

A STRUCTURALIST EXPLORATION OF ADA AGADA'S *INTIMATIONS*

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Abstract

This study investigates Ada Agada's structuralist approach in *Intimations*. This is because to the best of our knowledge, no writer has before now done a critical work on the anthology. It becomes pertinent therefore to fill this intellectual vacuum by using structuralism as a literary theory. The study shows that poetry has always responded to the challenges of society. In Africa, one of the factors that have impacted so much on the well-being of the people is their poetic experience. In this study, therefore, Agada's personal anthology has been used to show how poetry has reflected the African experience using structuralism as a literary theory. The key finding is that Agada's text's claim to universality and his neglect of specificity constitutes his major poetic strength. The paper concludes that, viewed from structuralist lenses, *Intimations* evokes a concentrated imaginative experience.

Key words: Structuralism, Poetic experience, *Intimations*, African experience.

Introduction

That poetry is an integral part of African literature has long been established. What this means is that poetry has been a paramount feature of literature in Africa. The effect of poetry is such that its relevance lies in the salient messages contained in every line. Over the years, there have been a litany of approaches for decoding the messages in poetry. Often, the choice of one over the others is dictated by a range of factors including the historical epoch during which the work in question is written, how pliable such a work is to a given theoretical orientation when compared with the others and even the mere fact that several theories had been applied to the study of such a text at the expense of a particular one. In the case of Ada Agada's *Intimations*,

which has not yet enjoyed any scholarly attention of note, neither the first nor the last of the above reasons could suffice. The present study hopes to justify the use of the structuralists approach to this text based on the thinking that the theory is more amenable to this collection of poems.

Structuralism, according to Culler Jonathan, is a theory resting on the realization that if human actions or productions have meaning, there must be an underlying system that makes this meaning possible, since an utterance has meaning only in the context of a pre-existent system of rules and conventions (95). It is clear that this is important due to the relevance of a detail enquiry in a text. This now raises the issue of whether the poet; Ada Agada, is a structuralist writer and that his poems are a representation of his literary preoccupations. This study sets out to identify first, structuralist tenets in Agada's *Intimations* and secondly, to open up new research gaps for future scholars to explore.

The scope of the study is the poems written by Ada Agada and contained in his book which is his first personal anthology. In the text under study, 11 poems have been selected and they include; 'Blow Fresh Air', 'The Worst is not Death', 'Minutes of Twilight', 'The Tribe Must not Die', 'Goodbye', 'Man of Peace', 'Guiding Spirit', 'Forget Us Not', 'Chastity of Joy', 'Beyond the Earthly' and 'After Glow'. There was a need to pay close attention to the individual poems that evoke structuralist's tenets. This gave room for a mixture of random and purposive sampling approaches while studying the text. However, so many of the poems were left untouched in this present analysis due to avoidance of multiplicity of ideals. The purposive sampling was also employed because only the poems that show structuralists tenets were considered.

This study sets out to establish to what extent Ada Agada's *Intimations* portrays the features of structuralism. The study therefore seeks to identify the structuralist's aesthetics in the collection of poems. This includes to also ascertain the extent to which the features of structuralism are manifest in the collection. A study of Ada Adaga's *Intimations* from a structuralist point of view therefore has a lot of

promise. This is because nothing has been written on the text so far and this study will fill the vacuum of critical perspectives on the text.

Theoretical Framework

Structuralism is a literary theory which places emphasis on a set of objective criteria for analysis and a new intellectual rigour. Structuralism relied initially on the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Like Plato, Saussure regarded the signifier, words, marks and symbols as arbitrary and unrelated to the concept, the signified, to which it referred. The discipline of semiotics plays an important role in structuralist literary theory and cultural studies. Semioticians apply structuralist insights to the study of sign system, a non-linguistic object that can be analysed as if it were a language (Eagleton 205). The structure of a single literary work therefore is determined by how its composition demonstrates the underlying principles of a structural system. Part of the appeal of structuralism, says Eagleton, is that like science it reduces complex system to their most fundamental parts. Structuralist's analysis makes the claim to universality, to finding the structures or elements that are common to all cultures, at all times, in all areas of the world. From this perspective, the author is cancelled out, since the text is simply the function of a signifying system, not of an individual.

According to Ghanasekaran, R. and Shivakumar, S. the movement of structuralism was the one in which the structuralist movement attempted to understand language through scientific study. Its in-goal is ultimately to try to account for all of human thought, behaviour, speech and action and of course it was not successful on this level but it was however essential in uncovering some important truths about the way in which we communicate with each other. Structuralists' theorists are interested in identifying and analysing the structures that underlie all cultural phenomena and not just literature (263).

Again Ghanasekaran, R. and Shivakumar, S. opine that a structuralist criticism views literature as a second-order signifying system that uses the structural system of language as its medium, and is itself

to be analysed primarily on the model of linguistic theory. While non-structuralist literary critics might want to analyse what one poem sounds like and what that means, structuralists care about the relationships between a large number of poems (264). This is why since all the poems in the text are written by one poet, this theory of structuralism is best suited for the analysis of the selected poems. The undertaking of a thorough literary structuralism in this text however, is to explain how it is that a competent reader is able to make sense of the literary text by specifying the underlying system of literary conventions and rules of combination that have been unconsciously mastered by such a reader.

Agada's Intimations

The structuralist's goal is ultimately to try to account for all of human thought. From a structuralist perspective, all human beings would be fundamentally the same, because all share the same skeletal structure, regardless of what kind of skin or brains might distinguish one particular person from another. From the same view point, all languages are the same, because all have the same structure, regardless of what kind of words they contain. For literary theorists, this scientific perspective meant approaching literature from a very different angle than that of critics before them. An in-depth perusal of Agada's poems reveals his entire poetic experience more succinctly than could be stated in any analysis as captured in the poem "Blow Fresh Air"

Inspire me to action, to action!
Lift up O my body,
Lift up and lean on this strong mind,
For you, body, you're my mind too!
Hold on grimly to the moment's mercy
Grasps firmly the present inspiration,
Before the blow blunder to day (76).

The undertaking of a thorough literary structuralism is evident in the above lines. It is meant to explain how it is that a competent

reader is able to make sense of a particular poetic line by specifying the underlying system of literary conventions and rules of combination that have been unconsciously mastered by such a reader. This has made possible interpretations of individual poems and the system of rules and codes that governs the forms and meanings of the literary expressions.

Structuralists are concerned with what is the most basic units of a text. Agada explores this tenet throughout the collection. His conversational tone is evident in 'The Worst is not Death' where the poet 'search blindly parallel to the wailing wall/ As you reach for the light of life/ in the boldest desperation' (11). His contrite wit is seen in his 'Minutes to Twilight' where the poet 'Descend soon/ with purity of sorrow/ and let me see visions' (14) the restraint of detailed abstract imagery, the liberation of imagination that makes the creative writer freeman of the world here in this poetry collection is Agada's structuralist approach. His poems gain strength and perhaps triumph only by forging from bitterness a steady compassion, by plunging into horror deep enough to bring forth tenderness.

Another feature of structuralism is that it makes claim to universality by finding the structures that are common to all cultures. Interestingly, the poems are not as easy to understand as they should, but the non-simplicity is chosen according to the demands of his society and is an end and not a beginning. That it has been reached by the priceless dissatisfaction of self-criticism is evident enough. But the poet must go on to write because, without putting out his words on paper, he dies within as clearly expressed in his "The Tribe Must not Die": 'The tribe must not die/ And an era must not wane/ And vanish without a trace (75).

Ada Agada's *Intimations* portrays the literary theory of structuralism in majority of the poems. For instance, in "Goodbye" Agada draws parallels between the rich and the poor in 'our shared paths/ crisscrossing/ divides forever/ at this path-meet of doubt/ on the eve of mutual weariness' (28) he parallels them with the rich in the following lines 'Forge ahead in total peace/ along the new path of your choice/ which today diverges/ forever/ from the common path of

communion shared until yesterday.' In view of this, he expresses dismay as he maintains that the poor who produce wealth yet hardly benefit from such labour. This goes with the saying that one works like an elephant but eats as a grasshopper.

Ada Agada's collection of poems deeply conveys the essence of structuralism which non-structuralist literary critics might want to ignore. To analyse what one poem sounds like and what that means, structuralists care about the relationships between a large number of poems. They tend to analyse literature in batches like how different scientists pick their own favourite chemicals, body parts, or other areas to focus on. This experience is vividly conveyed due to Ada Agada's relationship with his immediate environment.

In Agada's "Man of Peace" he says 'I walk away/ from the hue and cry, of the world/ seeking greater peace/ even that one/ that passeth all understanding' (38). The poet's Structural commitment to the cause of poetry is evident. Agada envisages a glorious future of equal opportunities for all in what the "Guiding Spirit" said, 'Personal god of a chequered life/ your eyes are so keen/ they pierce the bleakness/ of other dimmer realms/ closed to my mortal eyes' (40) the personified earth in the poem urges the masses to unite for a possible and total elimination of the exploiters of man.

"Forget Us Not" climaxes Agada's structuralist intention. Here, the rich not only threaten humanity but the environment. 'Africa, you bastard of our making/ here comes the new generation/ of the intellectual elite/ and the moral royalty/ to redeem you at last'. Thus, even if 'Beloved Africa brutalized/ we want to go home today/ to return to you in spirit' (74).

There is also a structuralist feature of non-tolerance to close reading. They prefer a particular text to read with a corresponding structure of all texts. Agada does this especially when he turns to symbolism and metaphor as in "Chastity of Joy" where the poets' home nation is explored, at the close of the poem; he slashes away with a single image the comfortable remove of the good days which he has put us:

Ignite in me the fire of rapture!
 Anticipation bubbles again
 For you are coming
 To teach us to smile again
 And smile too with virginal chastity (24).

The structuralist is concerned with the system of rules and codes that governs the forms and meanings of all literary productions. The lovely evocative submission to God in “Beyond the Earthly” which begins with; ‘I seek to wield all powers/ Beyond the earthly/ And far into the tethered’ (60) Ends with a sudden insight into the readers mind with logical remarks ‘Of wielding real power/ in glorious supremacy/ Of the eternal life’. This shows that a structuralist analysis is not concerned with anything beyond the interrelationship of units and rules.

In any field, a structuralist is interested in finding the basic elements, the units that make up a system, and in discovering the rules that govern how those units can be combined. A structuralist view of a literary text, as Spiller Robert posits, would start by asking what are the most basic units, the ‘atoms’ of a text? A literary text is made of languages; so a structuralist analysis of literature would start with a structural examination of language itself (19). In “After Glow” pure sensation is conveyed in the following lines;

Where hope flutters feeble
 There is still good
 And while there is good
 There is still beauty,
 Even across the sky of Africa (27).

This means that structuralists’ literary theorists were not as interested in certain things that literary critics before them took very seriously. For example, close reading is not a big deal for structuralists. Sure, we can spend hours analysing one juicy, ambiguous poem. But what is the point of wasting time, the structuralists would say, if that one little poem is not telling us anything about the structure of poetry.

This of course, scandalized all those other literary critics who were all about close reading. Structuralism ignores the specificity of actual texts and treats them as the result of impersonal force or power, and not the result of human effort. If poetry evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience or a specific emotional response through language chosen and arranged for its meaning, sound and rhythm; then Ada Agada's *Intimations* can be placed under the literary theory of structuralism.

Conclusion

In this study, we have attempted to show our understanding of structuralism using Ada Agada's collection of poems, *Intimations*. We have explained that structuralism is a literary theory that places emphasis on a set of objective criteria for analysis and a new intellectual rigour. The last part of this study was dedicated to citing lines from the collection to further buttress our points. Our conclusion is therefore that structuralism divides along the lines between categorical and modal logic in Ada Adaga's *Intimations*, and there are also several structuralist positions on themes like truth, reference and ontology.

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