

PRONOMINAL GROUP AS SIGNALS OF AUTHORITY, OPPOSITION AND SOLIDARITY IN THE POETRY OF TWO MODERN AFRICAN POETS

BY

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the use of pronominal forms as signals of authority, opposition and solidarity in Obu Udeozo's *Excursions* and *Cyclone* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures*. The pronominal group expresses the role relationship between and among participants in a discourse. These poets use pronominal forms specifically to identify the various 'speaking voices' in their poetry collections and to reveal their ideological positions. They also use these pronominal forms to enhance the ideational content of their poems. The issues raised in the poems and the events and situations described concern 'us', 'you' and 'me'.

My examination of the exploitation of personal forms in this paper derives from the need to use the tools of linguistics (stylistics) to explicate the poetry collections already highlighted. It is also motivated by the fact that despite their simplistic nature, the pronominal forms are meaning-signalling devices in the poetry collections. In our adoption of a linguistic approach, we are motivated by the opinion that linguistics can be a useful aid to the analysis of texts and can complement the efforts of literary criticism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Language is the basic tool of poetry. The language of poetry differs in essence from the language of other genres of literature. Although it sometimes seems difficult to classify certain forms of literature as prose, drama or poetry. This is due to the overlapping of features. However, in poetry, it is common for poets to take advantage of poetic licence to demonstrate unrestrained creativity.

Through the creative use of language, poetry achieves communicative and aesthetic effects. In the light of this, Adejare Oluwole (1984:13) describes poetry as 'one variety of language where the fusion of language as an art and language as a means of communication is fully realized' .

Like any other linguistic event, poetry does not exist in isolation from other aspects of human social behaviour; it is influenced by a number of social factors such as cultural, social, historical, political and economic events e.t.c. In other words, in addition to making use of language in a unique and creative way, poetry as a form of literature often mirrors the society that produces it. The poetry of Obu Udeozo and Tanure Ojaide command interest in this regard. Their poetry demonstrates these two peculiar characteristics of poetic discourse. In other words, their works provide a good example of poetry that combines social message with a characteristically unique medium of expression. It would seem that these poets see themselves as people with a mission to awaken the social consciousness of their readers.

Their thematic concerns are issues of social relevance like the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, corruption, dictatorship, mediocrity and hypocrisy. They also treat events of contemporary significance in Nigeria and other countries: war, upheavals, elections, struggle, politics, religion, governance, love, hardships e.t.c. They therefore use poetry as a rewarding channel through which the people (the common man, the oppressed, the down trodden and the disposed) can be salvaged in a society where frustration, abject poverty and other social realities survive unchecked.

Udeozo and Ojaide are contemporary Nigerian (Modern African) poets whose works highlight lavish display of grandeur. The reader is often carried away by the import and power of the poems. Their poetry, exhibit the creative use of language and are socially oriented. Their works can be seen as poetic excursion across diverse array of issues in contemporary Nigerian society in particular and other countries in general.

My interest in this paper is to examine the use of pronominal forms as signals of authority, opposition and solidarity in Udeozo's *Excursions* and *Cyclone*, and Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures*. The pronominal group expresses the role relationship between/ among participants in a discourse. These poets use pronominal groups specifically to identify the various 'speaking' voices in their poetry collections, and to reveal their ideological positions. The personal form 'I' for instance, is for self identification and as a symbol of authority. Its plural form 'we' is used for group identification as well as to indicate solidarity. In a similar vein, the pronouns *they*, *them* e.t.c. are devised to mark out the 'opposition' or those views the poets do not share. The demonstratives act as modifiers and they belong to the grammatical category of determiners, showing 'near' or 'distant' reference.

These poets use the pronominal group to enhance the ideational content of their poems. The issues raised in the poems and the events and situations described, concern 'us' 'you', and 'me'. In this regard, in order to portray the decadence in their country, these poets use the personal form 'I' to play the role of the informant. In other words, they use it to show that they constitute the primary source(s) of the information provided in their poems.

My examination of the exploitation of personal forms in this paper derives from the need to use the tools of linguistics (stylistics) to explicate the poetry collections already highlighted. It is also motivated by the fact that despite their simple nature, the pronominal forms are meaning-signalling devices in the poetry collections. In my adoption of a linguistic approach, I am motivated by the opinion that linguistics can be a useful aid to the analysis of texts and can complement the efforts of literary criticism.

2. PRONOMINAL FORMS IN THE POETRY COLLECTIONS

The pronominal group expresses the role relationship between / among participants in a discourse. The group comprises personal pronouns such as "I", "me", "they", "them" e.t.c.; possessive pronouns (determiner function) "my",

“our”, “your”, “their” e.t.c. and demonstrative pronouns: “this”, “those”, “these”. These items, when referring to something, point out its functions in a speech situation. They also reflect a kind of interpersonal communication between the persona (or the poet) and the reader and between him and some beings or objects specified in the poems.

The poetry of the three poets under focus, reveal clear structuring of pronominal forms. The poets use these to develop the ideational content of the texts. The personal pronoun “I” as earlier said is used mainly in the collections for self identification, while the plural forms “we”, “us”, “our” e.t.c. are used for group identification. Sometimes, in using “I”, the poets also imply “we”. At another level also, the pronoun “they”, “them”, “their(s)” e.t.c. are used to refer to the ‘opposition’. The poets’ ideological positions here provide the reason for this pronominal structuring. The *I*, *we*, *us*, *our* and the *they*, *them*, *their(s)* occupy opposing camps in the ideological spectrum. It is with the *I*, *we*, *us*, *our* that the poets maintain great solidarity, and they constantly seek to involve them, dialogue with them, motivate and mobilise them. This desire to maintain rapport with their characters underscores the attention they give to pronominal structuring. In using pronominal forms to both criticise and maintain solidarity, we find that simple as pronouns may be, they constitute useful references, which do not just aid the rhetorical impulse of texts, but also point in the direction of the writer’s artistic vision. The poets write in favour of the masses and largely, their use of the pronominal forms enables them to advance this position.

2.1. THE PERSONAL PRONOUN (I)

The personal pronoun ‘I’ in terms of person refers to the first person singular. In spoken or written text, it refers to the speaker only. It is primarily used in the texts to identify the ‘speaking voice’, which is either the poet or the poet personae. In using the first person singular ‘I’, the poets address some human and non-human elements. The poets use this pronoun to mark their own voices

as the speakers as well as that of the poet personae, and to show that they have the power and authority to say whatever they want to say. Grammatically speaking, the personal pronoun 'I' acts as the head of the nominal group in a sentence. The poets use this form in the collections both to mark their own voices and the voices they speak through. Thus, with its use they present issues, situations, events e.t.c. to the reader as they write:

- 1) I am surprised
you'd not realized
there's apartheid even here.
(*Excursions* : 33)

- 2) You weep for Mandela
I understand,
But I will not waste my tears.
(*Excursions* : 'Epiphanies' 49)

In these extracts from Udeozo's *Excursions*, the poet is affirmative about the situation of things in his country. He acknowledges the decadence in his country and seems astonished that this fact is known. In this regard, he uses the pronoun 'I' to play the role of the informant. In extract (1) in particular, he uses it to show that he constitutes the primary source of the information provided in the next, that is, the fact that there is apartheid in his country though unknown.

In extract (2), the poet uses the 'I' to express an understanding between him and the person he is addressing (you), and at the same time hold on to his resolution. He tries to show that he acknowledges and sympathises with the position of the addressed, but he is resolute not to waste his tears since "black guns hold us hostage in our lands". The use of 'Mandela' in this case is symbolic, it represents all the political activists held against their will and whose efforts made to ensure their release have proved abortive.

In the above extract, the poet seeks to convince his reader about all that he says. He seeks the reader's confidence in the information he provides as he exposes the activities of some workers in the Civil service. Here, he speaks with authority as he affirms the first person pronoun 'I', it is as though he is saying "I

know what I am saying so you must believe me”. So, he plays the role of the informer.

In the poem “When Tomorrow is too long”, Ojaide lashes out at politicians and at the same time warns his beloved people of their deceits:

3) And if a juggler ever arrives in town
with an eagle in a glittering cage,
beware of the season beware
of twilight and worse....

His closed fist presses
a honeyed cake into an ashen loaf.
with his gap- toothed shine for a wand
he throws out one thing
with one hand
and with the same five
takes in more than seven.
I have been a victim of inflation....

His attendants, poster-pasters,
frolic in the loot of a flood;
the rest of the world
live in a drought of denials!

(*The Fate of Vultures* : When Tomorrow is Too Long 18)

The above extract is indicative of a political satire. Here Ojaide’s focus is particularized. His allusions are better understood by those sharing the same historical and social background. His use of the lexical items ‘juggler’ and ‘season’ concretises his message. He likens politicians to a juggler in a circus who after performing his act (using gimmicks), disappears only to appear again

when there is another show to be performed. In like manner, politicians during electioneering campaign, toy with the emotions of the masses with a view to persuading them to cast their votes for them. After winning the elections, they disappear only to show up during another campaign.

The above excerpt also shows two contrasting sections of our society- the haves and the have nots. As a result, the poet warns his people to “shun all the trappings of democracy”, resist the falsehood of these politicians, since if they allowed to carry on with their evil acts they are “bound to be the beneficiary of all accounts” while the people will be the victims. Thus, Ojaide plays out the role of an engaged poet committed to a social cause. His choice of lexical items in this poem tactfully depicts corruption. The poet though using a satirical tone succeeds in conveying his intended meaning to the reader. In this case, he acts as the town crier who warns his people of an imminent danger. His use of the personal form ‘I’ shows that he is also included in the sufferings the people are made to go through on account of the activities of these politicians. Thus, he writes in favour of the masses and seeks confidence in the information he provides.

2.2. THE PLURAL FORMS WE, US AND OUR

The ‘we’, which is the first person plural, represents the speaking voices, that is, the collective voice. In this case, the poets create some nameless participants, ‘we’, through whose collective consciousness the experience and issues in some of the poems in the collections are conveyed. The following extracts illustrate this point:

- 4) We’re littered, panting, sweating
while our conquerors, stand firm,
undented, un-ruffled...

the wines and meat

the rice and beef; the
pork, suya, salads, eggs and drinks,

which defeated us,
stand their grounds,
waving, inviting us
while like a battered

boxer
dazed,
humbled,

we withdraw, one by one
and the boss
who touched nothing
sustained, the Conference
with a Coterie of Friends,

(Excursions: A December Feast 11)

In the above poem, both the poet and his reader (or his assumed audience) are made to identify with a common problem or situation. This helps to create an illusion of reality in the poems. The use of 'we' shows an involving 'tone' or sense of solidarity, hope and the will to survive. The poet draws on everyone, especially the poor, oppressed, downtrodden and marginalised, as partakers in the socio-economic situation of Nigeria. The use of 'we' and 'our' as explicated in the extract achieves the psychological effect of not only establishing a familiar relationship between the poet and the reader (audience), but also making him (reader) an active participant in the situation highlighted in the poem. "Collectivity" is highlighted in the use of the pronominal head 'we' and the possessive 'our'. In the poem, collective struggle and quest for survival is

explicated. It therefore shows solidarity-“we withdraw”. ‘Our’, an anaphoric reference to ‘we’ and a possessive pronoun that serves a determiner function, acts as a modifier-‘our conquerors’.

Udeozo tries to balance the plural form ‘our’ with the second person. The poet’s use of the plural form is to maintain solidarity with those he sympathises with. The use is to elicit the response of the poet’s assumed audience and to create a kind of fellow feeling. This fact is further explicated in the extract below:

5) Starvation is
kneeling at your feasts
weeping for fragments of the village cake
with a barometer of justice
but your fire power
mocks our prayers
(*Cyclone*: ‘Throats’ 92)

In the above extract, Udeozo recalls characteristic and criminal acts credited to past leaders such as, Mugage, Idi Amin Dada , Hitler, etc. Despite the rise and fall of these tyrants and their subsequent replacement by other tyrants, the poet is optimistic that “no human oppression can cover time’s goalpost against eventual liberty from pain” (92). From Udeozo’s poetic vision, there is hope for the future.

In the extracts below, the poet further highlights the nominal head ‘we’ and the possessive form “our”.

6) we must rescue
our lone baby from oblivion’s fire

we must re-plant
our finger print

against the monologue of English,

resurrection

awaits those

who drink from our roots

not our suicidal love of foreign

(*Cyclone* : Igbo 151)

7) your geometric reasoning

was our Moses upon the Nile

colour coded

against the infanticide

awaiting Hebrews and Igbos

astride time....

(*Cyclone* : Geometric Reasoning 204)

In extract 6, Udeozo shows conscious effort made to salvage the culture and languages of his society. His language has become inferior to the English language. The ‘our’ serves as a determiner and acts as a modifier to several lexical items. From the extract, we observe that it modifies the following lexical items:

our + { lone baby
finger print
Suicidal love
roots

In this extract, the speaking voice is full of determination and feels that ‘they’ are under obligation to reinstate the culture and local languages of Africa back to its original status. This is realised from the use of the modal auxiliary “must”,

which is indicative of ‘obligation’ or ‘compulsion’. Worthy of note is the fact that the speaker (speaking voice) and the unnamed others, see themselves as being under an obligation to carry out what they have proposed. This sense of solidarity is heightened with the use of the first person plural ‘we’.

In extract 7, the speaker addresses an unnamed individual. The use of the possessive determiner ‘our’ portrays collective identity. In this instance, the speaker shows an opposition, that is, ‘our’ and ‘your’. Here, the speaker draws a line between what he and others have (our Moses) and what the opposition has. In this sense, he tries to show that the person addressed is the representative of a larger group (your), which obviously puts them (the speaking voice and others like him) in a position of greater power. From the structure of the lines, we observe that the extract is a question, but the poet deliberately omits the question marker at the end of the lines, thereby, supplying information rather than requesting for it. Thus, the poet’s conscious effort to create a gap between group identity and opposition. He deliberately leaves out the opposition, but from the contextualization of the poems, the opposition becomes obvious.

8) We ask for food and water
to keep our toiling frames
on the hoe
but they inundate us with udoji

(Songs of the Market Place: Udoji 35)

The ‘they’ the speaker refers to in the extract above represents a group of unidentified persons. It is ‘they’ used in a general sense and in a deliberate manner to avoid naming. It is a ‘they’ that the reader easily identifies as the decision makers, the government officials, the authorities, who rather than provide more food and water for the urban (and rural) poor, embark on the increase of salaries as part of the government generosity. Here, the speaker who uses the collective we and its objective form us to include himself and all others with “toiling frames”, is clearly unimpressed with the action of the

‘they’, thoughtful though it may seem. He laments a misplacement of priority and the attention given to what is not needed. The workers (we) have been toiling and they need food and water to keep them going. Why salary increase that would step up inflation? This is what confounds the speaker and compels his disappointment. He does not call them by name even as he reports his plight to the reader, whose support he enlists. He merely refers to them as ‘they’, thus heightening the tension in the ideological battle.

3. CONCLUSION

From the poets’ use of the pronominal forms, the speakers firmly identify and mark out the group to which they belong, that is the oppressed. They distance themselves from the opposing camp with their choice of pronouns. The poets, associating with the oppressed, show that they are not in the camp of the oppressors and this is clearly stated with the use of the collective ‘our’ and the opposition ‘they’.

From the poets’ use of pronominals, they achieve the psychological effect of not only establishing a familiar relationship between the personae and the reader(s), but also making them active participants in the event of the poems. From this analysis, we observe that the pronominals ‘I’ and ‘we’, are linguistic components of tenor in the collections. Their use of these forms not only aid the artistic effect, which they achieve in their collection, but also enhance the meaning potential of the poems.

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