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Between Form and Freedom: Stylistic Nuance in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*

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Abstract

This paper systematically explores the literary strategies and style as layers of meaning in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. It focuses on how the author's language choices and stylistic techniques shape meaning, narrative impact, and thematic growth. The study uses tools from linguistic stylistics, including foregrounding theory, transitivity analysis, modality, and cohesion. It investigates how Okri's manipulation of language creates a unique literary voice that blurs the boundaries between fiction, parable, and philosophical reflection. Special attention is given to deviation, metaphor, repetition, and narrative perspective, along with the inclusion of other traditions and mythic elements. The analysis shows that Okri's style is not merely an aesthetic feature; it serves to engage with themes of freedom, transcendence, consciousness, and reality. By highlighting the connection between form and meaning, the paper argues that *Tales of Freedom* illustrates how stylistic innovation can improve literary and philosophical exploration. This study contributes to the broader discussion on African literary stylistics and underscores the significance of linguistic methods in revealing the richness of postcolonial literature.

Keywords: linguistic stylistics, *Tales of Freedom*, literariness, foregrounding, narrative style, postcolonial literature, African fiction, stylistic deviation

Introduction

Stylistics, according to Okeke, is a field of study that developed in Europe right after World War I. It aimed to fill a gap in the humanities between a dry academic philology focused on formulating laws for explaining phonological and semantic change and a lackluster literary history that explored every question about a work except "What does it mean?" Scholars at

that time were uncomfortable with literary criticism approaches that were subjective and impressionistic, relying on external views. A closer engagement with the text was needed, ensuring that interpretations had verifiable textual and linguistic evidence. Thus, the language of the text requires careful examination. Texts must be analyzed beyond their semantic, syntactic, and phonological rules, focusing on how linguistic features function, especially in the hands of literary artists, to create meaning. Stylistics then serves as a bridge between the linguistic forms of language and its literary qualities. The concept of linguistic stylistics refers to a style study that relies heavily on the 'scientific rules' of language in its analysis. These rules include lexical, grammatical, phonological, figures of speech, context, and cohesion categories. It is a linguistic method for interpreting and appreciating texts, especially literary ones.

Literary stylistics differs from linguistic stylistics in that the former focuses on external materials. These might include the author's background and the socio-economic and political realities of the time. This study adopts a linguistic stylistic approach to analyze Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom* since the researcher is interested in how Ben Okri uses linguistic resources to convey his message to readers. Lawal states: Using a simple morphological analogy, one can say that 'style' is to stylistics what 'language' is to linguistics. Stylistics may be a branch of linguistics, but it derives largely from sociolinguistic interest in treating variables in entire texts viewed as communicative events. This sheds light on the origin of stylistics. The study of style is stylistics. Therefore, while style has its focus, it is multidisciplinary. Stylistics examines style in that dimension.

Research problem

The principles of linguistic stylistics have been applied to various texts across different genres and discourses. Dada and Bamigboye conducted a stylistic analysis of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. They explored foregrounding as a stylistic tool, specifically at the graphological, phonological, and lexical levels. The study found that writers intentionally highlight certain words to capture the reader's attention. Ayaga examined a stylistic analysis of Funke Egbemode's *Intimate Affairs*. In this analysis, the author identifies and discusses literary elements in a collection of journalistic articles. Okeke conducted a linguistic stylistic analysis of William Faulkner's poem *The Sound and the Fury*. This study examines foregrounded lexis, syntax, and textual relationships in the poem. Onanuga investigated the linguistic stylistic analysis of Niyi Osundare's *State Visit* and *Two Plays*, which are satirical dramas on post-colonial leadership crises. The focus is on lexico-semantics in representing leadership gaps in the text. Some stylistic features identified in this work include neologism, lexical sense relations, and collocational deviations. The literary qualities in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom* are understudied, which is what this paper explores. The paper aims to discuss the connections between identified literary features and the text's thematic focus. It will also analyze figures of speech and tropes like simile, metaphor, and euphemism, as well as the functions they perform in the text. A stylistic investigation of these features is expected to provide valuable insights into how Okri combines literary tools to achieve aesthetic goals and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the text at hand.

Literature Review

About Stylistics

At this point, the work will examine the contributions of style in linguistics. Abrams viewed stylistics as the application of critical procedures aimed at replacing what is seen as subjectivity and impressionism in standard analysis with "objective" or "scientific" analysis

of the style of literary texts. Saleh noted that style refers to how language is used in a specific context by a particular writer or speaker for a specific audience. Saleh considers a writer's style an echo of the author's personality, unique features, and voice. Style can apply to oral and written forms of both literary and non-literary varieties of language and shows variations in a person's speech or writing. Style often shifts from casual to formal based on the situation, location, historical context, topic, and the audience. A specific style is typically termed a stylistic register or variety, such as colloquial or formal. According to Leech, "Style is a selection of linguistic; a sort of medium of revolt against the norm; a repetition of linguistic forms. Style also defines the personality of a person. Style shows the thoughts and ideas of a person. Leech views that the structure of words should be changed to achieve clarity in diction."

There are four types of style: expository or argumentative style, descriptive style, persuasive style, and narrative style. Expository style explains and communicates an issue to the audience and presents the writer's perspective on that topic. In descriptive style, the writer focuses on providing a detailed account of an event or situation, commonly used in poetry or journal writing. The persuasive style aims to convince the reader to adopt the writer's viewpoint on specific subjects. Meanwhile, narrative style tells a story or incident in both literary and non-literary genres.

Aslam et al (2014) state that stylistics is a branch of applied linguistics mainly concerned with evaluating the styles of textual content. Sebeok (1964) views stylistics as dependent on linguistics since style cannot be defined without reference to grammar. The aim of stylistics is primarily to classify. Roger Fowler (1971) agrees with Sebeok, stating that stylistics emphasizes individual features, making each work more recognizable and distinct. He describes stylistics as a branch of linguistics that studies the features of distinctive language use in various situations. It seeks to establish principles that explain the specific choices made by individuals and social groups in their language use. Authors use language not only to express creativity but also to convey experiences.

Roger notes that stylistics investigates the narrow range of responses readers have to literature, focusing on form and pattern. He suggests that stylistics highlights literature's characteristics, drawing attention to itself as a significant artifact and a signifying medium. In general, stylistics examines the causes of this attention. Leech and Short (1981) define style as a way of writing and describe stylistics as the linguistic study of style, rarely conducted for its own sake. They see it as an effort to describe how language is used and as a means to explain the relationship between language and artistic function. Leech further states that the goal of literary stylistics is to relate the critic's focus on aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's focus on linguistic description.

Anyanwu (1999) argues that stylistics is a taxonomic study of how well a text fits its audience. He defines stylistics as the scientific examination of a text's appropriateness for its audience. Literary style synthesizes all other styles and uses them in various ways. He elaborates that stylistics allows the reader to evaluate a text at multiple levels of linguistic and social sophistication. Factors considered in stylistic analysis include the text's genre, level of lexical sophistication, sentence structure, audience appeal, and tone.

Okri's prose fiction serves as a metaphor for the widespread suffering in society caused by unfavorable government policies and the oppression of the powerful. These conditions create "living dead" people who endure poverty, neglect, and hopelessness in a troubled socio-economic landscape. According to Okri, suffering is a key theme, almost a character, in his works. Appiah (1992) states that suffering is one of the main characters in *The*

Famished Road, highlighting the various ways people experience pain. There are many variations, but suffering remains the central theme. This is also evident in *Tales of Freedom*, where some characters are trapped in the forest and seeking a way out.

Chikogu (2014) examined the syntax and aesthetic functions in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. He argues that the syntactic features with the most notable stylistic effects include simple sentences, complex or compound sentences, parallel structures, interrogative clauses, non-finite clauses, verb-less clauses, subject-free clauses, and noun phrases. These categories are defined in the eclectic grammar of Quirk et al. His review is relevant to the researcher's work since it contributes to the discussion in the previous section on data analysis.

Hawley (1993) describes Okri as someone with a strong sense of creativity. He claims that Okri's choice of a liminal figure like the Abiku as his spokesman, who bridges two worlds and draws power from both, shows his desire to imagine something new. This new creation, represented by modern liminal characters in Okri's prose, supports his focus on themes such as violence and suffering. Here, we agree with Joan Rockwell's assertion that social truths can be revealed through fiction, even the most unlikely types (Onuekwusi 2003). Ezeigbo discusses how Okri creates a metaphysical world. He emphasizes that Okri builds a strange world of fantasy to reflect his vision of a broken and violent society. His symbols, chaos, nightmare, dream state, are effective, as they highlight the confusion, pain, and suffering in people's hearts and eyes.

Okri vividly describes an everyday idea. Ezeigbo (2003) adds that Okri may choose a narrative style that mixes realism with myth because he deals with a world gone mad, where violence has become the common language among men, women, and children. Okri looks for a suitable approach to portray the distressing situation. He believes that a realistic or naturalistic medium has become insufficient to express the chaos of the present reality. As a result, he turns to extra-realistic devices like fantasy, dream states, hallucinations, and trance, using them as artistic tools to explore his vision of society. In this context, his characters navigate between the real world and the fantasy realm, which Okri refers to as "the other world (107)." On a deeper level, however, Okri uses the liminality of some characters to show his lasting hope for an ideal human society.

The satire in Okri's portrayal of an abiku as a main character is more subtle than obvious. He criticizes the educated elite, who take over from their former colonial rulers, as a selfish and unpatriotic class that impoverishes their people to build personal wealth. Okri also includes the common man in his critique of Nigeria's socio-psychic landscape. Notably, Okri connects abikuhood with the level of hygiene maintained by the potential parents of an abiku. Essentially, he argues that poverty and poor hygiene should not go hand in hand, suggesting that the poor are partly responsible for their own circumstances. At the very least, Okri believes the poor should free themselves from passivity and take control of their destinies (111). This work closely relates to this essay since the author moves between the real world and the dream world, a recurring characteristic in all his writings.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach that is fundamentally interpretative, allowing for more flexibility. Data is collected in textual form. The study's outcome is largely based on the researcher's interpretation of the data. However, no part of the study is predetermined; it remains open to adapt to details or insights that may arise during the analysis process (Dornye, 37). This approach enables the researcher to account for the communicative value

of the linguistic features in the text. Here, the researcher agrees with Leech and Short's thesis that style involves choices in language use.

The data for analysis is Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*, a collection of thirteen short stories referred to as *stokus*, a blend of story and haiku, exploring themes like the journey of man on earth, freedom versus slavery, and man and nature. Okri's *Tales of Freedom* is seen as a literary experiment because he presents the short stories in the form of haiku, which is rooted in Japanese poetic tradition. In this way, Okri attempts to merge two distinct literary genres to create a new form that addresses existential questions faced by humans. For these reasons, this study will undergo a linguistic stylistic analysis focusing on graphology, lexis, and syntax while employing certain stylistic principles such as foregrounding, repetition, reiteration, deviation, and choice.

Analysis

The second half of the book uses third person narration with terms like "He," "She," and "It." This is known as the omniscient narrator. This technique supplies detailed event information to the reader, unlike the first person narrator, which offers a more immersive reading experience in the book's first half. Third person narratives can give the reader various character perspectives, helping them develop empathy. It allows insight into multiple characters. By writing in the third person, the author can reveal both characters' thoughts and what is happening, allowing readers to understand the characters better. This point of view enables the narrator to follow multiple characters throughout the story. Third person narratives allow readers to discover more about the world beyond a first person perspective. The third person omniscient viewpoint is the most objective and trustworthy because an all-knowing narrator tells the story.

Semantic Features (Figurative Expression)

Okeke states that "figures of speech are regarded as special regularities and irregularities of language exploited, especially in literature, for their special communicative power and communicative values" (27). Figurative expressions enhance the impact of communication. Common figures of speech in the texts include metaphor, simile, oxymoron, hyperbole, euphemism, antithesis, paradox, and repetition. According to Adedoya, Ogunrinde, and Jayeoba (2023), these elements stem from the lexis for imaginative creation.

Metaphor

Lehtsalu et al present metaphor as a figure of speech where an expression refers to something that it does not literally denote to suggest a similarity. It acts like an analogy (20). Abrams and Harpham argue that in metaphor, "a word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison" (119). A metaphor transfers meaning based on the similarity of two notions or ideas. Besides denoting an object, a metaphor gives a text expressive qualities. Understanding the background knowledge of a metaphor allows for its significant interpretation. In *Tales of Freedom*, the author uses metaphor to clarify emotions and relationships that ordinary language cannot capture. For example: 'When we were the garden and the garden was us' (106)

The New Woman who makes this statement reflects on her emotional connection to the garden. The forest is described as a garden because it provides her with shelter and security. Before her statement, she tells her husband, "let's play again." This shows her excitement and need to express it. The depth of the New Woman's words is striking, as they are the only content on page 106. Metaphor adds a poetic quality. "Practically every

notional part of speech can be used in a figurative sense as a metaphor. It is mostly nouns and verbs that are suitable for the metaphoric transfer of meaning" (Lehtsalu et al, 21).

More examples include:

'...It seemed the last stop for me in the world (113)

The journey was your life, your life on the road (195).

Life is compared to a journey. This illustrates that life is like a movement from birth to death. People start their journey of toil, struggle, and survival at birth. Human existence involves labor to make ends meet. People have little rest until they achieve freedom. Metaphor is one of the clearest ways to express an idea. Metaphors enhance the understanding of language and thought. They illuminate, helping the reader see things differently. Metaphors offer new insights and can shift narrow ways of thinking. They help the reader reason and grasp the world around them.

Simile

Abrams and Harpham state that "in a simile, a comparison between two distinctly different things is explicitly indicated by the word 'like' or 'as'" (119). A simile explicitly compares two different things, often using "like," "as if," "as though," "seem," or "as." The author uses similes to create more vivid or graphic descriptions of one of the compared objects. A comparison without expressive function is not a simile. Examples include:

His head is like an orange (30).

As asleep as sleep (35).

...cooly like a heart attack (52).

Silence settled on them like dew (65).

...like a bottle of wine...like a glass of water (72).

"His head was like an orange" describes an imaginary figure the Old Man shares with his boy, Pinprop. Old Man realizes that Pinprop is bored in the forest and wants to make him laugh and forget his worries. He compares the boy's head to an orange squished by a gorilla. "As asleep as sleep" describes Pinprop, who is deep in slumber and unaware that the night is too cold. The Old Man prepares to start a fire for warmth. "Silence settled on them like dew" describes a moment when everyone in the narrative suddenly becomes very quiet. The silence is so intense that the drop of a pin could be heard. "...like a bottle of wine...like a glass of water" describes a moment when the young man and woman, tired from strolling, have no energy left. The young man encourages his wife to keep going home while holding onto their best memories. They need to be cautious and careful, just like someone carrying a bottle of wine or a glass of water. "Both of you are beginning to look like skeletons" is a playful jab from Pinprop when he sees his masters looking malnourished. Because of a lack of food, the Old Man and Old Woman's ribs are visible. Pinprop forgets he is in the same situation. "I think I stink like old cheese" is a thought the Man has. He wanders into an open area, feeling down and dragging his feet. He hasn't had water for a long time and needs to drink or wash. At this moment, he starts to smell bad. "They spoke like children discovering light" refers to the New Man and New Woman. This couple is in darkness and enjoying their time together, possibly caught up in a romantic moment. From this excerpt, it's clear that simile is an imaginative comparison. It adds richness to the text and describes emotions and

feelings; it engages the reader. Ben Okri uses simile throughout the text because it provides a vivid and colorful account of events, actions, and characters.

Oxymoron

This is a way of combining contradictory terms, usually in phrase form, with emphasis on the second term. Wales (1989: 332) describes an oxymoron as “a figure of rhetoric which apparently juxtaposes contradictory expressions for witty or striking effects.” It uses a descriptive word or phrase that contradicts or does not match the noun it describes. Some examples from the text include:

A harmless liar (40).

tolerable hell (48).

impossible heaven (48).

In the first example, “A harmless liar,” Pinprop refers to the Old Woman. She wanted to frighten him by saying skeletons were in the woods. However, Pinprop did not believe her, calling her “a harmless liar.” Lies typically cause harm. A lie is meant to hurt someone or deflect blame. When a lie is harmless, it is not meant to cause any pain. The second example, “Tolerable hell,” refers to the complicated relationship between the young man and young woman. Their cruelty and weaknesses bond them together. “And that is our cruelty and weaknesses that bind us together...yes. Wonderful symbiosis” (47). This means that it is indeed a wonderful symbiosis. Such a companion could only be described as “intolerable hell.” The third example, “Impossible heaven,” comes from the young woman. She contrasts the tolerable hell they have, which brings pleasure and rest, with impossible heaven, seen as a badge of honor. If one cannot meet the high expectations of heaven, it might be better not to mention it at all.

An oxymoron can also express the author’s attitude, as seen in “a harmless liar,” which emphasizes the character’s ability to instill fear in her conversation partner. The stylistic effect of an oxymoron relies on the fact that the literal meaning of the descriptor is not completely lost.

Euphemism

Wales defines euphemism as “the substitution of a gentle or pleasant expression for a harsher one or for a term that directly brings to mind a distasteful or taboo subject” (158). Euphemism is a figure of speech that replaces a strong or blunt expression with a softer, indirect, or vague one. It describes an offensive idea in a way that feels less offensive. Page twenty-six provides an example of euphemism.

Old Woman lifted her head, saw the man, clapped her hands, inspected her palms, and flicked something away with her finger (16-17).

“Clapped her hands” in this context means she killed a mosquito that bothered him, while “inspected her palms” means she confirmed the mosquito was dead. In the bush, Old Woman and her husband faced many challenges, including hunger and irritating mosquito bites. At that moment, Old Woman struggled to catch some sleep. Instead of saying the man killed a mosquito, the author used euphemism, describing it as clapping hands to suggest that no death occurred. Another example is “Expanding the universe.” This line indicates that the character is thinking about making love, having sex, and having children. To avoid directly mentioning love-making or sex, the character uses the more acceptable phrase “expanding the universe.” Many characters who lacked basic rights like food and shelter engaged in intimate relationships to find pleasure. Thus, the author uses euphemism to

soften the impact of certain words and avoid taboo expressions, replacing them with more gentle terms as shown above.

Antithesis

Abrams and Harpham state that "Antithesis is a contrast or opposition in the meanings of adjacent phrases or clauses that show parallelism" (14). Antithesis often relies on contrasting structures and ideas placed at the beginning and end of a sentence or in similar syntactic roles within one or more sentences. In poetry, an entire passage or stanza may center on antithesis. On page 12 of *Tales of Freedom*, the author uses antithesis to create opposition in meaning through verbs:

Pinprop wailed and laughed wildly at the same time (12).

This structure strengthens an argument by using exact opposites or simply contrasting ideas; it can include both. The stylistic effect makes the statement more memorable for the reader through balanced wording. Furthermore, it allows the reader to see the conflicting emotions in the character, who feels both joy and worry. On page 49, there is another antithetical structure:

We stayed together precisely because we did not really love each other (49).

In this case, each clause contrasts with the other. Staying together is typically due to love, affection, and mutual respect. However, when people "did not really love each other," they shouldn't stay together. This antithesis combines contrasting ideas so readers can contemplate the contradiction or impossibility of the actions. In short, antithesis also enhances focus.

Paradox

Wales describes a paradox as "a statement that seems self-contradictory, a kind of expanded oxymoron" (333). According to Abrams and Harpham, "A paradox is a statement that seems logically contradictory or absurd but turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense" (239). A paradox contradicts itself; it appears meaningless but reveals some truth upon closer examination. Here are some examples:

(1) I remember to forget (61).

(2) Getting closer was also getting farther (194).

The first excerpt, "I remember to forget," comes from Old Man, who barely recalls the pleasant dreams he had with his wife before they were stranded in the forest. Old Woman remembers those unattainable dreams. The Old Man uses this expression to criticize himself for always forgetting them. Essentially, he remembers to forget those happy dreams. In the second example, "Getting closer was also getting farther," describes someone on a long journey who feels tired and worn out. Even though every step brings him closer to his destination, his fatigue makes him feel far away. That is why "It is easier to feel one has arrived when one sees the battlements and turrets, the flags and banners of the castle" (194). At this moment, despite feeling exhausted, he finds renewed hope and excitement as he reaches his destination. Paradox captures the reader's attention and encourages new thoughts. It communicates irony and leads readers to reflect on the immediate subject.

Discussion

At the semantic level of analysis, the analyst focuses on the figurative use of language, such as simile, metaphor, oxymoron, euphemism, antithesis, and paradox. While all of these have been identified and discussed as used by the author in the text, their stylistic and aesthetic significance has also been highlighted.

Although Okri's *Tales of Freedom* is a fictional work, the author relies heavily on figures of speech to give the text a somewhat poetic feel. These figures include metaphor, simile, oxymoron, hyperbole, euphemism, antithesis, paradox, and repetition. The author effectively uses metaphors and similes to provide a vivid representation of events, actions, and characters for readers. Oxymoron and antithesis foreground contradictory ideas, actions, and characters, allowing readers to reflect on the ongoing struggle between freedom and captivity, as well as liberty and slavery. Euphemisms soften the harshness of the difficult conditions, actions, and experiences the characters endure, while paradoxical phrases further underline the contradictions and irony between freedom and captivity, master and slave, liberty and slavery, life and death.

Conclusion

Literature imitates life and reflects society. It exists in words, which give it vitality and sustenance. The use of language creates literature. This study helps readers appreciate the novel more through a linguistic lens. A lexical analysis was conducted to understand how the writer uses linguistic features to serve thematic and literary purposes. The analysis shows that writers carefully highlight certain words and patterns in their texts to capture the reader's attention. This aligns with Ogunrinde and Adedoya's view that the language used to create appeal includes figurative language, as found in *Tales of Freedom* (2020).

Almost all of Okri's works address social issues affecting our contemporary society, but the language in *Tales of Freedom* stands out, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters. The text remains easy to read, with everything symbolizing something else. The author employs an elegant language that requires decoding for full understanding. The book is rich in paradoxes and poignant ideas that many people can relate to, touching on fundamental human desires like ambition, freedom, love, and family.

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