

INSTANCING POETIC SUBSTANTIATION THROUGH LINGUISTIC REFRACTION IN THE POETRY OF MUAZU MAIWADA

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Abstract

Expressivist poetics dictates the primacy of the apprehension of the author's emotions, feelings and observations about life as these find expression in his or her artistic composition. It does this without prejudice to the importance of the text as a singular entity sometimes to be critically viewed and assessed irrespective of the author's opinion of it. In a bid to show their angst, to showcase their feeling of deep anxiety and dread over the dissatisfying and disaffected state of affairs in their nation, poets resort to use of strong images and language with such force that the reader has no option but to look again at the text to see what is informing this strong condemnation. This shocking experience, this jolting to wakefulness, on the part of the reader underscores the poet's success for there lies his intention – to arrest the reader's attention. Muazu Maiwada's singular collection of poetry State of the Anus is typical of these poetic texts. Indeed from the very title one is mesmerized, stupefied would have been preferable here, into either going through with unconventional poetic experience or gets instantly repulsed and toast the book aside as one of those documents recounting the existential angst of the privileged elite through disgusting images. This paper takes the former stance and discusses the rare convolution of language to express an attitude to issues that were otherwise portrayed in a more acceptable form in other genres.

Keywords: Expressivist poetics, language, artistic composition, image, Muazu Maiwada

Introduction

Without doubt, Muazu Maiwada's is one of the angriest poetic voices to come out of Northern Nigeria in recent literary history. He is so disenchanted with the docility with which other poets in the region go about their trade that to him such luxuries of romance and religion were more anomalies than a credit to the poets themselves. He seems to think that there is no place for poetic pleasure in a country so bedevilled with poverty, corruption and ineptitude of leadership. The strangest thing however is that in spite of this singularly idiosyncratic disposition, a consistent irony dogs Muazu Maiwada's poetic experiment. His unapologetically modernist style and deliberate linguistic dislocation to achieve higher meanings makes his text a material to be appreciated only by the erudite literary elite. The deliberate obfuscation of meaning through linguistic refraction jettisons the social message that one would have expected to be made readily available to the ordinary reader of poetry.

For in the first, the very choice of the poetic medium to carry his message across limits the audience he attempts to reach. This is because by its very nature, poetry is a specialized genre. Secondly, the over concentrated deployment of heavily loaded linguistic infraction, which requires ample pre-deciphering patience to apprehend, further shrinks the number of critics or readers to appreciate this otherwise beautiful text. Thirdly, and this definitely more worrisome, is the choice of the title itself – *State of the Anus*. It appears frivolous at first but as soon as one reads the blurb and sees such esteemed poetic names as Prof. Aderemi Bamikunle of blessed memory and Dr. Okello Oculi, one knows that it is a serious text. So why should a text

like that have a title like this? This puts people with lighter sensibilities off. Very few writers can match the derisive voice of Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* when it comes to using highly suggestive images and symbols to show disenchantment and disgust with prevailing political and social situation in the society.

The highly sustained images of decay and putrefaction going through the length of the text to the very end have been extolled internationally by literary critics. But this was achievable only because the novel was read. And it was read because one was cajoled from the very ironic title (which most readers truncate to *The Beautiful Ones*) to find out what the text was about. In the case of *State of the Anus* such irony is not even implied in the title. Indeed the author finds it necessary to explain his choice of title for fear of being misconstrued as plain disgusting. In the preface to the text, or what he prefers to call “By the Way...”, he offers what amounts to be an apology to the text as indeed an explanation for the title:

State of the Anus is not an area of study. So also, geo-anatomically speaking, neither is the anus, that loquacious dimple of beingness, when reduced to a crypt, the raw material of some vapid innuendoes. State of the Anus is an affirmation of metaphor, an attempt to deal with some beginning of sorts, of a species and its condition...(p.xi)

Ordinarily the modern critic would not be swayed one way or another by this explanation. In the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley (1995) in their redoubtable essay *The Intentional Fallacy* the design or intention of the author is neither available

nor desirable as standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.

What is imperative is what the text has to impart. Still it is instructive to note that this explanation would have been totally unnecessary were it not for the unconventional choice of title. What however is relevant to this paper is that the poet himself agrees that his collection is a metaphor, an attempt to deal with some beginning of sorts, of specie and its condition. This last would form our focus. To us, therefore, contrary to the arguments of the anti-intentionalists, the author's perception about his art matters. This paper intent to discuss the affirmed metaphor that deals with the human species and its condition, the portrayal of which gratifies Okello Oculi (2004) and makes him see the writing as delightfully instructive and helps me to leap to heights of awareness. The style through which this is achieved also commands our attention.

Definition of terms

The thrust of the paper is the instancing of poetic substantiation through linguistic infraction in Muazu Maiwada's collection of poems, *State of the Anus*. Instancing of poetic substantiation refers to the deliberate documentation of the author's perception and feeling about events and issues in the society as pragmatically expressed in his poetry. This pragmatic expression is however premised on the one hand on the commonality of the issues treated and on the other hand on the style adopted in treating them. This then leads to the second phrase in our title which is linguistic refraction. Refraction, which calls infraction to mind, indeed in some instances the two are almost synonymous, by its very nature suggests a reflection different from the ordinary - an oblique, or if one wills, a convoluted kind of reflection. In the case of Maiwada's poetry,

this takes the form of extreme experimentation with form, a stylization unique and peculiar to him at least from the northern part of the country, an experimentation usually to be discerned from the handling, not to say mishandling, of the language itself. In the blurb Prof. Aderemi Bamikunle refers in mild almost patronizing tone to what he sees in *State of the Anus* as good poetry from the point of view of wit, coinage, fresh turn of phrases and the working out of the central image running through the poem(s).

One muses at this expression especially if one notices that Bamikunle himself is not uninfected by Maiwada's frequent recourse to the deployment of parenthesis for deeper or additional meaning – "...central image running through the poem(s)". This at once suggests to the reader the collection can be seen as one long poem or a collection of several poems. As will be seen later in this paper, Maiwada makes abundant use of this and several other unconventional turn of phrases or parenthetical spellings for heightened effects. Coinages and (un)expected turn of phrases actually form the foundation on which *State of the Anus* is built. Linguistic refraction thus refers to the poet's unique use of language where consistently phrases or spellings or puns in general and sometimes even ellipsis are deployed with remarkable degree of success to jolt the reader from his serene state and make him an accessory in capturing the sad dislocated state of affairs in the nation.

Intertwining message and the messenger

Form and content are consistently intertwined in these poems. The style is as integral to the meaning as the message it carries. In fact, in most cases, there is no separating them. From the very structure of the poems contained in this collection, one notices that there is clearly an uneven structural demarcation of

parts. Like some Shakespearean drama where a play is divided into five acts, Maiwada's text is divided into five decidedly unequal parts. Of these parts, the first three have a form of preamble which gives an inkling as to what to expect in the section. These preambles are so poetically expressed that the temptation to quote and explain them is overpowering.

The first part is termed ANAL-LOGY, the second ANAL-YSTS: A PORTRAIT; the third, ANAL-YSIS, the fourth, POST-MORTEM and the fifth, INTIMATIONS. Interestingly, the last two parts which are more philosophical than the first three, are the ones without the ANAL-anything in them. The first three on the other hand have a phrase or a quotation introducing them: in Part I, ANAL-LOGY for instance we have this quaint statement:

if in the solemn midst of elders
a child begs leave of a fart, his
anus may as well be granted leave
of a weightier matter.

From our perspective, this can as well serve as an epigraph for the whole collection since what it attempts to do in the beginning is to talk about the state of the anus only to gravitate later to the posthumous dissection of social situations captured in *post-mortem* and *intimations*. The second part is ushered in by carefully couched phrase: "a durbar of absences, presences and essences". The third brings us back to our by now familiar, if still repulsive, lavatory imagery of shit with a unique philosophy all its own:

Shit was something
Sweet, tasty –
Until it went into us

Out the anus –

It still hasn't exhausted its utility.

After this, the poet no longer finds any need to introduce the remaining parts or indeed prefix them with any iconographic ANALity, if one can venture a coinage. This can only suggest that the remaining parts were written separately and joined later to form one whole. This therefore nullifies the needless parenthesis of Bamikunle quoted above – *State of the Anus* is a collection of poems, not one long poem. But the structural lack of continuity or inconsistency may be a reflection of the state of the society where some things are symmetrically construed or made while others are haphazardly made.

What this paper is trying to submit at this juncture is that there is a marriage of sorts between content and form. The reader is warned that the book is not an area study. Yet everything in it suggests the contrary. Indeed the very first poem in the selection celebrates the anus in a song. Oriki, is Yoruba term for a veneration song and the poet titles this poem “Oriki of an Anus”. Because the article in the title is indefinite, it follows that the Anus there is representative of other anuses, other similar states.

Anus, anus,
Where is your no(o)se
Or where you born a leper
What are you doing at the hem of affairs
Off-side of hope, red-carded by living
One-eyed brigand stating issues
In a whirlpool of loud declarations
In you the sun never rises, never sets
Never shines
Arse-hose leading to the terror in

Cascading down the error out...
They say I must go
I must go to see my would-be in-laws
Why should I enter a pact
You will never keep?
She is a divorcee and a hunchback –
Your talent for impertinence
Will come in handy (p.15).

Laced with iridescent, not to say sardonic, humour this poem resonates with rich suggestive metaphors and shows how in spite of the sad state of affairs we can still get out of it. The metaphor is played here by the poet protagonist as a suitor saddled with a bride who is a divorcee and a hunchback and it is only the anus with its capacity for impertinence that can set him free. The bride is the Nigerian society which he wants to get out of at all costs. To get the anus to do its bidding, its values first have to be acknowledged and extolled. The first three lines are rhetorical. “Where is your nose for sensing trouble? Where is your noose for tightening what is not desired?” The first wonder is expressed calling the attention of Anus itself. “Where you born a leper?” This is cheeky and ironic challenge. “What are you doing at the hem of affairs?” This is a daring if brilliant challenge with the unmistakable pun on helm. Translated, it seems to be challenging: what are you doing down there when you should be doing something worthwhile up here? After throwing this challenge it is to be assumed that the personified anus would cooperate and the rebellion of abandoning the state exemplified by the in-laws will be played to its conclusion.

They say I must go
I must go to see my would-be in-laws
Why should I enter a pact

You will never keep?
She is a divorcee and a hunchback –
Your talent for impertinence
Will come in handy.

Surely after such a visit the in-laws will not want to see the poet protagonist ever again, having carried the anus along to display its talent for impertinence which the poet finds handy. In this poem he sees escape as a form of rebellion and it is treated humorously though its import is no doubt serious. And however one views it, having risen above the miasma of the anal imagery and the convoluted, refractive language, one uncovers a message as germane as the style that is used in handling it.

In another poem “The Way We Are”, the poet gives the same theme a different treatment. The issue is now handled seriously. Even from the very title itself, one is left in no doubt this one will be a reflection of our condition. Whether the reflection would be historical, topical or futuristic however would be seen only after the poem is internalized. The “we” versus “them” theme is effectively handled in this poem.

We have become, and are celebrated thus,
Masters of the game of survival
Our resilient spirit ignites the pyre
Of their hallowed iniquities
We sponge in the chic damnation
They throw in the shame quarters
Of our tank existence
East to West, North to South (p.16)

Here, as elsewhere, the poet lambasts the docility of Africans in the face of continental oppression and subjugation. He later narrows it down to Nigerian specifics where in recorded history, precisely in 1986, Ahmadu Bello University students were

mowed down by police bullets after a genuine protest. Six students died as a result of that fracas. And the media did its best to downplay first the number of the dead, then the number of the maimed and the bodily damage inflicted on several others. The satire and the ironic humour are captured vividly. Again in unrivalled choice of words and coinages this is poetically expressed thus:

And the hybrid monsters, like the local
Chancellor of vice, and the inter- and national
Maggots grow luxurious in the cesspool
Of our “better tomorrow”
When we whine, they parade the armoury
With which they would blackout
And history remained a perfect observer
Hobbling on its crutches
To keep perspective

...

If you want the RATEST NEWS
Tune not to the short-wave of our famished
souls
The anus has no tribe, nor scribe, nor does it
Suffer the epilepsy of words. And tell me,
who
Does not know its signal tune?

Of note here is the use of “hybrid monsters” to describe university officials. They are deracinated educated African elite whose allegiance is not to their motherland and the kowtowing is not respected by the colonial masters. For the “chancellor of vice” read “Vice Chancellor”. The university officials are the national and international maggots who feed on the promise of the better tomorrow of the youth. And when the youth complain,

they send police men to kill them – “when we whine, they parade the armoury/With which they would blackoutus”. *Blackoutus* is as much an inversion as it is a coinage, the will black us out, delete us, kill us. And history remains indolent, incapacitated since records are in the hands of the rulers.

And history remained a perfect observer
Hobbling on its crutches
To keep perspective.

These examples of poetic infraction abound in the collection.

While all these deserve commendation and critical attention, it is in *Anal Report* that the Nigerian situation is encapsulated, and this almost prophetically so. The poem needs to be quoted in its entirety. For in a situation where the sounds made by fired guns during coups are aptly compared to the sounds emanating from the anus when “it is granted leave to let go of weightier matters”, the poet really overreaches himself as wordsmith here.

Anal Report

“Parrat! tat! tat! prrat!
Bang! bang! bang! goes shit
Bang! bang! bang! goes fart”

...

And this warless Generals-infested army
With manic lips hot
On the trumpet of honed violence
In civil disputes!
“Bang! bang! bang!”
I hear a report from the barracks
“His sheep of state is bleating,” I said
Too much moin moin is bad for the shitstem”
Stay cool idiot,” they said

“There is a coup in process –
“Cabbage out garbage in”
I can see the sweat making fissures
In their emasculated khaki
And the blood flowing on the bridge
Of the earth’s surface
The affairs of the anus are a tasking matter
Blood and sweat from the massified
Is the votive required by the chief priest
Our blood the correction fluid
For their regal errors
So pray from where will salvation come

The total disenchantment with the political system is captured here. The disgust is evidenced by the comparison between the sounds from the barracks and those from the anus. The contents emanating therefrom are not fundamentally different. The apparent hopelessness in the Nigerian situation is captured in the phrase, “Cabbage out garbage in”. This speaks volumes for Nigeria’s political system (*shitstem*, according to the poet) where almost eternally, the previous government is better than the current one – the previous one is the cabbage, at least edible while the succeeding one is the garbage, totally useless and uncaring. This scenario is being played up to the present moment. The image of the starch emasculated khaki representing the wickedness and power of the military is again apt. The irony at the end of this poem is unmistakable: in trying to give up in despair, the poet resignedly says “So pray, from where will salvation come.” Evidently, if the politicians and the military have failed us, and the government of the day is always worse than the previous regime, then the only recourse left is prayers. But “pray” in that last line may not necessarily refer to any

religious supplication. It may well be a manner of speech; in which case the tone of despair and despondency is even worse than it appears. But then this tone of helplessness and hopelessness runs through the whole collection. This is what underscores the poet's disgust with the system and he feels the only way he can best express this is through the anal imagery.

Conclusion

What the discussion above seems to suggest is that throughout the text of Maiwada's poetry, there is a sense in which language is broken and dislocated to capture the broken and dislocated state of affairs in Africa. The anal imagery that runs through the collection signifies the disgust and apprehension felt by the poet whenever he looks at the ineptitude of our leaders whose abysmal performance in office always suggests that they are bent on throwing the Nigerian state into the chasm of nothingness. The specialized use of language which is sustained and contained is a credit to the poet where words are aptly used to capture and describe situation. It is true that he did not call a spade a spade and that all conclusions are inferred, but then this is what makes it poetry. It is not how difficult or indecipherable the words are but how uniquely they are employed that determines the poetic savvy of the poet. In this regard by intertwining message and messenger, Muazu Maiwada has created a poetic niche for himself, a creation that is almost inimitable.

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