

## **A critical discourse study of Obafemi's Marxist ideology in "Songs of Hope"**

**Abdullahi-Idiagbon Muhammed Sani,**  
Department of English, Faculty of Arts  
University of Ilorin, Ilorin P.M.B. 1515, Nigeria,  
E-mail: msidiagbon@gmail.com

**Abdullahi Ayinde Kadir**  
Department of English  
College of Arabic & Islamic Legal Studies,  
Ilorin P.M.B, 1579, Nigeria,

### ***Abstract***

*Poetry as a genre of literature is seemingly the least communicative due to its abstraction in the use of language. In addition, poet's choices of words which are empowered by worldviews and ideologies which further make decoding the meaning of a poem even more complex. "Songs of Hope", a collection of poems by Olu Obafemi reflects the poet's Marxist view. This paper analyses selected poems using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework to examine how the poet's Marxist ideology is conveyed through the use of language. Special attention is given to the lexical choice, style, tone, theme, etc., and how these features are skillfully deployed in Obafemi's collection of poems to champion the idea of national liberation. It is discovered that through an ideologically-driven use of language, the poems echo ethos of combat and prove as an effective tool for social re-engineering of both individual and national psyche.*

**Key words:** *critical discourse; Marxism; "Songs of Hope"*

## 1. Introduction

The task of creating an ideology which reflects the historical reality of a societal culture, its economic and political system as well as its system of beliefs has dominated the thinking and writing of Obafemi over a period of time. This paper focuses on Obafemi's "*Songs of Hope*". The paper discusses Marxist ideology in the selected poetry with a view to analyzing the core of Obafemi's revolutionary dialectics from the perspective of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

CDA studies the underlying knowledge of an ideology, the institutionalization of societal practices and individual behaviours in a particular social order. It is concerned with studying, describing and analysing texts in order to reveal the sources and forms of power which ultimately create significant influences on social, economic, political and historical life of the masses. As a result of common insights and principles in Marxism and CDA, this paper explains Obafemi's selected poems in "*Songs of Hope*" based on these two theories.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Background

People all over the world are classifiable into two groups based on their socio-economic status: the minority who amass and control wealth and power (the bourgeoisie) and the vast majority who bear the brunt and agony of wealth production (the proletariat). These proletariats, in Marxism, are the workers who are used in creating wealth, but who, however, have no influence on its distribution.

The bourgeoisie class is in three strata: the haute or high bourgeoisies who own large companies, the petit or small scale industrialists and the professionals who serve as agents to either of these bourgeoisies. Due to class conflicts in society, struggles are imminent among the divergent components of the social classes. This conflict is as a

result of the capitalistic sphere of influences which ultimately wields power and influence to those with economic power. Economic infrastructure enhances political power, which, in turn, subsequently transforms into an ideological power, thereby shaping and controlling people's faculty of reasoning.

## **2.2 Critical discourse analysis and Marxism**

The level of exploitation is unimaginable if people's thinking ability is taken away from them—a situation which CDA is poised at exposing and waging war against. CDA scholars aim at supporting the oppressed by encouraging them to resist exploitation. To this end, CDA stresses that human utterances are not objective, because they reflect the interest of the speakers or opinion leaders, like governments, courts and elites. CDA describes the discourses of the dominant and oppressed groups or institutions and explains how boundaries of legitimacy and non-legitimacy are set between the two social classes.

In the work of Karl Marx (as cited in Fairclough & Graham, 2002) published in 1973, Marx established a strong connection between language and thought or ideology. He proclaimed that ideas are born of language and that the two have independent attachments. In demonstration of this assertion, he applied language as a critique of capitalism. This experiment is premised on the assumption that language can contribute not only to the understanding but also to the remoulding of contemporary capitalist order.

A critical study of Marxist conception of language by Fairclough and Graham (2002) revealed that language plays a major role in studying the contemporary socio-economic reality. These scholars concluded that Karl Marx is indeed a critical discourse analyst. The assertion is evidenced in various Marx's economic and political views considered similar to those of critical discourse analysts. Fairclough and Graham asserted that:

“... (although) discourse analysis did not exist in his (Marx’s) time..., Marx’s view of language and mode of language critique are similar to those of some contemporary discourse analysts” (p. 190).

CDA offers a systematic insight into the linguistic forms which are capable of unraveling contemporary socio-economic formation and practices built on exploitation and dehumanization. Language, in Marxism, is conceived as a social process dialectically interconnected with other spheres of life.

Marx asserted that capitalism is a discourse contrived of language, ideology and discursive practices and should be resisted in the same way it is contrived. CDA is a linguistic approach, ideologically-oriented and knowledge-based. It provides an explanation to knowledge- and ideologically- based discourse. Marxist ideology explores the symbiotic connection between systems of belief and systems of material, especially class interest.

Through 3 tenets of CDA (Fairclough, 2000), the evils of capitalism can be exposed: first, identification of social structures comprising, for instance, class status, ethnicity and gender; second, culture, comprising professionals and elites; and third, discourse, in forms of words and language. A study of these 3 tenets shows the disparity and its concomitant conflict in societies.

CDA tries to unite the actual text and discursive practices with what is obtained in the larger social context. Wilmot (1986) stressed the significant relationship between the idea and reality. Cabral (1966) linked the essence of ideology as a system of ideas with structuring concrete historical realities, and as a tool for rationalizing action, directing economic and political struggle and guarding the destiny of a people. The fact that CDA goes beyond the boundaries of linguistic tools to other ideological considerations should not be a surprise because, according to Van Dijk (2000:1), “CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework or modeling”. CDA, unlike discourse

analysis, has its major thrust, i.e., the necessity that social and economic resources should ordinarily usher in the desired socio-political and economic prosperity. Fanon (as cited in Wilmot, 1986) urged the masses to speak out because

"The future would have no pity for those men, who possessing the exceptional privilege of being able to speak words of truth to their oppressors, have taken refuge in an attitude of passing, of mute indifference and sometimes of cold complicity" (p. 16).

### **2.3 Ideology in African poetry**

Marxist ideology is not only a global vision seeking to encompass the entire field of humanity, but also the one that takes in its stride the totality of human history. It is emphasized that a Marxist analysis of African literature cannot turn a blind eye to the problem attendant of African encounter with Europe. Marxist aesthetics illuminates African lives. Only a Marxist mode of critical analysis can give significant insight into the ideological stance of many African writers. Background knowledge of Marxism is therefore significant for understanding the thrust of Obafemi's collection of poems.

Marxism lays down rules by which poetry should be developed, the purpose of which is to transform artistic creativity into an effective weapon of communist propaganda. Ngara (1983) argued that the primary function of literature must be to lead proletariats into recognizing their role in the class struggle. For Marxists, like Terry Eagleton, Bertolt Brecht and Louis Althusser, literature works the way any ideology does by signifying the imaginary means through which people perceive the real world. Marxism affirms that aesthetics and politics are symbiotic.

Thus, Marxism is an existential philosophy of action and change which stresses theory of dialectical materialism. The theory also postulates that political events are due to the conflict

of social forces arising from economic conditions. Revolutionary ideology thus becomes a dominant feature of Obafemi's collection—"Song of Hope". Obafemi, like other emergent Nigerian artists—Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Abubakar Gimba, to mention but a few—applies the dialectical materialist approach of Marxist ideology in his poetry, influenced by both classical and modern theoretical convention as well as socialist predisposition of Terry Eagleton.

Obafemi has taken a definite ideological position in his campaign against the social rot and moral debacle of post-independent politics in Nigeria. His ideological awareness opens up a perspective in the study of contemporary poetry. "Songs of Hope" is a form of literary production that touches the historical, materialistic and dialectical spheres of postcolonial vision. The thrust of this anti-capitalist anthology is to establish a new community of people that is free from oppression and exploitation. In a postcolonial state dominated by national leadership that abandons its alliance with masses, Obafemi's ideological posture assumes a radical dimension. His anthology seeks to intervene in the aesthetic process of criticality, and ideologically examines the condition of man with a view to providing solutions to societal problems.

Contemporary ideology tends to address the new socio-political realities of Nigeria. For instance, in *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*, Ngara (1983) made reference to 3 forms of Marxist ideology that are crucial to the criticism of literature. They are dominant ideology, authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology. Dominant ideology refers to the sum total of beliefs, values, assumptions and norms that dictate the function of the people. Dominant ideology is central to the postcolonial discourse of Obafemi's anthology, because ideological issues relating to society heavily influence him.

Authorial ideology is what determines the poet's perception of reality. Whatever poet projects aesthetically depends largely on authorial

ideology. Aesthetic ideology refers to the literary practice adopted by an artist. Various literary ideologies like Marxism, postcolonialism, realism, etc. are collectively referred to as aesthetic ideology. The high point of this argument revealed that:

Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here, a writer has no choice whether or not he is one of or not he is aware of it, of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles of our society. What he chooses is one of the other sides in the battle field: the side of the people or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (Ngugi, 1981:22)

As literature becomes partly political, Obafemi like other contemporary Nigerian artists are committed to the cause of ordinary people and to use the words of Eldred (1996:2)

put themselves in the firing line in their opposition to powerful forces who they see as betraying the people in whose name and by whose sacrifice wars were fought and independence won.

### **3. Textual analysis**

#### **3.1 Social consciousness in Obafemi's poetry**

In Obafemi's "Songs of Hope", poetry is infused with social consciousness. The poet specifically engages in the production of idea to recommend the adoption of ideology, to illuminate the essential relation between the ideal and reality, to sensitize the masses and to mobilize against the mode of governance in Nigeria in particular, and Africa as a whole. The "Songs of Hope" represents a reflection of the decadence of many African nations, arising from misrule, insatiable greed and corruption in all facets of life. The underlying theme of the anthology is pervasive culture of graft

and cut-throat exploitative tendency of the elite class who represents the dominant interest group that leads the nations to their present state of anomie. Obafemi stated in “Song of Hope”:

Though we know  
 Those who cut our bellies open  
 With a knife  
 Meant for the throat of a cow  
 We do not stretch our hands  
 To strangle the air (p. 17).

The poet, through the collocates, “cut”, “knives”, “bellies”, “throat”, passes a strong message. He compares the experience of the system of governance to cutting of throats and bellies. He, however, warns the masses not to rest on their oars to drive away the incumbents as they did to the colonialists, after all. “We do not stretch our hands to strangle the air” (Obafemi, 2001:17). This expression means that their struggle is not an impossible or unachievable task. The poet calls the attention to the social condition of the masses who suffer as a result of their position in the social and economic relations network. Often the existence of this working class is threatened by poverty as the poet observed in the same poem:

We know too well  
 That those who take the lean meat  
 From out of our watered mouth  
 Those who feed us with left over... (p. 17).

This is a theme of denial echoed in a tone capable of winning sympathy for the oppressed. The tone is also capable of triggering a move against the ruling cabal. The stanza captures the disillusionment which followed the post-independent era. The fallout of the independence is the failure of the ruling elite to translate self-rule to sustainable development. The privileged class rather sees the independence as a means of protecting its own selfish interest, irregular and unconstitutional means of acquiring



wealth and institutionalisation of corruption as a way of life. In "Only Dreams Remain", the poet captured this feeling thus:

Just  
When flowers have begun to bloom anew  
And hopes, like greenness arm forth;  
Arming forth from the yam-tubers  
Promising an oily green in the throat of tomorrow  
Locusts descend.  
Swarming,  
Piercing their death-granting proboscis (p. 25).

The style here seems romantic but it specifically aims at raising hopes and creating suspense. The imageries of flowers, locusts and yam-tubers paint the picture of scarcity plenty in the midst, a situation in which the masses horribly suffer. The poet describes here a brief period of hope after the political independence. Exploitation did not, however, disappear with the independence after all, only that the system of exploitation changed.

The poem surveys the political and social environment since independence, which is marked by a ceaseless cycle of misrule, mismanagement, corruption, violent upheaval and general misery. Obafemi reveals the comatose state of the nation's resources, the rampant collapse of humanity and value as well as the scandalous under-development of post-independent African nations.

### **3.2 Language and style**

Essentially, the collection through powerful imagery, symbolism and appropriate narrative style and lexical choice, depicts a nauseating social system and presents a sustained sanitization of the moral and socio-political decadence of African leadership after political independence. In the collection, Obafemi's ruminates over a wide spectrum of issues such as man's inhumanity to man. The problem is contextualized within the postcolonial Nigeria state,

which has been strangulated by excessive corruption since 1970s when the country transformed to a major oil exporter as encoded in “Only Dreams Remain”:

Yes,  
 Just as the oil of Oloibiri  
 Flung more coins into our bottomless purses  
 And the hopes that the building will rise,  
 Rise  
 To demolish the grassiness of our land,  
 We confront anew... (p. 25).

The mere mentioning of “oil” brings to fore the wealth of Nigeria as a nation. The noun phrase “our bottomless purses” represents the nation’s foreign hard currency realized from the exportation of oil. However, the poet points to industrial as well as the climatic and environmental hazards brought about by oil spillage. The image depicted by the poet here is seen as one of the fiercest indictments of modern economic culture, alien destructive forces of predators as well as industrial revolution with its attendant environmental hazards.

The poet also paints a picture of pain, agony and hopelessness coupled with falsehood as the common features in society. Obafemi welcomes the common man into a diseased society represented by the image of looters who plunder the nation’s resources through international laundering. In “Only Hope Persists”, Obafemi said:

I will be there  
 To witness the grinning gist  
 Of manufactured basket of falsehood  
 Those whose only sacred wish  
 Ensures the waffling of our collective harvest,  
 We Christen them  
 ‘Ala pa ru tu’  
 Olori pa—beku  
 Blunts Skulls of Cheat (p. 20).

The pronoun "we" is plural and in subjective case while "them" is also plural but in objective case. This is illustrative of a master (subject)—servant (object) case; the class struggles and conflicts between the oppressors and the oppressed. To contextualize the struggles, perhaps a word in Yoruba (a Nigerian language) "Alaparutu" was used to aptly account for "the blunt skulls of cheats".

Direct Yoruba translation employed by the poet in his lines shows his fidelity to love and orality. The implication of the above poetic programme of action is that the poet believes in a poetic mediation, where the content is ideological; the type of action whose resolution typifies the pathetic nature of the nation's socio-political and economic formation in the shackles of a corrupt and dysfunctional leadership. In "Only Hope Persists", the poet further revealed:

Domestic Wealth  
In Foreign treasury  
Like Rats  
That cannot swallow peas  
But can empty the barn  
In the dung-heap of waste (p. 20).

People have antonym like domestic/foreign, synonym like wealth/treasury and the imagery of rats as a parasite. It is paradoxical indeed that what is being laboured for domestically turns to foreign gains. In addition, the leftovers in the "barn" have been emptied by the "rats". A rat is an animal which usually lives where humans live. This connotes that fellow countrymen constitute parasites to others. Obafemi satirizes the new elite class who has developed into an exploitative class. This class of petty educated black people forms the basis of neo-colonialism. The people accumulate excessive wealth without any visible sign of productive potentials. The poet underscores their merciless looting of nation's resources.

### 3.3 Revolutionary vision in “Songs of Hope”

The poetry is a warning to society that the path of corruption and social rot lead to decadence and moral degeneration. Through this poem, the plight of ordinary people who have no means of decent livelihood is brought to fore. The masses are left desperate and in deplorable condition with no hope of gainful fulfillment.

The recurring theme in the collection is the failure of national leadership to harness the human and material resources and direct them towards common ideal. Corruption engenders a scandalous wealth among the masses. The national economy and social institutions have been draped into decay. Obafemi satirizes the state’s many injustices against the poor masses. Beyond mere chronicle of social malaise, the poet proffers solution: the need for revolutionary transformation of the society, the need for voiceless to abandon complacency and force their voice through. The poet stresses that social rebirth can only come after the pervasive decay, rot and corruption in the land are uprooted and replaced by a virtuous and honest leadership. In “Of Bruised Minds and Calloused Hands”, the poet offers direction for change when he said:

Gather the calloused hands  
Of history  
To free the minds  
Of the wretched of the earth  
From the brutal chains  
Of oppression (p. 63).

“Free the minds” is one of the principles of Marxism and CDA. People’s minds should be prepared with knowledge and other relevant ideologies needed to challenge corrupt institutions. The poet calls for a revolution which can liberate individual’s minds from all forms of ideologies that are in favour or in the interest of the bourgeoisie in the society. Similarly, he

calls for collective actions against the few powerful cabals who are responsible for Nigerian socio-economic predicaments.

The poet dialectically intends the pathos and emotive power of his poetry to instigate the oppressed masses into revolutionary agitation. The artistic form of this collection reflects the ideological content of the poet. The collection focuses on the evolutionary progress of the history of Nigeria. The work lays emphasis on the process of social liberation and the problem militating against developmental programmes in each stage of the unfolding history of Nigeria (Badejo, 2009). The poet explores the roots and multiple forms of the faceless exploitative and oppressive system of neo-colonialism with a view to revealing the peculiar problems of the people, their level of awareness, the deprivations and denials of their right.

Four of the collection; precisely, "Give Love a Chance", "Song of Hope", "Love in Paradise of Thorns" and "Only Hope Persists", are essentially a message of hope. They all call for perseverance and determination in the struggle against the injustices of leadership. The poet represents authorities with "lions", "dogs" and "wasps" as beasts, who only respectively roar, bark and sting harmless people; these beasts either instill undue fear or consume those who cross their way. On the other hand, fruits and vegetables like pumpkins, sweet cane and lettuce are symbols of the natural resources the nation is endowed with. Obafemi is of strong opinion that with persistent pressure and unwavering commitment to enthrone justice, the dark forces of torment can be defeated. He foresees a future in "Give Love a Chance" in which "the leopard paws may turn to kid gloves", "rats may ride in the willing backs of the bush cats" (p. 16).

The pronoun "we", a first person plural pronoun, subjective case (and of course others like "us" and "ourselves"), is referring to proletariats in "Love in a Paradise of Thorns", while "they" (as well as "those" and "them") is third person plural pronoun in objective case signifying bourgeoisies who benefit from the hard

labour of the working class. The workers produce “domestic wealth”, while the capitalists hide it in “foreign treasury”. This situation is captured in “Only Hope Persists” thus:

Blunt—heads  
 Robbed of all initiatives  
 To give freshness to the hope  
 Of the feeble fingers  
 That power them to the  
 Spreading head of tree (p. 20).

The poem describes this leadership’s “spreading head of tree” as a “shadeless” tree (p. 20), because these leaders have failed to provide the much expected socio-economic security.

Lexical choice plays an important role in describing divergent scenes of “agony”, “pain” and “doom” with the poet using birds of prey like “vulture” and “owls” and venomous reptile, “python” as agents of destructions. Obafemi shows intimacy with his audience by addressing them directly as “you” the second person plural pronoun. He often rhetorically asks “Do you hear?”, “Can you listen?” to reinforce his message.

The poet warns that no matter what the inducements are, people should be focused. Emphasis should be placed on collective efforts to restore justice and equity to the system. He goes philosophical on “The Fly on the Gangrene” that:

All fingers  
 Long and short  
 Must join  
 To crush the dancing fly (p. 57).

He is optimistic in the imminent victory of truth over falsehood, justice over injustice, equity over inequity. This is, because, as he observes in “The Homely Truth”. Truth is irrepressible. Obafemi sensitises people that spiritual leaders have abandoned their primary duties, and so can no longer be trusted. This in “Do Gooders” is the situation in Nigeria where many religious

leaders have turned stooges to successive governments and are conniving in enslaving people, both ideologically and politically. He urges people to shun religious bigotry, because the destiny of a man is in his own hands. The paradox of these people is captured in mismatch between what they preach and what they do as revealed in the stanza below:

The vicar and the Imam  
The babalawo and the Aladura  
Who close your eyes and open theirs  
Who chew the flesh and you the bone  
Must be tied to stakes  
Blazed in flames and flakes (p. 61).

The poet satirically describes religious leaders as cheats and selfish. This sounds as a warning as well as enlightenment. The use of religion as a means of exploitation and an opium of the oppressed is a common practice in the society. Obafemi calls for a pragmatic and non-sentimental approach to issues of national importance. It is through this that Nigeria, and of course Africa, can have a free, peaceful, just and progressive society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Obafemi is deeply influenced by Marxists like Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The radical Marxist pre-disposition and a comprehensive application of Marxist philosophy to the neo-colonial Africa have had greater force in Obafemi's polemical poetry. The implicit premise of his collection is the need for egalitarian social services and mass-controlled means of production and distribution. Through CDA, people have been able to study the Marxism in Obafemi, its principles and prospect to the people. Literature and language can no doubt serve as instruments for effective positive changes in societies.

## References

- Badejo, D. (2009). Gender ideology, global Africa and the challenge of pan- African studies in the 21st Century. *The Journal of Pan-African studies*, 1(10).
- Cabral, A. (1966). *The weapon of theory* (address delivered in Havana in January, (1966). Web, M, Passionate spaces: African Literature & the post colonial context). Retrieved on March, 2010, from <http://www.marxist.org/subject/Africa/Cabral/1966>.
- Eldred, D. J. (1996). *New trends and generation in African literature today*. London: African World Press.
- Fairclough, N. & Graham, P.. 2002. Marx as a critical discourse analyst: The genesis of a critical method and its relevance to the critique of global capital. *Estudios de Sociolinguistica*, 3, 185-229.
- Fairclough, N. (2000a). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2000b). Discourse, social theory and social research: The discourse of welfare reform. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 4, 163-195.
- Ngara, E. (1983). *Ideology and form in African poetry: Studies in African literature*. London: James Curry.
- Ngugi, W. T. (1981). *Writers in politics*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Obafemi, O. (2001). *Songs of hope*. Ilorin: Haytee Press & Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Omoriege, F. K. (2009). Rodney, Cabral and Ngugi as guides to African post-colonial literature. *African post-colonial literature in English*. Bostwana: University of Bostwana Press, 1-10.
- Van Dijk T.. (2000). *Critical discourse analysis*. Retrieved on May 2007, from <http://www.discourseinsociety.org/teun.htm>.
- Wilmot, P. 1986. *Ideology and national consciousness*. Ibadan: Lantern Book