

The Poetry of A.N Akwanya: A Formalist Evaluation of its Technique

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Abstract: *The readings in existence on the poetry of A.N Akwanya are very few among which there is no formalist approach to the investigation of the technique of his poetry. This essay occupies that critical space. In specific terms, the theory of formalism is deployed in evaluating the three volumes of poetry by Akwanya, namely: Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems, Moments: A Collection of Poems, and Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems. It is demonstrated that in spite of shortcomings of a poetic technique in some of the poems, these corpuses of poetry of the poet are estimable works of literature.*

Keywords: poetry, poetic technique, formalism, close reading, objectivity, sociological criticism, evaluation

1. Introduction

There are many critical apparatuses usually utilized for the study and evaluation of literature which are quite appropriately designated "literary theories". One such equipment is formalism, a type of twentieth-century literary theory whose concept Roman Jakobson, a Russian formalist, is one of its protagonists and advocates. In their work, *Literature: Reading, Reacting, & Writing*, Kirszner & Mandell enlighten that "the formalist movement in English language criticism began with I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*(1929)" (1940). But formalist movement has not only existed in Russia and England but also in America under the name *new criticism* (Kirszner and Mandell, 1940). Essentially, the theory of formalism emphasizes the vitality of literary form in verifying the signification of a work. To put it another way, it stresses that criticism of a piece of literature should be based on the work itself without a shred of what it stands for or means outside of the text. Hence, biographical, historical, and sociological information which are the trappings of sociological criticism are unimportant to formalists in ascertaining the meaning of, say, a play or poem. More to the point, Kirszner & Mandell have eloquently written that formalists

read the text closely, paying attention to organization and structure, to verbal nuances (suggested by word choice and use of figurative language), and to multiple meanings (often created through the writer's use of paradox and irony). The formalist critic tries to reconcile the tensions and oppositions inherent in the text in order to develop a unified reading. (1940)

It is deducible from the above quoted script and from Kirszner & Mandell's further explanation in their said book that through the close reading technique which this theory employs to unearth the meaning of a text unaided by any related data outside of it, active reading and independent mindedness are hugely encouraged. Indeed, this is a useful way of achieving a very high level of objectivity in literary criticism, for accurate biographical, historical, and sociological details can hardly be accounted for; the reasons being that fact and fiction can really be intermingled in a literary work and a literary text

is the sole object of critical engagement. But much of the interest and the excitement that come with undertaking a sociological criticism is absent in a formalist reading because such characteristics typical of the former as an author's bio-data, the cultural context of a work, or, its historical backdrop are discountenanced by the latter. Nonetheless, sociological criticism also has a failing, which is that there are usually many accounts about the sources of a work or a writer's influences without the kind of degree of objectivity in a formalist evaluation of a text. True, no literary theory is without a shortfall, which is why another theory can be employed to conduct this inquiry other than formalism. But since the theory of formalism concerns itself with the structural design of literary works, one suggests that it is a more suitable device with which to investigate a corpus or collections of poetry--in this case, A.N Akwanya's poetry. This is because it is too arduous a task to delve into, say, a sociological criticism of the whole pieces of poems in a volume or volumes of poetry. Even so, a formalist critical activity may choose not to canvass the entire poems in the poetry collection(s) of a poet. This present one too does not study all of the poems in the three volumes of Akwanya's poetry. Nor does it attempt to inspect every poetic technique or literary device of the poet.

Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems (2005)

In this first book of poetry, *Pilgrim Foot: A Collection of Poems*, which has a total number of forty-one items, A.N. Akwanya predominantly makes very high effective use of diverse poetic techniques or literary devices to convey meaning, some of which are: theme, poetic diction, simile, repetition, and rhetorical question. To begin with, theme is the central idea(s) or message(s) which a writer communicate(s) through a work of literature as a novel, play, or poem. In *Pilgrim Foot*, Akwanya explores many themes some of which relate to religion; as in the poem "Judgment by Fire", which resonates with religious overtones. Death, as in "Anonymous" and "Seesaw"; catastrophe, as evident in "To the Master of the Universe", politics; seen in "Time for the Military", determination and success which are present in the poem "Pilgrimage"; war, as exemplified in the "Civil War" poem and ethnic nationalism, which is ever so apparent in the poem "Igbo Diaspora" and while it is obviously correct to reflect that

the poet meditates on variegated issues, it is equally right to reason that there is a common thematic thread pertaining to 'losses' which runs through many of the poems in this collection, an idea that Florence Oyebuchi Orabueze aptly describes as "dispossession" in an article on the same work. Interestingly, the poet himself uses a synonymous term "dispossessed" which in part constitutes the name of a segment, "The Broken Dispossessed," in the poetry book. In fact, in the article by Orabueze, "The Theme of Dispossession in A.N Akwanya's *Pilgrim Foot*", the writer amplifies the issue by first drawing illustrations from ten poems in the work under study to underscore the fact of dispossession of human beings, especially those in the Nigerian society, by different dispossessors and then she scripts thus: "A. N. Akwanya has shown that, indeed, man suffers from different forms of dispossession from diverse dispossessors. Some of the acts of dispossession are inevitable, and unleashed by forces stronger than man; he has to bear them" (319). Of particular note is the poem "Anonymous" in which the poet draws a striking picture of a thief dispossessed of his life, as partly illustrative of the following: "The charred remains on the roadside with a fixed gaze/ at the morning sky was as if praying"(1-2). But though these initial lines do not say whether the deceased is a criminal nor do they or any other lines communicate the dead man's name, which is, in fact, why the poem is entitled 'Anonymous'; the poet satisfies the reader's curiosity with this information: "no one claims or knows him/thief that he was, /caught red-handed in the act" (41-43).It is, in addition, worth remarking that although Akwanya does not make use of the word "love" throughout this volume of poetry, "Your Eyes are Far Away" and "Towards the Setting Sun" are some of the poems that are instinct with it. As a result, themes connected to love can be extracted from them.

As suggested earlier, another literary device of the poet worthy of examination is poetic diction. Diction can be described as the choice of words of a writer in a work of literature. It includes phrases, the sentence organizations, and at times figurative language. (Abrams and Harpham, 298) In *Pilgrim Foot*, Akwanya's word choice is very simple. He does not strive for difficult or obscure vocabulary so much so that his poetry is almost reduced to literalness, except that by their artistic phrasings, abundant deployment of figures of speech, and occasional concealment of meanings, the poems are predominantly genuinely captivating. Still, "Time for the Military" and "For the Family" are pieces with just infinitesimal artistry quite unlike the rest because their meanings are not concealed and in them linguistic acrobatics are lacking.

Simile, which signifies a comparison of two things with unlike nature using the terms "like" and "as", is a recurring kit in *Pilgrim Foot*. Some instances of its occurrences are in the poems "Ruins" where the poet says: "But the village-dwellers are large-hearted as nature" (47); "Seesaw" as can be seen in "her life had slammed shut like a book" (32) and "Short of Breath" where Akwanya pens that "Stubbornly he holds his ground/ and full of fight, / though his tongue lolls/like a mature tumour (46-9). In fact, in that same stanza the device is seen employed

again: "though he slowly chokes to death, / he quakes with pregnant energy/ like an ancient lorry"(50-52).And it is to the poet's credit that the last but one simile outlined here crackles with humour. True, what may be humorous to one person may not be so to another. But for the present writer, and one believes for some other person(s), saying that "Stubbornly he holds his ground/and full of fight,/though his tongue lolls/like a mature tumour" is truly humorous. Correspondingly, there is also humour in the statement that "though he slowly chokes to death,/he quakes with pregnant energy/like an ancient lorry". Here again, some may not find this humorous whereas others will be amused by it. Particularly, the humour lies in the words "ancient lorry". But if the poet had otherwise said "old lorry", it would certainly not have been humorous.

Repetition as a literary device simply implies the recurring use of same word(s), either within the same line of a poem or elsewhere in the very poem. This literary tool is one of the dominant ones that occur again and again in many of the poems in *Pilgrim Foot*. A case in point is in "You are Led Now" where the terms "we have" are seen to be repeated in the following: "we have come down, /we have" (19-20). In the same poem also, there is repetition of the word "quick" as follows: "being so quick, / yes, quick"(51-52).

The last poetic technique of the poet, Akwanya, which receives attention here, is rhetorical question. It means asking questions that require no answer. In *Pilgrim Foot*, this technique is frequently put to use by the poet. For instance, there is rhetorical question at the end of the poem, "Now I Have You", where it is said: "Now I have you:/See?"(16-17) In "A Morning Ritual", there is also its presence where the poet writes that "he has grey at all in his head, / do you think?"(28-29) In the poem "Short of Breath", there is yet another example where the poem reads: "or had I my terrible wrack/ for standing idly by?"(73-74) Indeed, many other illustrations exist in the text.

Moments: A Collection of Poems (2007)

Akwanya's second book of poetry, *Moments: A Collection of Poems* has also various techniques. For the purpose of this analysis of the book, consideration will be given to only theme, poetic diction, repetition, alliteration and personification which are for the most part highly successfully used. First of all, the thematic issues in this work relate to violence, death, religion, politics, and moralism. Also, except for moralism, the rest thematic concerns of the work sampled here are part of those already said to exist in his *Pilgrim Foot*. But leaving aside this aspect of the issue, the poem "January 1966" which receives critical attention in this section of the article, is a perfect example of poems with a violent theme in *Moments*. In the poem, the poet gives a disturbing account of a riot that happened in January 1966 of which old men of different religious persuasions express gratitude at their places of worship for having survived it. As the poet puts it: "The old men retiring/ had thought about this turbulence/ unabated/ as the twenty-first century came in sight/and gave thanks in church/ to have survived/ and in

the mosque, / gave thanks at the ancestors' shrines..." (1-8). But how could old men who should normally bemoan the situation and probably that it is claiming young lives express thanks-giving in the church, mosque, and shrines for surviving the unrest? The afore-mentioned beginning lines and the rest that follow, which together make up the first stanza of the poem, provide inkling that the old men have questionable characters and are, in fact, not innocent of the disorder in January 1966. The remaining lines of the stanza read thus: "with downcast eyes/ and trembling hands/ because of the history they carried/ on a platter/like the head of the Baptist" (9-13). It is attractive to mention in passing that lines twelve and thirteen echo T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which biblical allusion to the beheading of John the Baptist is worked into the poem in like manner. Despite that, Akwanya's allusion serves his poem a very useful purpose; for when it is not considered in isolation but linked to line eleven, there is indication that the old men have slain history or damaged things. Nevertheless, stanza two offers adequate proof that the retiring old men are not alone in performing such evil act, that they with men of social standing and young men carry out such wrongdoing but that they are even less committed to it, which is why they retire. Witness it:

It will be received
into hands well used to ill
since the breaking of the law in January 1966
by young men who espied thieves
and managers putting harvests
for days to come;
pondered what they had seen:
let the thief go
with his loot,
the betrayers of their charge
retire at their own choosing,
their own terms?

It is clear in stanza two above but clearer in stanza four that it is the youth who are used to perpetrate this evil as the latter reads:

And the pullers of the triggers
Of the echoes' echo--
young anarchists
in vaguely angry organizations;
young fortune hunters
with none of the things the world trades;
young hired men
serving escaped thieves and time servers,
with expatriate families! (41-49)

In the last stanza, the poet speaks to the retiring old men, saying that when they retire amidst a raging fire or upheaval (of which they have a hand in it), there will be much on their consciences. In other words, their consciences will prick them. But he is optimistic that there will be rehabilitations. It can, therefore, safely be said that the theme of the poem, "January 1966", is that "violence has no place in nation building".

Akwanya's poetic diction in *Moments* is also simple. Again, this simplicity almost mars the work. But it is the poet's adroit application of smooth flow of diction and figures of speech in the work, not forgetting his occasional

departure from openness to veil meaning--it is all of these which make much of the poetry enjoyable. And yet, it must be pointed out that many of the lines of the poems in this second volume do not have as much artistic finesse as the majority of those in the first in which the poet made high artistic achievements. "The Toll" in *Moments* has just such lines. But with the humour infused in it, the poem is hard-won.

As with *Pilgrim Foot*, another technique the poet applies to many poems in *Moments* is repetition. In fact, *Moments* is awash with this literary device. Some textual references to this fact find expression, first, in the poem "The Things I See" where the word "sometimes" is repeated as follows: "sometimes quietly, / sometimes violently" (36-37). Second, the phrase "like migrants everywhere" is repeated in the poem "Money to be Made" where the poet writes: "like migrants everywhere, /specializing, like migrants everywhere" (55-56). Third, in "War Grievs Finely Etched" the word "little" is put to use in a part of the first stanza in this fashion: "there's only just a little sadness/as with any loss,/a little shock (9-11). Also in the same poem, the poet repeats the term 'slaughter' in stanza 10 where it reads: "slaughter and slaughter" (169). The fifth and last example of repetition listed here is in the piece that closes the collection of poems, "Retreat After a Hold up" in which the word "pellets" appears in the first stanza and recurs in the fifth, as shown respectively: "Pellets aimed to pulp my head and chest"(1) and "...the moment the pellets went through" (76).

Similarly, Akwanya makes abundant use of alliteration in *Moments*. Alliteration, according to Kirsznier and Mandell, is the "repetition of initial sounds in a series of words, as in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper": "So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep". Alliteration may be reinforced by repeated sounds within and at the ends of words" (1973). Some cases of the use of alliteration in the work are: first of all, in the poem "Moments", from whose name the poet derives part of the title of his work, where it reads: "of a great green snake" (17) because the sound "g" alliterates in the words "great" and "green" in the line. In stanza six of the poem "Last Straw Dangling", the "f" sound alliterates in the phrase "fleeing from famine" (140). In "Pieces of Myself Left or A Man who Runs" the "c" sound alliterates in "that provided me a constant change" (11) and "w" sound alliterates in "and received with warm welcome"(51). In the final example offered which is in the poem "Between us who are Voted Happy", it is the "s" sound that alliterates, and in the words "some" and "slow", thus: "rattling some slow coach out of their wits" (17).

The last poetic technique of Akwanya in *Moments* x-rayed in this article is personification. Personification is a literary device that gives inanimate things or abstract ideas life or human qualities (Kirsznier and Mandell, 1982). The poet exploits this kit several times in the work in order to achieve his intended meaning. For example, he skillfully applies personification in the poem, "Two Lone Accomplices" where car tyres are said to be lacking patience and to be remorseful: "The car horns sound again/raucously/ with screeching of impatient/ and

sometimes penitent tyres” (50-53). In “War Grievs Finely Etched”, peace is personified as having a heart, like this: “Don’t forget:/the unjust peace/afterwards/has nothing in its heart” (311-14). Finally, in “Last Straw Dangling”, Africa is personified as having wounds, even wounds that fester in the following way: “Africa, /poor old Africa’s festering wounds” (153-54). Other instances of the use of this device also exist in *Moments*.

Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems (2012)

This assessment of poetic techniques in *Visitant on Tiptoe*, the third of Akwanya’s volumes of poetry, pays mind to just theme, poetic diction, repetition, run-on line, and personification, the majority of which are very well handled.

Themes relating to violence, death, religion, politics, and moralism can also be found in *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems*. Those which concern with nature are also noticeable, not only in this work but also in the rest. In *Pilgrim Foot*, a poem entitled “The Harvesters” is an example. In *Moments*, “Two Lone Accomplices” is another, whereas in *Visitant on Tiptoe* the poet dedicates the third section of the work to seven suchlike poems. Appropriately, he designates the section with one of the poem’s title, “Seasonal”. Seasonal is, in fact, the poem whose thematic concern will be examined shortly, for it is enormously charming and it is one of the pieces that do not stereotype Akwanya as a disaster-prone poet or some other label but instead reveals him to be among other things a fine nature poet. In the poem, the poet writes about the wet season condition of the year, keenly observing the weather changes that happen during this period in which the frequency of rainfall is high. As a result of the weather condition, both humans and other living things like the birds and the trees react. Indeed, the whole poem attests to this:

You have to raise your eyebrows
in surprise
that weeks after getting under the rain’s skin
the sun gets into yours
to let you see
there is a bite in his bright, shiny teeth.
The very leaves have an idea of it
and you will see them from time to time
fan themselves
quite gently, deliberately;
the birds then chirp away in the bright noon
whether in protest
or as ovation due the victor
in the seasonal duel.
Alone the weatherman is shy
and won’t say if it’s a definite change
since it may well rain this very evening. (1-17)

Interestingly, what can be deduced from the poem is that human beings are very much a part of nature as are other living creatures of the earth. But also, and tied to what is said in the preceding sentence, that nature must have its course.

The poetic diction in this third collection of poems is as well simple and meaning is only from time to time hidden. Many of the poems have high artistic beauty. But some have less, because at some point they engage in direct references to political, biblical, and literary resources. For example, a poem as “Easter II” discusses Chinua Achebe’s first novel a bit, and, refers to the Bible, thus: “Umuofia called his misadventure *female murder*” (16); “Oh, a good case for some smart lawyer to take/up/someday to clear his name/perhaps as part of *Things Fall Apart’s* centennial”(29-32); “‘We have a law’, they told him, /‘and according to that law...’(Jn 19.7)./So God himself cleared him (Ac 3.15)”(46-48). In the poem, “Amnesty”, Akwanya scripts that: “General Abacha/not to be faulted for advance warning/omitted/spoke those deadly words/to us/when Nigeria almost crossed the line/unknowingly/after Abiola” (25-32). Robert Graves, writing on Robert Frost and his poetry, decries a similar situation when he said: “I admit that even Frost lapses at times into literary references, philosophy, political argument and idle play with words; yet has any other man now alive written more poems that stand up to this packaging test?”(*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 122) Indeed, even today, there may be none, not just for the criteria Graves has pointed out but as regards what one is saying here. Visible, also, in Akwanya’s poetic diction is the acknowledgement of “God” throughout the three poetry collections. There is, in addition, the vocabulary “visitant” or a variation of it appearing in *Pilgrim Foot*, *Moments*, as well as *Visitant on Tiptoe*, where the word in question is a glaring part of the book’s title. To substantiate this claim, one can find evidence of the use of this lexical item or another form of it in the poems “Fleck of Colour” and “Civil War” in *Pilgrim Foot*; “Two Lone Accomplices” in *Moments*; and “Survived” in *Visitant on Tiptoe*. It would seem that this is deliberately orchestrated by the poet. And yet, it could be through and through coincidental. For writing is both a conscious and unconscious activity.

Repetition is also strewn everywhere in *Visitant on Tiptoe*. Consider, for illustration, five poems listed: “Alive or Dead”, “Democracy”, “The Feast”, “Numberless Centuries You Were a God”, and “In Addition”. In the first, the phrase “Alive or Dead” found in line 1 begins the poem and it reappears in line 13. In the second, the term “anticipate” is seen in lines 15 and 20. In the third, another phrase “reminds you” occurs in line 6 and it is again put to use in line 9. In the fourth, there is the occurrence of the vocabulary “interdictions” in line 6 and it is seen again in line 22. And, finally, the word “roof” is deployed in lines 17 and 18 of the fifth poem listed. Needless to say, through these repetitions (and more of the same) that are in the work, the poet achieves making a bit of music.

Visitant on Tiptoe is as well replete with a literary device called run-on lines. Known also as enjambment, a run-on line is a statement that starts from one line of a poem and continues to another without a major punctuation mark as a full-stop. Here, one example suffices as it will be distasteful to give two instances or more of its occurrences vertically:

Conversation with myself always
tappers off
at a point I know
it would become fruitful
and could lead to an understanding
if I knew then
what I know now. (1-7)

Taken from the poem "Conversation with Myself", these lines are a typical sample of run-on lines.

The last poetic technique of Akwanya that is examined here which is in his *Visitant on Tiptoe* is personification. This literary device is employed in several places in the work. For instance, in the poem that opens the collection, "Mother Teresa of Calcutta", fear is personified as having deadly teeth or claws and manning the door where the poet asks: "...were there fear's poison fangs/guarding the doorway/on evil days/to be dared only with eyes tightly shut?" (17-20) In the poem, "Best Things", the poet qualifies love as a living thing with "roots" when he questions: "why are love's roots always delicate?"(17). In yet another poem, "Adult Troubles", peace is personified as having arms in the following: "when endless peace/folds its enormous arms" (28 -29).

Conclusion

Without doubt, the poetry of Akwanya is largely admirable. "Largely", because while he has very successfully put to use poetic techniques some of which are theme, simile, repetition, rhetorical question, alliteration, run-on line, and personification, seen in his three dissected volumes of poetry, the poet's accomplishments in the use of language or poetic diction in some of the poems are not as high as the rest. Nevertheless, these collections of poetry, which are markedly reflective of one whose mind is constantly steeped in contemplation about the state of things in the world, are worthy of esteem.

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