



LINGUISTIC CUES AND IDENTITY RE (CONSTRUCTION) IN OSOFISAN'S *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS AND RED IS THE FREEDOM ROAD*

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Abstract

The paper examines the linguistic cues deployed in Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers and Red is the Freedom Road* with a view to identifying how language is used to rewrite identities in relation to the socio-political and economic realities of Nigeria. The study is anchored on selected excerpts, purposively drawn from Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers and Red is the Freedom Road*. The texts are preferred because they project contemporary socio-political and economic issues, which are relevant to the present time. The study involves a close reading of the texts in order to identify the thematic issues projected therein. A linguistic reading of the texts is done to discover recurrent linguistic nuances and features of the texts at all levels of linguistic analysis. Data are analysed using constructionist framework, propounded by De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006. Findings show that the plays adopt powerful narrative language and symbolism to portray the oppression of slaves and the corrupt ruling class. Findings further show how Osofisan adopts language to paint a pathetic picture of the misery of the down-trodden Nigerians amidst opulence and affluence of a few. The study concludes that the two texts harp on Nigerian leadership style and its impact on the masses. The texts are reflections of how Nigerian leaders continue to pursue policies and interests that are injurious to Nigeria's sustainable growth and development.

Keywords: Language, Identity, Sustainable Growth, Socio-Political, Realities

Introduction

The concept of identity has been at the forefront of vibrant and ongoing research across numerous disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Scholars from diverse fields have shown a keen interest in understanding the multifaceted nature of identity (Fearon, 1999; Jenkins, 2004). This fascination stems from the recognition that identity is a complex and often ambiguous construct that influences debates across various domains, including nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, culture, history, and language (Hall, 1996; Smith, 2010). Importantly, identity is inherently fluid and susceptible to change, with its evolving nature rooted in specific social contexts. As Buckingham (2008:1) observes, "who I am, or who I think I am varies according to 'who I am with,' the social situations I find myself in, and my motivations at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined." This underscores the notion that identities are both constructed and reconstructed through social interactions, inter-group encounters, and contextual influences (Fearon, 1999; Hall, 1996).



Beyond its theoretical implications, identity also encompasses profound struggles for self-determination and recognition, often entailing life-or-death stakes in various parts of the world (Buckingham, 2008). Consequently, contemporary discourse on identity has gained renewed urgency, prompting scholars to explore it from multiple perspectives. For instance, Jenkins (2004:4) describes identity as, “the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with others,” while Deng (1995:1) emphasizes its role in how groups and individuals define themselves and are defined by others based on race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language. Mendoza-Denton (2004) further conceptualizes identity as an active negotiation of one’s relationship with broader social structures, mediated through language and other semiotic means.

The centrality of language in the discourse of identity cannot be overstated, as it serves as a primary mode of expression and negotiation of selfhood. Joseph (2004) asserts that identity is rooted in language, suggesting that individuals continuously construct and reconstruct their identities through linguistic practices. In the digital age, this process is exemplified in computer-mediated discourse, where studies by Raheem and Akande (2019) examined pseudonym use and naming strategies on *Nairaland* to link global youth cultures, while Chilwa (2010) analyzed discursive practices and Nigerian identity in personal emails. Similarly, Taiwo (2014) investigated identity negotiation on blogs and *Nairaland* using a discursive practices approach. However, despite these valuable insights, few studies have employed the framework of social semiotics to explore how identities are shaped by the socio-political realities of a nation.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to investigate the processes of language-mediated identity construction and reconstruction within the socio-political contexts reflected in Osofisan’s plays, *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Red Is the Freedom Road*. By applying a constructionist framework, this research seeks to illuminate how linguistic resources operate in shaping individual and collective identities amid societal upheavals.

Literature Review

Quite a number of studies have been done on African drama in recent past. In Bode Sowande’s *Farewell to Babylon* (1979), the playwright shows indubitably the state of Nigeria as being comparable to nothing but Babylon. The bourgeois leaders have become a great octopus, hounding and incarcerating all revolutionaries, both real and imagined, who are against the regime. The result is a ruling class totally insensitive to the plight of the masses.

Isidore Okpewho’s *Tides* (1993) is a political thriller, condemning the ineptitude and vices of the Nigerian rulers. In this text, Okpewho uses the epistolary technique to explore the disastrous effects of oil exploitation in Niger Delta during the late 1960s. Kehinde (2008:342) jokes that the Nigerian society that is depicted in the text is a totalitarian police-state, collaborated by the profiteering local chiefs and corrupt government bureaucrats. The central motif of the text is state’s reckless disregard of public welfare. The text offers a harrowing portrait of modern political terrorism in all its forms (governmental and insurrectionary). It is indeed a penetrating study of the complex psychology of complicity and betrayal.

Soyinka (1977) in *Opera Wonyosi* and *A play of Giants* (1984) lambasts military dictators and depraved soldiers in Africa. Also, in *Kongi’s Harvest* (1967), Kehinde claims that Soyinka establishes a hall of shame for prototype of President Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, drawing a dreadful barbaric portrait of the best and brute force in African military leaders (2008:345). The military rulers are depicted as masters of terror and censorship, draining the nation’s wealth and impoverishing the masses. In Soyinka’s texts, Ipshita asserts that Nigerian rulers see the country as an object that could be possessed by them, even at the cost of its very survival (2004:124).

Biyi Bandele-Thomas’ *The Man Who Came from the Back of Beyond* (1991) and *Sympathetic Undertakers and Other Dreams* (1991) dwell on the shortcomings of military rules in Nigeria. The two texts are modern Nigerian fables with unreliable narrators; they explore a post-independence descent into madness. The



military dictators are shown as corrupt and inhumane rulers who do not care what crimes the indigent masses resort to in order to pay their taxes and make a living. In ridiculing the military dictators, Bandele-Thomas lampoons the naïve political diatribes and utopianisms of the Nigerian leftocracy (2008:339). He creates a caricature of Nigerian military rulers and exposes their slavish mentality, lack of organizing ability, business acumen and concern for the governed.

Achebe can be understood to mean that Nigeria is naturally endowed with all it takes to be a great nation, but due to the ineptitude of its leaders, the country is grossly engulfed in backwardness, of which the masses bear the brunt. In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), a novel that synthesizes brutal episodes, exposing the effectiveness of military rule in transforming human society into a sheer hell hole (Innes 1991:24), the foibles of military rulers are foregrounded through a circle of three friends who are in different powerful positions in the country during a military era. In fact, they constitute the cream of our society and the hope of the black race (Achebe 1988:2). However, the hope is shattered as power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Sam, the military commander of the fictional country, Kangan (unmistakably Nigeria), who has assumed the presidency in a coup, brooks no opposition and he is starving a dissident province into submission to the central authority.

Sam, the president for life is suffering from bestiality and authoritarianism; he subjects people to cruel indignities. For instance, he closes the borehole of a community in the midst of a major drought. The trouble with the country is summed up by Ikem, the editor of the National Newspaper. To him, Nigeria's political woes are traceable to the failure of the country's rulers to establish vital links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being (1988:141). The text depicts a deeply diseased country that urgently demands greater determination to cure its ailments.

In *A Man of the People* (1966), a socio-political satire, Odili, the intellectual protagonist, rather than succumb to cynicism and nihilism, believes that the decadent system can be internally cleansed. However, the result is an odyssey of naïveté, graft, corruption and political ineptitude (2008:340). He is idealistic and superficial. The would-be democrat reformer himself is hardly fired by altruism and the dream of heroic glory (2008:340). He is a victim of moral myopia, becoming like the populace he despises. The novel explores the indecency of the politicians and the desperation with which they desire wealth. Kehinde opines that Odili is a prototype of the Nigerian politicians in this regard (2008:340). The text touches the ingratitude and the misuse of opportunities and privileges by the Nigerian politicians. Kehinde submits that the world of the novel is that of corrupt and rich politicians who have not one atom of decency in their persons; they worship at the altar of money (2008:341). Therefore, civil rule is not endorsed by Achebe in the novel. He therefore enlists soldiers to put an end to the rot and mess. However, Army coup proves to be mere cosmetics. Later events in the country reveal this to be a controversial denouement. The military therefore are depicted as having no solution to the problems of the nation.

Dasylyva's *Songs of Odamolugbe* (2006) is a scathing attack on the Nigerian leadership from the time of independence to date. Dasylyva draws attention to the fact that Satan (known as Lucifer) has been granted reprieve to continue his jail term in Nigeria. Thus, on arrival in the country, Lucifer becomes a 'prince' attending to the needs of the country's 'politricksters'. In his 'poetilogue', Dasylyva writes:

That reminds me; because Nigeria recognizes his former position in heaven just before he fell, he was granted permission to change his name from Lucifer to Satan. And besides Kirikiri and Gashua, he has a cell in every state of the federation and Abuja. Like I said earlier, he was hardly in any of the executive cells; he is more visibly busy at Aso Rock, Nigeria's seat of power...at the senate and House of Reps...They find him very useful, he keeps their Ghana-must-go bags for them (2006:18).

Dasylyva makes his task plain by revealing his intention through his anger at a system that ought to be working, but which is not, due to the maladies and maladministration on the part of the country's leaders.



He submits that the beauty of Nigeria has been bastardised by those at the helms of affairs and decries the state of dilapidation, brought upon Nigeria by the rulers:

Now devastated, dormant. Clucking gulls flew over the gullies...Long, long ago before the Agoni of Ogoni Oil spillage by the bastards, or Ishekiri-Ijaw fratricide they called ethnic cleansing! But the soldier-ants and pepper-soup platoons. Termite at the root...feverish and famished! (2006: 49)

One motif that runs through the works examined is that Nigerian rulers have lost their senses of patriotism, communal responsibility, pedigree, pride, attachment and cultural duty. The texts reveal that the ideal dreams of independence in the country have sizzled out. The only ambition of the new rulers is to move into the spaces vacated by the colonizers without restructuring the political, social and cultural arrangement left behind by them. According to Fanon, "each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it" (1963:166).

The literary search for social and political changes that can transform Nigerian life has revealed that the citizens must determine not only to achieve victory over imperialism but also to triumph over hunger, diseases, despair and misgovernance. What the country requires therefore is a leadership that recognizes the problems at the roots of the national life, a leadership which decides to risk its will and reputation in solving the myriads of problems bedeviling the country. This is the predominant political statement Ola Rotimi is making from *If...A Tragedy of the Ruled* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*. Hence, those African literary texts reviewed above, and with which the selected texts for our study maintain intertextual relationship, are evidence that leadership failure cuts across every nook and cranny of the Nigerian society.

Methodology

The study is anchored on selected excerpts, purposively drawn from Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers and Red is the Freedom Road*. The texts are preferred because they project contemporary socio-political and economic issues, which are relevant to the present time. The study involves a close reading of the texts in order to identify the thematic issues projected in the text. Equally, a linguistic reading of the text is done to discover recurrent linguistic nuances and features of the text at all levels of linguistic analysis. Data are analysed using constructionist framework, propounded by De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006. This framework is grounded in the idea that suggests that phenomena typically considered as internal (e.g., knowledge, intentions, agency, emotions, identity) or external (varying widely from more obvious constructions such as marriage, money, and society to less obvious ones such as location, event, and continuity) have their reality in an inter-subjectively reached agreement that is historically and culturally negotiated. These agreements are never fixed but subject to constant renegotiation- in which the forms of discourse that negotiators rely on play a major role.

Discussion of Findings

In the selected texts, Osofisan employs a range of linguistic tools to vividly depict how the socio-political environment perpetuates violence and crime. *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1991) explicitly demonstrates that society's structural issues, such as persistent unemployment, widespread corruption, and economic exploitation, which inevitably produce potential criminals, exemplified by armed robbers. Through metaphorical language, Osofisan portrays armed robbery not merely as individual moral failure but as a symptom of systemic failure. The recurring use of socio-political metaphors underscores the idea that violence is a consequence of societal neglect and greed. The playwright adopts dialogic and rhetorical devices to humanize the robbers, challenging viewers to see beyond the criminal label. For instance, Hassan's declaration in the nominal expressions, "Everyone has a dream. Everyone has a point at which the dream cracks up," (1991:90) employs personalized language and rhetorical questions to evoke empathy and illustrate the universality of disillusionment. Similarly, Angola's question, "...too many people ride their posh cars along the same ridden backs of the poor, is there no other way?" (1991:29), employs



metaphor and irony to critique social inequality and pseudo-development, exposing the contradictions of rapid economic growth amid widespread poverty.

Osofisan also uses contrast and juxtaposition to emphasize societal disparities in his explication of “wealth versus poverty, corruption versus innocence.” The contrasting images of the wealthy elite’s affluence and the impoverished masses are reinforced through visual descriptions and symbolic language, which highlight the socio-economic divide. The recurring motif of corruption, depicted through figurative language, underscores the systemic rot. For example, the play’s depiction of leaders as “cancer on the flesh of his people” employs metaphor to symbolize societal decay and leadership’s destructive influence. The dialogue of characters like Mama Alice and Bintu employs colloquial and emphatic language, making their plight relatable and evoking audience sympathy. Mama Alice’s rhetorical question, “. . . we have to feed our family, haven’t we?” (1991:30), uses direct speech and rhetorical inquiry to underline the desperation driving people into criminality. This linguistic strategy effectively foregrounds the moral complexity of survival under oppressive circumstances.

In *Red Is the Freedom Road* (1982), Osofisan adopts powerful narrative language and symbolism to portray the oppression of slaves and the corrupt ruling class. The dialogue is laden with imagery and metaphor, vividly depicting the dehumanization and brutality inflicted on the oppressed. Ibidun’s lament, “Our masters have become more cruel with us. Each day, their whip cuts deeper into our skins,” (1982:117) employs visual and tactile imagery to evince empathy and highlight the cruelty of tyranny. The use of symbolic language such as ‘whips,’ ‘chains,’ and ‘slavery’ serves as potent metaphors for political and social subjugation. Osofisan’s language in this play also deploys repetition and parallelism to emphasize the relentless suffering and hopelessness of the masses. The depiction of the rulers as “cancer” and “oppressors” adopts metaphor and hyperbole to critique leadership that is destructive and parasitic. The descriptive and emotive language paints a stark picture of hunger, chaos, and despair, reinforcing the urgent need for societal change.

On the whole, Osofisan’s strategic use of metaphors, imagery, contrast, colloquial expressions, and rhetorical questions functions as a linguistic toolkit that exposes the socio-political realities of Nigeria. His language not only critiques the leadership failure and social injustice but also fosters empathy and awareness among audiences. These linguistic features serve to underscore his overarching message: that societal decay and corruption are deeply embedded in Nigeria’s political and economic systems, with devastating consequences for the common people.

Conclusion

So far, the present study has investigated the place of linguistic cues and identity re (construction) in Osofisan’s *Once upon Four Robbers* and *Red is the Freedom Road* with a view to identifying how language is deployed to rewrite identities in relation to the socio-political and economic realities of Nigeria. Findings show that the plays adopt powerful narrative language and symbolism to portray the oppression of slaves and the corrupt ruling class. Findings further show how Osofisan deploys language to paint a pathetic picture of the misery of the down-trodden Nigerians amidst opulence and affluence of a few. The study concludes that the two texts harp on Nigerian leadership style and its impact on the masses. The texts are reflections of how Nigerian leaders continue to pursue policies and interests that are injurious to Nigeria’s sustainable growth and development.



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