

Linguistics Elements and Meaning: Imagery as a Subtle Communication of Ideologies in Poetry.

Jeremiah Mutuku Muneeni (Kenyatta University)

jermut2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

Language is the vehicle through which ideas are communicated. In order to have a holistic criticism of the works of art, the critic is called upon to break down language into small elements that embody the meaning intended to be communicated. One such an element of language is imagery which encompasses metaphors, similes, images, and symbols. Artists use imagery to appeal to audience's senses. Over the ages, different images have been used to describe the two genders, thus inviting different perceptions. The interrogation of the said elements is a rich repository for analyzing the position each gender occupies as seen from the point of view of the community from which the artist draws his or her materials. As such, gender subjugation and or elevation can be analyzed through interrogating the images that poets employ to bring forth their thematic concerns. By analyzing the images, one is able to identify traces of gender subjugation or otherwise in the poetry of the early East African Poets whose poetry is informed by the (then newly) acquired Western education. This paper interrogates five poems by East African early male poets namely: "The Motoka" by Theo Luzuka, Richard Nturu's "Rhythm of the Pestle", Jonathan Kariara's "A Leopard Lives in the Muu Tree" Eric Ng'amaryo's "I will Cling to Your Garment" and Austin Bukonya's "I Met a Thief." The paper analyses gendered images employed by the selected East African (male) poets with a view to deconstructing the representation of female gender in their poetry. The poems will be analyzed within the deconstructionist literary theory. The paper aims at finding out whether the images used by male poets in making reference to female characters are chauvinistic.

1.0 Introduction

Language is the vehicle through which creative writers communicate their concerns to their audience. The same language is broken into elements which enhance the effectiveness of passing of the message meant to be communicated. Major among the linguistic elements is imagery. The employment of imagery enables the literary writer, especially the poet, to extend the language at his/her disposal since they use terms in transferred or connotative sense. As John Mugubi observes, metaphors, and to a certain extent, imagery serves to give an item or items vivid description, helps the artist to achieve brevity, helps the author to magnify his/her heart and helps in minifying – biding together the seemingly "unbindable" elements such as notions that seem to be incontrovertible (170).

The major purpose of imagery is, however, to help the creative writers to practice language etiquette. Where the avoidance of profanity is impossible, use of imagery helps the use non-offensive figures of speech to talk about the obscenities respectably or with language that entails some sense of aptness or decorum. When utter frankness is used to refer to taboo words, focus is likely to shift from thematic concerns to the foulness of the language. If the choice of odious words seem to be selectively directed to women, then that could be considered to be a deviation that calls for scrutiny since it approximates to misogyny.

2.0 Deconstructing the Poets' Imagery

Deconstruction literary criticism, built on the ideas of Jacques Derrida, more than any other tool of analysis helps to provide a window through which critics peer through the meaning of the text(s). Derrida points out that all texts are mediated (or in the process of being mediated) thus truth, meaning and knowledge is held by cultural systems, ideologies, symbols (signs), intertextuality, structure of ideas and practices which we call reading. Literature relies on deconstruction because of multiple of meanings, exclusions, substitutions or intertextuality. Deconstructionists argue that meaning circulates and since it relies on difference, then, the 'other' can only stimulate it, when it comes before it. The process of deconstruction always reveals an underlying authority beneath prior authority and that way it brings depreciation or displacement of a text or narrative. In deconstruction the inferior is elevated and the superior imploded giving rise to extended and expanded horizons (Mboya, 2010).

Deconstruction then becomes a system of inquiry which tries to identify meaning in areas which are marginal or deferred as opposed to the proclaimed authorial intention. All those ideas decentred by a text are privileged in a deconstruction so that the difference between the centre and periphery is explored.

Since the kind of imagery that an author adopts to aid them in communicating meaning embodies their (author's) ideologies, then through deconstructing the imagery used by the author, one can be able to ascertain the subtle meaning inherent in the authors' works of art. As such, deconstructing the imagery employed by the author to depict women vis-à-vis those that depict men is thus an avenue through which critics can find out whether, in a subtle way, one gender has been subjugated as the other is elevated.

3.0 The Relationship between Imagery in Poetry and Gender Ideologies

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo argues that:

Issues of gender and language, discussions center around theories of dominance and difference, masculinity and language, power and identity, notions of completion and cooperation, and the fluidity of masculine subjectivity (50).

While the element I am examining in this paper is not centered on masculinity (or its absence), it is important to note that, the male dominance or female subjugation encapsulated in imagery which this paper examines cannot be detached from masculinity.

Poets, due to the nature of verse form which demands economy of words, are among the major consumers of imagery. The use of images enlivens and dignifies the poets' works of art and offers an opportunity to give a vivid description of what is being communicated especially given that, the main purpose of poetry is to communicate one's experiences, feelings ideas, and emotions.

The images that writers use are drawn from their socio-cultural backgrounds from where they draw their writing materials as well as their experiences as they interact with different people and perhaps races during their sojourns occasioned by different reasons. As such, the images carry with them the nuances of the society's ideologies which are perpetuated by the authors who are agents of the communities from which they write. Where the poet presents personal worldview, the same can be said to have been shaped to a great extent by both the nurturing the

poet undergoes as he/she grows as a unit of the community. With regards to the kind of images and choice of vocabularies a poet uses, A.D. Amateshe observes that an effective communication between the poet and the reader can be achieved through:

[use of] ... precise description, appropriate choice of words, meaningful relationship of images, vivid portrayal of an activity which an artist captures with his poetic eye and [employment of] noteworthy vocabularies (6)

It is the meaningful relationship of images being referred to above that poets employ in their works of art which, if closely examined, can reveal whether the author subjugates or elevates a certain gender.

Gender representation has been an ongoing debate among literature scholars for some time now with some feeling that women subjugation has a historical base in earliest literature ever written by mankind, especially done by male writers. Florence Stratton in her essay: “How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Not Together”, a chapter appearing in her book *Contemporary African Literature and Gender Politics* is a leading light in decrying women (mis)representation by male-dominated writers from Africa in general. Stratton is of the opinion that, male writers deliberately use images that are derogative to women in order to depict them negatively (25). Thus Stratton isolates use imagery among the male creative writers as an avenue through which they perpetuate their biased representation of female gender while elevating masculinity and male chauvinism.

As argued elsewhere in my MA thesis:

(T)he roles and positions of women within a body of literature can serve to systematically analyze that society and societal attitudes towards women. The duties and activities assigned to a particular gender can demonstrate its respective position in the overall power structure in that particular society (Muneeni, 32).

In addition to the above assertion, it is also true that images used to depict one gender as opposed to the other can also be systematically analyzed in order to establish that society and societal attitude towards that genders involved.

We need to ask ourselves, is it possible to establish the place of women through evaluation of gender related images that the poets have used? Did these early writers deliberately choose images that were demeaning when it came to women representation and tone down the same when representing their male counterpart? Can the subtle negativity inherent in the images used to represent women be used as the base to brand the early poets male chauvinists? Through juxtaposing poems that have images for both genders, we can respond to these pertinent questions. This paper examines five poems published in *An Anthology of East African Poetry*.

The first poem this paper examines is entitled “The Motoka” by Theo Luzuka. (Page 101). The first stanza reads:

You see that Benz sitting at the rich’s end?

Ha! That Motoka is motoka

It belongs to the Minister for Fairness

Who Yesterday was loaded with a doctorate

At Makerere with whisky and I don't know what

Plus I hear the literate *thighs* of an undergraduate (my emphasis, line 1-6)

Luzuka's poem demonstrates an enormous success with regards to adopting a form of conversation which borrows from the ordinary speech flavoured with the appropriate diction in order to make an immediate impression on the reader and or the audience. It is worth noting that the poet's choice of a woman - a tomato seller - as the speaker helps him to effectively employ pragmatics aspect to satirize the kind of leaders whose moral standing is questionable.

That notwithstanding, the "unapologetic" use of metonymy (thighs) in reference to women is, by all means, offensive to the dignity of women.

The second poem under examination here is by a renowned poet Richard Nturu entitled: "Rhythm of the Pestle" (page 92). The poet employs images that call for scrutiny with regards to gender representation:

In stanza one he writes:

Listen – listen-

listen to the palpable rhythm

of the periodic pestle,

plunging in proud perfection

into the cardinal cavity

of maternal mortar

like the panting heart

of the virgin bride

with the silver hymen,

or the approaching stamp

of the late athleting cows

hurrying home to their bleating calves (my emphasis, lines 1-12)

The poet's artistic employment of alliteration and the achievement of rhythm has been lauded by many poetry critics and it makes his poem a reference point for discussion whenever critics are called upon to analyze the two sound patterns in poetry. Further, the diction the poet uses captures the literal meaning absolutely – that of pounding maize meant for preparing *githeri* using the traditional mortar and pestle. As for the deeper meaning, the writer seems to be alluding to the sexual activity, an aspect that he has presented in a perfect artistic manner. Nevertheless, he, like many others has not resisted the temptation of referring to aspects related to female organs distastefully. Use of imagery that compares the act of pounding of the grains to a “virgin who is panting as she loses her virginity and therefore her hymen” is indeed mortifying to female fraternity. Perhaps this kind of depiction is in line with Ernest N. Emenyonu's assertion that there is a critical imbalance and lack of objectivity in the appreciation and the image of womanhood depicted by male authors (xi)

Austin Bukenya in his poem “I met a Thief”, (page 96) faithfully follows the footsteps of his fellow male poets in using unapologetic images in reference to women. The title betrays his intention even before we interact with the poem itself. The “thief” in this context refers to the woman who is not the poet's wife but whom the poet meets at the beach and succumbs to her sexual overtures. How come then that it's only the woman who is a thief but the persona is “innocent” despite the fact that it takes two to tango? Actually the persona, in stanza one, says (the woman) thought he had a heart to steal. In stanza one Bukenya writes:

On the beach, on the coast

Under the idle whispering coconut towers,

Before the growling, foaming, waves

I met a thief who guessed I had

An innocent heart for her to steal (lines 1-5)

Use of the image of a thief denotes evil and thus female fraternity is depicted as an evil gender. If what makes the persona to call the woman involved a thief is the fact that she was trying to engage a married man into sexual activity, the male persona is “more of a thief” than the woman because he is the one who possesses the secret – that he is a married man. Use of such a derogative term to refer only to the woman and presenting the man as a victim is, thus, a distortion of images aimed at denoting women as the originators of evil bedeviling the society.

In stanza two, Bukenya furthers the derogatory depiction of the female gender by using images to describe their womanhood:

She took my hand and led me under

The intimate cashew boughs which shaded

The downy grass and peeping weeds

She jumped and plucked the nuts for me to suck

She sang and laughed and pressed close.

The persona here uses images that refer to women's pubic hair as "the downy grass and the peeping weed". Though he has avoided the blatant reference to the private parts, he has all along cast the woman as the evil one as "she takes the poet's hand" and "leads him..." Thus despite Bukkenya restricting himself to etiquette with regards to diction, he remains guilty of bedeviling the womenfolk as the initiators of the evil and for dragging the otherwise "holy" men into it.

Eric S. Ng'maryo has employed rare artistry to present a poem "I will cling to Your Garment." Which offers the analyst an opportunity to view from both literal and symbolic points of view. Ng'maryo writes:

I will cling to your garment like a wild grass seed

I will needle your flesh

And pray that my insistent call for you

Be not met with

A jerky removal

From your garment

And a throw into the fire,

But that

You will drop me into the fertile ground of

Your favour (Lines 1- 10)

Indeed the artistry in Eric Ng'maryo's, especially the diction is appealing. A critic who chooses to read the poem literally may argue that the poet's imagery is referring to a louse or any other vermin in somebody's garment which is seeking protection, warmth and survival being closer to its host; the human body. Hidden in the literal meaning, however, is a deeper meaning which can be interpreted as that of a man in love with a woman pleading with her not to betray, let him down or mistreat him because of these strong feelings he has towards her. He seems to be pleading with her to reciprocate his love by agreeing to his marriage proposal. There is no doubt this is a wonderful composition. Nevertheless, a critic's keen eye detects some images that the poet has employed which are demeaning to the artist. The first two lines of the poem reads:

I will cling to your garment like a wild grass seed

I will *needle your flesh* (my emphasis)

Owing to the fact that the speaker in the poem is a male addressing himself to a woman, then the images of needling one's flesh connotes sex. While it is remarkable that the poet conceals the intention by using a very descriptive image, he cannot be absolved from the guilt of depicting women negatively by using an image that may suggest that women are just "injected" while in the real sense they are also partakers of the act.

In the same poem, Ng'maryo, in lines 9 and 10 writes:

You will drop me into the *fertile ground* of

Your favour (my emphasis)

"Fertility" or "fertile ground" in this context can be deconstructed to mean the woman's womb. Once more, the poet succeeds in concealing the disparaging aspect that could have been depicted by using the term in its literal sense. Observably though, the womenfolk is demeaned as the term seems to mean that, the man's ultimate aim is to access the fertile ground.

The overt use of images to misrepresent, subjugate and subvert women discussed above can be juxtaposed against the images that represent male gender. To achieve the objectives of imagery juxtaposition, I will use two poems: one whose imagery that point to womanhood has already been considered and another one that centers on images that seem to elevate manhood.

Leo Luzuka's poem: "The Motoka" which has already been discussed with regards to the kind of images that the poet adopts while referring to women totally metamorphosis in the subsequent stanzas when the poet uses images to represent their male counterparts. When the poet decides to refer to male private parts, he chooses a less offensive metaphor – as demonstrated in stanza three of the same poem:

Look at the driver chasing the children away

They want to see *the pistol in the door pocket*

Or the button that lets out bullets from the machine

Through the eye of the car shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Let's not talk about it (my emphasis, 15-19)

Euphemism is inherent in the metaphorical reference to the male organs in the stanza above. One may, therefore, wonder whether the poet could not attack the immorality inherent in the leader's action but still maintain the dignity of both genders in an equal measure. Why couldn't the poet find an equally less offensive imagery to represent women? Why did he have to be so blatantly offensive?

Another poem that can be used to point out this disproportion in images employed is Jonathan Kariara's "A Leopard Lives in A Muu Tree", (page 110) which predominantly employs images that are widely in reference to manhood. A disparity in terms of the dignity accorded to the two genders is evident. The first six lines read:

A leopard lives in a *muu* tree

Watching my home

My lambs are born speckled

My wives tie their skirt tight

And turn away

Fearing mottled offspring (line 1-6)

The above poem, at literal level would simply be referring to the owner of a homestead whose lambs are not safe because there is a leopard that lives next to his home on a *muu* tree. However, when the idea of his wives comes in, the critic is forced to dig deeper into the imagery used in order to explore the sexual images that the poem evokes. It turns out that leopard is an outsider, perhaps a neighbor or a relative who takes advantage of the persona's infertility to sleep with his wives. The resulting offspring are "speckled" resembling their father – the "leopard" which is indicative of the outsider having sired "mullato" children as a result of the extramarital affair.

In the subsequent lines, the poet laments the contempt with which the "leopard" treats him and lets the audience know the reason as to why, other than cutting the *muu* tree, he cannot rescue himself from the derision.

I am besieged

I will have to cut the tree

I am besieged

I walk about stiff

Stroking my loins

A leopard lives outside my homestead

I have called him elder, the-one-from-the-same-womb

He peers at me with slit eyes

His head held up

My sword has rusted in the scabbard (Line 11-21)

From the metaphor that the poet employs in the last line, we get to know why he cannot perform his conjugal duties – simply because he can no longer "rise to the occasion" so to speak. We sympathize with him for his condition and perhaps support his intention of cutting the *muu* tree. The poet further reveals to the audience the contempt he has to endure from his wives

because of his condition and then blabs out the reason: that he is incapacitated in sexual terms by old age:

My fences are broken

My medicine bags torn

The hair on my loins is singed

The upright post at the gate has fallen (lines 28 -31)

Of my interest here is how the imagery used in reference to male organs compare with those (images) used where the female sexual organs are involved. The poet refers to the man who cohabits with his wives as the “leopard”. This image has two identifiable attributes: the specks that characterize the leopard’s appearance which is transference to the half casts that the other man begets. Again, there is an image that alludes to the slyness that is associated with the leopard, which likewise, is transferable to the behaviour of this man who has an affair with the speaker’s wives. In line 21, the poet uses a decorous image: “the sword that has rusted in the scabbard” to refer to the male sexual organ that is dysfunctional. Further, the poet refers to the speaker’s manhood as “medicine bags” and “a gate” which he symbolically says it has fallen meaning it can no longer perform its duty.

In a nutshell, the images that the poet uses in the poems above are characterized by demureness. Luzuka tries his best to sound casual, if not normal with regards to the uncivilized behaviour that the revered leader in the poem is involved in. The “gun-bullet” image employed here is not only symbolic of the organ being referred to but also, as Joseph Walunywa argues, a symbol of manhood, of power, the strength that goes with masculinity (35). Thus the poet, perhaps unconsciously, through diction elevates male gender to reverence while subjugating women through the images he uses.

Kariara also approaches the subject at hand with a lot of prudence. He avoids blatant description especially because the situation the speaker is in is, by all means, the most regrettable to male guild. Use of imagery here appears to be less offensive to the manhood since the ability to function sexually is, arguably, what makes a man. Imagery also affords the poet an opportunity to euphemistically handle an otherwise highly odious topic. The decorum the male fraternity is afforded by Kariara invites any critic interested in female gender (mis)representation to start questioning the rationale behind the overt bias demonstrated by other poets where female gender is involved.

4.0 Conclusion

Collectively analyzed, the five poems above depict a representation of a generation of poets whose use of images show commonality. They appear to have a skewed diction as well as images that they use for different genders. Women seem to be the major victims of iniquitous representation across board as presented by male poets. Through the diction and choice of images that are gender specific, the early male poets misrepresent women by deviating from the morally acceptable choices of images that are derogatory to women but maintaining etiquette where men are involved. The early poets, just like their prose fiction counterparts, can be said to have practiced inequality where the two genders were concerned - not necessarily through the

subjects they handled in their creative works - but through the language they chose to represent the different genders.

Works cited

Amateshe, Kisa (eds) *An Anthology of East African Poetry*. Longman. UK, 1988. Print

Azodo, Uzoamaka. "Masculinity, Power and Language in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*."

Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol.1 Emeneka: The Master

Artist. Ed. Emenyenu Ernest. African World Press inc. Trenton: 2004, (49-63) Print.

Emenyonu, Ernest. "Introduction, New Women's Writing: A phenomenal Rise" *New Women Writing in African Literature*. (Ed.) Emenyonu. London: James Currey 24, (2004) : xi-xiii. Print

Kivai, Georgiads."The Female Voice and the Future of Gender Relationships in the Nigerian

Nation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Kenyatta University, (2010)15-16. Print

Muneeni, Jeremiah."The Nneka Principle in the Fiction of Chinua Achebe: A Study of Mother

Archetype in his Selected Novels . Unpublished MA Thesis, Kenyatta University, (2014) 32-33. Print

Stratton, Florence. "How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Not Together?"

Contemporary African Literature and Politics of Gender. London. Routledge, (1994) 22-38. Print.

Walunywa, Joseph. "Patriarchy in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Okonkwo's Wrestling

Match with Unoka" *Egerton Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education* Vol. 5 No2/3 Kenya. Egerton. (2006). 35-62. Print.