

A Stylistic Study of Figurative Language and Social Commentary in Niyi Osundare's "A Song for Ajegunle"

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Abstract

This article undertakes a close stylistic analysis of figurative language in the poem "A Song for Ajegunle," examining how simile, metaphor, personification, and symbolism function as constitutive instruments of social critique. Drawing on the stylistic model of Leech and Short (2007), Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional grammar, and Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) cognitive theory of conceptual metaphor, the analysis demonstrates that the poem's figurative choices are the architectonic means through which its social commentary is constructed, sustained, and intensified. The recurring anaphoric refrain, "I saw you sprawled out / like..." operates as a cumulative simile complex that builds, across six iterations, a progressively more ominous portrait of Ajegunle's deprivation, while the poem's metaphors advance an ideological argument implicating wider Nigerian society in the production of slum conditions. The study situates these strategies within the tradition of what Osundare (1986) terms "functional aesthetics" in African poetry, a mode in which formal sophistication and political urgency are mutually constitutive. The article concludes that stylistic analysis is indispensable for a full account of the poem's social vision, since that vision is inseparable from the specific linguistic means through which it is made.

Keywords: stylistics, figurative language, simile, metaphor, social commentary, Nigerian urban poetry, Ajegunle, functional aesthetics

Introduction

Among the many dimensions of language that stylistics illuminates, few carry as much ideological weight as figurative language. Simile, metaphor, personification, and symbolism are frequently treated in introductory literary study as ornamental features applied over the surface of literal meaning. Mature stylistic scholarship has decisively overturned this view. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental mode of human cognition: when a poet deploys figurative language, the act is one

of world construction, building a framework for perceiving social reality that carries ideological force and moral consequence. This insight is particularly significant for the tradition of socially committed African poetry, where figurative language has historically served as a primary vehicle of political critique and social witness. As Osundare (1986, p. 23) argues, the most significant African poetry is characterised by a "functional aesthetics" in which formal resources and the demands of social engagement reinforce rather than compete with each other, producing works in which aesthetic achievement and political urgency are inseparable. "A Song for Ajegunle" must be read within this tradition.

The poem addresses Ajegunle, a sprawling waterfront settlement in the Apapa Local Government Area of Lagos State, bounded by the Lagos Lagoon on one side and by the prosperous enclaves of Ikoyi and Victoria Island on the other. Its geographic proximity to extreme wealth, combined with its continued structural exclusion from the systems that might alleviate its conditions, makes it the powerful emblem of postcolonial inequality that the poem constructs it as. As Nwachukwu-Agbada (1995) notes, the postcolonial city functions in Nigerian literary tradition as a compressed ideological space in which the contradictions of uneven development are rendered legible through figurative elaboration. Despite its acknowledged significance as a work of Nigerian urban poetry (Emenyonu, 2004; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1995), "A Song for Ajegunle" has received no dedicated stylistic analysis. Existing discussions operate at the level of thematic summary, telling us what the poem is about while remaining silent, to adapt Leech and Short's (2007, p. 11) formulation, on what makes it a poem. This article addresses that gap.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks. Leech and Short's (2007) *Style in Fiction* provides the primary methodological foundation, insisting that "the study of style is the study of the relation between form and meaning" (p. 11) and offering a systematic framework for examining how lexical choices, grammatical structures, and figures of speech produce meaning and effect. Leech's (1969) earlier *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* supplies the taxonomy of figures of speech that underpins the present analysis. Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional grammar, particularly the ideational metafunction, provides a secondary framework

for examining how figurative language constructs participant configurations and representations of experience. The cognitive linguistic approach of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), extended by Kovecses (2002), provides a third perspective, arguing that metaphor is not merely linguistic but cognitive: cross-domain conceptual mappings encode cultural and ideological orientations, making figurative choices the bearers of worldview. These three frameworks address the formal, experiential, and ideological dimensions of the poem's figurative language respectively, and their combination produces a more complete account than any single framework could achieve alone.

The broader intellectual context for this analysis is furnished by scholarship on figurative language and social commentary in African poetry. Egar (2000) demonstrates that figurative language in African poetry is never politically innocent, and that stylistic analysis ignoring ideological orientation is necessarily incomplete. Emenyonu (2004) establishes that disease and bodily suffering imagery in Nigerian literature constructs physical conditions simultaneously as social symptoms, while Kehinde (2005) shows that the negation structure characteristic of Nigerian urban poetry formally enacts the deprivation it describes. Garuba (2005) and Quayson (2003) provide broader postcolonial frameworks for understanding formal innovation as social critique. Together, these studies establish the tradition within which "A Song for Ajegunle" operates and confirm that its figurative language must be read as simultaneously aesthetic, cognitive, and ideological.

The Anaphoric Frame: Structure as Rhetoric

The poem is organised around a recurring formula, "I saw you sprawled out / Like...," that appears at six intervals throughout the text. This anaphoric refrain is not merely a structural device; it is the poem's primary rhetorical engine. The past-tense verb "saw" insists on the empirical and the experiential: in a social context where the conditions of communities like Ajegunle are routinely rendered invisible by middle-class indifference and official neglect, the act of witness is itself a political act (Osundare, 1986, p. 31). Each iteration of the refrain introduces a fresh simile whose vehicle is drawn from a distinct semantic domain, and their accumulation generates what Leech and Short (2007, pp. 63-64) call "cohesion through repetition": semantic accretion across the text, so that by the final refrain the phrase "sprawled out" carries far more weight than its literal denotation. The anaphoric structure additionally functions as testimonial rhetoric, building its case through

accumulation rather than discursive argument. As Emenyonu (2004, p. 51) observes of the "literature of social exposure" in Nigerian writing, the sustained particularity of social representation does the work of political argument without the vulnerabilities of abstraction.

Simile: The Architecture of Destitution

The poem's first simile closes the opening quatrain: Ajegunle has "spread [its] battled history / Like a tattered mat for my calling feet" (lines 3-4). Before the simile arrives, three lines have already established Ajegunle as a personified entity characterised by effort and hospitality under deprivation. "Calloused hands" signify labour; the "weed-infested smile" signifies a welcome choked by neglect; the "battled history" signifies a past marked by protracted struggle. The mat is a culturally resonant object in the West African context, a basic implement of hospitality spread on the ground to receive a guest. That this particular mat is "tattered" means it cannot adequately perform its function. The simile specifies it further as "for my calling feet," laid out not for a guest of honour but for a passerby who merely calls. The social relationship encoded is one of asymmetrical intimacy: Ajegunle extends what hospitality it can while the observer remains at a distance, witnessing rather than sharing. Through Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity framework, Ajegunle is the Agent whose action of extending hospitality is represented as structurally inadequate, with the lexical qualifiers "calloused," "weed-infested," and "battled" foregrounding, in Mukarovsky's (1964) sense, the conditions that undercut the welcome before the simile even arrives.

The six refrain similes constitute a progressive figurative sequence that is the poem's most important structural achievement. The first, "Like an empty bag on the threshold / Of Ikoyi's bursting barns" (lines 7-8), activates the conceptual metaphors POVERTY IS EMPTINESS and WEALTH IS FULLNESS (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The empty bag is structurally intact but substantively void; Ikoyi's barns overflow with more than they can contain. Kovecses (2002, p. 34) notes that the full-empty binary carries normative as well as descriptive implications, encoding the value differential naturalised between the two conditions. But the ideological weight of the simile rests on the spatial preposition "threshold." A threshold marks a boundary that is simultaneously a site of exclusion: one is at the door but not inside, within sight of the contents but structurally barred from sharing them. The spatial figure encodes the social reality of Ajegunle's relationship to

Ikoyi with the precision of a political diagram. As Nwachukwu-Agbada (1995, p. 82) argues, the geography of the postcolonial city is itself a form of social argument.

The second refrain simile, "Like the daub of apprentice painter" (line 16), introduces incompleteness as social diagnosis: Ajegunle is not a community that has failed to develop but one that has been inadequately developed and abandoned before its human potential could be realised. The third, "Like a sheath with an absent cutlass" (line 24), is the most philosophically resonant. The community possesses the structure of a functional urban settlement but has been deprived of its animating substance: economic opportunity, political representation, public services, educational provision. The absent cutlass carries a double valence, since a cutlass is simultaneously a tool of productive labour and an instrument of potential violence. A sheath without its blade is also a sheath awaiting the blade's return, and this latent menace connects forward to the poem's closing images. The fourth simile, "Like a stream without a bed" (line 32), figures the diffusion of human potential without structural direction. These four similes share a diagnosis of constitutive absence: capability without the conditions for its realisation.

The fifth simile, "Like a cat with hidden claws" (line 43), marks a decisive turn in the poem's figurative argument. Unlike the preceding figures, which all figure Ajegunle in terms of some form of lack, the cat is not lacking anything. Its claws are present and fully capable, merely concealed. The community's power has been suppressed rather than extinguished, and what is suppressed can be released. Kovecses (2002, p. 78) identifies the conceptual metaphor POWER IS A CONTAINED FORCE as among the most pervasive of embodied metaphors, and its implication here is unmistakable: the container is straining. The sixth and final simile closes the last refrain: "Like a wounded snake" (line 50). A wounded snake is among the most dangerous of natural creatures, since pain and desperation remove the caution that ordinarily mediates between provocation and response. The simile synthesises the victimhood established by the preceding five figures and the suppressed capacity for violence introduced by the cat, producing an image of a subject maximally dangerous precisely because it is maximally vulnerable. This final image transforms Ajegunle from an object of sympathy into a subject of potential action. Egar (2000, p. 78) identifies this trajectory from victimhood to latent agency as characteristic of

politically engaged African poetry: the transformation of the margin from object of pity to subject of history.

Metaphor: The Ideological Argument

While the poem's similes construct a cumulative phenomenological portrait of Ajegunle, its metaphors operate at a higher level of abstraction, advancing an ideological argument about the structural causes and moral implications of the conditions the similes describe. The poem's middle section deploys a network of metaphors from the semantic fields of disease and organic decay. "Cholera bowels" (line 12) is a compressed genitive metaphor identifying the gutters with the symptom of a disease associated with the systematic absence of clean water, adequate sewage infrastructure, and public health provision. As Emenyonu (2004, p. 53) notes, cholera is "a disease of social failure," and by naming the gutters in terms of the disease they produce, the metaphor directly implicates the social system in the illness that results. "The feverish orchestra / Of milling mosquitoes" (lines 13-14) renders disease as spectacle, defamiliarising the conditions of deprivation in Mukarovsky's (1964) sense and making them visible as consequences of social arrangement rather than natural facts.

The poem's night passage deploys five compressed noun-phrase metaphors: "the shadowy thunder of hurrying feet," "the hooded stench of nightsoil pails," "the brooding brow of startless pangs," "the sweaty stupor of crowded mats," and "the gutsy blast of angry guns" (lines 26-30). Each phrase fuses a sensory or physiological vehicle with a social or psychological tenor, making the physical conditions of slum life and their experiential dimensions inseparable. Together, as Osundare (1986, p. 45) observes of this technique in African poetry, the accumulation of particulars builds a general argument more persuasive than any abstract assertion. The morning metaphor, "Morning here is a crow without a cock" (line 33), is the poem's most inventive single figure: a crow is the call of a rooster at dawn, not the bird itself but its utterance. Here the crow arrives without its source, the form of beginning without its animating substance, an announcement of a new day that the new day itself does not fulfil. The subsequent oxymoronic noun phrases, "taps without water, tables without bread / Children without schools, schools without children" (lines 34-35), extend the negation strategy, figuring Ajegunle's condition as systematic institutional failure. As Kehinde (2005, p. 112) observes of this rhetorical pattern, the negation structure

"enacts formally the very deprivation it describes: the form promises what the content withholds."

The poem's closing apostrophe delivers its most concentrated ideological charge through three successive metaphors: "Oh dreg of our foaming wine / Graveyard of our truant conscience / Cesspool of brewing rage" (lines 45-47). The grammatically decisive feature is the first-person plural possessive "our," which implicates both speaker and reader in the conditions being described and refuses the reader the comfort of detached observation (Leech & Short, 2007, p. 213). "Dreg of our foaming wine" activates the conceptual metaphor SOCIETY IS A FEAST: the prosperity and commerce of Nigerian urban life are figured as fermenting wine, vivid and intoxicating. Wine produces dregs, the bitter sediment that sinks while the wine above is enjoyed at the table. Ajegunle is what is left when the feast is consumed, encoding the political economy Quayson (2003, p. 67) identifies as structural: the margin is produced by and for the centre. "Graveyard of our truant conscience" names the moral dimension directly: truancy is not inadvertent absence but wilful, guilty abdication, the evasion of one who knows their duty and has chosen not to perform it. "Cesspool of brewing rage" constitutes the poem's final and most politically alarming argument. Drawing on the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS A HEATED LIQUID IN A CONTAINER (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 50), it figures the rage accumulating in Ajegunle as a fermenting force building toward a release. The poem does not advocate violence; it predicts the consequences of conditions that make violence a structural inevitability. Read together, the three metaphors trace a complete social argument: Ajegunle's destitution is produced by the same system that generates the wealth of Ikoyi; the social conscience that should have responded has deliberately absented itself; and the consequence of continued abdication will be an uncontrollable explosion.

Personification and Symbolism: Address and Political Economy

The poem's most pervasive figurative strategy is the sustained personification of Ajegunle as a human interlocutor, addressed throughout in the second person. In a social context where slum communities are habitually treated as administrative problems rather than human collectivities deserving recognition, addressing Ajegunle in the second person confers subjecthood on that which has been objectified (Egar, 2000, p. 78). The personification opens with three human attributes: hands, a smile, and a history, precisely the qualities that define

the human being as a social subject. That all three are qualified by markers of deprivation, "calloused," "weed-infested," and "battled," insists that the humanity of Ajegunle is constituted in and through conditions of deprivation rather than in spite of them. The attribution of "callous" (line 9) to the rain extends the personification to the natural world, performing a rhetorical displacement in which the moral failure of the human agents responsible for Ajegunle's infrastructure is transferred, with pointed irony, to the indifference of rain. The irony is unmistakable precisely because rain cannot be callous; only people can. The poem's symbolic structure is organised around the spatial and economic contrast between Ajegunle and the enclaves of Ikoyi and Victoria Island. "Green with sweat" (line 39) is the most compressed symbolic statement in the poem: the lawns of Victoria Island are rendered green not by natural abundance but by the labour of Ajegunle workers, encoding the political economy in which the comfort of the wealthy enclave is produced by the bodies of the impoverished community nearby (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1995, p. 89). Night and morning are symbolically inverted throughout, with night rendered as concentrated misery and morning as false dawn, employing the inversive symbolic strategy that Garuba (2005, p. 267) identifies in African literature of social resistance to insist that the temporal rhythms of hope and renewal are structurally unavailable to those on the urban margin.

Conclusion

"A Song for Ajegunle" realizes fully the potential of what Osundare (1986) calls "functional aesthetics" in African poetry: a mode of writing in which formal sophistication and political urgency are not competing tendencies but mutually constitutive aspects of a single literary project. The poem is not social commentary that happens to be expressed through figurative language; it is social commentary constituted through figurative language. Its six anaphoric similes build a cumulative portrait that moves from inadequate hospitality and structural emptiness through suppressed power to terminal danger. Its metaphors advance a coherent ideological argument, implicating wider society through the inclusive possessive "our" in the production of the conditions they describe. Its personification confers subjecthood on a community habitually reduced to an administrative problem. Its symbolism encodes a political economy in which the greenness of Ikoyi and the destitution of Ajegunle are aspects of the same system. Together, these strategies constitute what Leech and Short (2007, p. 187) call the poem's "dominant": its governing

stylistic principle, which is the constitution of social critique through the precise resources of figurative language.

This conclusion carries broader methodological implications. Politically committed literature ought not to be studied at the level of theme and ideology alone, as though its social arguments could be expressed equally well in any number of different ways. The social vision of such literature is inseparable from the specific linguistic choices through which it is made, and a complete account of that vision demands the kind of close, theoretically grounded stylistic analysis practised here. The argument is consistent with the positions of Leech and Short (2007), Egar (2000), Quayson (2003), and Nwachukwu-Agbada (1995), all of whom insist that form and content in politically committed writing are inextricably bound. The poem's warning remains urgently contemporary. Ajegunle and communities like it continue to bear the structural conditions that the poem describes, and a cesspool of brewing rage cannot be indefinitely contained.

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