



Re-reading Feminist Stylistics Commitment in Literary Education: A Critical Study on Okoye's Behind the Clouds

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically re-reads feminist stylistics commitment in Ifeoma Okoye's Behind the Clouds as a re-appraisal of the feminist discourse. It tries to permeate through the aesthetics deployed diction and style in her work to establish a pulsating and rational feminist communication which orates complementarity of the sexes. The thrust of this work asserts that a number of works have been done by scholars on the study and interpretation of Ifeoma Okoye's prose fiction, especially through literary and critical analysis. However, it appears that there is an absence of fictional texts studies on re-reading the feminist stylistics commitment in her work. The problem which this research recognizes, therefore, is that Okoye's fiction, especially the title under the present study, has not been studied and interpreted using the feminist stylistics commitment principles. To this end, therefore, it could be said that radical feminism had yielded little dividends in Africa and this was not distinct with the fact that female radicalism, either in words or in deed did not conform to the African cultural values and realities. This work seeks to address the issue of feminist stylistics, through a critical re-reading of the diction and style Okoye adopts as the major weapons in the disseminating the feminist missive. The author's text title suggests a liberal and pulsating strand of feminism through a stylistic and textual analysis of her work, especially with emphasis on linguistic techniques and theories such as alliteration, humour, diction, authorial voice, violation of character code, etc. These literary aesthetics and theories served as our framework. This work buttresses that Ifeoma Okoye's stylistic approach upheld a brand of feminism which is sensitive to African cultural values and tradition. It justifiably posits that this brand of feminism is feasible in the African context and capable of promptly preceding the ideologies of feminism.

Keywords: *Ifeoma Okoye's Feminist Stylistics; Literary Aesthetics; Selected Literary Techniques*

1. Introduction

Feminist literature has offered the African feminist writers an arena to speak the forbidden in a style of their own. Afonja (2005) perceives African feminist literature as a “radical means of the transformation of the underdevelopment and poverty of women in the region” (Afonja, 2005). Thus, the discourse challenges the dehumanizing socio-cultural practices which have underdeveloped the women in the traditional African Society.

Feminist stylistics challenges the notion that women are only comfortable with their roles as wives and mothers as they are portrayed in literature before the advent of feminism. It is a sensibility that is deep-rooted in a popular consciousness and mass awareness of the nature of human and social existence. Bradford (1997) says “feminist writers are particular about illuminating the unpleasant socio-cultural hierarchies in the society and therefore concern themselves with a peculiar style as an element of the more important agenda of cultural and ideological change and mutation”. Thus, the focus of this or is on this peculiar style feminist stylistics.

Feminist stylistics provides an avenue for exploring and exposing the realities of social injustice against women in patriarchal societies and in the works of art. As a result of this, the literary scene, has in recent times witnessed an incredible influx of female writers globally. This trend can only be explained as a reaction from a new generation of feminist writers who are protesting the plight of the woman in a patriarchal society. The effort of these writers to salvage, re-create and even re-brand the image of the woman has culminated in a female literary tradition known as feminist stylistics. This distinct literary tradition cuts across all genres and has diverse styles of presentations; though with the common goal of sensitizing the women folk against their subjugation. Suffice it then to say that the emergence of African female writers was informed by a deep-seated desire to challenge patriarchy and the stereotype image of the African women in Literature where the female characters have been misrepresented as second-class citizens. The work seeks to study the stylistic mechanism underlying this formidable literary tradition.

Feminist writers adopt a thorough and defiant stylistic approach, characterized by a confrontational language use to decry issues such as marginalization, subjugation, relegation and violence against women. In order to achieve this, they favour conscious writing technique as a means of purpose delivery in their works. Perhaps, the basic ideology underlying feminism from inception may have informed its radical language and style. Therefore, language use in the texts under study in this thesis is of interest for its deviation from this radical trend. Nevertheless, all feminist writers write for obvious reasons. According to Enkvist, et. al. (1964) the forms of language in use are a part of, as well as a consequence of a social process, and the linguistic forms of speech and writing express the social circumstances in which language occurs (Bock, and James, 1992. This explains the fact that feminists are not only women but also men who write against the social ills in the society especially as they concern the marginalization of women for example, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Samuel Asare Konadu, Mongo Beti, Ola Rotimi among others. Tania Modleski (1991) in her book ‘Feminism without Women’ explained that the title can mean the triumph either of a male or female feminist perspective that excludes women. Feminist literature is thus loaded with stylistic mechanisms aimed at addressing the plight of women. The curiosity to establish this purposeful style in Okoye’s prose fiction informs this study.

Feminist stylistics has become a component of contemporary Literary studies, drawing its techniques and expectations from intellectual fields beyond the traditionally enclosed realms of rhetorics and aesthetics (literary and style). Consequently, the feminist writer has chosen to add various affective rudiments that partly reflect her ego and the social forces she is subject to. The task of stylistics is to examine those elements and study the means by which language expresses them and their mutual relation, as well as analyzing the total system of expression of which they are a part. This is central to this study as it analyses language in literature with particular emphasis on style as used by Ifeoma Okoye in her prose fiction.

According to Mills (1995) feminism implies ‘commitment to changing the social structure in the society to make it less oppressive to women and for that matter to men (Adebayo, 1997). She holds the view that feminism connotes a change of the social order. Feminist consciousness had led to the controversial question about sex and gender whether gender is an issue of nature or nurture, nature or culture, inherited or learnt. Uchem, (2001) asserts that:

“...Sex is a biological constant, in the sense that each one of us is born as either female or male; gender has to do with the roles expected of men and women in a particular society. Evidently, gender roles are learnt and vary from one culture to another and differ in matrilineal and patrilineal societies.”

Although male chauvinism and its roles are subject to change, and because they are not permanently in-built in either male or female, feminists therefore, maintain that socially constructed gender roles and stereotypes limit women's opportunities and potentials.

Feminist Stylistics as a Protest

Feminist writers have deployed a peculiar revolutionary style as a weapon onto unearthing and protesting violence, marginalization and subjugation against the women. Sara Ahmed in Eagleton (2003), feminist theory is a relationship between feminism and pain in the sense that women's experiences of violence, injury and discrimination have been crucial to feminist literature. Women's testimonies about pain for example about their experiences of violence or abuse have been crucial not only to the formation of feminist subjects (a way of reading pain as a structural rather than incidental violence) but also to feminist collectives which have mobilized around the political and ethical demand for redress, not with a physical combat but with a literary stylistics (Oguta, 2005). Bursto (1992) maintains that the context in which her book is written is the fundamental unhappiness and alienation of women and continual suffering born out of patriarchy and other systematic oppression.

Feminist therapy embedded in their styles, allows women to make connections between their lived experiences of pain and frustration and such feelings as implicated in social and power relations. Hence women's experiences of pain seem crucial to the mobilization of feminism as a response to the injustice of violence that is structural as well as lived and bodily. Tauris (1982) asserts that consciousness-raising groups were very important because 'to question legitimate institutions and authorities, most people need to know that they are not alone, crazy or misguided. From the ancient English poetry of E.E. Cummings and T.S. Eliot, we can note that their style of poetry was a pointer to their identities as English poets, who lived at the time. For instance, one of the poems of Cummings – Ageless Warlords (1908) had its major theme as the English war at the time and so it had a stylistic representation of a GUN: (Such that the writing was graphically modeled on the shape of a GUN). Style betrays the content and the author's attitude to it, for instance, the subject of protest feminism.

For protest literature to be explicitly expressed, style has to be appropriately deployed for the achievement of the desired goal. Feminism can be described as protest literature which fights for the rights of women and so, its style could be called revolutionary style. Their stylistic weapons of protest are embedded in their use of diction imageries/symbols, figurative expressions, rhetorical and literary devices amongst other feminist stylistics features.

A Re-reading on Okoye's Authorial Voice: An Aesthetic to Feminist Stylistics

Authorial voice is the voice or opinion of the author. Conscious writers make deliberate and conscious effort in their management of diction so as to allow authorial voice to reveal their intention, opinion and verdict over issues. Azuike (2006) agrees that conscious writers make deliberate, distinctive choices of the linguistic features that appear in their discourse. He further explains that:

"... To achieve effective style in communication, the writer has to consciously select features which will not only suit the context of the communication but also accord with the tenor of the occasion"

Many of the utterances which Okoye assigned to the authorial voice in all her works are so consciously ordered to reflect Okoye's feminist concerns. They are meant to portray the image of the woman positively, thus revealing her good attributes. The utterances also reveal Okoye's non-radical attitude towards the feminist crusade. From the onset, an authorial voice discloses that:

"... He (Dozie) as having some difficulty paying his school fees and could not combine his studies with going to work. I had to keep two jobs in order to help him pay his university fees (Achebe, 1969)"

Ije was confiding in Dr. Melie how she supported her husband Dozie, financially during his university days in England. It is not common in the traditional African context for a woman to support the man financially. In many of male-authored works except for male feminists, women are often portrayed as unproductive, economic dependents and in extreme cases parasites. Ije's utterance has been deliberately worded to buttress the fact that women do support their husbands economically, contrary to the popular view against women on the matter as created in some literary

works before the advent of feminism. The sentence “He was having some difficulty paying his school fees...” contains the deliberate inclusion of the phrase “having some difficulty” which paints the picture of hardship allows the reader to appreciate Ije’s benevolence to Dozie. Dozie needed a help-mate in a time of difficulty and he found one in Ije. Okoye also employed the feminist stylistics technique and its effect in the utterance for aesthetic representation and effect.

Significantly, we note other utterances of the authorial voice in the text that portray women as supportive to the men

... At a time jobs were not coming he (Dozie) had exhausted his savings running about to secure contracts and in bribing his way, Ije had kept her job and of her own free will had given him (Dozie) all her salary. Life was hard, but she never complained. (Achebe, 1969).

This utterance portrays Ije as a supportive and submissive wife in spite of her high educational qualifications. This is contrary to the thinking of Ije’s mother -in- law whose language reveals the traditional prejudice against the educated woman, when she advises her son Dozie, not to consider an educated woman for a wife. She cautions:

...highly educated girls were in most cases wayward and often childless, they were also headstrong and disrespectful” (Achebe, 1969)

But the authorial voice creates a positive image of the African woman with utterances that reveal her hard work and submissiveness. Okoye deliberately introduces this voice to counter the utterance of Ije’s mother-in-law. Other such instances are located on pg. (4) “...she (Ije) took her husband’s brief case into the bedroom and then went into the kitchen”. Also in

... Ije followed her husband into the bathroom and while he undressed, she ran his bath- after for him... then Dozie entered the bathroom, Ije went to the kitchen to see to his food. In another instance the authorial voice paints Ije a supportive and understanding wife “...they got into Ije’s car and Ije to the heel as she often did then he was tired.” (Achebe, 1969)

In that utterance, “took the wheel” is an idiomatic expression which gives the utterance the desired effect that makes the act of driving look like, that “a man can do, a woman can also do”. This is the new image of the African woman that Okoye has constructed. Also, the compound word ‘way-ward’ (Achebe, 1969) is vulgar and derogatory to express the extent of the dirty impression Mama has for educated women. There is a stylistic touch by the author in the use of contrast for the reconstruction of a negative belief against women. Unlike Nwapa, Buchi and Alkali, Okoye’s heroine Ije, is not rebellious. Her disposition in the novel, counteracts rebellion. A rebellious woman does not achieve much in the African cultural reality. Ije uses dialogue most of the time to deal with issues. Okoye’s authorial voice also captures this important approach in human relationships, especially in marriage.

...Dozie came home from Port Harcourt late in the evening. Ije was happy to have him home again. She hugged him affectionately ‘welcome D. But D, why didn’t you telephone me to come and fetch you back from the airport instead of taking a taxi? (Achebe, 1969)

With the above reception, Dozie didn’t have a choice than to apologise to Ije quickly for not telling her before embarking on the Port Harcourt trip. “... I’m very sorry I had to leave without prior notice.” (Achebe, 1969) Dozie had made the trip without telling Ije. An offence capable of provoking nagging and a face-off between husband and wife. But on the contrary, Ije used kind words and wisdom to get the man to open up and apologise to her. We notice that ‘D’ is a short form of the word ‘Darling’ (Achebe, 1969). Ije uses this pet name for a delivery of the emotional effect of love, to which Dozie reacted positively.

A Re-reading On Okoye’s Diction: An Aesthetic to Feminist Stylistics

A writer’s purpose and intents are often established and concretized through utterances of the characters, the authorial voice, and or the omniscient narrator among other devices. In *Behind the Clouds*, Okoye makes a deliberate and conscious effort to structure appropriate words and utterances which are delivered through her

heroine Ije, and other characters such as Dozie, Virginia, Beatrice, Ije's mother-in-law amongst other characters. Azuike (2004) states that:

"It is from what a character says and not what he does that the reader is able to fathom the inner recesses of his mind, his outlook and general perception of events in life."

In view of this, we may begin to appreciate that diction is not just the putting together of words by means of observing syntactical rules in language, rather it is a well calculated and articulated act of selecting appropriate utterances with the intention of creating special effects as well as revealing one's concerns over an issue. In *Behind the Clouds*, Okoye's stand on feminism is made clear by the roles and conduct of her heroine Ije. Okoye's purpose is to uphold a complementarity position on the issue of feminism. Accordingly, some utterances and choice of words (Diction) have been located in the text as appropriate for actualizing this purpose.

A Re-reading of Violation of Character-Code Concordance in *Behind the Clouds*

A re-reading on feminist stylistics commitment on *Behind the Clouds* cannot be completed without pointing out the 'Violation of Character-Code Concordance' in the Text. We notice a violation of character-code concordance in *Behind the Clouds* in some instances. Azuike (2004) states that, "a novelist in his attempt to create credible and easily identifiable characters consciously and perhaps unconsciously introduces character types whom the readers are familiar with. He maintains that a violation of this expectation can be seen as a deviation from a stylistic norm which is capable of destroying the aura of make-believe for the readers.

The researchers' observation in *Behind the Clouds* is that all the characters, except Mama in some cases and James, speak good English. It leaves one to wonder whether Okoye was mindful of her management of diction while assigning utterances to characters such as Teresa, who is a house-girl, and even Adaku and Gabriel who came from the village, the tall and short women who reform the gossip role, Dozie's uncle amongst some others, as they all speak impeccable English which is not consistent with the roles assigned to them. Azuike further stressed that:

"...The codes available to the Nigerian novelist are Standard English and its translated or transliterated variety. Pidgin English and indeed indigenous languages. With this repertoire of codes, the novelist then constructs characters that he equips with the facility of one or two of the codes which accord with the roles such characters are playing in their different contexts"

Okoye has by this oversight exhibited therefore, a significant and conspicuous departure from the stylistic norm of diction and character harmony or concord in this work. This is obvious, as we can see from the following examples from the text.

We start with Virginia, who is portrayed as a club girl in Owerri. The reader expects this character to be a school drop-out, or one with limited educational background or none at all. Virginia should have been equated with the likes of Rosa and Jagua who are prostitutes in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, as they operate in similar environment. But in *Jagua Nana*, the codes with which Rosa and Jagua relate to people is pidgin. One would have thought that for a proper assignment of code, Virginia should not have been seen to be speaking impeccable English by the role assigned to her. The following utterances of hers are noticeably in conflict with concord of code and character. On page 85, we note that Virginia snared at Dozie by saying "Aren't you ashamed to tell the mother of your baby to live outside your home while a woman ho's useless to you occupies it".

In another instance, Virginia shouted at Ije in correct and grammatically, correct sentences. Virginia addressed Ije: "...who are you to direct me in this house? (page 95).

On page (91) Teresa replying Mama's question says: "Sorry Mama, I didn't hear you, my mind was far away" and on page (108), Teresa to her Madam, Ije, "Madam, she will kill me if I stay in this house without you. If you don't want me to go with you, I'll go home to my..."

Other instances are located at pages 13, 44, 56. It is rather surprising that Teresa is operating with this type of code when we have not been told anywhere in the text about her educational back ground and exposure. Teresa's code of cooperation is seen as inappropriately assigned. This same situation applies to Gabriel and do – Dozie's uncles. Gabriel is a village boy who lives with Dozie's mother in the village, but we notice that when Mama sent him on an

errand to her son, Dozie, he spoke in a code that does not match what and how a village boy is meant to talk. We can see this on page 30 when Gabriel re lied to Dozie's enquiry about his visit:

"Yes, sir, she sent me to you. She said you and Madam should come home with me", (page 39).

If we believe the concept of style as the individual, then Gabriel has been clothed in a borrowed robe in this context. Do we accept that Gabriel is educated and yet he is serving Mama in the village? Something is not well placed here and that is definitely the code. This same improper assignment of code affects Udo. Udo is supposed to be Dozie's Uncle who had attended the launching where his nephew Dozie, was made Chief-Launcher. This Uncle, like Mama his sister, is known to be uneducated. But ironically on page 69 the utterance of this Uncle is discord and with his person. He says to Dozie his nephew, 'I want a ride in that beautiful car of yours'. The word 'ride' is not Udo's age dialect; so, it is out of place in his utterance. 'Ride' is an adolescent age dialect. Okoye failed in matching these identified characters with the appropriate code. The proper thing would have been to assign them pidgin and some ungrammatical utterances for the realization of character-code concordance.

Conclusion

The scholarly work has been able to integrate and re-read critically some ideas that suggest feminist stylistics commitment which is the focus of our study. We have been able to identify the inter-play and inter-dependence between the concepts. Feminist stylistics can be said to have carved out for itself a peculiar style suitable for protest and revolution. It is characterized by a peculiar language aimed at exposing issues such as marginalization, subordination, subjugation and gender bias. Feminist writers are conscious of their use of language as a means of purpose delivery. Our analysis of Okoye's texts confirms a conscious attempt in her use of language to deliver a feminist message of complementarity between the two genders.

Okoye's literary feminist ingenuity has enabled her to appropriate language and stylistic techniques to create stories and messages that synchronize with her peculiar feminist persuasion. Feminist stylistics as an avant-garde discourse has helped in reconstructing the image of the women in the literary world. It has also drawn the society's attention to social injustice against women. The critical re-reading of Okoye's prose fiction has no doubt revealed an alternative and interesting perspective on the issue of feminism which can be branded as "complementarity feminism". Here is without doubt, a first class and an interesting work on feminist stylistics commitment.

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