

Representing Ethnicity of Yoruba Tradition:

A study on Select Poems of Niyi Osundare

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Abstract:

This paper studies the representation of Yoruba tradition in the poetry collection *Songs of the Market Place* by Niyi Osundare. It examines how the poet's deployment of proverbial lore and folksongs in his poetry. As the oral traditional performance, his poetry employs rich Yoruba and literary devices such as the usage of repetitions such a way that Osundare's poetic style is unique. Osundare's poetic style is infused with the experimentation in language, usage of Yoruba words and proverbs. African literature, especially poetry can be considered as the byproduct of Africa's historical experiences, It encourages the dynamic cultural varieties prevailed in African society. The usage of traditional African literary and musical elements that attractive to ordinary people evokes cultural associations among the readers. In the paper titled "Representing Ethnology of Yoruba tradition: A Study on Select poems of Niyi Osundare discusses the use of indigenous Yoruba concepts found in the texts.

Keywords: Proverbial lore, Yoruba tradition, orality

INTRODUCTION:-

Folklore is an essential part of daily life back then. People were reliable on its various branches like folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, hymns, dance, folk ballads etc. at that time folklore also keeps the record of the life. It has also done the preservation of the customs of the common people and consequently information of the people. The oral tradition from which folklore emerges, survived because it serves the interest of the people preserving it.

Since the folkloric tradition was maintained by people, contemporary events that affected the people also affected the folklore. It strengthens the cultural traditions, and helping to educate the next generation.

Africa is a multicultural continent, people believe in their culture and tradition and follow it firmly because they associate it with their identity. In order to retain their identity, they want to retain their things including proverbs, wit wisdoms etc. What they got from their ancestors are as much important and relevant as it used to be earlier. Proverbs are not only meant to decorate a language merely. They all are based on common sense or experiences and also help us to confront with difficulties of life and overcome whenever one is in dark.

African literature, an area where the relationship of the writer with the land is absolutely recognised and understood, covers a huge range of languages, cultures, and colonial contexts. Literature in the African continent has its basis mainly in the traditions of South African, Francophone and Anglophone literatures. A key element in the process of celebrating African culture was the literary adaptation of lore from the rich oral tradition. In Anglophone Africa, the most startling example of oral narrative style is Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Francophone African writing of the 1950s produced much autobiographical fiction. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* includes an Anglophone perspective of colonial education. Achebe highlights the ambiguities produced by the colonial encounter, but there was also a very strong vein of anti-colonial nationalist writing.

The postcolonial stage saw satire, ambiguity and hybridity become the dominant motifs of much African fiction from 1970s onwards. There was also a pronounced move away from realist narratives to more fragmentary and experimental style. The ethnic chaos, widespread poverty and oppressive regimes in many emerging African nations, as well as the continuing dependence on Europe, led many writers to question the whole nationalist project in their writing. While the second generation African writers include Niyi Osundare, Festus

lyayi, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Zainab Alkali, Tess Onwueme and Bode Sowande and the third generation writers include Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta, Chris Abani and others.

In contemporary African literature, Niyi Osundare occupies an important position. Osundare achieves his objective of representing African oral traditions through the poems. Poetry of Osundare is a site of African oral cultural heritage and can be claimed that the African oral tradition is a rich and varied device of expression. Osundare tries to manipulate the English language with the infusion of many legends, proverbs, riddles and myths from the Yoruba tradition. Through the language, Osundare attempts to capture the tradition of the African people to feel the Yoruba tradition and the African culture among the readers. In the current paper Osundare's use of the elements of oral culture especially proverbs and Yoruba words in *Songs of the Marketplace* can be studied in detail.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

Niyi Osundare one of the most outspoken of the new breed poets from Nigeria can be considered as a poet of substance. The perfect instance for the employment of the new styles of poetry is visible in Osundare's poems. Osundare's work uses a wide range of vernacular stuff and literary idioms to frame its lyrical aspects of poetry. As a part of emerging new voices in contemporary African poetry, Osundare tries to reflect local African experience. Critical work which emphasizes on Niyi Osundare's poetry is Joe Ushie's detailed essay with the title, 'Cultural Crossings in Osundare's Poetry'. In this essay Ushie says that even though Niyi Osundare like other written African poets have chosen to express themselves in English language because of the acceptance from the part of audience and readers. The English language used in their work is made to put the weight of the African Culture.

According to Ushie:

Osundare is known for his deployment of devices from his Yoruba roots into his poetry in English. Indeed so conscious and deliberate is his reliance on Yoruba culture and language that Stephen Arnold has described him as not an Anglophone African poet but a Yoruba poet who writes in English. (11)

It is significant to point out first and foremost that Niyi Osundare is a poet who draws heavily from the Yoruba Culture. He uses the English language but a domestication of the English language is visible in the major poems o the collection *Songs of the Market Place*. Poet here incorporates elements of the oral tradition. One can highlight two major things while reading the collection of poetry *Songs of the Market Place*. They are the incorporation of the oral tradition into Osundare's poems and the usage of African language, especially use of the Yoruba words and proverbs.

The dominant aspects of African orality in the poetry collection include the presence of repetition, the use of the proverb, riddles and folk myths. In every culture proverbs is an integral part of the oral tradition. Proverbs are wittily saying that reveal the philosophy and wisdom of the African man. According to the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe proverbs is defined as the oil with which words are eaten. Osundare employs proverbs in his poems to show the richness in representation of African oral culture in literature. In the early period, all attempts of the poets were focused on gathering oral literature including Folk Studies, songs, proverbs, idioms, myths, chronicles, riddles and wit-wisdoms. This literature includes both narratives and non narratives. The proverb belongs to the non narrative genre. Proverb is one of the significant genres among the early collection of folk literature.

One can be analyzed the knowledge that social structure determines both the experience and its expression. The individuals who are assimilating the social structure are on the basis of the existing class consciousness. The relationship between these individuals who

belong to this particular community is always followed by the logic of the class consciousnesses. George Lukacs, Hungarian thinker and aesthetician advocated a more humanist approach to the class struggle. Class Consciousness as described by Lukacs, is opposed to any psychological conception of consciousness, which forms the basis of individual or mass psychology. On the contrary, he propounded that each social class has a determined class consciousness which it can achieve. According to him Class consciousness is different from the social consciousness. The class consciousness is intertwined by the reason and matter, instead social consciousness is purely depending upon the beliefs and self determination. In this context class consciousness is deeper than the social consciousness. So that, the social consciousness has its roots on class consciousness, people interpreting and evaluating their actions on the basis of their self determination. Therefore the method to understand the class consciousness of a community, we must focus on the existing social relations and the discourses among those relationships.

One can evaluate experiences in three different ways. Among the first two phases, people are becoming more and more self centered and it leads to the destruction of the class consciousness. But in the third phase individuals are capable of recognizing their limitation and hardship as it is socially constructed one, and realizing the fact that these situations are not the mere fate of those individuals. The development of class consciousness is visible in the case of language also. The mere evaluation of theories and ideologies in a language may help to interpret the existing system of class consciousness. On the other hand, one can only realize the class consciousness and interrelationship of different classes of a society through continuous acquaintances between the individuals in such a society.

Proverbs becomes more favourable for the Renaissance politics, because it makes possible the world which negates the discourses of history. Thus, in socialist democratic society proverbs are less applicable than that of the periods of monarchy.

The poem titled as “Reflections” can be analysed on the basis of its orality.

Osundare’s usage of proverbs in the poetry is so provocative and socially relevant. Proverb employed in the poem “Reflections” is given below:

The Lizard feeds on its own brood

And wonders why they say it barriers

Its futures in its guts (37)

The above mentioned proverb says the social background of the country Africa. People from Nigeria are suffering out of poverty caused by the leaders from Africa themselves. Proverbs are representing the second phase of the development of class consciousness. When a person who realizes that his/her fate which determined by the divided consciousness among the poor people who alive in their society, finally curse him/her self because of the class struggle prevailed in the system. Proverbs are reproducing the same ideology that which cannot attain a unity among the classes. Thus they always divide people on the basis of caste, religion and even gender. It always limits Man’s possibilities of a better livelihood. Another example of the proverb can be found in the last stanza of the poem “Reflections”:

The World is like Solel Boneh’s Steam Shovel

It scoops earth from one place to fill another. (38)

Apart from this, poet Osundare employs Yoruba proverb that can not translated in the poem “On seeing a Benin Mask in British Museum”:

Lya jajeji l’Egbe

IIe enil’ eso ye’ni(40)

The meaning of the above mentioned proverb is suffering afflicts the stranger in an alien land, your treasure is in your home. From the poem “To the Dinosaur” one can see another use of proverb:

The whip that carved weal
On the first wife
Will descend from the rafter someday
To give the new bride a stoke of history (41)

In his poem “Who is Afraid of the Proverb?” in which footnote he gives this English translation of the significance the Yoruba attach to the proverb:

The proverb is the horse of the word
The word is the horse of the proverb
When the word is lost
It is the proverb we use for finding it (101)

In one of the stanzas of the poem “Who is Afraid of the proverb?” which resembles a physicist’s definition of a straight line:

Who is Afraid of the proverb
Of the shortest distance (101)

It can be understood the connotative meaning of proverbs by analyzing it on the basis of discourse. Structuralists are considering proverbs as a part of Fixed Phrase Genre. Structure of proverbs and riddles are not similar that of the conventional narratives, which is always considered as flexible. Thus some scholars have given static form to the proverbs. The essence of the proverb can’t be found in the linguistic structure, but it is there in the discourse

or social context. When we consider the collection of proverbs from the ages of Gundert, it can't be analyzed the text without the context. Proverbs, which lie beyond the discourse, are simply a form of speech which lost its historical and social context. Discourse Study does not consider language as a structural form. In Structuralism it gives emphasize the form which was constituted before the speech. However, Discourse Study follows the specificities of context in which speech was formed and the social relationship between the languages. Apart from the semantic differences between sign and signified discourse study enlighten the social context which forms the meaning. Structuralism approaches languages as it always consider the similar in functions. Structuralism conceives the language as speech community, grammar and in accordance with the function. Instead, discourse study tries to problematising such contexts. It is very significant in the questions like Who? When? To whom and How? in the usage of proverbs. The discourse study considers the historical contexts in which the proverbs are formed. The relevance of the interrelationship between sign and signified is arbitrary in here also. In the historical context the interconnectedness between sign and signified is deep rooted. It does not make sense the study of proverb without considering the context in which it was formed.

Apart from this in *Songs of the Market Place*, Osundare uses plenty of Yoruba words. Some of which were translated in the text while some are left untranslated. Poet used many Yoruba words in order to promote the Yoruba language and to reflect the African culture through literature. Apart from the use of the proverbs there is also the deliberate movement into the unwritten poetry of features that characterizes performance in African oral literature. There are the specific amenities for the use of musical instruments to accompany the recitation of many songs and poems; usage of refrain which enhances the musicality of the texts. The presence of the refrain, which demands the participation from the part of audience,

also can be considered as the feature of orality. These features confirms the presence of African culture represented in the poetry of Osundare.

Osundare uses some of the words from Yoruba language in the collection *Songs of the Market Place*. Some of the Yoruba words are translated in the text while some are not. Examples are:

(1) Tanwiji (9)

Mosquito larvae (translated in the text)

(2) Omalanke (11)

Hand pushed cart (translated in the text)

(3) Olee barawoooooo Onye oshiii (16)

Thief (translated in the text)

(4) Babalawo (37)

Medicine man, herbalist (not translated in the text)

(5) Ekan (18)

Elephant grass (translated in the text)

(6) Egigun (71)

Siva cotton tree (translated in the text)

(7) Afemoju (78)

Dawn (translated in the text)

There are equally some of other Yoruba words which are used in the collection without translation. Examples are:

(1) molue, danfo, dagbere (11)

Name of passenger vehicles.

(2) gari (35)

Nigerian/ African staple

(3) Langbalangba (40)

Undignifying/ gracelessly

(4) Esua (72)

Memory aid

Some of the words considered untranslated. There is no apt word for the Yoruba word in English language. There are some elements brought into the poems just to keep the musical aspect, apart from the semantic meanings in their original context. Osundare is a poet who shows his concerns for both the semantic aspects and musicality of the texts. Osundare believes that Yoruba, rather than English is better use in his poetry to capture the local flavor of the country, Africa. His work *Songs of the Market place* offers us as the best example of a successful acculturation and through the poem poet could transfer African oral heritage into print form.

My poetry is strongly influenced by Yoruba Poets. Mine is the figured fancy. Metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy and other figures of speech populate the lines as fishes do a fertile river. (55)

Osundare also uses sound symbols and sound images in his work. This is because Yoruba is a tone language and as such sound matter in the movement of meaning in a normal communicative event. Hence, Osundare tells us that “meaning is sounding and sounding is meaning. (*My Poetry*, 25)

The reliance on and use of the rhetorical strategies of Yoruba oral poetry such as repetition, parallelism, word play, alliteration and assonance as well as tonal counter point have far reality implications for rhythm and ultimately, the form of Osundare’s poetry. Writing on the

nature of rhythm in his work, Osundare writes that “rhythm for me systemic and pervasive. It is secreted in every consonant and every vowel even as both engage in the musical unicorn that begets the syllable. The Yoruba syllable is a unit of music”. (*Yoruba Thought*, 15)

Osundare’s poetic creations draw extensively from the Yoruba oral tradition. This is adequately from the Yoruba tradition. This is adequately corroborated by Shook (2007) when he states:

Osundare’s numerous travels have influenced him, but it is Nigeria, with its linguistic and cultural diversity, that has most shaped his writing. In his poetry, Osundare draws from the oral tradition of Yoruba, one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria. (29)

The poet himself confirms this trust on the tradition of Yoruba oral culture.

Without any doubt, Yoruba or African oral tradition has a strong influence on my works. It is for me both a source and an inspiration. I was not really “introduced” to Yoruba culture. I was born to it, and I grew up in it... The Yoruba also have a deep fascination- no, fascination is a weak word- an abiding respect for and interest in the word (ohun/oro). Words are not just the building blocks of language; they are its core, essence, and enabler. Without words, no language; without language no society. This is why the Yoruba consider words as delicate/ fragile/ sacred. A popular Yoruba saying. “Eyin loun or eyin/Ioro.” Provided the title. The word is an Egg, for my volume of poetry published in 2000.

(Shook, 29)

In the following lines from “Advice”, this is confirmed appreciably:

To yourself

Friend, be true

You farm a thousand yams

And tell us it is two hundred

Alright

After eating a hundred yams

You will eat a hundred lies (19)

These lines serve as indelible moral rectitude. The lines have been composed from the prominent apothegm designed to make people desist from telling lies. As the Yoruba maxim goes:

Agbe to Ko'ogorun ebe l'oko

T'o pe'gba lohun ko

Ni' gba t'o baj'esu ogorun ebe tan

Ko ni sai j'ogorun iro.

(A farmer who has made only a hundred

Hips

Who claimed he had made two hundred

Hips

After he has finished eating the yams

Contained in the hundred hips

He must inevitably eat the hundred lies)

The maxim contains in the Yoruba moral saying no doubt provide very rich raw material for Osundare in this poem. It is the orality that Osundare's poetry illustrates that Nwachukwu- Agbada (1993) identifies when he says "proverbs, tongue twisters, riddles, communal traditions, even folktales in snippety forms are built into poetic lines, certainly with the intention of Africanizing poetic meditation"

The important feature of proverb is none other than sociality which expressed through an individual. The knowledge produced here indicates the sociality. The Structuralists would not often consider the aspect of performance of a language. Instead discourse study often emphasizes on the performance aspect of language. Utterance makes use of the expressive aspect of language. On the other hand language constitutes the consciousness. Here one can see the similarities between the dualities Individual/ society and utterance and language. Bakhtin's concepts outline a distinctive philosophy of language and culture that has at its center which claims that all discourse is in essence a dialogical exchange and that this endows all language with a particular social or political force. He considers utterance as the form of expression of an individual and the language as social.

Saussure's concept of language is entirely different from that of Bakhtin. Bakhtin emphasizes the social aspects of language. Sociality always changes in accordance with language. The sociality of the languages is changing through the times by the interest of class, institution, and creed. The contribution of Bakhtin is based on Saussure's concept of langue which is again under reconstruction with the existing social values. According to him every word is inextricably bound to the context in which it exists. Thus studies on proverbs inescapably intertwined with the discourse studies.

Proverb is always manifests its response to the existing discourse of language and its incomparability. Both the listener and speaker seek the heritage of the existing language. This makes the discourse of proverb possible. Structure of the proverb will be always same or it is unchanging. But at the same proverb generates different meanings in accordance with contextual difference. The distinctiveness of proverb is its representation, because those statements are metaphorically represented in a distinguishing manner. The dubiety of meaning will be existed in the case of proverbs.

Each proverb carries two different kinds of reading. First one represents the “utterance” which is synchronic in nature and the other one is the “langue”, the diachronic approach. Proverb gets its contextual meaning through the interactions of synchronic and diachronic studies. Thus proverb creates its meta-studies in accordance with the social and cultural milieu. Synchronic study shaped of the differences in the speech events which include its context, orality and genre. A particular meaning of a proverb is generated through the projection of varieties of social and cultural contexts and finally diachronic study is possible. The numerous possibilities of meanings are possible in the case of a proverb.

All the above mentioned quotes are becoming as a part of oral literature without knowing the authenticity of the text. These are quotes have the same function as that of proverbs. It is significant the comparison between the proverbs and quotes, Like the form of folklore, in proverbs also does not carry a single thought of individuality and imagination. But the meanings of these proverbs are determined by two different contexts. While we are applying a proverb in conversations we are taking context that is already there in the tradition. A person using a proverb is trying to form a bridge between two different contexts which is separated by the generations. A person who is using Absolute Quotes is always trying to separate it from the context in which it was originally formed. When the proverbs or proverb like quotations making the speech more logical and clear, Absolute Quotes are

leading the creator of the quote, a person who uses quotes and listener more complex speech events. But generally the usage of proverbs and Absolute Quotes are considered as similar by the listeners. But in its deeper level two of them are entirely different.

Proverbs are always putting the conversations into the tradition. It generates the feeling that the history is an unchanging process. The proverb, “the word and old sack of Mappila is same” is not about the Muslims or Christians who were living in Kerala. Mappilas were those people they were Christians and Muslims had to take the commerce while there were no caste existed “Commerce and Business” as the assigned job based on caste. The implied meaning of the above mentioned proverb is never believe a businessman. In the Modern times all people turned into business and world is became consumerist society. But later in some other contexts this same proverb has got the meaning racial criticism. Because it is separated from the original context in which it was existed. Thus it reconstructed and reconstituted an entirely different meaning. In every usage of proverbs there is an intention, which is the history is unchanging and the socially life was already built by the powerful hands. The proverbs are seems to be more simple because it is putting the complex contexts or events into the mere logic of common people. At the same time these Absolute Quotes are breaking the smooth passage of history and it makes to believe that the present life is the only reality.

Here the Quote like proverbs are separated from the real context and used in the entirely different situations. There is no extension between the original context and the attributed one. Like the proverbs the Absolute Quotes are also doing the same social responsibility of proverbs which consciously negate the historical reality.

CONCLUSION:-

All the discussions pave way to the ideological functions of proverbs and Quotes. Most of them are narratives of different life which negates the historical realities of the society. No one experience the social reality in a direct way. But it is usually reaches the people as in the various ideological forms of which included proverbs. Hiding the contradictions, to turn a person as author, to strengthen the imaginary relation of individuals towards the existence of the so called reality, to reconstruct the existing pattern naturally, make to feel that moving as stable; interrelated as the separated; changing as unchanged, considering power as blessings, to place wonder instead of the analysis - Like these proverb is one of the significant linguistic expression which always institutionalize the life and finally human beings lead a life which is yielded to the power structure of the society.

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