

## A STYLISTIC STUDY OF THE MOTIVATED LOCAL METAPHORS IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S VILLAGE VOICES

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### Article Info

**Keywords:** Local metaphors, Stylistic device, African literary writers, Village voices.

### DOI

10.5281/zenodo.17035345

### Abstract

Since its formal inception at the historic 1962 conference at Makerere University in Kampala where the language of African literature was extensively discussed, the debate on which language is the most effective communicative medium for the African literary writer has generated different submissions from scholars. While a set of these scholars believe that the only choice for African writers is to dump foreign tongues for their respective indigenous ones, others seek to explain the reasons for African writers' sustained use of colonial language. However, through those arguments, a fact has been established: African writers have found a way of bending the foreign tongue to accommodate African values, customs, thoughts, and viewpoints in a way that they are no longer the ancestral languages of the coloniser. It is based on this background that the analyses in this paper are embarked on. Using Leech's (2014) approach to the analysis of metaphor, the paper seeks to analyse some locally motivated metaphors in Osundare's Village Voices and then establish that they are a stylistic device by which Osundare expands the frontiers of English to accommodate his African viewpoints.

### 1. Introduction

One of those legacies left behind by the colonial overlords on the independent continent of Africa, which has lasted until this moment, is their language, which was overly imposed for maximum colonial domination. Many African countries still use these foreign languages as their official language. For example, Nigeria still uses English as its official language, while Gabon and Senegal still use French as their official language. Many have argued that the sustained status of these languages is a pointer to a conscious complex of inferiority, the complex that African languages are inferior to those of the erstwhile colonial masters because they are deemed incapable of withstanding the complex facets of scientific, economic, and literary modernity.

Often easily indicted in the linguistic complex are the African writers who use foreign tongues as a mode of literary expression and, of course, have most of their works written in colonial languages. They often come under serious criticism who criticised their sustained use of English in Nigeria and French in Senegal. Nnolim (2016) laments the tragedy of their era. The tragedy is that most African writers not only imprison themselves with the use of the language of their masters but also physically imprison themselves in the land of those who enslaved them with the use of a paltry sum of money. Any writer who is talking to his people by using an interpreter cannot be considered a great African writer. Nonetheless, other critics recognise that the problem confronting the African

writer is not as simple as it may generally seem. The argument is that these writers are faced with daunting factors, such as readership and availability of standardised code, which compel writers like Achebe to ‘have no choice’ (see Ten, 2011). A representative of this former school, Jeyifo (2010), admits that quite a good number of our languages have not been given full ramification of the culture of the alphabet, maintaining the need to first recognise the disadvantages of our indigenous languages in relation to the world-dominant languages.

However, many scholars, both literary and linguistic, agree that although they are constrained in their expression of Africa, these African writers have tried several ways to extend the frontiers of colonial languages so that they are better suited to bear the heavy burden of African thoughts. In so doing, they have created a mark of identity for what is now popularly known as African literature. They do this by creating the types of English that are not basically referred to as the standard version but have been adopted to express the tradition and culture of the Africans (Adebayo, 2013). As such, critics (such as Osunkentan, 2009) have diagnosed their works to contain a heavy dose of local elements, which are inevitable because, for instance, in the process of speaking and writing, an average Nigerian will basically reproduce his culture with the use of language (Olaosun, 2003 cited in Osunkentan, 2009).

Niyi Osundare is a gifted writer who has successfully pulled the borders of English far beyond expectations for their literary businesses. His creativity in representing African settings and voices in his works is acclaimed. Osunkentan (2009) lends his voice to the creative ingenuity of Osundare when he comments that Osundare is interested in how language can be positively used to transform culture and people’s level of awareness, especially peasants and the ruling class. How will a new society, socio-political, and socio-cultural culture evolve through language? In short, Niyi Osundare is an international standard poet who expresses African culture by using a domesticated English language.

In *Village Voices*, one of the prominent devices through which Osundare brilliantly sets his African settings and voices for his thematic concerns is the use of local metaphors, which according to Adebayo (2013) are not only to lambast the government but also to castigate the individual.

## **2. Meaning and the Metaphor**

Meaning is what a speaker or writer intends to express and what a listener or reader infers from what is expressed. Senders of meanings have different media from which they can choose to accurately convey their intended meanings, and how a particular meaning is perceived or successfully constructed may be to a large extent dependent on which medium of meaning expression is favoured. Generally, people convey what they mean in the general sense that people perceive meaning and so there is no difficulty in grasping what is meant. However, because this mode of expression is often monotonous and creativity and excellence in the use of language can only be achieved by deviating from this general standard, brilliant users of language often resort to other modes of meaningful expression that deviate significantly from meanings as people know them and tend to foreground some aspects of the meaning that is expressed. One of the deviant media through which meaning is constructed is metaphor.

Metaphor is generally regarded as a figure of speech that indirectly compares two things that are hardly similar just to highlight some levels of similarity between them, which tends to project a point of view. This is because metaphor can be seen as an invitation to look at a common thing or person from an entirely new or fresh perspective in such a way that what is expressed might appear as though it has never been said before. One might agree with Alexander Pope here that wit (poetry), which depends and, of course, survives very much on metaphor, is “that which has been often thought but was never before so well expressed” (Samuel, 1916). Furthermore, so, where a poet’s metaphor ends, another begins.

Metaphor, however, is a more general term that absorbs other tropes that are generally regarded as separate figures in their own right. For example, personification, which is often said to be a figurative use of language that gives inanimate objects animate characteristics, is a kind of metaphor, i.e., an animistic metaphor (Leech, 2014). Taken as an invitation to experience old meanings from a fresh and enjoyable point of view, it is justifiable to view metaphor as a figure encompassing some other figures such as personification and synesthesia. Let us take this personification example: "...and the sun smiled." Here, the sun is indirectly compared with a human being represented by the human attribute "smiled." The writer of this expression has invited us to experience the sun from a new perspective: to determine that the sun is also capable of being friendly. In summary, although the expression is generally regarded as personification, it is better analysed as metaphor.

In his "poetics," Aristotle defined metaphor as the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy. In his contribution to the concept of metaphor, Gibbs (1994) proposes a terminology that is still current. He claims that metaphor has two terms, namely, topic and vehicle, and that the latter is used metaphorically. These two terms have a relationship called ground. Goatly (1993) describes metaphor as "the figure of transport", the identification of two things from different thought ranges. It is the ability to find resemblance in both the tenor (idea) and the vehicle (image). A critical look at these definitions reveals that they all have one thing in common: they talk of two terms that are related to each other because of their similarities.

Writers and poets employ metaphors for several reasons. It is used to express thoughts in a few words. It is also employed to express ideas that cannot be explained with literal language. Metaphors can also be used to make their ideas more vivid. Rulon (1977) contends that most metaphors are easy because their meanings can be easily deciphered without recourse to extra-linguistic situations. However, he admits that there are also hard instances of metaphors whose meanings cannot be known by making reference to extra-linguistic situations. Opeibi's position (2009) is similar, asserting that metaphor can best be interpreted and understood within a particular socio-cultural context. They are culture-specific, and their meanings can only be understood by those who share the common background knowledge of the speech community. This means that not all metaphors have universal meaning. Therefore, metaphors that do not have universal meaning are local metaphors.

The concept of local metaphor in this paper is taken to be those metaphors that are firmly rooted in the culture and environment of the Yoruba people to which Osundare has invited his international audience or readers to experience the common concepts of capitalism, laziness, passing of time, etc., in his collection of poems *Village Voices*. Metaphor is a way of painting the same old house in a charming and compelling new colour by which we enjoy ourselves, gain more wisdom, and witness meaning from a new perspective. As metaphor itself is a point of view, it is an effective tool in the creation of points of view.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Owing to the opportunities it affords one in systematising one's understanding of a metaphor, Geoffrey Leech's approach to the analysis of metaphor is borrowed in this paper. Leech (2014) outlines a few steps for metaphor analysis. However, there are some concepts that one must understand before taking a look at the steps.

First, it is useful to describe the term "tenor," which, according to Leech (2014), is under discussion. It can be taken as what the speaker or writer is actually talking about, that is, an idea or sense in its traditionally known form. Second, "vehicle" is the image or analogue in terms of which tenor is represented (Leech, 2014). It is a window to which a speaker or writer invites the listener or reader to experience a given tenor. In other words, tenor is a point of view to which a particular common idea is invited. Generally, tenor is taken in its literal sense, while vehicle is taken figuratively. Summarily, tenor is what is being compared, while vehicle is what tenor is

being compared with. Lastly, there is the concept of “the ground of comparison.” This is the similarity that is established between tenor and vehicle that gives them the ticket to enter into comparison in the first instance. For example, in the metaphoric expression, “Abake is a goat,” “Abake” is the tenor, and “a goat” is the vehicle, whereas stubbornness, which is the established mark of similarity between the two, is the ground of comparison. In Leech’s approach to the analysis of metaphor, the first stage separates the literal from the figurative. This can be done by distinguishing between the literal part of a metaphoric expression and the figurative part of it. In the example above, for instance, the literal part is ‘Abake is,’ while the figurative—one that has been used beyond its ordinary sense—is “a goat.” The second stage reconstructs tenor and vehicle by supplying some lexical items with which they are ordinarily used so that both are experienced in their respective literal senses. Using our example, the second stage would look like

(L)iteral: Abake is [a student]

(F)igurative: [I saw] a goat

The two are literal because they both express ordinary senses. They have now been used with words that they ordinarily co-occur with, and so are not difficult to understand as their meanings are directly expressed.

The third stage is to state the ground of comparison, and this is where the analyst can answer the following questions: why has a particular tenor been compared with a vehicle, what levels of meaning is the writer or speaker inviting us to gain from the metaphor, and how effective has the comparison been to the totality of what is said. Here, the analyst brings life to the metaphor as he, having linguistically described the metaphor, appreciates and passes value judgment about the metaphor. This is important because any linguistic study of a literary work that does not relate the linguistic cues to the message is not a linguistic stylistic exercise but a mere exercise in linguistic description (Adegoke 2012: 121), which, in our opinion, might be guilty of killing the beauty, the very essence of literature. Different analyses may pass disparate judgments on how effective a metaphor is in projecting its layers of meaning, but the point is that the relationship between tenor and vehicle must be verifiable.

#### **4. Analyses of the Local Metaphors in the Collection**

The poems in the collection are grouped into three major divisions, with one from the first group of poems and the other from the last group, which respectively serve as an introduction and conclusion. The analyst takes only three poems from the collection, which appropriately represent its major divisions and the three major themes that are broadly expressed in each division: satire on social vices, change and nature, and satire on capitalism and selfishness.

##### **4.1 Analysis of Sleeping at Five and Twenty Years (Page 11)**

This poem represents the poet’s concern about some social ills that need correction in this division of the collection tagged **“voices in dialogue and banter.”** In this poem, the poet sets out to correct the social problem of laziness by carefully rendering different local images in metaphor. “The poem contains some jibe to reflect the social implications of laziness among the Yoruba people.” In Yoruba society, laziness has no excuse, and whoever is lazy is an automatic candidate for insults and abuse. People go to every length, from behavioural pattern to physiological attributes, to vituperatively hack a lazy person down and the sociological purpose of this is to discourage a person from being lazy. The poet’s goal in this poem is not too different.

The trace of this harsh lashing of words is foregrounded in the poem’s very first two lines, where the poet opens:

If you have decided not to move  
Take your wooden body out of the way.

(Lines 1 and 2)

These two lines are full of derision and are thus sarcastic. The imperative sentence, “Take your wooden out of the way,” which is a metaphor through which the reader is expected to see the physical property of a lazy fellow, catches our attention. To understand this metaphor, let us consider which part of this imperative is literal and which is figurative (i.e., used to signify what it is not normally used to signify):

L(literal): Take your \_\_\_\_\_ body out of the way.



F (figurative):” “ ” “ “wooden ” ” ” ” ”

In the structure above, it can be seen that the poet is comparing the adjective “wooden.” The poet deviates from the norm by using this adjective where collocation is less possible. Consider what would happen if the structure had been constructed to suit our common perception:

T (tenor): Take your [fat, thin, etc.] body out of the way.

V (vehicle): Take your wooden chair, stool, etc. out of the way.

From the above, it is immediately clear that the poet is comparing a human being to a senseless object. A similarity must exist between what is being compared and what it is being compared with, which we have described in the theoretical framework as the ground of comparison. The word “wooden” is an attributive adjective that describes the material from which a particular object is made. Therefore, describing a human body, made up of blood, bone, and tissue, as wooden is awkward. However, the poet used this to pass on some salient pieces of information. A wooden object, such as a chair, lacks the purpose or the inclination to “move,” to aspire, to desire, or to struggle for greater things, so it remains where it is. According to the poet’s presupposed meaning, this is true of the object of this poem, who, like the chair, lacks the will to aspire, desire, and struggle to make it in life. Therefore, these attributes are what the poet finds similar between a lazy human being and a wooden object, which warrants this comparison. Nevertheless, comparing a human being with an object that lacks reason and emotion among the Yoruba people is a serious contempt. In fact, a person might cry ceaselessly or even go to hang himself/herself because of such flammable insults or vituperation. Therefore, when the Yoruba idiomatically say *fi oro ka paanu ori eniyan* which literally means to use words to remove the roof of a person’s skull, the object of the verbal abuse has no choice but to cry or commit suicide. What makes this metaphor particularly interesting is how it draws from Yoruba oral culture. This verbal abuse is made more prominent because it is rendered in the imperative. When an abuse is rendered in the imperative, it is further heightened because it implies asking somebody to do something (which ordinarily appeals to their negative face) while you have already invoked their negative face by abusing them. Thus, in this metaphor, the poet launches a verbal attack on the lazy individual in society, which continues until the end of the poem. Three lines later, another metaphor that also borrows so much from the Yoruba worldview is dropped:

Still sleeping and snoring

## Snoring and sleeping

While the sun burns your youth away (line5-7)

In these lines, the two infinitive clauses “still sleeping and snoring” and “snoring and sleeping,” which are part of the metaphorical expression, give the reader the sense of an action repeated over and over again. The fact that the two continuous verbs “sleeping” and “snoring” are repeated in a mutually reverse order points to a monotonous gain-less cycle of inactivity in which the lazy person engages himself. The adverbial clause of time where the metaphor is prominently manifested is “While the sun burns your youth away.” Running this through our analytical framework, we obtain the following:



L: while the sun burns your ——— away

F: “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ youth “ “ “ “ “

The nominal item “youth” has been used figuratively in that the process denoted by the verb “burns” does not, ordinarily speaking, with abstract ideas such as “youth.” Hence, the two different senses, that is, the literal and the figurative, used with some collocative choices would look like the following:

T: While the Sun burns your [ice] away

V” [while you waste your] youth [slowly]

The poet describes the tenor, steadily wasting one’s life, in terms of the vehicle, the sun burning a physical object such as ice, to appeal to the sense of sight of the loafer. Humans are usually moved by what they see rather than what they think or imagine, which explains why the poet invokes this imagery to emphasise the implication of being lazy and wasting one’s life. This is yet another verbal attack on the lazy individual, perhaps he may change his ways. Again, the poet draws from the sociolinguistic base of his Yoruba culture, where comparing a person to a physical process of destruction, such as the one in question, may a calculated attempt to unreservedly wound a person’s feelings.

A yet prominent metaphor in the poem is the line “heavy gourmet’s swing between your legs,” which is the first line of the penultimate stanza, where the tenor is implicitly stated to be the scrotum. The poet compares the loafer’s scrotum to gourmets, which, unlike the scrotum, lack the ability to reproduce humans. The implication of this is to point the loafer’s attention to the fact that women are avoiding and making jest of him, as can be seen in the line that immediately follows, “maidens tease your limp stump.” Having women around to comfort one is part of Yoruba people’s earthly enjoyment. However, they believe that having women, maidens for that matter, to comfort one depends on one’s ability to work hard and earn a good living, as most women only go after men who work hard and make it in life. No wonder then that Yoruba people often say *Owo ni obinrin mo*, which literally translates to “women only understand money.” What the poet apparently hopes to achieve with this motivated metaphor cannot be divorced from our earlier observations: to verbally abuse the lazy individual in society, perhaps the jibe may pain him to a point of repentance.

In summary, the poet, using these locally motivated metaphors, directs the sting of his poetic word-lashing at the lazy individuals in society. Through these metaphors, the poet presents the social problem of laziness from the Yoruba viewpoint. It is the verbal practice of the Yoruba people to spell out a person’s physical appearance, highlight the person’s physical deformities, and compare them to inanimate objects to psychologically force the person to repent from what they do that is not socially acceptable. In other words, the metaphors examined here and others in the poem faithfully convey information from the Yoruba worldview.

#### 4.2 Analysis of a Passing Year (Page 33)

Every society has its own environmental peculiarities and distinctive perceptions of them. In this poem, the poet records the passing of time and admonishes his fellow men and women to plan for a coming year, using different locally motivated environmental metaphors to effectively convey his poetic musing.

This poem is a good representative of the second division in the collection, which is tagged *as voices about coming and going*, where the poet examines different environmental outlooks of Yoruba society and also has to do with time.

The poet invokes several visual images to convey how time has passed. He must be particularly aware that the best way to tell the people that a year is almost gone and that they must make a new determination is to appeal to

their sense of sight. This might be an appropriate way to explain why the poet chooses to open the poem with the following lines:

The sun has disappeared  
Behind the tree of another year  
The moon's yellow disc  
Has danced to the brink of a new dawn  
(Line 1-4))

In these lines, the reader is invited to observe the passage of time or the end of a year from the prospective of environmental elements. One of those metaphors that catches our attention in the above lines is the following structure, which has been separated into its lateral and figurative elements:

L: the moon's yellow disc      \_\_\_\_\_ to the  
F1: “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ has danced      \_\_\_\_\_  
“ brink of      \_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

From the above, we can now form the tenor, what is described, and the vehicle, in terms of which tenor is described. Thus, we have the following:

TEN: The moon's yellow disc [has moved] to the east

VEH: [The man's daughter] has danced to the brink of [a flowing river]

VEH2: [The people of the community have seen the beginning of] a new dawn.

However, the above metaphor is complex compared with the ones we have previously examined. In this extract, the tenor is described in terms of two unrelated vehicles. Filling up the semantic in the tenor and the two vehicles with possible choices in their respective paradigmatic slots has revealed that the two vehicles are complexly brought together to induce a sight that best describes the passing of time. The verb “dance” is notable in the first vehicle. This verb denotes what the people are familiar with. Yoruba people hold festivals where people move in steps to some harmonious rhythm—dance. The poet appeals to this memory and tries to invite the reader to understand the passing of time in terms of the steps made to flow rhythm. To further heighten this imagery, the poet constructs a second vehicle to the brink of a new dawn. The poet also appeals to the reader’s memory of the edge of a riverbank where one knows one is close to plunging into a new sensation. Considering that the abstract word “dawn” is described in terms of (or compared with) the concrete word “brink,” we note that the poet is painting the imaginative in physical proportions to help the reader understand the slow but steady passage of time. The poet, having tried to paint this dispersal of time in concrete images, turns to admonition by using other different locally charged metaphors. This is rendered in the following lines:

## Planting new vows

In the compost of the old breaches  
So that the coming year does not die

## Hunger of the former days

Paying attention to the local metaphors in the extract, we realise the following:

VEH: Let us plant new [seed] in the old farmland compost.

TEN: Let us [make] new vows [from the lesson] of past breaches

TEN: so the coming year does not [end in the manner of the previous year]

VEH; so the [brilliant boy does] not die of the hunger of the former days.

From the above, it is clear that the poet compares the nominal item “vows,” an abstract entity, with the implicitly stated item “seed”—the verb that is normally used with the word “seed” is used with the word “vow.” The poet here is trying to invoke the sense of sight of the people again, to make them see that just like in farming where you plant seeds that would later yield good results, setting a new goal can also bring equal reward. One quickly recognises again here the poet’s attempt to describe the abstract in terms of the concrete. Why does the poet admonish the people to make new targets from the lesson of past failures? It is necessary that the coming year does not end [or die] the way former years have ended. The poet’s choice of the adverbial clause of purpose so that the coming year does not die of the hunger of the former days is especially classical. The poet compares the passing of the year to the death of a human being. What he is doing here is to induce in the reader the same that one has when a person passes on.

In sum, the poet invites the reader to his perception of the passing of a year and what one should do in a new year by providing a lens for them through his locally packed metaphors. Doing this, he can create a perfect imagery and induce some feelings necessary to influence a person's behaviour. The most important point to note here is that the metaphors not only achieve the aforementioned goals for the poet but also create a distinctive point of view for the poem.

#### 4.3 Analysis of The Land of Unease (page 45)

**The last part of the collection, Voices of Indictment and Anger, is where** the poet directs his questioning muse on the capitalistic tendencies of the rulers. Therefore, it is a common property for each poem in this part to contain satire on capitalism and selfishness. In this poem, as in several other poems in this collection, the poet questions the excessive wealth of a few group of people at the expense of a teeming poor majority. The opening of the poem is compelling as the poet makes the following assertion, which is charged with every tone of seriousness as the declarative mood used is a regular bearer of strong emotions:

The land never knows peace.

Where a few have too much

And many none at all (line 1-3)

Our poet writes from a background wrought with corruption, where what is meant for the majority is callously diverted into individual pockets. In such a society, some progressive-minded individuals, such as the poet, would challenge the situation. The poet poses many questions, but the response leaves much to be desired, as shown in the following declarative sentence:

When we ask why

They say that their fingers are not equal (line 24-25).

The people for whom life is unjustly a bed of roses are often quick to point out that it is the destiny of some to be rich, while many others remain in poverty. To counter this misbegotten rationalisation, the poet agitatedly drops the following—and this is where we direct our analytical

Focus:

Why have a few chosen to be thumbs

And many others Omodindinrin

Clinging precariously

To the palm periphery?

(Line 26-30)



The lines above are interrogative sentences that portray the agitation of the poet concerning capitalism and selfishness. The interrogative is a good signifier of the mood of the poet. However, the subtle locally motivated metaphor in it is more inviting, which is presented in the following structure:

TEN: Why have a few chosen to be rich and the many

Others [are poor]

The vehicle in this metaphor is inseparably integrated with the tenor, but it is clear from the tenor that the poet compares the few rich people in society to the thumb, which enjoys positional and dimensional advantages over the omodindirin (the little finger), which serves as the vehicle for viewing the teeming marginalised majority in society. Once again, the poet draws from his Yoruba linguistic background to present a claim and then agitatedly counters such a claim. In Yoruba, there is a proverb, *ika ko dogba*, which literally means that fingers are not equal. The poet draws from this proverb to question the few individuals in society who choose to be rich at the expense of the masses. This metaphor is effective because it invites the reader to re-examine capitalism and selfishness through the dimensional and positional differences that exist between the thumb and the little finger.

Briefly speaking, the metaphors that are deployed in this short poem are significant for their complex simplicity, locality, and the African point of view they help to achieve for the poem.

## 5. Conclusion

Through an analytical journey around the three poems selected for this study, we have established that Niyi Osundare's *Village Voices* abounds with locally motivated metaphors. We have established that these metaphors help Osundare in the creation of his effective imagery and the projection of a distinctive point of view for the collection as a whole. From the study, it is to the credit of Osundare that he is presented as an African poet with a special creative ability as evident in the manner in which he has deployed his knowledge of English grammar, bent some rules of English such as collocational restriction to accommodate his thoughts, thereby extending the frontiers of English and validating the claim by many scholars that African writers have taken control of English for their literary expression. Rather than allow the prescriptions of English to rule them, they take full charge of the language, putting 'on the toga of a linguistic outlaw' (Adegoju, 2010:53-66), so that they are the comptrollers, ordering the English language around, rather than being in the prison house of English.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the blind reviews of this paper for their invaluable suggestions.

## Funding

The author (s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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