

A Stylistic Study of Soyinka's Autobiographical Imagination in *Ake* and *The Man Died*

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Received: March 4, 2015

Accepted: September 7, 2015

Online Published: September 10, 2015

doi:10.5430/elr.v4n3p72

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/elr.v4n3p72>

Abstract

This paper is a stylistic study of the autobiographical imagination in Wole Soyinka's *Ake, the Years of Childhood* (*Ake*) and *The Man Died (TMD)* especially in the way in which these works provide the linguistic and literary sources for a good deal of the author's fictional writing as well as social activism. The study proceeds from the theoretical postulations of Olney, Abrams and Harpham, and Maduakor on the literary artistry in the autobiographical imagination and style, as well as Halliday's theories of context of situation and scale and category for the analysis of lexical and grammatical items. It undertakes a stylistic appraisal of the major aesthetic qualities of the two texts at the levels of lexis and grammar, and demonstrates the linguistic, literary and socially redemptive parallels between these autobiographies and his fictional works. The paper concludes that the sheer melodrama inherent in Soyinka's autobiographical prose underscores the contention that real life drama is the primary source for a writer's literary style, and that life itself is stranger than fiction.

Keywords: Autobiographical, Stylistics, Aesthetic, Artistry, Lexis, Grammar

1. Introduction

1.1 Stylistics and Autobiography

Over the years, contemporary stylistics has continued to consolidate the process of reinventing itself especially in the wake of the 'bruising' criticism it received in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. From the Fowler-Bateson controversy during the 1960s about the usefulness of stylistics as an academic activity (Fowler, 1971; Simpson, 2007) to Stanley Fish's complaints about the 'timeless formalism' and 'covert impressionism of anchorless statistics and self-referring categories' of stylistics (Fish, 1981, p.53), the discipline, in recent years, has vigorously and successfully shed the toga of stylometry as well as the disproportionate 'focus on the text' to the exclusion of contextual determinants. The result is that today, through its continuing versatile partnership with disciplines/genres like (auto)biography, discourse analysis, education, gender studies, history, pragmatics, psychology and sociology, stylistics has resulted in affective stylistics, cognitive stylistics, discourse stylistics, feminist stylistics, pedagogical stylistics and pragmatic stylistics. All these versions of stylistics incorporate, within their proportionate focus on the observable regularities of the text, the temporal context of a mind and its experiences such as can be found in the artistic works of the non fictional (or partly fictional) sub genre like (auto)biographies.

The (auto)biography, according to Abrams and Harpham (2012), is a relatively full account of a particular person's life by him/herself or someone else involving the attempt to set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject's activities and experiences. It is, in Dryden's words, 'the history of particular men's lives' (Abrams and Harpham, 2012, p.27). The autobiography dates back to the Graeco-Roman times when the Greeks and the Romans produced short, formal lives of individuals. The medieval period witnessed general stories of the deeds of monarchs or religious figures, but the eighteenth century England was the age of the formal and literary (auto)biography making it one of the most popular literary forms.

As a biography written by the subject about himself or herself, autobiography has often been distinguished from the memoir, in which, like Soyinka's *The Man Died (TMD)*, the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed (Abrams and Harpham, 2012). This study, however,

classifies both as (auto)biographies with the focus on their artistic and literary merit as they attempt to ‘set forth character, temperament, and milieu, as well as the subject’s activities and experiences’.

2. Artistic Autobiographies

Apart from the more specific focus of autobiographies on contextual realities, it is now fairly the case that very little difference exists between the (realistic) novel and artistic autobiographies. In style, themes, organization of plot, setting and aesthetics, autobiographies are now more and more frequently organised like fiction. Abrams and Harpham (2012, p.28) argue that:

In recent years, the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred, as authors include themselves under their own names in novels, or write autobiographies in the asserted mode of fiction, or...mingle fiction and personal experience as a way to get at one’s essential life story.

Olney (1973) makes a distinction between artistic autobiographies and political ones, for instance. Artistic autobiographies, he points out, are organised like novels in that they do not adhere too closely to a strict chronological, biographical arrangement. Real life events, according to him, achieve this artistic importance ‘if a pattern has been discerned, achieved, and imposed out of the author’s own internal order, by himself, thus acting as an artist’ (pp.20-21). T.S. Eliot implies this in a related discussion that a writer’s artistic preoccupation is usually determined to a greater extent by real life events rather than his studies, and posits that ‘only a part of an author’s imagery comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood’ (Eliot, 1975, p.91). And for Maduakor (1986), both autobiography and fiction originate from the same social matrix, thus making much of African fiction autobiographical.

The fact that the contents of autobiographies are from real life, that is, actual happenings which were not ‘created’ by their authors, does not make the artistic autobiography any less artistic than the novel or the poem, for instance. Indeed, the actual arrangement of the story; what events to record and in what order; what details to expunge – all require even more challenging levels of artistic imagination from the author, and these are of significant interest to stylistics. Ultimately, a good many, or even a greater percentage of autobiographies are really works of imagination. Although usually stories about one’s life, they can be a recreation of oneself in the image one has of oneself, and the views of Ogundipe-Leslie (1984) in that regard are aptly summarised thus:

For the autobiography, not being a documentary...gives us the memory, which is an edited, selected, and reworked version of facts and events, battered by time, not as they actually happened. Memory fictionalizes (p.144).

Taking the argument further, Bown (1973) argues for the non discrimination between autobiography and fiction in linguistic and literary studies, and advocates supplementing works of imagination with non-fictional prose because ‘literature of its nature has no set boundaries’ (p.209). Stylistic variations are often more readily influenced by subject matter than by sub classifications of genre. This accounts for the identity of style between autobiographical and fictional prose, but this is, of course, not an attempt by this study to rekindle the monist-dualist debate about the dichotomy or otherwise between form and content. Rather, it is essentially a justification for the renewed stylistic focus on the contextual implications inherent in non fictional texts with specific references to Soyinka’s *Ake* and *TMD*. In doing so, the study attempts to exemplify the ways in which the texts provide the stylistic, thematic and contextual ‘raw materials’ for his more ‘explicitly’ fictional works like *The Interpreters (TI)* and *Season of Anomy (SOA)*, and in the process, it also illustrates the views expressed by Leech and Short (2007, pp.28-29) that:

There is no reason to treat fictional language in a totally different way (from non fictional language)... Language is used, in fiction, to project a world ‘beyond language’, in that we use not only our knowledge of language, the meanings of words etc, but also our general knowledge of the real world to furnish it.

Thus, in Soyinka’s case, as will become obvious, the thin line demarcating autobiography and fiction blurs considerably. In the following sections, from lexical and grammatical data obtained from the texts, the research applies these theories to the analysis of Soyinka’s style.

3. Soyinka’s Autobiographical Imagination

Although *Ake* (1981) was published almost a decade after *TMD* (1972), chronologically, the events recounted in the former precede those of the latter. *Ake* chronicles the first eleven years of the author’s life, during which the young Soyinka strives in turns to interpret, respond to and reconcile what he perceives as the contradictory sense of justice

of the adult world. This world, to him, is alternately 'hostile and secure, cruel and tender'. It is a world teeming with 'ghomids', educators (Reverend Ransome-Kuti, Essay), missionaries and catechists (Bishop Ajayi Crowther), kings and traders. It is an enchanted world.

By far, the most stylistically significant aspect of the work is its portrayal of the early development of Soyinka's sense of justice, non conformism and social activism. In several portions of the text, Soyinka clearly expresses his disenchantment with what his infant mind perceives as adult injustice. For instance, his mother, whom he nicknames 'Wild Christian' (She was impatient with 'infidels') narrates to him a story of how Sanya (Soyinka's uncle), his siblings and she had been chased by wood sprites right up to their doorsteps for wandering too far into the domain of the spirits. Reverend Ransome-Kuti, with the Bible in his hand, had ordered the 'ghommids' back to their place of abode 'in the name of God!' The young Soyinka's response to being told that the erring children received corporal punishment in addition to the manual labour of cutting grass for a week is to feel that 'the fright should have sufficed as punishment' (p.7).

Again, the bookseller's wife, Mrs. B, is tormented by an 'abiku' child (who engages in a cycle of premature death and birth), Bukola, who manages to wring concessions from her parents by relapsing into frequent fainting fits. In the young Soyinka's estimation, 'Mrs. B was too kind a woman to be plagued with such an awkward child' (p.18). This search for the meaning of justice propels the young Soyinka to rebel against his mother's attempts to show him off before visitors as a precocious child while disparaging his sister, Tinu, in the process: 'I was simply puzzled that no one else appeared to share my deep sense of injustice'(p.81). And when his father, Essay, jokingly threatens to cut off the bookseller's hand for what he (Essay) considers the man's blasphemy on a Sunday in taking the word of God literally, Soyinka is appalled at his father's behaviour:

My father had the habit of speaking as if he was on first name terms with God.
Why should he suggest that God would come into our front-room just to
prosecute the bookseller! (p.21)

For the Soyinka, therefore, 'there was neither justice nor logic in the world of grown ups' (p.104). At the end of the book, however, before he turns eleven, the author enlists in that world of grown ups and contributes to the fight against injustice. It is the Egba Women's uprising organised by Mrs. Ransome-Kuti, popularly known as 'Beere', Wild Christian and a few other enlightened Egba women to fight against taxation, exploitation and other forms of injustice visited on the women. Soyinka becomes an integral part of this struggle as "their young teacher," courier extraordinary, scout and general factotum' (p.213). From these incidents can be glimpsed the formative stages of Soyinka's non conformist tendencies and even his literary iconoclasm which reach a crisis point in *TMD*.

TMD deals with Soyinka's arrest and incarceration during the Nigerian civil war. It is an evocation of the author's personal experience in detention. After the 15th January, 1966, coup d'etat in which several northern Nigerian political and military leaders lost their lives, northern military officers and mobs carried out reprisal pogroms against Igbos, whom they blamed for the coup. The Igbos, perceiving the inability or reluctance of the Federal Government of Nigeria to guarantee their safety within Nigeria, seceded from the federation resulting in a thirty month civil war. Soyinka toured the north and the east to organise a 'Third Force' which sought to bring some of the original executors of the coup – Alale and Banjo – as well as other radicals together in a move to counter both the north's genocide and the east's secessionist agenda by campaigning for an arms embargo on both sides. For this and his other anti-war statements and activities, the author was arrested and detained incommunicado. But he managed to beat the network of prison security around him, scribble and smuggle out notes and messages. Some of these notes later became *TMD* on his release.

TMD became highly controversial on its publication. It was criticised for being too emotional and sensational to merit literary attention (Maduakor, 1986). Expectedly, the gory events of the civil war form the background of the book. Described variously as prison literature, political autobiography, resistance therapy and a justly intemperate book, it has even been the subject of court litigations and proscription. Regarding its literary quality, Maduakor observes that Soyinka was 'too close to his material to successfully distil the experience into imaginative literature' (p.167). But this opinion obviously overlooks the series of sustained discussions of the metaphysical dialectics about the appropriate response to the overwhelming state of anarchy, as well as the author's attempts to exteriorise the private turmoil occasioned by his internment. The choice before the author as a social activist is to either capitulate like Oedipus and gorge out his eyes or continue with the resistance. In *TMD*, Soyinka chooses the latter option. Being extremely incensed at not just the excesses of the Gowon regime, but also the collaborative tendencies of the country's intellectuals, he appropriates linguistic obscenities and flings them at the obscenities of his tormentors and

antagonists. The intellectuals are criticised specifically for supporting Enahoro's extradition from Britain to which he had fled after the coup, when they said, 'Coward, let him return home and face the music'.

TMD paints a portrait of the author as an irate crusader for social justice deeply involved in a struggle to enlighten the people and incite them into a spontaneous and socially redemptive action. It is a role which, as we have seen, began at an early age in *Ake*, and crystallises into a private quest for meaning as well as a thorough understanding of the psychology of power. This role is expressed in 'terms of a common denominator for the people' and the hope that 'the East will pause, ask for a ceasefire and give the Third Force time to proliferate through all the key places...' (p.178).

As we have hinted at already, numerous criticisms trailed the book. The most poignant of these was that Soyinka failed to clearly articulate a definite course of action for the radicals. Others charged him with elitist, obscure and self-aggrandizing language which tended to confuse rather than educate the people (Maduakor, 1986). Soyinka's most comprehensive response to all these criticisms can be found in the Preface to the 1988 Spectrum Books edition of the book. To the criticism of not suggesting the way forward, he says:

When, some twelve years ago, I set out to recapture certain realities of experience in preventive detention, I most certainly made no claims that I was writing a political tract. I did not set out to write the history of Nigeria up to and including the Civil War, nor was I about to set down prescriptions for its political or economic salvation (p.xii).

The operative words here are 'realities of experience,' and it is indeed instructive that most of the critics have overlooked this fact. The book lays no claims to any political ambition. Rather, it seeks to set forth character, temperament and milieu. Indeed, as Soyinka himself charges, the book in its pugnacious style underlines the inability of its critics to proffer their own suggestions for an apt language for a truthful representation of the obscenity that provokes certain experiences. The book is replete with lexis designed to hurt members of the Gowon regime as well as shock the complacent public. Soyinka exploits the physical deformities of his tormentors and assigns to them repugnant cognomens like 'Polyphemus' (ugly, mythical, one eyed giant), 'Hogroth' (Pig, concrete mixer throat, regurgitating mortar and slag and dung plaster), and 'Caliban' (Shakespeare's brutish character in *The Tempest*). These characters are vilified by Soyinka until the reader no longer sees them as human. This will be examined more closely in the next sections of the study.

4. From Autobiography to Fictional Mythopoeisis

This study has already referred to the way in which the two autobiographical texts reveal the sources of certain events and images which are fictionalised in Soyinka's novels, *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*. They are sources not just for Soyinka's thematic preoccupation, but also his lexis and grammar. We read in *Ake* that the village elders insist that the young Soyinka prostrate before them like every Yoruba child, to which he, having just returned from a Sunday church service, retorts: 'If I don't prostrate myself to God, why should I prostrate to you? You are just a man like my father, aren't you?' (p.128). This incident is observable in the character of Egbo in *TI*, who insists on greeting his guardian standing, in spite of the numerous threats and corporal punishment:

'When you greet your elders,' the merchant said, 'you prostrate yourself.' 'You mean, lie flat on my belly?' 'On your belly, you son of the devil.' And Egbo would correct him gently, 'My father was a reverend pastor and he never taught me to prostrate.... If I only kneel to God why should I prostrate to you?' (p.15, *TI*)

Also, Egbo's love for groves and secluded places where he would commune with nature is obviously a motif traceable to the young Soyinka in *Ake* who, in his predilection for solitude, would often retire to a mountainous rock which he nicknames 'Jonah'. The name comes from a Sunday school teacher's comparison between the size of the whale which swallowed Jonah and that of the rock: 'On the other side of the school building, hidden from us was a rock that was smoothed by our feet.... That was my rock. My own very private rock.... Jonah was my own very secret habitat.... Jonah was bare, solitary and private' (p.64). Again, in *TI*, Egbo was discovered at midnight lying at the water's edge in the grove of Oshun, one ear against the ground:

'What were you doing there?' they asked. He said he was praying. So they beat him for paganistic leanings. 'All well-trained children pray in church,' the woman screamed, 'not in some evil grove of heathens' (p.15).

Even the comparison in *TI* of Bandele's unyielding posture to the staff of Ogboni obviously derives from the numerous Ogboni presences in *Ake*. The same phenomenon is observed between *TMD* and Soyinka's second novel, *SOA*. With its explosive and poetic language, *TMD* is clearly the precursor of *SOA*. Kaduna prison in *TMD* is Temoko in *SOA*. Polyphemus in the autobiography is Suberu in the novel. The massacre of 'aliens' in Cross-river in the latter text derives from the slaughter of Igbos in the north in the former. The struggle in, and the tour of, Cross-river by Ofeyi and Demakin in the novel recall their counterparts by Soyinka and his colleagues in the autobiography. Perhaps, Ofeyi's seminal idea of permeating the larger society with the Aiyero community's life affirming values in *SOA* stems from Nzeogu's adventure which forms the basis for the whole of the events narrated in the autobiography.

There are more of these fictional motifs which can be traced to their real life parallels in *TMD*. Even the phenomenon of Indo-Pakistani incursion into the Nigerian Railways and Medical department in which the late Premier of northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello, was reported to have imported unqualified Indian and Pakistani doctors into northern Nigeria that we see in the autobiography finds a parallel in *SOA*; the all-powerful Zaki Amuri imports unqualified Asian doctors into Cross-river.

Finally, the statement which sums up Soyinka's position on the 15th January, 1966, killings: 'It was a pity that any killing took place at all, but it is the rare and lucky revolution which manages to avoid blood' (p.149), in the autobiography, becomes in the novel: 'Just the same, the sowing of any idea these days can no longer take place without accepting the need to protect the young seedling, even by violent means' (p.23, *SOA*). In all these, it becomes fairly logical to argue that the thin line demarcating autobiography and fiction blurs considerably in Soyinka's case. For, these cross-references and stylistic parallels further buttress our earlier argument that *Ake* and *TMD* are artistic autobiographies.

5. Prose Texture

The prose in *Ake* and *TMD* are as elliptical, allusive and as poetic as those in *TI* and *SOA*. It is frequently evocative and pungent. It is replete with the characteristic Soyinkan near impossible admixture of persiflage, candour and combative phraseology in which the most heterogeneous of ideas are yoked together. The style here alternates between opacity and transparency, between brutal realism and subtle organization of materials, and between a fair amount of lexical as well as grammatical verbosity and impressionism. Both texts involve the piling of seriated and individuated lexical items as well as unusual collocations whose chief feature is that communication is obtained by means of short cuts through a dense undergrowth of words and sentences.

6. Lexical Features

Soyinka's choice of words in both autobiographies is complex indeed. It alternates between his precocious, urbane sensibilities and naïve sensitivities in *Ake* on the one hand, and between his ire and introspective metaphysical flights in *TMD* on the other. In every case, the lexis – whether single words or phrases – is heavy, poetic and emotive. Here are some examples.

[6.1] The colored maps, pictures and other hangings on the walls, the coloured counters, markers, slates, inkwells in neat round holes, crayons and drawing-books, a shelf laden with modelled objects – animals, human beings, implements – raffia and basket-work in various stages of completion, even the blackboards, chalk and duster...I had yet to see a more inviting playroom(p.25,*Ake*).

[6.2]...a half, pressed against St. Peter's parsonage wall is shared among a variety of stores peddling the products of a global waste industry fly-blown shawls, combs, mirrors, flaring radio antennae, chrome or foam-and-rubber motor-car decorations, ornamented flasks, drinking glasses disguised as floral arrangements, oriental table-mats stamped Manchester, clocks, 'gold' jewellery, photo-frames with a backing of white voluptuous bodies... Raquel Welch, Marilyn Monroe, Diana Dors, Jane Russel, Greta Garbo (p.150, *Ake*)

[6.3] Earth. Earth. Sit on the floor. Blanket. If only it were not freezing. Pillow then, sit on the pillow to protect your ankles, wrap the blanket around you. Breathe....And again. And again. Roll the words in the mouth. Taste wine-grace, pollen flavor, spirit dust....Greedily. But greedily! Swallow beyond repletion (pp.186-197, *TMD*)

[6.4] Cardiograms, blood pressure, blood sample, urine tests, reflexes...on the second last visit to the hospital it rained. The deluge was a strange unreal awakening. I had forgotten wind and flood as denizens of open spaces (p.289, *TMD*)

Three of these passages contain value judgements. The items ‘inviting’ [6.1], ‘global waste’ [6.2] and ‘deluge’ [6.4] are embedded within singular character statements namely, the way the author interprets the sights before him. They also resonate with poetry, especially so in [6.3] with its crisp, muscular, imperative subject-less sentences. These individuated words and phrases almost give the excerpts an overloaded quality. And, although there is considerably less esotericism in the diction here, the description of the assortment of items – decorative pictures of international models and a cosmopolitan stock of utensils – creates a somewhat disorienting effect against the backdrop of the semi-rural environment of the 1930s described. Passage [6.1] describes the attraction that school held for the young Soyinka even at the age of two and a half. He had accompanied Tinu, his sister, to school and insisted on enrolling immediately for the reasons described in the passage. Thus, the lexis, composed of words like ‘coloured maps’, ‘coloured counters’, ‘markers’, ‘slates’, ‘inkwells’, ‘crayons’, ‘drawing books’ ‘blackboard’, ‘chalk’ and ‘duster’, is carefully selected to set forth the character of the young Soyinka as ‘a lover of school and books’ even at this stage. The rest like ‘raffia and basket work’ show the author as rooted in the culture of his people.

In text [6.2], the description is of the comparison between the state of the *Ake* neighbourhood prior to, and after, modernity. Again, the lexical items are carefully selected to set forth what would turn out to be the author’s international and versatile character. We are inexorably drawn to this interpretation by the versatility of the scenery – ‘fly-blown shawls’, ‘combs’, ‘flaring radio antennae’, “‘gold” jewellery’, ‘photo-frames’ of contemporary international celebrities. The majority of the texts eschew finite verbs and conventionally complete sentences. The emphasis is thus on the individual words and phrases and the visual effects which they create. The passages from *TMD* describe Soyinka’s introverted experience in detention and a visit to the hospital. The items: ‘Earth’, ‘Blanket’, ‘Pillow then’, ‘Breathe’, ‘cardiograms’, ‘blood pressure’, ‘blood sample’, ‘urine tests’ and ‘reflexes’, carefully individuated, as well as ‘deluge’, ‘awakening’, ‘wind’, ‘flood’ and ‘denizen’, remind the reader that he is confronted by man in society, that is, a lone individual battling against oppression, against the elements, and ultimately against society. Items like ‘raffia’, ‘chalk’ and ‘denizens’ have become characteristic features of Soyinka’s mythopoesis, and can be found across a broad spectrum of his writing whether prose, drama or poetry. The word ‘denizen’ (Anglo-French) meaning ‘foreign resident person or thing, or inhabitant’, belongs to the class of words which includes ‘arabesque’, ‘camwood’ and ‘anomy’, which are now more or less distinctively Soyinka’s. The reader comes across them in a good many of his works – *Madmen and Specialists*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *Idanre*, *Season of Anomy*, *Ake* and *The Man Died*. The private metaphysical quest in *TMD* even results in such grotesque items as ‘crescendoing’ and ‘deminuendoing’ (p.231).

The special stylistic quality of passage [6.3] is the impression of dialogue between participants which Soyinka creates, instead of the interior monologue which it actually is. A paradox of impressionism and verbosity is achieved by the single word imperatives directed at himself, which are abridged versions of potentially longer expressions: ‘I thought about sitting on the pillow, or on the floor...and then thought about wrapping the blanket around me...’. A summary of the stylistic qualities of the passages’ lexis is as follows:

Passage [6.1]	Passage [6.2]
+ pedagogy register	+ domestic utensils register
+ descriptive	+ descriptive
- finite predicator	- finite predicator
- complex vocabulary	- complex vocabulary

Passage [6.3]	Passage [6.4]
+ simulated discourse	+ medical register
+ word complexity	+ word complexity
- complex vocabulary	- complex vocabulary

In *TMD*, Soyinka is extremely incensed at the policies of the Yakubu Gowon regime and, especially, at the collaboration and inertia of the country’s intelligentsia. As a result, he exploits the physical deformities of his tormentors, assigning to them repugnant cognomens. The gaolers in Kaduna prison, where he was later transferred to,

are, as we have indicated, assigned such bestial names as ‘Polyphemus’, ‘Hogroth’ and ‘Caliban’, and vilified until they lose their humanity in the following examples:

[6.5] These men are not merely evil...They are the mindlessness of evil made flesh. One should not ever stumble into their hands but seek the power to destroy them. They are pus, bile, original putrescence of Death in living shapes. They surely infect all with whom they come in touch and even from this insulation here I smell a foulness of the mind in the mere tone of their words (p.228).

[6.6] I heard his scabby hand dip in the fire-bucket and soon after a slosh of water doing the rounds of his cola-coated mouth. That is when my fingers fly to plug the ears. I know what will follow. Unfailingly, as if all the toads were one and that mighty fulsome toad was wedged in his throat –Hraaaargh!—and splat! – the gob of sputum hitting the wall. This man, this thing has a family. He has wives, he has children, he has more than likely some other family hangers-on who defer to him and call him Baba (p.133).

[6.7] Four yards away a gob of slime hits the grass verge of the gutter, the end of a blurred arc that begins on ptuh! And ends in splat! The churning in the throat is resumed, preparing the world for another goro-gritty gob (p.134).

[6.8] Caliban, I have never seen. Visually he remains a mystery. But I know he has a leg and a half. Or three. Certainly one leg is twice the length (or weight) of the other, their uneven thuds are unmistakable as he pounds his nightly round in the hollow of my head. Shuffle, then sledgehammer. In the dead of the night to the shuffle-clump rhythm of his unequal strider wraith of smells passes and repasses. It is the reek of yeast in extreme fermentation, a passage of stink bugs trapped in a cheap oily scent – is he so liberal with scent because he must disguise the stench of alcohol? (p.135)

Hogroth has a nasty habit of chewing colanut and gargling his throat disgustingly. Caliban wears perfume on his unwashed body. As a result, there is no respite for them from Soyinka, who employs these exceedingly intense expressions to describe their ugliness. Virtually all the horrible epithets are here:

evil, pus, bile, putrescence, death, infect, smell, foulness, scabby, slosh, cola-coated, toads, fulsome, hraaaargh, splat, sputum, thing, ptuh, goro-gritty, thuds, shuffle clump rhythm, strider wraith of smells, reek, extreme fermentation, stink bugs, cheap oily scent, stench

These are strong words indeed. Soyinka even creates phonaesthetic items in ‘slosh’, ‘hraaaargh’, ‘splat’, ‘ptuh’, ‘thuds’ and ‘shuffle’ to underscore his disgust. There is time also for an alliteration in ‘goro-gritty gob,’ even in his anger. The government doctor who, to his chagrin, examines him at a Lagos clinic is ‘an unctuous toad’. Soyinka’s desire to recapture his childhood and punish his antagonists verbally reaches new heights in these texts as he deploys ornate, polysyllabic phraseology. In *Ake*, he speaks of the parsonage being fenced by a ‘tumuli’ of rocks (p.2). The bookseller’s wife possesses ‘bovine beauty’ (p.15) another alliteration, and when the comparison of his ‘private’ rock to Jonah’s whale by the teacher reveals it to the other students, Soyinka experiences the ‘loss of a replete subsuming presence’ (p.64). The guava tree is described as moist yet filled with ‘crisp vitality, silent yet wisely communicative’ (p.65).

Continuing in this lexical extravagance, the author writes of expecting ‘a cataclysm of unthinkable proportions’ from Folasade’s death (p.98). The delightful things to be purchased on the way to choir practice in Ibarapa become ‘a sumptuous resurrection of flavours’ (p.154). The carvings which decorate the Alake’s palace are ‘luminous eyeballs of petrified ancients’ (p.204).

In *TMD*, the chief occasions for this polysyllabic phraseology and rhythmical rendering are the author’s frequent excursions into metaphysics to ‘stay the season of a mind’ in detention. There is a revelation akin to that of Oedipus about the forces he is contending with, but unlike Oedipus Rex who capitulated and blinded himself rather than

confront the gods, Soyinka goes on the verbal offensive. His Joyce-like epiphany in detention, which gives rise to the title of the book, is described as a 'catechumenical pronouncement' (p.13). His decision to embark on a hunger strike in prison is justified because 'the early chirurgens bled the choleric' (p.41). The headword is an archaic word for 'surgeon'.

Furthermore, the author's trauma in detention is a 'marshmallow of sensations' (p.88) which result from attempts to prevent his partaking in the 'regenerative continuance of the promethean struggle' (p.89). The expression, 'promethean', recalls a classical struggle of its kind. There is, of course, 'protocolic infliction' in the practice of travelling in siren-blaring motorcades by Heads of State (p.231). Soyinka is assaulted from all sides by ideas and revelations which resonate with a sledgehammer intensity. He in turn delivers these in intensely associative vocabulary. The spider's delicately ornamented web with which it traps flies, which recalls the regime's elaborate trap for him, is, to him, 'clean geometric filigrees'(p.259), and when one of the prison guards accidentally breaks a window glass while attempting to kill a lizard (the unwitting destruction of part of the system while seeking to destroy Soyinka), the event is seen as a 'chromatic disintegration' which 'dazzles and deafens, showering down in primal damp fragments of the sun's last rallying percussions' (pp.271-272).

As the study has indicated, Soyinka provides a vigorous defence of his choice of words and style in the preface to the book. Defending the intemperateness of the language deployed against his gaolers, Soyinka says:

When power is placed in the service of vicious reaction, a language must be called into being which does its best to appropriate such obscenity of power and fling its excesses back in its face. Criticism of such language is simply squeamish or Christianly – language being expected to turn the other cheek, not stick up a finger in an obscene defiant gesture.... Language must communicate its illegitimacy in a forceful, uncompromising language of rejection seeking always to make it ridiculous and contemptible, deflating its pretension at the core (pp.xiii-xiv).

Although Soyinka concedes that such a language does not pretend to dismantle that structure of power since that can only be a collective endeavour, he nevertheless believes that it contributes to the psychological reconstitution of public attitudes to oppression, and in this, language is part of resistance therapy. It is the harsh and unsparing language of rejection deployed to confront the harsh and unsparing landscape in which the author finds himself. Soyinka elaborates on this in the following way:

The language we use in addressing culpable power is, in itself, part of the needful preparatory activity towards this liberation of a popular will...; it is the hidden language of an oppressed populace – the writer does no more than expose it, re-appropriating it for the commencement of the liberation therapy (pp. xv-xvi).

Finally, the peculiarities of Soyinka's lexical style are enriched by the plethora of aliases and cognomens which he coins for some of his characters, as we have hinted at earlier. His father is 'Essay', an acronym from his initials of S.A, but it also conjures up the man's elaborate manners which, according to Soyinka, were akin to the elaborate steps required in writing a composition (essay). His mother is nicknamed 'Wild Christian' for reasons which we have already explained. This style of naming, which we have also seen in *TMD* in 'Polyphemus', 'Hogroth', 'Caliban' and 'Gorilla', seems to provide the sources for their more fictional counterparts like 'The Morgue', 'Queen Bee' (*TI*), 'The Dentist', 'Iridescent', and 'IQ' (*SOA*). They also imbue the prose with the twin qualities of persiflage and vigour.

7. Grammatical Features

The syntactic structures in *Ake* and *TMD* in the narrative portions recall Osundare's description of them as 'a dry pod whose seeds are so closely packed that they cannot shake or move about'(Osundare,1983,p.32). However, *Ake* contains many portions in which the sentences loosen up and become essentially transparent possibly because the subject matter revolves around the author's younger, childlike perceptions. Still, the evocative and poetic qualities of the sentences are complemented by the overriding desire of the author to jolt the reader into a compulsory attentiveness. Four passages from both texts illustrate this tendency.

[7.1] The sprawling, undulating terrain is all of *Ake*. More than mere loyalty to the parsonage gave birth to a puzzle and a resentment that God should choose to look down on his own pious station the parsonage compound from the profane heights of Itoko (p.1 *Ake*).

- [7.2] The Ogboni slid through Ake like ancient wraiths, silent, dark and wise, a tanned pouch of Egba history, of its mysteries, memories and insights, or thudded through on warrior's feet, defiant and raucous, broad and compact with unspoken violence (p.203, *Ake*).
- [7.3] In a moment of enforced calm, I moved out of the echoes of voices in the streets, of voices in the markets, out of whispers in corridors, glances in-gatherings, out of the rain of spittle and contempt, moved out from the target of pointed fingers, the giggle in the dark, out from the wise nods of geriatric consciences, out of the mockery, the assuaged envy and jubilation of the self-deluded (p.80, *TMD*).
- [7.4] To survive, but to survive in a transmitted form, full of nebulous wisdoms, corrupted and seduced by sagehood homage, carefully insulated from intimacy with the affairs of men, that kind of bribery which Oedipus at first snatched at, blinding himself physically to eradicate in entirety the route to socially redemptive action – this is the preference of all establishment (p. 89, *TMD*).

Apart from the irresistible poetry of these texts, their special stylistic quality is in the loose sentence structures in which all of them, except [7.4], are expressed. In loose sentences, the main clause, usually containing the chief information, is placed at the initial position, and there is a preponderance of trailing, rather than anticipatory, constituents. In the first three excerpts, the main information is in the following:

[7.1]: The sprawling...Ake.

[7.2]: The Ogboni...wraiths.

[7.3]: In a... streets.

These are then followed by numerous qualifying phrases and expatiatory clauses typical of Soyinka's poetry. In the last sample, the situation is reversed and what we have is a periodic structure in which the chief idea is left till the end:

[7.4]: ... this is the preference...establishments.

As Ufot (2009) observes:

Loose sentences make for easy grasping of the syntactic information by the reader because each part of the sentence is potentially a complete whole, especially the first part, and we can easily decode the syntax as we proceed, holding in memory only the immediately preceding grammatical context (p.332).


Perhaps, the urgency, beauty and serenity of the author's childlike recollections in *Ake* account for their loose, less turgid tone whereas the periodic, suspenseful structure of the last passage is in character with its complicated metaphysical response to the author's harrowing, ugly experiences in detention. Passage [7.1] is the opening paragraph of *Ake*. It is made up of two sentences, the second of which is complex, but they are very important as introductory statements. At first reading, the reader is somewhat perplexed as to what they mean. Closer reading enables us to determine, through a focus on the first sentence, that this is a description of how the young Soyinka perceives the geo-religious terrain of Ake. For the young Soyinka, it seemed unfair for God to choose to look on the parsonage (his pious station) from Itoko (the part of the town which was on a hill seeming to merge with the heavens) where the unbelievers lived. This feeling, he says, arose not merely from his childlike loyalty to the parsonage, but from a standpoint of his sense of justice. In lexis and grammar, as well as in tenor, the passage is akin to the opening sentence of *SOA*, which describes the communalism of Aiyero with a great deal of linguistic extravagance:

A quaint anomaly, had long governed and policed itself, was so singly-knit that it obtained a tax assessment for the whole populace and paid it before the departure of the pith-helmeted assessor,...(p.1).

The first sentence: 'The sprawling...Ake,' contains a stylistically rendered complement, 'all,' which is closely linked with the qualifying phrase 'of Ake'. Soyinka could have said: 'The sprawling undulating terrain is all that Ake has/is made up of,' in which the phrase 'of Ake' would be replaced by a longer construction – an adjectival dependent clause: 'that Ake has/is made up of'. The structure of the longer sentence would have been SPC as follows:

Subject: The sprawling...terrain

Predicator: is

Complement 

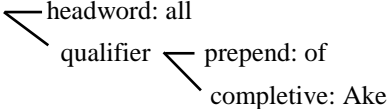
Subject: Ake

Predicator: has/is...of.

But Soyinka's condensed version shows the phrase 'of Ake' as a rankshifted qualifier of the complement. Thus, his condensed but similar structure has the following structure:

Subject: The sprawling...terrain

Predicator: is

Complement 

In the second sentence, the principal clause: 'More than mere...resentment' is structured thus:

Subject: More...parsonage

Predicator: gave birth to (phrasal verb)

Complement: a puzzle...resentment

This is followed by a rankshifted adjectival qualifying clause: 'that God... Itoko', with a binder 'that', and structured thus:

Subject: God

Predicator: should... down (phased predicator with phrasal verb)

Adjunct: on...compound (appositive)

Adjunct: from...Itoko.

Passages [7.3] and [7.4] are similar because they are replete with short, crisp often repetitive structures. They describe the author's moments of sober introspection and angst about his role in the struggle, and they are indeed redolent of poetry. Both passages consist of a single long sentence each with more or less the same structure as that of [7.2]. Again, the relationship between the first sentence of [7.1] and the rest of its constituents is similar to the one between the main clause of [7.2]: 'The Ogboni slid...wraiths' and the rest of its own trailing constituents: 'silent...violence'.

[7.3] begins with a frontal adjunct which precedes a subject that is followed by a predicator and numerous adjunct phrases introduced by the repeated element 'out of'. This device is called rhetorical anaphora:

Adjunct: In...calm

Subject: I

Predicator: moved

Adjunct: out...streets, of ... markets...out of...gatherings out... contempt,
moved out... self deluded (rhetorical anaphora)

Passage [7.4] is introduced by two co-ordinate 'to-infinitival, non-finite' clausal constructions functioning as the appositive subjects together with: 'that kind of bribery', and followed by a number of predicative phrases which are finally restated grandly in two clauses, the first of which contains a complex rankshift, as follows:

Subject: To survive...men

Subject: that kind of bribery...snatched at } appositives

Restated clause – Subject: this

Predicator: is

Complement: the preference...establishment.

8. Conclusion

Soyinka's autobiographies – *Ake* and *TMD* – taken together are a rich depository of imaginative writing, spanning his early childhood and early adulthood. As demonstrated by this study, in themes, imagery, words, phrases and sentences, these two texts paint a portrait of character and style. They paint a portrait of the formative characters of both the author and the Nigerian society of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in which he has had to struggle. The texts reveal the way in which socio-historical relationships involving Soyinka have helped to shape the poetry of his style. In his lexical choices in the two texts, there is thus a preference for the poetic in describing both the evocative beauty of a vanishing period of his life in *Ake*, and the symbols of ugliness of the larger society which he wishes to vanquish in *TMD*. The deployment of amazing, singular phraseology in several portions of the texts is the result of the author's desire to characterise the complex, dialectical and diachronic narrative of his life – the simple pleasures of his early life, and the harsh and unsparring landscape of his latter society. The context of the images, diction and grammar of Soyinka's writing generally can be traced to the two autobiographical works.

As we frequently see in his fictional works, the syntax in *Ake* and *TMD* shows a preponderance of loose and orthographic sentences whose only graphological features are commas and full stops. Numerous qualifying, appositive or restated phrases and clauses within the sentences are employed to describe the same dialectics of struggle and quest which began quite early for the writer, and that is perhaps why there is a minimal occurrence of conventional co-ordinating devices such as linkers and binders or even complete clause structure elements such as SPCA. Consequently, as the contextual, lexical and grammatical sources of much of his overall literary imagination and style, Soyinka's *Ake* and *The Man Died* exemplify the argument that life itself is stranger than fiction.

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