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## **Alliteration and Assonance in Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market-Place*: A phonetic analysis**

### **1.0 Introduction**

It is common knowledge that language, the most important and versatile of all the means of communication available to man, exists in two principal forms; namely, the spoken and the written. The spoken involves sounds produced by the speech organs and is perceived by the ear while the written mode is presented by means of marks on paper and is deciphered by the eyes. Of the two forms, the spoken is indisputably primary. Its counterpart, the written form is man's ingenious attempt at making durable the impermanent spoken signs, although not on a one-to-one correspondence. Thus, the two forms cannot be said to be completely mutually exclusive. Rather, their relationship should be seen as a flexible continuum, evident in the availability of materials that are spoken to be written and others written to be delivered orally.

Poetry is one genre of literature which though written, is often to be read as if spoken to enable the audience appreciate its value, in Okpewho's (1985:7) words, "with their EYES and EARS" (emphasis mine). Sogunro (1989:1) expresses the strong phonic potential of poetry: Poetic language the world over, especially its written form, cannot be fully appreciated if due consideration is not given to the way it would be spoken. These statements have a strong implication for the analysis of poetry: the linguistic features which poetry exhibits and the message they convey cannot be fully accounted for without a reasonable explication of its phonology.

This paper's focus is on two significant sound patterns, alliteration and assonance, used for aesthetic and communicative purposes in Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place*. The paper is thus a practical analysis of poetry based on sound effects. The aim is to sensitize the reader to some artistic and message-enhancing phonological features which are important for comprehension of the poetic text.

## **2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

This paper derives its impetus from the fact that certain sounds, when they appear in clusters, often have intriguing correlations with certain ideas or emotions. In other words such phonological features as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme and rhythm have been recognized as having significant contributions to the total message being conveyed in a literary text. Thus, a careful explication of the spoken features of a poetic discourse is often crucial to a fuller understanding of the text owing to the fact that certain sounds tend to evoke ideas and emotions. As David I. Mason (1967:11) expresses it,

Certain sounds are acknowledged by majority of readers to be appropriate to certain ideas and inappropriate to others. The poet with a good ear will tend to select (consciously or unconsciously) certain sounds appropriate to the mood or subject of line or lines he is writing and the sensitive reader will (consciously or unconsciously) accept for correct the colours with which the poet presents him.

In other words, certain vowel and consonant patterns are used in a significant manner in poetry.

The great Irish poet W.B Yeats (1924: 192-3) captures the relationship between sounds and emotions thus:

All sounds , all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relations, a beautiful relation to

one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art whether it be an epic or a song.

Mason and Yeats are quoted at some length because their observations are valid and instructive in the study of poetry in particular. As Kolawole (2003:06) points out, “A considerable knowledge of phonology is required for a good analysis of a poem.”

### **3.0 FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

Our analysis of alliteration and assonance in *Songs of the Market-Place* takes the route of stylistics. Stylistics, as Berry (1975:5) describes it, “is the application of linguistics to the study of literature”. The stylistic approach is a bridge through which a linguistic incursion into literary texts is made possible. This paper singles out one of the important levels of linguistic description, phonology, in the text for consideration, using tools and theories provided by stylistics. The goal of our approach is to identify, classify into categories, analyse and discuss the communication effects of certain clusters of sounds in the poetic text.

### **4.0 PRACTICAL ANALYSIS OF SONGS OF THE MARKET-PLACE BASED ON SOUND EFFECTS**

Sound patterns of alliteration and assonance are employed in *Songs of the Market-place* to project and reinforce the messages of oppression, suffering, poverty, brutality and fraud conveyed in the text. In interpreting the sounds, we have been guided partly by observations made by scholars with respect to certain sounds and partly by our intuitive feel of the sound texture. We thus provide empirical evidence to justify our conclusions about these sound effects.

## 4.1 Alliteration

The repetition of certain initial consonant sounds is noticeable in some poems in the text. Such consonants fall mainly within the plosive sounds, but also extend to the glottal and sibilant fricatives. Plosive consonants are, as described by Leech (1969:94-95):

Those consonants articulated by a sudden damming up and sudden release of the stream of air from the lungs. Thus to general bunching of consonants they add a particular texture of sounds: a pervasive abruptness; a flinty, unyielding hardness.

The sudden damming up followed by a sudden audible release of the stream of air compressed behind the closure is not without violence or explosion. The additional texture of “a flinty, unyielding hardness” seems bound also to some sort of violence; “unyielding hardness” in particular brings to mind the violent destruction which awaits unyielding stiff necked people, as expressed in proverbs 29:1, “He that is often being reprov'd that hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed and that without remedy”. In *Songs of the Market-Place*, prominent repetitions of certain consonants at the word initial are used in a striking manner to add weight to the message of violence and destruction conveyed.

### 4.1.1 Alliteration of the Bilabial Plosives /p/, /b/

#### a. Voiceless Bilabial Plosive /p/

Examples in “Excursion 1” and “Excursion 11” are *plump preacher*, *paltry pennies*. More examples are found in “At a university Congregation” and “Publish or Perish”: *Printed in Yokohama, Published in London, Pirated, Plagiarised, Paper Pillar of cardboard tower*, and *Pulp test of our collective wisdom Papyrus*.

*Plump preacher* sounds forceful and fits into the harsh sermon extolling the virtue of want.

*Paltry Pennies rattling* suggest noise, disorder or chaos. The symbolic message is that poverty

(paltry pennies) and violence (rattling) are inextricably linked. The plosive sounds underscore the message of poverty and oppression conveyed in the poems.

In “Publish or Perish”, the alliteration of /p/ indicates the “do or die” violence implicit in the destruction associated with academic nonproductivity in universities. The setting of the poem is a typical Nigerian University. “Perish” in such an environment connotes intellectual or professional stagnation due lack of promotion. The frequent repetition of /p/ in the poem emphasizes the central message of the poem: no publication no promotion. The poet insinuates through such items as *pirated* and *plagiarised* and the repetition of their initial consonant that the race to promotion on the campus sometimes takes the lane of desperation.

b. Voiced Bilabial Plosive /b/

“Excursions I” has the following examples: *Body Buffest Between Belches, Baring ... Benevolence*. “Excursions II”, *Begging Bowls. Sule Chase: a Barrel-Buttock woman Blows the whistle*. “Siren”: *Buntings and Banners, and Brazen Bombasts*. A most significant use of the consonant is in “The Fall of the beast”.

Bullested and fang  
 Bathed in Blood and bile  
 Brained the hulk  
 Bolstered by Baser Beasts a Broad.

This message of violence (though in a different form) is continued in the repetition of the voiced counterpart of, /b/. For instance, in *the body succumbs to the buffets of hunger, buffets* paints the picture of hunger hitting the body with force as a physical object. Violence, in the form of aggression is suggested in the alliterative use of /b/ in *barrel-buttock women blows...* The use of *barrel* – the metal tube of a rifle, as part of the compound modifier, *barrel-buttock*

and *blow* conjures up an image of a violent woman. In the poem, her violent nature is displayed in her leading the crowd to pursue Sule, the helpless three-kobo-loaf thief.

In “Siren”, violence of a different kind is conveyed. The voiced bilabial plosive in *buntings and banners, brazen bombasts* and its repetition at word initial position suggests noise violence associated with the Siren of the men in power. Such deafening noise often results in confusion on the part of other road users and may further lead to violent destruction of lives and property through accidents. The noise generated by the Siren relates to the forceful release of air during the production of plosive sounds. It also portrays the men in power as vain and brainless: like empty, hollow drums, the rulers make empty noise.

This insensitive attitude of rulers is poignantly captured in “The Fall of the Beast”. Here, bloody, pointless violence is evoked, provoked by the bestiality in man: *Bolstered by baser beasts*. The repetition of /b/ and the capital <B> at the beginning of each line in the fourth stanza of the poem drive home the fact of the inhuman acts of the tyrants in government.

#### **4.1.2. Alliteration of the Voiceless Velar Plosive**

The alliteration of /k/ like the other plosive sounds discussed above suggests a kind of violence and confusion. A relevant example is found in “Rithmetic of Ruse” – a poem centered on political fraud and resultant violence. The first stanza of the poem prominently employs the voiceless velar plosive:

A calculated Cloud by SataniC Computers  
Coughing CataClysms in algebraic  
Quantum.

The repetition of /k/ evokes some sort of mathematical / figure (computer) violence or confusion which is a reflection of the confusion that surrounds the question of what two-third of nineteen was,  $12 \frac{2}{3}$  or 13, during the 1979 political elections in Nigeria; the subtitle “Reflection

79” provides the context for the poem. This confusion or violence becomes more glaring when the sound is seen in relation to the Yoruba word, *katakata*, a meaning conveying sound whose equivalent in English is ‘scatter’ or ‘confusion’.

#### 4.1.3. Alliteration of the Glottal Fricative /h/

In the articulation of the glottal fricative, Gimson (1980:191) describes the processes involved thus:

The air is expressed from the lungs  
With a considerable PRESSURE  
Causing some FRICTION throughout  
the vocal tract. (emphasis mine)

The articulation of the sound /h/ is associated with pressure and friction. The sound embodies a sense of harshness or friction. This feeling seems to be conveyed in the lines of the poems where there is a repetition of the sound. Examples are found in “Excursion III” *harsher than Hitler’s Siren* and “Homecomings” *A hollow head ... break their hammer / let their hand suffer / stir hornet*. The sound suggests to the reader the harsh pain which poverty and exploitation bring to the sufferer.

#### 4.1.4. Alliteration of the sibilants /s/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/

Apart from the repetition of the glottal fricative, there is also the alliteration of the sibilant sounds as an effective expressive device in the text. The prominence of sibilant sounds, as Leech (1969:96-97) observes, “is capable of suggesting certain classes of sounds (rusting, hissing, sighing, whispering)”.

In “Excursions I”, the repetition of the sibilant fricative /s/ is noticeable in *sunken sockets, skins scaly squeezing spongy breast, soul succumbs several...sanity inspectors*. Here, the frequent occurrence of the sound suggests the sighing of pain and hissing in disapproval of the

exploitation. A similar show of disapproval seems to be demonstrated by the alliteration of sibilant sounds in “Sule Chase”. The alliteration is noticeable in the poem’s title as well as in the first line of the poem:

The chase starts in some shadowy stall.

The repetition of the sibilant sounds in the title and first line of the poem suggests hissing and reflects an attitude of disapproval of a society which delights in lynching a small fry of a thief (Sule stole a three-kobo loaf) as opposed to the large lump of national cake embezzled by the rogues in government who are adored rather than lynched by the society. In “Sule chase”, the *chase*, though, *starts in a shadowy stall* and not a big, imposing departmental store or government office; it is one in which lawyers, doctors, tailors, civil servants, etc., get involved in order to catch Sule. Symbolically, there is the collocation of the harsher sibilant sound /tʃ/ in “chase” with the fricative /ʃ/ in shadowy” to suggest that in chasing Sule, the society is merely pursuing the shadow. The repetition of the voiceless sibilant /s/ in “start” and “stall” seems to hiss at the starting point of the race, a mere stall not a big modern shopping complex. Here, the deployment of sibilant sounds also evokes the *pshaw* sound which indicates contempt for a society in chase of shadows.

Alliteration of /s/ also signals some message in the poem entitled, “Dry seasons”. The alliteration of /s/ in the first line, *The sun stands smothered* is linked thematically to the rest of the stanza *and clouds heavy exchange / groans of parturition*. The message is wrapped in the sighing, suggesting repetition of /s/ conveys the oppressive heat of the sun.

#### **4.2. Assonance**

A close reading of the text reveals that certain vowels run through the text in a prominent way. Like their consonant counterparts, these vowels are significant in the way they transmit and



reinforce the message in the text. Though there is no preponderance of such vowels in the text compared with consonants, we can still identify the assonance of the following vowels: /ʌ/, /ɔ/, and /ɪ/, /i:/ which we classify according to their kind and function.

#### 4.2.1 Assonance of /ʌ/, /ɔ/, and /i:/

Many examples of these vowels are found in the three sections of the long poem, “Excursion”. They include, *running, sores, vaults, porters Omolanke crumble smuggled pluck, hawking oranges, million, blood multiplying foreign fortunes, glamourised, slums, saw, exporters, muzzle, sunken sockets, boys, kwashiorkor, body, politics, vulture. and dawn’s dust.* The subject matters of the poems in “Excursions I, III” include poverty, exploitation and insensitivity to people’s problems. /ʌ/ and /ɔ/ bring to mind the grumbling-like noise made by frogs. The croaking of the frogs finds a parallel in the grumbling of the masses under exploitation. Like the sibilants, the vowels also have a link with the expression of contempt, *pshaw* which shows a condemnation of the actions of the exploiters and oppressors.

#### 4.2.2 Assonance of /i:/ and /ɪ/

The repetition of the long and short vowels evokes the cry of pain in the poems in which they are prominent. Examples include *we meet skins, chronic, squeezing, shriveled, pin, ribs, baring disintegrating disc, and busy reciprocity, and seek coffin ailing the precarious tilt.*

### 5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper identified, analysed, and discussed the use of alliteration and assonance in *Songs of the Market-Place*. Alliteration and assonance are, as Berry (1975: 57) observes, “sound patterns that are not commonly found in all registered but are exploited in poetic/ literary language to strengthen the central thought of the work”. The demonstration in this paper testifies to the communicative and aesthetic effects the use of alliteration and assonance has on Osundare’s

message: it has not only reinforces the poet's message but enhances his art. The present exercise also points to the wealth of information "an all eyes and all ears" reader can draw from the puzzle that is poetry. It is hoped that more attention will be paid to the phonetic aspect of poetic language, especially in the course of digging deep in the mine of African poetry in English by language scholars and literary critics.

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