds extended parallel construction in Osundare's poetry. This is a style that goes beyond juxtaposed parallel lines into separate larger verses as we have in this example:

T 6:

Ikoyi

The moon here
 Is a laundered lawn
 Its grass the softest of infant fluff;
 Silence grazes like a joyous lamb
 Ajegunle
 Here the moon
 Is a jungle,
 Sad like a forgotten beard
 With tensioned climbers
 And undergrowth of cancerous fury (Moonsongs 42).

A contrastive semantic parallel is drawn here and we are invited to contemplate the insinuated social distance and what characterized it. Consequently, we can infer a project of inequality in which the inequality between the rich who reside in geographical locations of affluence of Ikoyi and the poor who reside in poverty infected Ajegunle residential areas of Lagos, Nigeria is perceptually projected. Thus a contrastive parallelism of structural sameness is drawn between the metaphorical "moon" that is "laundered lawn" and that which is "a jungle", between "infant fluff/joyous lamb" that contrast with "forgotten beard/tensioned climbers". In this context, as in most of Osundare's poetry of similar composition, meaning proceeds not only on the recognition of this parallelism which is essentially a literary form, but much more so on the syntactic arrangement that organizes and call attention to it- the structure and the meaning ignited by it.

Another major characteristic of parallelism formulaic in Osundare's poetry is the invitation of anomalous graphological arrangement which seems to foreground the focus of the elements of structures and the relationship that can be construed between words and phrases that are juxtaposed as

we have in (T1 and 4-6 above). Let me provide a more bizarre representation of this style as in the following poem from *Songs of the Marketplace* collection:

T 7:

Sundown

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. | rooster roosting hearth sizzling | sun exiting |
| 2. | nightbirds cooing embers graying | orange valedicting |
| 3. | horizon closing coquettes kis- | oilflames dancing |
| 4. | earthysky mating sing worms glowing | courters cro-oning |
| 5. | stars winking managers wining | elders remembering |
| 6. | moon beaming labourers pining | children romping |
| 7. | muezzing blasting ikoyo glowing | clubs booming |
| 8. | ramadan evening ajegunle smogging | churches brooding (Songs: 82) |

Importantly, the clauses in the poem are arranged in groups with the clauses in each group parallel to the other, in structure and meaning. In all, there are twelve groups of clauses. For example, there are three groups in lines (1-2). Each member of each of the groups presents an activity in some kind of antithesis to each other. Each group implicates potential conflicts or relation. For example, “sun exiting” and “orange valedicting” (lines 1 and 2) present cause-effect order of planetary arrangement and relation. On the other hand, “club booming” and “churches brooding” (lines 7 and 8) conceptualize oppositeness and conflict, where the “booming” is the cause of the “brooding”. The alliteration in the two words further connects their relationship. Of course, club activities are anathema to church activities and this is the source of the conflict. Horizontally, there are three groups, and vertically there are four. What this emphasizes is that each group of clauses could be scrambled to implicate its autonomy. It also follows that each of the groups in the poem could be read as an autonomous entity horizontally or vertically without distorting the aesthetics or the meaning of the poem. Each group is self-contained in terms of structure and meaning relation and ditto the antithesis of meaning engendered.

T 8:

The bison who thinks he is the king of the wild
let him remember raging elephants
with legs of mortar
The hillock which thinks it is the frontier of heights
Let it remember Kilimanjaro so hot
With a peak of simmering snow
The streamlet which thinks it is the Zambesi of the lore
Let it remember the sea merges earth
And sky in realms of misty blue
The prophet who thinks he has conquered tomorrow
Let him mount galloping mountains and mervel
Dodging canthers of the horse of time
The shotgun who says he is an awesome god
Let him take note of burning statues
And streets wild with vengeful spaers... (WL:51).

What we are being invited to construe in T8 is the power paradigm and its dynamics in the units of language drawn into parallel structures. The locus of parallel units is *warning*. The warning theme is implicated by contrasting hierarchy of power, suggesting that monopoly of power can be dislocated, particularly in its complacency mode. Thus a 'power' contrast is drawn between "bison" and "elephants", "hillock" and "Kilimanjaro" mountain, "streamlet" and "Zambezi" river, "prophet's" idea of the future and the passage of "time" and finally between "shotgun" and "vengeful spears". The first element in each of the pairs seem to represent metaphorically human subject; ruler politician-despots with arrogance of power, with *dues-ex-machina* disposition, forgetting that there are more powerful forces, metaphorically represented in the second elements in the pairs, that could terminate such a brutal self-conceiting power.

Let me explain this further with reference to "shotgun" in relation to "burning statues" and vengeful spears...". The power of the "shotgun", a symbolic reference to a draconian and brutal regime at a time in history, is attributed by its lethality, metaphorically equated to the all-powerful "god's" authority. This conceptualizes arrogance and complacency of political power, whereby the "shotgun", phallic symbol of destruction, represents the holder and brutality of power, by what the object does. The metaphor in the last line is located in the noun phrase "vengeful spears". The adjective "vengeful" conceptualizes "spear" as people/citizens who rise against metaphorical "shotgun" human politician despot in an orgy of "burning statues", a signification of mass protests. In the hermeneutic parallel relationship that is drawn here, we can then construe that the power is capable of being truncated by "burning statues", an indirect signification of pulling down and uprooting of well known despots in some countries in times of civil uprisings signified in "streets wild with vengeful spears"- This poem published in 1990 seems a foreshadowing of the greatest "street wild with vengeful spears" that the world is currently witnessing.

CONCLUSION

Repetition and listing of related ideas in parallel structures to represent single or connected themes could be found in large measure in Osundare's poetry. What I have analyzed here, while it is not exhaustive, is a representation of what could generally be found as style-maker of parallelism in Osundare's poetry. The style juxtaposes different levels of related ideas and invite readers to abstract thematic signification. Parallelism in its repetitive form while adding to the rhythm and flow of the poems calls attention to the ideas that are juxtaposed in different patterned structures in which they can be construed.

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