

# Grammar Applied Linguistics and Society

A FESTSCHRIFT FOR WALE OSISANWO

**Edited by**  
**Akin Odebunmi**  
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# GRAMMAR, APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND SOCIETY: A Festschrift for Wale Osisanwo

Published by



Obafemi Awolowo University Press  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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2016

**ISBN: 978 - 136 - 553 - 6**

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Printed by  
Obafemi Awolowo University Press  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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## SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS AS ARCHETYPAL PULSE IN IDRIS AMALI'S *EFEEGA:WAR OF ANTS*

Charles Akinsete

### 43.1 Introduction

Tracing the genesis of the word "literature", its definition cannot be completely extricated from the technology of writing. In fact, one of its most popular definitions is often related to the Latin expression, 'litera' which simply means to 'write'. That is why Alain Ricard's (2004) all-pervading description of the (alphabetic) writing in Africa is viewed as oppressive to orality and other forms of expression i.e. painting, sculptures etc. Conversely, the point here is that the exploration of the concept of literature, especially in the contemporary times, is inescapably tied to writing, even though its oral form far predates and purportedly more dynamic than its written counterpart. From the twentieth century, the technology of writing has shaped and continues to reshape the perception of African literature and further affects its interpretation and criticism. But what makes the discipline of literature to stand out against others such as history, politics, economics, geography and others is the utilisation of specialized kind of language accompanied by artistic ingenuity (Chris Baldick, 1990). By implication, whatever that is written becomes part of the process of material content which is called the literary text and invariably remains a crucial feature to examine in the interpretation or critical analysis of such literary text.

The definition of H.L.B. Hoody (1973) becomes rather relevant to this essay. He states that literature is "spring from our in born love ...of arranging words in *pleasing patterns*, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experiences." This description foregrounds the notion that literary texts are relatively indebted to its linguistic structure or form. And that the subject of aesthetics in literature remained evidently confessed as part of its essential characteristics, one of which is its distinct language use. Hoody strongly avers that human experiences in literature are best captured and expressed in the way language is systematically organized. This systematic organisation, which Hoody alludes to as "*pleasing patterns*", could as well be referred to as the literary language.

The literary language certainly is a deviation from normal language use. It draws attention to itself by conveying additional layer or layers of meaning, which

could be subjective but very much affective. Of all the three, there is no other genre of literature that justifies these principles than poetry. Katie Wales (1989:279-280) affirms this, asserting that "literature, especially poetry, commonly foregrounds language and meaning consciously and creatively in a way that overrides simple informative function". Therefore, the critical analysis of literature, poetry in particular, cannot be extricated from the language used. The literary language arguable becomes an essential threshold of discourse in any given literary engagement.

Donatus Nwoga (1966), in the preface of *West African Verse*, describes poetry as a distinct expression of a poet over any given subject matter. Hence, there are two characteristics of poetry enlisted as 'distinct expression', which holistically encompasses the literary language, and the 'subject matter', which simply illustrates the message or the content matter of the poem. The duo forms a unique literary artistry which justifies the overall import and aesthetic dimension of any poem. Against the backdrop of poststructuralist criticism that subverted the trope of form/structure in literature, Nwoga, in the same essay, remains resolute on the importance of form and structure, as it relates to poetry. He argues that,

A poet writes to communicate meaning and perhaps the first effort a reader makes is to extract this statement, the theme of the poem. But it is not the 'subject matter' alone that makes poetry. Otherwise poems dealing with the same subject would all be of the same quality, and in any case, there would have been no need to write in the poetic form.

Invariably, the language of poetry crystalizes this concept of specialized language. Artistic ingenuity becomes premised on systematic presentation of the particular language use, which is unique to the creativity of the poet. Hoody (1996) identifies with this assertion, saying "the poet combines various techniques to produce his meaning and it is on the success of these techniques that the beauty of this poem depends on". It is on this premise that this paper attempts to recognize and identify the import of language choice that characterizes Idris Amali's *Efeega: War of Arts*. Therefore, this work takes a critical look at the salient words or expressions that constitute the symbolic representations evidently portrayed in this poetry collection and how some of the poems keep engaging the perception of the reader.

### 43.2 Theoretical Framework: An interface of Formalism and Marxism

Since this research endeavor is premised on the choice of the literary language, the relevant theory suitable for the critical analysis of the selected text is Formalism. This literary theory, which began with the emergence of Russian Formalism school of thought in 1915, focuses strictly on the study of the literariness of text. Ann Dobie (2012) describes this as "the work's recurrences, repetitions, relationships, motifs – all the organisational devices that create the total effect." This significance of this paper therefore lies in the interrogation of symbolic representations recorded in the text and how these symbols eventually aid the discovery and rediscovery of meaning. However, of all the three tenets of formalism, form,



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diction and unity, attention will be paid mostly to diction, in which words or phrases reveal much more than the ordinary. Therefore, through the exploration of both denotative and connotative levels of interpretation, alternative meanings inherent in the texts will be uncovered.

Marxist theory becomes a secondary but relevant theory to this paper due to the intensity of Amali's diction which can be best interpreted as vicious and revolutionary. Through the diction of the texts, one cannot but engage the poet personae with Leon Trotsky's famous expression, in *Literature and Revolution* (1925), that "there are many people in this world who think as revolutionists". One of the key objectives of poetry is to provoke intellectual engagement between a poetry work and the reader. Why then does Amali's choice of words immediately reveal a revolutionary intent, that is peculiar to Marxian dictum? Must aesthetics and functionalism always be viewed as different perspectives in the critical analysis of literature? Or is Amali's work suggesting a fundamental connection, or a healthy nexus rather than obstruction?

Therefore, the argument of this paper is that critic's observation could as well pass through the precepts of symbolism, words and expressions in this poetry collection, and still connect with further strands of multi-dimensional interpretations, which irrevocably conforms with the principle of dialectal materialism and class conflict. In other words, the deliberate selection of violent diction in *Efeega: War of Ants* (formalism) automatically translates to revolutionary thinking (Marxism) in the mindset of the poet personae and extended to the reader. Quite a number of the poems draw significantly to the principal tenet of Marxism which is class struggle. While Marxism dwells on history, politics, society (people-centred experiences), formalism ignores such but focuses strictly on linguistics parameters in the interpretation of texts. Since formalism remains insensitive to how the society is reflected in the text, it continues to be an outcast in the Marxian philosophy.

Therefore, it is no surprise that both theories are viciously apathetic in their respective views of literature and how it should be interpreted or analysed. In fact, this expression is an understatement in the exploration of the hostile historical and political war of attrition recorded by proponents of Formalism and Marxism in the early twentieth century. However, an exploration of this approach would not only result into a needless digression. It would totally negate the significance of this research, in which Marxism is observed as an interpretation of not just societal but literary experience, backed by linguistic variances in this text. The purpose of this work is to find a gap in the sense that the choice of literary language can as well be accommodated in the depiction of other alien theories in literary texts, Marxism in particular.

#### **43.3 The Use of Symbolism in *Efeega: War of Ants***

In poetry, symbolism remains one of the effective ways in which literary language is deployed in a given text and meaning is inventively achieved. An important rhetorical strategy, the use of symbols creates layers of interpretations which are initially embedded in a word or expression. In other scenarios, words often serve

as symbolic reference points in the evocation of other abstract ideas or concepts. Right from the first poem to the last, there is a cross section of symbolism which would be explored in the course of this work. It is however pertinent to note that this archetypal refrain is further enhanced with the overwhelming use of metaphor and imagery which also span the length and breadth of the book. After all, literature, according to Cleanth Brooks (1951: 72), is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic. Hence, this paper investigates these core fundamentals of poetic devices in *Efeega: War of Ants* and how meaning is further re-interpreted in the specific choice of words of the poet.

Amali's collection is divided into seven parts, namely "Desert of Needs", "Pride of Filth", "Restless Abode", "Struggle", "Exchanges" "Dine with the Past" and "War without Arms". Each title is inherently provocative and somewhat contradictory. These layers of contradiction, which elucidate on the mood, and indeed message of the poet, is quite fuelled by enduring images. The first part "Desert of Needs" articulates the dire state of helplessness, an unrepentant state of perpetual deficiency, while the "Pride of Filth" captures an outright rebellious nature towards sanctification and rejuvenation. The oxymoronic phrase "Restless Abode" undermines the universal meaning of the noun 'abode' which signifies a place of rest. The poems in this part allude to themes of distress and homelessness, all amplifies by salient symbolic representations. While "Struggle" clearly implies confrontation, revolt and revolution, "Exchanges" and "Dine with the Past" are references to socio-political and historical characters, places or situations which, still, are allusions or symbolic representations. The last part "War without Arms" reveals an ironical twist of fate.

What remains interesting is the choice of words in the enlisting of the skeletal framework of this text. Selection of fiery words such as "desert", "needs", "restless", "struggle" and so on justifies the intent of the writer in the establishment of profound imageries as clues to inherent meaning(s). The mental pictures created by these expressions unconsciously register the irate mood, unrestrained tone and radical message(s) of the poet persona. These words, indeed, are symbolic representations of 'stories' of discontentment, disappointment and displeasure, which perhaps articulate an extension of meaning that transcends denotative exploration of the poems in the text.

The critical analysis of this poetic text commences from the title, *Efeega*, which literary means "the war of the soldier ants" in Idoma language. The words "war" and "ants" create a substantial ambience of interpretations of this collection. In the first place, there is a question about the choice of 'ants' as key agents of insurrection or revolt. Is this choice suitable? And why? But the answer seemed obvious when examining the basic features of this creature. As an individual, a single ant is unaided, blind, puny and defenseless against the majority of its adversaries. On the contrary, collectively, it is a different story, as the ants frequently initiate a formidable force that takes down any animal, large or strong, on their path. Therefore, the symbolic representation of the ants galvanizes towards the theme of strength in number. Given the context of the poem, "EFEEGA: war of ants" on page 108, it is not only clear that 'ants' symbolizes mass

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strength but also collective will; besides, the poet persona readily identifies with this animal in the first stanza of the poem, as well as confirms the sustained victory that comes with communal understanding and capacity.

Let us line this triumphant route  
Where the elephant threads  
And the bush cow dare not pass  
And wave leaves and tree branches vibrantly  
To shake this earth with our fragile beings  
Clenched feeble fists with shouts of war heroes (pp. 108)

The symbolic representations in the poetry collection begin with words pregnant with metaphorical references to animals. In this category, the ant reigns supreme. Apart from the allusion to strength-in-number and will power, the weak frame of an ant cannot be overlooked, as its susceptible form attracts danger from all sides. Having discovered this meaning, it is impossible to ignore the overall metaphorically depiction of the ants in comparison to the masses. The word 'masses' suggests a group of people who operate at the base structure of the society; hence, the metaphoric description of the lexicon 'ants' cannot be captured from the physical attributes of the insect alone. There is an extension of meaning which translates to class struggle; other layers of meaning reveal other interesting words such as 'work force', 'collectivism' and total dependence on one another for survival.

We are great ants  
Fighting for our portion  
In the name of bravery  
We have conquered

We are strong ants  
Fighting for our own  
In the names of oneness  
We have conquered! (pp. 109)

The use of repetition in the first line of each stanza buttresses on the poet persona's determination to identify with the ant colony. This statement alludes to the supremacy of the masses, despite the seeming helplessness. The language of the poet persona ascertains hope, optimism and resilience. Likewise, the utilization of the metaphor "we are great ants" emboldens that necessity and tenacity in the advocacy for freedom obtained at all cost. Furthermore, the introduction of the elephant in the second line of the poem advocates beyond the threshold of formalist discourse. The imagery of 'ant', foregrounded in the use of the personal pronoun 'us', provokes an antithetical undertone in comparison to that of the opposition, which is the 'elephant'.

A revelation of an established binary opposition paves way for another robust interpretation. The claim of the ants as being 'triumphant' in their 'route' arrogates power, control and ultimately victory to an animal that ordinarily stands no

chance. The irony of victory is further established with the story of the ants in the first line, even "Where the elephant threads". This defines the subversion of hierarchy that, again, must not be diluted with mere formalist interpretation. Consequently, the theory of Karl Marx provides that extension, that required literary dimension to further textual interpretations. Therefore, 'ant' and 'elephant' as well as the hostile relationship between the duo, as foregrounded in the poem, are symbolic representations of class struggle between the strong and the weak, or the rich and the poor (and in Marxian dictum, the bourgeois and the proletariats). Therefore, the choice of words here are actively symbolic in their representations.

For instance, the word 'line' also has a unique undertone. As a noun, it is simply defined as a formation, which is a peculiar characteristic of the ant. But the change in the use of the word as a verb in lines 1, 9, 11, 24 and so on creates a totally different picture in the mindset of the reader. There is a strong sense of battle, an imagery of war. It further connotes strategy, or plan for a line of attack on an unwary enemy.

Let us *line* this triumphant route (line 1)

*Line* the bardists and seers (line 9)

Let us *line* this brave route... (line 11)

Among the ants, the word 'line' is a metaphor for control, activism, defence and service. It signifies a ready reaction against any force of opposition. It establishes a voice for victory, even when the battle is yet to be fought. The mood, despite all odds, is that of optimism, especially knowing full well that condition would not exactly be a bed of roses. This is evidently portrayed towards the end of the poem.

Let us line this route

To face this monster of a hill we erected

With our pains and sweat

In war without arms

To reclaim our gains of life (pp 110)

The final puzzle is revealed in these last few lines. The adversary of the ants becomes clearly foregrounded in the expression "to face this monster of a hill" which is an allusion to the elephant. Its size, gait and strength aptly aid such hill-like qualification as the formidable opponent. However, this does not justify the declaration of war by the ants, until the appearance of the word 'monster'. Here, the word metaphorically categorises the elephant as the tyrannical enemy that must be fought and conquered. But mere structuralist analysis of these two characters does not capture a salient interpretation of their past association. In the words of the poet persona, the elephant was actually "erected" (pp 110, line 2) by the ants in the first place. Hence, this relationship symbolically references the concept of class struggle, in which the activities of the masses (ants) results in the establishment of economic power for the rich (elephant). In turn, the result of this cycle of relationship is violence and revolution by the ants, spurred by the dictatorial tendencies of the elephant, and other predatory beasts.

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Therefore, the diction of this poem is highly inflammatory and incendiary. Expressions such as "war", "bravery", "fire", "broken", "blood", "charge", "cannon charge", "heroes" creates the imagery indispensable in the textual analysis of the poem. There is a demand for restoration which can only be established by violent revolt. It is on this notion that the choice of words articulated in this poem possesses symbolic representations that support this assertion. At a metaphorical level of interpretation, the theme of severe oppression and subjugation is philosophically depicted in this poem. Although not explicitly discussed, it is definitely implied in the poet's 'songs' of rebellion and revolution.

Furthermore, the poem "The hyenas here" replicates the presence of the enemy "in the same garbs". Here, words such as "hyenas", "leopards", "jackals" "wolves" are interpreted as predatory animals, whose voracious tendencies create the imagery of brutality, trepidation and death. They, like the elephant, symbolize the repressive foes that must be resisted at all cost. There is a long-lasting undertone of triumph. Anything less is not communicated, or in fact suggested in the language of the poem. It is evident that the poet uses the symbols of animals in divulging his message to his readers. However, it is the provocative imagery that enraptures the imagination of the reader.

Meanwhile, the last line in the fifth stanza introduces a deviation from the metaphoric use of animals. There is also the portrayal of certain non-living entities as symbolic representations in the collection of poetry. For instance, the expression "the daylight thieves" metaphorically designates another enemy in human form, a connotation that is immediately connected to certain blights in the society, such as corruption, bad leadership and unpatriotic propensity. As foregrounded in the first line of the poem, the poet persona identifies again with the masses, but immediately registers:

My brothers and sisters  
These hyenas are here again (pp. 35)

There is an immediate message in this line for the call against impending chaos and disorder; it is a call for caution, wariness and communal responsibility. There is the creation of an awareness and immediate recognition of the enemy of the people, who only thrives on the industrious masses and feed on their hard-earned accomplishments. The theme of revival and reintegration is foregrounded further in the poem "Let's count our strength". There is a clarion call from "ancestors of scores of decades past" as well as the need for an evaluation of the strength of the masses. The poem titled "Rise" best articulates the message of revolution against oppressive stance of the enemy.

Let's rise brothers and sisters  
With one solid voice  
Stone voices in concrete minds  
Resolved to regain our stolen rights  
To feed upon our commonwealth (pp. 111)

The verb "rise" in the poem incites the spirit of insurgency. There is urgency for self-actualization towards emancipation. At a metaphorical level of interpretation, the phrase "one solid voice" illustrates the need for solidarity in an extremely divergent cosmos. It questions the notion of dissidence as a symbol of diversity of purpose, especially when there is a common foe with common interest. The categorical theme of harmony and unanimity resounds throughout the lines of this poem. The poet persona views this as the only sucker punch that can bring out drastic change in any given society.

The usage of animals as symbolic representations continues in the poem, "The eye of the sun". The poem explores the gathering of "cows", "camels", "goats", "sheep" and "donkeys" which are termed "beast of burden", produced for the singular purpose of nourishment and productivity. Here, each animal is defined by peculiar nature of subjugation. Again, these animals symbolize the masses. Their gathering in this brood is a representation of the diversity in the suffering and pains of the masses, "awaiting the eye of the sun". This eye here is a metaphor for redemptive light, an anticipated new beginning, a far-reaching transformation in their endless waiting for freedom and autonomy. In a nutshell, these poems are decorated with symbolic representations that are obtained from certain features of peculiar animals. Consequently, the interpretation of the poems is depicted through these symbolic refrains that not only provoke impressive imagery but also allude to further sociological interpretations.

The second wave of symbolic representations shifts to expressions that figuratively depict diverse personalities. For instance, the poem "the lone walker" is a metaphor for a man or woman with a vision in a visionless world. The word 'lone' is a further reflection of individualism. As a result of not conforming to societal decadence, he walks "alone through a teeming crowd" and is ostracized from his society and ends up becoming a victim, rather than a celebrity. He exists "in a world naked, which cannot clothe him". The lone walker symbolically represents people with "important mission" but "no one notices him" as a result of the intensity of moral decadence in the society. In addition, the lone walker is a metaphor for lack of solidarity and followership as far as credibility, accountability and good governance is concerned.

This thematic thrust is also evidently portrayed in the "Dedication" page of the collection. The poem here discusses the history of a particular land that is ravaged by immorality and corruption. Hence, there is depiction of lawlessness and savagery, in which there appears to be no form of respite or restitution. The message of debauchery and depravity is strong in the first stanza of the poem.

As this land

Prides and strives on great fertile filth

We lay our heavy burden of neglect

Below the huge mountains of filth

Punctuating every nook and cranny of our land

With the proud looting of our commonwealth (pp.5)

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Again, poignant expressions such as "fertile filth", "heavy burden", "huge mountain of filth" and "proud looting" stimulates dominant mental pictures of gloom and insecurity in the minds of the readers about that particular society. The poet persona sings a tale of societal decadence, premised on nefarious activities of colorless individuals that exemplify bad leadership, exploitation and other forms of abuse.

...By men and women without shame  
As the rule of theft and misrule  
Have become the rule of law  
The powerful have turned into legion of looters

But the second stanza begins with a cry of vengeance. Here, the archetypal theme of revolution and restitution permeates every single line of this stanza, beginning with the rhetorical questions that explode with impetuous defiance against the negative status quo. Here, the anger and disgust of the poet persona is vividly expressed, against the silence and lack of immediate reprisal. His tone resonates the power of communal achievement. His voice becomes sodden with explosive vituperations.

Must we turn to be lineages of cowardice  
And watch and wait until our last breath  
Must we not call with stone voices and clubs  
Into the face of the Chief of State  
Who in thus carnival decorates  
These filthy necks with envious gold

In addition, the use of the pronoun "we" automatically creates a distinction from the previous group which comprises "men and women of shame" led by the "Chief thief of the State". This second group metaphorically denotes the victims of socio-political and economic sabotage. Again, in retrospect, there is an allusion to the concept of class struggle, in which the previous group symbolizes the rich and powerful, whose corrupt tendencies stifle the lives of the second, who metaphorically depicts the masses, the weak. But the story again reverberates the leitmotif of revolution. The poet persona predicts the demise of the "trampling elephants" by the collective efforts of the "commanders of war of ants without arms". In a similar vein, the poem entitled "these people" inadvertently delineates two classes of people. While the poet persona is silent on the first group (which figuratively represents the masses), he decides to exposes the weaknesses of the second (which metaphorically depict leaders of the society).

These people have  
Eyes, heads, mouths, legs, hands and anuses  
Like us.  
BUT  
The eyes  
Do not see  
The heads

## Not meant for thinking... (pp37)

The expression "these people" automatically creates a severe division among people of the aforementioned community. The imagery of people without major parts of their senses provokes the metaphor of the zombie. Their lack of awareness and mindlessness further accentuates disorder and pandemonium which is experienced in the society. At a metaphorical level of interpretation, this poem satirizes the disability, incapability and the failures of those who pride themselves as leaders. The emblematic nature of the people is highly significant because it symbolizes societal instability and insecurity that mostly characterize societies with visionless leaders.

#### 43.4 Conclusion

In sum, the poetry collection, *Efeega: War of Ants*, is a mindboggling metaphor of pervasive nature of many societies which are heavily characterized by the philosophy of class struggle. It is indeed a sad song of moral and intellectual decadence in a society that should ordinarily thrive and excel. Through the use of provocative imagery and symbolic representations in virtually all the poems in the collection, the readers are able to decipher the disgust, pain and disillusionment that are generated from the diction carefully illustrated in this text. Furthermore, through the profound use of symbolism too, the poet also awakens the doused spirit of the masses to rise against the tyrannous rule of the leaders. While depicting the struggle to be tough, he however concentrates on the symbol of the ants, as a colony of soldiers who rely on one another in order to survive all odds, even at the expense of the ruthless and indomitable elephant. He ends on the notion that only violence, pound for pound, that can emancipate the masses from the shackles of its itinerant oppressors.

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