

Construction of African Identity through Poems: A Linguistic Exploration of Susan Akinkurolere's *My Black Brother and My Folks*

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Abstract

The concept of identity, especially in relation to black is not only a major preoccupation in African-American literature but also in typical African literature. Indeed, the concept has become issue of scholarly interest both in literature and linguistics. Despite this, it has been observed that an exploration a particular poet's work based on identity, as portrayed in poems written at home and abroad, has not received much attention. Consequently, this paper explores two poems from an anthology of an emerging poet in Nigeria – Susan Akinkurolere, to emphasize and reiterate socio-cultural implications of identity construction from linguistic perspectives. It is therefore, concluded that Africans are proud of their heritage, and they display identity and sense of belongingness in their literature.

Key words: Culture, identity, Yoruba, Africans, Poetry.

Introduction

Effective literary criticism is very vital in all genres of literature. More importantly, poetry as a genre with distinctive and unique features and language, is well appreciated through literary criticism in literature. To Akinkurolere and Ariyo (2015), literary text is unique 'because a large number of audience or addressees are those the author or addresser has never met and may never meet. Yet, a literary text makes a continual pragmatic implication and relevance in the society for years.'

It is quite interesting that stylistics is a sub-linguistic field in language study that provides for in-depth analysis of literary work through linguistic theories. Hence, Leech and Short (1981) argues that, stylistics is the study of style. However, any communicative use of language involves style,

which makes its application to any subject appropriate. No wonder, Mode (2015) posits that stylistics is neither a discipline nor a subject but seeks to mediate between disciplines and subjects. These subjects are language and literature. This implies that stylistics with focus on language is regarded as Linguistic-stylistics, while stylistics with attention on literature is referred to as Literary-stylistics.

Poetry is defined Leech (1996) as ‘One variety of language where the fusion of language as art and language as a means of communicator is fully realized’. It is noteworthy that Aurelie (2014) observes that:

Poetry is not a genre commonly discussed in the linguistics literature. This is not entirely surprising, as poetical language – especially in its contemporary form – is expected to defy the accepted rules of ordinary language and thus, is not a particularly good example of the efficient medium we use to communicate in everyday life. Still, it would seem misguided to argue that poetry does not belong to the subject of linguistics.

This argument reflects that there is a symbiotic relationship between language and literature but which scholars may or may not emphasise in their work. The main interest in literary criticism lies in identifying the literary features while literary stylistics analyse the linguistic features.

The paper examines identity is constructed in selected poems of Susan Akinkurolere – ‘*My Black Brother*’ and ‘*My Folks*’.

The poet, Dr. (Mrs) Susan Olajoke Akinkurolere, born at Ogori, Kogi State, hails from Okeluse, Ondo State, Nigeria on 23rd March, 1980. Susan graduated with a Second Class Upper Degree from the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria in 2002; M.A. and Ph.D. in English Language from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria in 2012 and 2016 from the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. She was employed as an Assistant Lecturer in 2005 and has risen to the level of Senior

Lecturer in the Department of Languages, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria. She has an anthology of 50 poems, *A Journey in the Forest of Books* (2017), apart from her contributions in other collections. She is the current General Secretary of Association of Nigeria Authors (ANA), Ondo State Chapter, Nigeria.

Methodology

Two poems were selected from an anthology, *A Journey through the Forest of Books*. These poems have similar thematic preoccupation and they both on identity construction. The poems were examined to identify the discursive features deployed to express identity in the poems; to show how the identified features are used to identity by the poet; and discuss the socio-cultural implications of the features in the poems, Nigeria and Africa. This linguistic tool is Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive Model of Critical Discourse Analysis. This approach is distinct because it gives room for interaction between discourse, society and cognition. Faloye (2017) states that 'vanDijk CDS is not a method, but rather makes use of a large number of methods, both from Discourse Studies itself, as well as from the humanities, psychology and the social sciences'. The linguistic approach is appropriate as it relies on VanDijk's CDS with insights from Literary-stylistics, to study the selected poems.

An Exploration of Identity in 'My Black Brother'

My Black Brother is a poem of 84 words, 18 lines with three stanzas. The poet is the personae in the poem and it was written when she had the opportunity of travelling to Venice, Italy, for a presentation of an academic paper at Ca' Foscari University, Venice in 2014. The poem was written to relate part of her experience when she boarded a bus from train station at Mestre to the Terminal at Venice. The analysis of the poem goes thus:

My Black Brother

1 You are black
2 And indeed my brother
3 We sailed on land
4 From train station to terminal
5 You came in with hand luggage
6 And it contained newspapers

There is the use of 'My' a possessive pronoun, in the title. Also in the title, there is the use of the lexical item 'brother', which shows 'kinship'. The use of 'my' with lexical item 'brother' portrays a relationship that is established because the personae and the addressee share the same colour. The black colour shows that they are from the same continent—Africa.

The first stanza portrays the message of the title in an in-depth manner. Line 1 contains the lexical item 'black', which is a repetition, while 'my brother' is repeated in Line 2. Repetition is employed in the poem to reiterate the identity of both the personae and the addressee. Also in Line 3, 'we' shows that they have something in common; they are actors of the same action.

The use of the verb 'sailed' which relates to journeying on water depicts the geographical setting of city, which is an island as the bus terminal (Line 4) is where the personae intended to board a boat to her destination. 'You' in Line 1 is repeated in Line 5 to announce and reiterate the concern of the personae. The words, 'hand luggage' and 'newspaper' in Lines 5 and 6, show that the type of job the '*brother*' does in a foreign land. The poet is interested in identifying the addressee's work as a newspaper vendor because of her concern and love for him.

7 Oh! my brother
8 African brother with black cover
9 Your ticket activated not
10 Your cap turned backward
11 Something is wrong

¹²In an European white land

The words, 'my brother', 'African brother', 'black cover', in Lines 7 and 8, are employed to emphasise the identity of the addressee and relationship that exists between them. The identity of being an African and an unpronounced tie are established through these lexical items. Lines 9-12 are expressions of outcry to lament the plight of the addressee in Venice. The addressee did not activate his ticket. This implies lack or poverty as he cheats the system by not buying a ticket card he should activate in the bus. More so, dressing, which is an important aspect of African culture, is also mentioned. No wonder, the personae is surprised to observe in Line 10 that the cap on the addressee's head is not well placed. The lexical item 'backward' in Line 10 signifies the plight of the addressee as expressed in Lines 11 and 12.

¹³I spoke in my deep heart

¹⁴Few Euros to offer for bond's sake

¹⁵But dare not embarrass you

¹⁶For only two in white bus

¹⁷May not see you again

¹⁸But forever remains my brother.

In Lines 13-15, the personae uses 'I', personal pronoun to disassociate herself from the unpleasant traits observed in the addressee and to show what she can do or how she can assist as an individual. Also, the lexical item 'deep heart' shows she is unhappy with the situation of a fellow African in a European country. There is the temptation to offer help as expressed in Lines 14-16 but she is apt to realise that she must not expose a fellow black because there are only two blacks in the bus. In Lines 17 and 18, the personae, quickly, shifts from distancing herself to focus on the departure of the addressee through the use of the pronouns 'you' and 'my'. This indicates that, despite the anomalies observed in the bus, the identity of being an African supersedes any ill feelings or disappointments. The love of the personae for the addressee is

reflected in the last line of the poem. Thereby, showing the strong tie that exists among Africans and how they ensure their identity of being Africans is protected and cherished, even in abroad.

The African society is a type that values relationships beyond immediate family. Indeed, a fellow black is regarded as a father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter etc. whether they are related by blood or not. In fact, there is no fact in the poem that the addressee is a Nigerian but the personae, a Nigerian, refers to him as 'My brother'. In a typical Yoruba setting, honorific pronouns are employed to show respect and politeness. This further confirms the sense of belongingness as encapsulated in the identity of Africans.

An Exploration of Identity in 'My Folks'

My Folks is a poem of 74 words, 14 lines (Sonnet) with two stanzas. The poet is the personae in the poem and it was written to appreciate other blacks living in her hometown (rural area), in her country. The poem is analysed thus:

1 They are my folks
2 Wonderful folks from my village
3 They resisted temptation of rush
4 To city where my soul sojourns
5 For long I dreamt of city taste
6 Despite her unpleasant noise
7 But appreciate my folks

The poem begins with an establishment of a link through the use of 'my' by the personae. The personae is showing her identity and where she hails from. By associating with them, she is showing the world that she is not better than them, being a highly educated and city-based woman. In fact, the repetition of 'my' in Line 2, establishes a connection between the nominal groups 'folks' and 'village' in Line 1 and 2. 'They', repeated in Line 3, is also a deitic word that signifies the importance of the folks. The difference between the personae and the folks is

clarified in lines 3-6, whereby, she employs 'I' and 'my' to show her peculiar wish and interest and 'they' for the folks. The last line, which also involves the repetition of 'my' and 'folks', reiterates the essence of same identity despite varied interests and locations.

8 They are my folks
9 My belly depends on their products
10 For survival in raw or processed
11 We once went bush burning
12 Also went hunting in fat reserve
13 Together we danced during festival
14 Together we sat for old Pa's stories

The second stanza begins with the repetition of the Line 1, in Line 8. This repetition shows that the personae is, indeed, identifying with her people, thereby connecting with them. The bond of relationship is further emphasized through the use of the lexical items 'my', a possessive pronoun and the noun 'belly'. Belly is used as a synonym for food, which is explicitly clarified in Line 10. In Line 11, the pronoun 'we' is used to express collective responsibility of the past. This is a reminder of their identity and oneness. Furthermore, the personae shows where she belongs, her root, native people and activities in Lines 11 to 14. The use of the preposition 'together' in Line 13, which is repeated in Line 14, depicts the identity of oneness and belongingness among Africans.

The poem portrays a typical African setting and refers to specific activities that are associated with the culture of Yoruba people in Nigeria. Nominal items such as 'bush burning', 'fat reserve', 'festival', 'Old Pa's Stories' are employed, in Lines 11-14, to show hunting and farming practices that are part of the culture. Also, traditional festivals and folklores are important cultural practices. It is in consonance with this, that Ojetayo (2015) posits that 'no matter the level of education and sophistication of some people, their behaviours are mostly shaped by the

ethical and moral standards, and principles from their cultural and religious heritages traditionally transmitted to them by their ancestors’.

Conclusion

No doubt, the exploration of the two poems has shown that Africans have a rich cultural heritage. These cultural values are reflected in the construction in their identity. Meanwhile, in the course of constructing identity, moral values are upheld. It is worthy of mention that western exposure is gradually influencing the African identity negatively as portrayed by the poet in the dressing of the addressee in ‘My Black Brother’. Nowadays, African languages, songs, dances, drama and games are gradually declining, which calls for the rediscovery of lost identity in traditional and cultural practices. Hence, the analysed poems of Akinkurolere Susan (Ph.D.) are written to portray African identity at home and abroad. Therefore, it can be emphatically stated that Africans are proud of their rich identity and cultural practices as demonstrated in their literary work.

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