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Stylistic Construction of Human Security and Socioeconomic Transformation in Niyi Osundare's *Unequal Fingers*

By

Adesanmi Moses A.

Department of General Studies, Federal University of Technology Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria

moses.adesanmi@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng

Abstract:

Poetic discourse in Nigeria, especially, can be serve as resistance to the systems most responsible for fostering poverty, exclusion and insecurity. In this study, Niyi Osundare's Unequal Fingers is examined as a means of establishing discourses on human security and socioeconomic transformation through stylistic devices. The poem highlights problems of corruption, inequitable distribution of resources, elite privilege, and the marginalisation of the masses - themes which remain relevant in today's Nigeria. It examined the poet's linguistic and stylistic resources of criticizing social injustice and pleading for a more just social order. Employing a qualitative textual research design and with close textual analysis of selected extracts from poem, the analysis is anchored on Critical Stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis as framework. The findings unveil how Osundare uses metaphor, repetition, contrast, imagery and evaluative lexical choices to bring attention to the character of the power play in the context of exploitation, and the social and economic ramifications of corruption and mismanagement of resources. Collective consciousness thus becomes the precondition for sustainable development and social transformation, with inequality as a threat to human security. The study concludes that Unequal Fingers offers itself a very effective means to social critique and civic engagement through the power of the poetic language. The poem advocates a vision of justice, inclusion and equitable development as pillars of a meaningful socioeconomic transformation.

Keywords: Accountability, deprivation, marginalization, redistribution

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For centuries, literature has been used to highlight social issues, critique systems of oppression, and call for social change. Literary texts have always been used in Africa to question the political, economic and social circumstances which impact the lives of ordinary citizens. To some extent, African poets have used their craft to not only express themselves in art but also to provide a social critique and engage in an ideological intervention (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). Poems reveal inequalities, challenge existing power structures and define different understandings of justice and development through stylistic creativity. A current discourse on human security has broadened the traditional concept of security, which was related only to military protection and territorial integrity, to the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Human security includes freedom from poverty, freedom from hunger, freedom from social exclusion, freedom from economic deprivation, freedom from freedom of human dignity, freedom from deprivation of a decent livelihood (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). The idea that sustainable socioeconomic transformation is impossible in societies with inequalities, corruption and unequal

Adesanmi M. A.



FUTIFMS International Conference

access to resources is gaining ground among scholars (Tadjbakhsh, 2014). Such representations in literature are therefore an important source of understanding of the realities that influence today's development.

The issues of governance, inequality, corruption and social justice have always featured in Nigerian literature. Niyi Osundare is one of the most prominent poets of today's Nigeria, marked by his social responsible attitude and a constant attack on oppressive structures. His poems are known for their accessibility, ideology and caring for the common people. Osundare is a socially engaged and public intellectual poet who regularly engages with questions of power, privilege, exploitation and social change (Egya, 2021).

One of Osundare's poems directly tackles the issue of social and economic inequality: *Unequal Fingers*. The poem uses powerful imagery, metaphor, repetition and contrastive structures to reveal inequalities in access to resources and opportunities in society. The poem draws attention to the experiences of subjugated populations while at the same time condemning the behaviour of elites who, by gaining wealth, are harming the wellbeing of the entire population. The poem thus poses pertinent and significant questions of justice, accountability, and inclusive development.

While the poet's ideology, ecology, sociology and linguistics have been studied, few works have considered how stylistic elements in *Unequal Fingers* create discourses of human security and socioeconomic change. The works of Osundare have received considerable attention from existing scholarship, with the focus so far being environmental consciousness, cultural identity and political commitment (Egya, 2021; Okoh, 2021). Thus, it is important to develop a stylistic investigation where linguistic means are shown how they help to portray inequality, insecurity, and developmental aspirations. Critical Stylistics is used to analyse *Unequal Fingers* in the context of the above. This study, therefore, aims to unmask the stylistic patterns of encoding ideological meanings and how the meanings are integral to wider discourses of "human security" and "socio-economic transformation" in the contemporary context of Nigeria. It intends to review the process of building discourses on human security and socioeconomic transformation in Niyi Osundare's work, *Unequal Fingers* through his stylistic approaches.

Objectives of the Study

1. Identify and analyse the major stylistic features employed in *Unequal Fingers*.
2. Examine how these stylistic features construct discourses of human security, particularly in relation to inequality, deprivation, and marginalization.
3. Investigate how the poem's linguistic choices project the need for socioeconomic transformation, social justice, and equitable development.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the study of African poetry has turned to a more interdisciplinary approach which involves stylistics, discourse analysis, ideology as well as socio-political analysis. For Niyi Osundare, his commitment to social justice, environmental awareness, and political responsibility are continually emphasized. Despite the body of work, however, it is clear that in the field of linguistic construction of inequality and human security there is still lack of systematic application of Critical Stylistics in *Unequal Fingers*.

Ideological meaning of texts is analysed with the help of the work of stylists, especially Jeffries' Critical Stylistics. As argued by Jeffries (2010, 2014), texts create worldviews via the construction of names, descriptions, prioritising, contrasting and other linguistic structuring. These tools enable researchers to discover the underlying meaning of ideas in literary and non-literary texts. Stylistics

Adesanmi M. A.



FUTIFMS International Conference

has been developed further in the ideology that it is a bridge between linguistic form and social meaning, with later developments in stylistic theory supporting this view. As of late stylistic experimentation is converging with discourse-oriented thinking with the view of meaning being socially constructed instead of just encoded. Yet, despite this theoretical extension, numerous stylistic analyses of African poetry remain descriptive and not critical, that is, they do not allow for a thorough application of the structured ideology frameworks.

Osundare's works of poetry have been recognized as socially committed texts. Egaya (2021) shows that Osundare's work is a reflection of the agrarian experience and socio-ecological realities, which make the poet a voice for the rural community. This contribution is a valuable one, yet it basically analyses what is being said and not the linguistic mechanisms that are being used. *The Eye of the Earth* is lexically analyzed in Okoh (2021). The paper examines how environment and development issues are linguistically expressed in Osundare's works. This is a move towards language-based analysis, but it still has a very semantic element and is largely restricted from using language tools for examining discourse, for example foregrounding or the use of ideological representation. Themes of corruption, inequality and social justice are consistently identified by critics of Osundare scholarship in broad terms from the 2000s. These studies however, usually approach language as a communicative tool to be used in the expression of ideas rather than as a tool for the construction of ideas.

Since the early 2000s, human security has grown beyond state-centred security to encompass the economic, food, health and environmental security. The broader definition is reinforced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) which focuses on the issue of protection from chronic threats like poverty and inequality. Human security is also a normative approach to understanding structural inequalities that threaten development and social stability, as Tadjbakhsh (2014) explains. Human security has become more associated with governance, inequality and sustainable development issues in the contexts of the Global South in recent development studies, especially in the 2020s. However, literary stylistic research rarely includes the human security frameworks in the analysis of the text. When they do, it's likely that the emphasis is thematic, not linguistic.

The advent of ecolinguistics, as represented by the work of Stibbe (2015) and (2021) for example, has broadened the focus of linguistic analysis to encompass environmental narratives and ideological “stories we live by.” According to Stibbe, language is the product of social and ecological relations, and thus influences the way societies perceive these relations. In the same way, Viridis (2022) pursues stylistic research into the field of the environment with ecostylistics, showing the language patterns that contribute to the creation of environmental meaning.

Osundare's poetry, although widely studied, has yet to be explored adequately by current scholarship to examine how the linguistic structures in *Unequal Fingers* create ideologies of inequality and human insecurity. The present study seeks to fill this void by employing the critical stylistic approach to provide the insight of socio-economic realities being expressed in the language and how it is related to larger discourses of change in the contemporary Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The critical stylistic approach (CS) developed by Jeffries (2010, 2014) serves as the basis for this study. The framework is chosen since it offers a systematic linguistic model to analyse the ideological construction of texts, representation and social meaning. The themes of inequality, power imbalance and socioeconomic injustice are themes that are explored in the text of *Unequal Fingers* and are thus, appropriate themes for analysis using Critical Stylistics analytical tools to



FUTIFMS International Conference

extract the meanings that are encoded in the text. Critical Stylistics emanated out of stylistics as a development which combines linguistic analysis and issues of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Texts can't be neutral, they are representations of reality with a particular ideological stance, according to Jeffries (2010).

Critical Stylistics is not descriptive stylistics, but a technique that analyzes how language constructs meaning by means of systematic textual-conceptual functions. The functions allow analysts to shift from surface linguistic constructs to deeper levels of interpretation in terms of ideology. Drawing on this, Jeffries (2014) elaborates on the pattern approach, which focuses on the ways in which language is used to shape readers' understanding of social actors, events, and relations. The text analysis tools utilized in this study are drawn from selected text-conceptual tools that Jeffries (2010) has developed and applied, and is especially useful for the analysis of inequality in *Unequal Fingers*. These tools include: Naming and Describing. This function analyzes the process of labeling and characterizing of social actors in texts. Also, Representing Actions, Events and States. The tool is targeting linguistic construction of events and social conditions. Equally, Equating and Contrasting. This shows oppositional patterns of text. Of equal importance among these tools is the one known as Prioritisation. A tool that aids in the process of examining how language structures foreground some ideas and at the same time background others.

The choice of Critical Stylistics for this study is particularly appropriate in view of the fact that *Unequal Fingers* is not a poem as much but rather a carefully composed ideological analysis of the problem of socioeconomic inequality. As used in this study, human security refers to security afforded to people against structural threats like poverty, inequality, and limited access to resources (UNDP, 2022). The framework provides a structure for the analysis of *Unequal Fingers*, which emphasizes how Osundare's use of language renders social inequality as lived, economic injustice as systemic, and socioeconomic transformation as moral and political imperative. The study shows that the stylistic features in the poem are not decorative, but rather ideologically charged and that they help in the formation of the meaning of human security and social justice in contemporary Nigeria.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Descriptive qualitative design is employed in this study with a textual analysis approach. Stylistic studies are suitable for qualitative textual analysis since it allows for a detailed examination of the features, meanings, and ideas of a literary text as well as its narrative structure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design is especially useful for the analysis of poetry, where the meaning is often compressed, metaphorical and/or stylistically organized. The poem elected for this study is Niyi Osundare's *Unequal Fingers* which is chosen due to its good engagement with issues of inequality, power relations, resource distribution and socioeconomic injustice in the present society. The data used in this study consist of extracted texts from the selected poem. The poem as a whole is considered as the text to be analyzed. It is purposively selected on the rationale that it resonates with the focus of the study on human security, inequality and deprivation, socioeconomic imbalance, and ideological representation of power relations. The poem contains ample linguistic information that is applicable to Critical Stylistic analysis, especially considering the role of language in the construction of social actors and economic conditions.

Close reading and purposive sampling of text features will be used for data collection. The researcher reads the poem repeatedly to look for language structures pertinent to the study's

Adesanmi M. A.



FUTIFMS International Conference

purposes. The analytical framework used in the data analysis is Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2010; Jeffries, 2014) as the main analytical framework. The analysis is based on selected tools of text and concept which include Naming and Describing, Representing Actions, Events, and States, Equating and Contrasting, and Prioritising. The analysis is carried out step by step: first by reading the poem many times to familiarise oneself with the general meaning and structure of the poem, then identifying and extracting relevant linguistic expressions and finally interpreting them in relation to human security and socioeconomic transformation in Nigeria.

The study employs a theoretical framework (Jeffries, 2010) which has been applied systematically and consistently to ensure analytical credibility, and clear classification of the linguistic features. Findings are based on observable linguistic data, and not subjectively inferred, so as to be valid in stylistic scholarship. All sources of literature that are accessible in the public domain and published scholarly sources are used in the study. There are no ethical issues concerning consent or confidentiality because human subjects are not used.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most dominant stylistic strategies in *Unequal Fingers* is the representation of social actors through contrasting naming and descriptive choices. Osundare constructs a clear ideological division between the privileged elite and the marginalized masses. For instance, the poem repeatedly foregrounds the idea of “unequal fingers”, a metaphorical naming that symbolises uneven access to resources and opportunities. The “fingers” represent actors in society, while their inequality suggests structural imbalance in resource distribution. Through such naming, the poem constructs two opposing social identities: those who control resources and those who are excluded from them. This aligns with Jeffries’ (2010) view that naming is never neutral but ideologically loaded, as it positions social actors within power hierarchies.

Osundare also characterizes inequality as a systemic issue, not an isolated one. One of the important lines of the poem introduces the distribution of wealth and resources in a subversive way, for instance, “some fingers gather what many hands produce” which describes an ongoing dynamic of accumulation and dispossession. The symmetry of economic relations is emphasized by using the term “gather” instead of “produce.” In tandem with Critical Stylistics, this is an image of actions and states that naturalise exploitation as a part and parcel of the social system and not as an anomaly. Such constructions are potent, argues Jeffries (2010), as they are ideologically charged through apparently easy-to-understand grammatical relationships. This is consistent with the current concept of human security which views economic exclusion as a structural challenge to wellbeing and development (Tadjbakhsh, 2014).

One very vital and preponderant stylistic element of the poem is the use of “contrastive structures” which show inequality. Osundare makes a moral and economic contrast between privilege and deprivation. For instance, the poem contrasts the people who “hold plenty” with the people who “stretch empty palms.” This contrast serves an ideological function of revealing the imbalance in resources. Critical stylistics is essentially concerned with binary oppositions, which show how texts organise meaning through an ideological polarisation (Jeffries, 2014). The contrast between abundance and scarcity also serves to accentuate the sense of systemic injustice. This juxtaposition highlights the importance of inequality as a hindrance to national development, and the need for systems of redistribution and inclusive governance from a socioeconomic transformation lens.

The central theme of the poem throughout is the marginalised, with repetition and emphasis. The metaphor of “fingers” is repeated as a clever device to maintain the focus on the unequal participation of society in economic life. The use of the imagery of the body, associated with labour



FUTIFMS International Conference

and production, gives more importance to the lived experience of the working class by Osundare. The foregrounding technique will make the theme of inequality the main theme of the poem. An explanation of prioritisation, from Jeffries (2010), is that it involves emphasising some meanings and backgrounding others. In *Unequal Fingers*, the lived realities of the poor are emphasized, and the legitimacy of the accumulation of by elites is challenged. This stylistic approach resonates with the discourse on human security that focuses on human wellbeing rather than abstract economic measures.

Discussion of Findings

Niyi Osundare's *Unequal Fingers* is a stylistic analysis of the poem which shows that inequality is not only the theme of the poem but an ideology which is linguistically constructed and organised in the text of the poem. The study, through the Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2010, 2014), shows the systematic encoding of social meaning by Osundare in the process of naming, contrast, representing action, prioritisation and implication.

A constant issue that runs through the poem while analysing is that the notion of inequality isn't a random social phenomenon, but a structured and recurrent system. The poem creates a worldview through a repetition of language frames and ideas of economic imbalance, such as "unequal fingers" and images of "disproportionate accumulation." It is in line with Jeffries (2010) idea that ideology is sometimes represented in natural looking grammatical and lexical structures which refer to power relations. Inequality is linguistically stabilised in Osundare's poem by repetition and metaphor, which emphasises its systemic nature.

The poem creates a distinct ideologically polarized view between the wealth producers and wealth controllers. Osundare names the "many hands" of labour, and describes them through strategies, to challenge the "few fingers" of accumulation. This asymmetry represents what Critical Stylistics terms 'ideological categorisation' in which social actors are linguistically situated to influence reader interpretation. The elites are made out to be 'the winners' of the structural imbalance, and the masses are made out to be 'the losers', but they are still productive. The elites are implicitly made as the beneficiaries of structural imbalance, and the masses are made of as the losers, yet, they are productive. Human security on this matter, strengthens the notion that insecurity is not just physical, but also economic and structural, as a result of exclusion from resources and opportunities (UNDP, 2022).

Also, among the main findings in this study is that economic relations are expressed through a dominant use of bodily metaphor, and in particular 'fingers' and 'hands'. This metaphor makes abstract economic inequality a cognitive experience of the human being, making its exploitation more accessible. The metaphorical system implies that society is a body and its parts are not equally empowered. This is consistent with cognitive stylistic conceptions of metaphor as a conceptual means of structuring social reality. Importantly, the metaphor also speaks of interconnectedness, as inequality in one aspect of society has repercussions on the overall stability. This reinforces the unspoken message in the poem that there is a need for social-economic change. Finally, the poem makes an implicit call for redistribution and structural change. No words for policy solutions are provided, but the lexicon of excess/deficiency makes transformation a moral imperative. The poem is thus consistent with development discourse whose focus is on inequality as a constraint on sustainable development and human security (Tadjbakhsh, 2014). In this capacity, Osundare's poetry is an act of aesthetic expression, and socio-political intervention. The analysis indicates that in general, *Unequal Fingers* is a discursive space of contestation, where language is used in a systematic way to produce and sustain an unequal and an unjust world.

Adesanmi M. A.



FUTIFMS International Conference

Using Critical Stylistic mechanisms, Osundare's poems become a vehicle for critique and social awareness.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings from this study show that the use of naming, contrast, metaphor, repetition and implication by Osundare has a cumulative effect in the representation of social imbalance between the privileged and the marginalized. These stylistic elements are not only ornamental, but are also ideologically charged elements that build meaning of power, access and deprivation. In addition, the findings indicate that inequality in the poem is linguistically constructed as a risk to human security, as reflected in the contemporary development paradigm where economic inclusion and social justice and human wellbeing are emphasized (UNDP, 2022). The poem's stylistic organisation suggests the inversion of society's norms and the need for an economic and social restructuring, one which is based on fairness and redistribution.

By applying Critical Stylistics, the study has demonstrated that literary texts can function as sites of ideological construction where social realities are not only reflected but actively shaped through language. Osundare's *Unequal Fingers* therefore stands as both a poetic and political text that critiques structural inequality and advocates a more equitable social order. The study contributes to stylistic scholarship by extending Critical Stylistics application to African poetry dealing with economic injustice, while also reinforcing the relevance of linguistic analysis in understanding human security and development discourse in contemporary Nigeria.

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