

PROSODY AND COMPLETENESS IN EWE ORAL POETRY: A READING OF KOFI ANYIDOHÓ'S *A HARVEST OF OUR DREAMS*

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Abstract

In Negro African literature, the poetry of rupture or dissidence is manifested in the way the prose is written. Prose poetry sets the postmodern poet free from the yoke or demands of metrics and prosody but the poet who uses this literary genre is regarded as a social outcast. The first prosodic sign which the reader can detect is a quite unusual writing style. Here, feminine rhymes alternate with masculine ones. From several fictitious realities, Kofi Anyidoho unfolds an ideology or rather set forth an everlasting quest for genius values whose articulation is turned into a “togetherness living”.

Key-words: Ewe, metrics, poetry, prosody, revolution, rhyme, phrase.

Résumé

Dans la littérature négro-africaine, la poésie de la rupture ou de la dissidence se manifeste par l'écriture en prose. Le poème en prose libère le poète postmoderne du joug ou des exigences de la métrique et de la prosodie mais le poète qui pratique ce genre littéraire, malgré le rôle important qu'il joue, est considéré comme un paria. Le premier signe prosodique que le lecteur peut déceler est la forme de l'écriture qui est inhabituelle. Ici, les rimes croisées font alterner une rime masculine et une rime féminine. A partir de plusieurs réalités fictives, Kofi Anyidoho déploie une idéologie ou du moins une quête inlassable de valeurs authentiques dont l'articulation actualise un « vivre ensemble ».

Mots-clés : Ewe, métrique, poésie, prosodie, révolution, rime, rupture, syntagme.

INTRODUCTION

In Negro African literature, the poetry of rupture or dissidence is expressed through prose as a writing style. This innovative writing style derives from the revolt of postmodern African poet against the demanding and tyrannical rules of classical verses writing. Thus, the African poet takes advantage of the Independence of African states to take on decolonizing the language of his poetic output. In this perspective, Negro African poetry reveals stands out as a true instrument of fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Modern poetry smells prosody so translating the will of the poet to undertake new literary initiatives. The poem edited in prose sets free postmodern poet from the yoke and demands of metrics and prosody. Furthermore, the poet invents in prose new rhythms and new means of expression which enable him to show his ideology and his vision of life. The yearning or dream for flexible and free verses becomes a reality. This demand linked to the form and target demonstrates that the freedom of the poetry in prose does not correspond to art for art aesthetic. The poem in prose is the manifestation of an individualistic spirit which refuses to follow the principles of an established world. Its main historical function is to draw people's attention on cultural clashes and the different forms of literature. It indicates that the world has become a "globalized world" or "a planetary village". The poet who uses this literary genre is regarded as a social outcast like Kofi Anyidoho. His readership is very limited because of the peculiarity of his poetry production. In this view, Michael Riffaterre asserts that "the language of poetry differs from the one of common use (...). A poem tells us a thing and it signifies another thing" (1983, 11). In this work, the prosodic use must be seen as a new form of writing in vogue in postmodern African literature. It deals with Prosody in Ewe oral poetry as a complete art.

Through the semiotics axis, the present study will discuss the song successively along first the perfectionist or dramatic poetry, next the identification of prosodic signs, and at last the prosodic rape corresponding to the affirmation of Ewe cultural identity.

I- The song in the perfectionist or dramatic poetry

In *A Harvest of our Dreams*, Anyidoho dramatizes Ewe songs. This poetic dramatization is a representation of Ewe oral poem which is both songs and words. Those songs are funeral songs that the poet translates through his writing. These songs are used during sad and disastrous periods. They permit to honor honest men. Funeral songs also enable the community to remember the bad and good events of the year. In this regard, the song is omnipresent in the poetry of Anyidoho. In his first poem entitled: "Mythmaker" (2), Anyidoho calls forth the song in order to give a particular rhythm to the musicality of the verses:

The children are away

The children are away
The children
These children are away (2)

This extract illustrates well the uncommon feature of Anyidoho's poem. What one can consider as a song is a combination of the first five verses of the first stanza and the four verses of the eighteen stanzas. This song is sung at noon light to denounce the social unbalance engendered by the coming of modernity into the Ewe imaginary space. Modern education is a "pragmatic indicator" (Todorov, 1978, 28) which represents the absence of young men or workforce in the clan. The repetition of the verse "The children are away" several times helps the reader better understand the psychological state of the society before the encounter of African and European cultures. The final rhyme "are away" which at the end of the verses creates a familiarization and expectation in the mind of the reader. It plays the role of a beacon in the successive utterances and constitutes the privileged place for meaning because the word at the end of the verse will be better memorized. In Anyidoho's poetry, the study of rhymes focuses on the form and the meaning of the semantics of words. This rapport highlights words which are close to each other "The children" and "These children". The analyst realizes that the rhyme of the beginning "The children" creates rhythm to "These children". Furthermore, the sociogram "schoolrooms" represents the disturbing element of social cohesion. Through the symbolism of western education, the poet translates the diverse internal antagonisms of Ewe society which contextualizes the work of poetry. In the Ewe "collective memory" (Tzvetan Todorov, 1978, 28), western education is a "sin" or a way that leads to perdition. For the Ewe man, missionary school alienates and puts the individual away from his clan. The following stanza clearly expresses the disdain of Ewe people vis-à-vis European education:

These children are away
away in schoolrooms where the world in book
distils daydreams into visions
burns memorials of the past
in bonfires of the soul (2)

Poetry is then a powerful means of making less alarming social misfortunes and contradictions. In this sense, Ewe poem is a way of crying without tears for in traditional African society, no man cries plainly like a woman. He symbolically cries through songs or dirge poems as shown in "Mythmaker". The dirge in the poem is melancholic. It is a source of hope and despair. In the two last stanzas of the poem, the poet arouses hope in the mind of Ewe people. In so doing, he acts like a futurist or a prophet. It is for this reason that he foretells that Ewe young men will come back home after completing their education abroad. The last stanza of the poem expresses the will of the people about the return of these young men:

The children will be home
 The children will be home
 The children
 Those children will
 be home
 Some day. (2-3)

In the above stanza, the rhyme reinforces the antithesis between the verbal phrases “are away” and “will be home” and the nominal phrases “home” and “day”. From then on, the beginning verse in the poem “The children are away” becomes at the end of the poem “The children will be home”. In other terms, the verbal phrase “The children are away” alternates with “Those children will be home someday”. The nominal phrase “The children” rhymes with the two nominal phrases “These children” and “Those children”. This exercise of virtuosity consists in rendering a poetic form through the use of rhymes or (words) imposed in advance by the poet. Here, the most important thing is to find a network of coherent meaning and probably among the provided words. In addition, the use of the modal “will” in the verbal phrase expresses that the poet is sure of the return of the lost ones. According to Ewe tradition, any lost son of the clan always returns home thanks to the magic of his umbilical cord buried in Ewe land. The image of Ewe poem that Anyidoho tries to translate or to show is a scriptural or perfectionist one similar to dirges or funeral songs. As such, the poet faithfully portrays Ewe oral poem. In this view, he plays with words. The strange look of his poem constitutes its beauty and its prosodic character. The reader perceives the pre-eminence of songs in the second poem of the book entitled “Seedtime”. Here, the refrain of the song is:

There is no curse on us.
 There is no curse on us. (4)

The recurrence of “There is no curse on us” four times in the poem implicitly explains the will of Ewe people to accept its social condition as an emanation of God. The Ewe man stands at the crossroad because the military revolution cannot turn the squalor of the people into an earthly paradise. Consequently, the reader notes that the poet plays with sounds to accompany and to back up the meaning of his words as seen in the poem entitled “Radio Revolution” (64). The game of words is also perceived in the verse “Revolution...Devolution...Resolution” (64). This words game is carried over and the beginning of the poem “Finale for Evil Ones” highlights this writing strategy:

 revolutions
 subversions

tribunals

confessions (69)

Considering the above verses, the substantives “Revolution”, “Devolution” and “Resolution” rhythm together. These three words have in common a prefix (Re or De) which depicts the pain, the sourness and the disillusion of the political change imposed by the army. Furthermore, these three lexemes have the same length, form, composition and final rhyme /lution/. Each lexeme is made of ten letters which can be divided in to four syllables: /Re/vo/lu/tion/, /De/vo/lu/tion/ and /Re/so/lu/tion/. The reader also sees the alliance of four contradictory values (69). The word “revolutions” goes along with the nouns “subversions” and “confessions”. These words also have the same final rhyme which is manifest in the last syllable by the sound /tions/ ou /sions/. The objective of the word game is to corrupt or alienate the consciousness of the people. The alliance of these contradictory lexemes shows that the revolution portrayed in *A Harvest of our Dreams* is an “unobtainable revolution” (Raymond Aron, 1988). The poet reveals in the following verses the strange face of revolution and his own disappointment:

through streets to all familiar walks
through maze of slums to armed barracks
of peace. Where? Where?
old peasant with hoe in hand, I
seek Revolution. Where is Revolution?
young veteran with blood across blue eyes, I
knew of no Revolution, but I
met Revolt limping down this road
chased by a howling herd of armed jacked
down this road down this road...(64-65).

These verses clearly show that the revolution or the social change referred to in the poem is a “revolution of the mind”. It is one which is not visible or tangible as seen in the lexeme in verse 10 “Where? Where?” and the verbal phrase of verse 12 “Where is Revolution?” In other words, the majority of the downtrodden does not know this revolution. Verses 11 and 12 reveal that Ewe people are in a quest of a true revolution, one that can put an end to discrimination, injustice and social classification. For this reason, the poor peasant and his hoe symbolize revolution. “I seek Revolution. Where is Revolution? (...) I knew of no Revolution, but I met Revolt limping down this road” (64). The desired revolution has become an imposed dictatorship. When we talk about meaning in Anyidoho’s poetry, we talk about feelings, impressions and life experiences. In addition, the sound often helps to create this particular climate which belongs to any poet. Likewise, it expresses the implicit of the

poet's ideology. The repetition of songs creates a monotonous atmosphere. This leads the reader to inspect the prosodic signs.

II- The identification of prosodic signs

The first prosodic sign the reader can discover in Anyidoho's poetry, is the form of writing. Indeed, some of the poems contain words or verses completely written in capital letters: "WE" and "YOUR" of "Oath of Destiny" (60). Also in "Radio Revolution", verses 39 and 43 are completely written in capital letters: "THE REVOLUTION-NOT A CONCERT PARTRY" (...) "LONG LEAVE THE REVOLUTION!!!" (65). This innovative and revolutionary writing form is a way to put a specific stress on the tone. These two verses can be compared to political slogans. Here, the poet alternates with masculine and feminine rhymes as followed:

LONG
LEAVE
THE
REVOLUTION (65)

Anyidoho's poetic language is infused with Ewe vernacular and Standard English. Anyidoho utilizes his poems as an alibi to promote the ideology of Ewe people. In this respect, he gives Ewe name as title to each poem of the second part (AKOFA) (13). This way, "Blewuu, Nunya, Dàdà, Tugbedzevi and Tsitsa" make the titles of the poems of this part. The poet's attachment to African tradition is revealed through the use of titles in Ewe language. The specificity of Anyidoho's poems is the use of verses in the poems as punctuation marks. "Fertility game" (19) is a potent example. In this poem, the poet uses nine times the verse "Come back home Agbenoxevi come back home" (p.19).

Come back home Agbenoxevi come back home

A week today at carnival time
youngmen of the land will gather
For the wrestling duel of song and dance,
Maidens will sharpen their tongues and
Carve praise images of dream lovers and
I have a gourdful of praise names laid aside for you

Come back home Agbenoxevi come back home (19)

(...)

All all my peers now carry big babies on their back.
Still I carry mine in my heart. Sometimes in my loins.
And O she cries so much for you.

In this extract, the very first verse reveals the violation of the writing technique. The substantive “Agbenoxevi” is located between the verbal phrase “come back home”. According to classical grammar rules, the second “come back home” must be separated from the noun “Agbenoxevi” by a comma. Similarly, and the other “Agbenoxevi” must be separated from the second “come back home” by another comma. If the poet wanted to respect the prosodic rules, he must also separate the beginning verbal phrase from the nominal group by a comma. In this case, the nominal group will alternate with the second verbal phrase. Thus, the first verse which the poet uses as a punctuation mark can be rewritten as followed: “Come back home, Agbenoxevi comes back home”.

In the poem under study, there is a predominance of structural disorder. The violation of usual writing principles stands out clearly. In the typography of Anyidoho’s poems, the verbal or physical contestation is back up by a writing of rupture which presents scriptural or typographic disorder as a sign of postmodern poetic freedom. For instance, the first verse “A week today at carnival time” has no semantic value because it is only made of a nominal group which can be divided as followed: “A week”, “today”, “at carnival” and “time”. Verse 1 is a combination of four substantives. As such, it is difficult to understand the meaning. In the second verse, the writing of the lexeme “youngmen” creates a problem to the reader. In this case, the poet combines an adjective “young” together with a noun “men” to form the word “youngmen”. This writing technique is also seen in verse 26 “Agbenoxevi Atsu Agbenoxevi”, made of the substantives “Agbenoxevi” and “Atsu”. Through this verse, the poet transposes his mother tongue and Ewe culture in the poem, so demonstrating his knowledge of his culture.

In verses 40 and 42, one notices the existence of prosodic elements. The repetition of the beginning of verse 40 “All all” and the one at the start of verse 9 “remember remember” in the poem “Upon the Harvest Moon” (75) has a dual meaning. These repetitions appear as a prosodic mark which enlightens the poems. The introduction of the sound “And O” at the start of verse 42 shows that Anyidoho is concerned with the translation of Ewe daily life in his art. To achieve this, the poet tramples down all the principles of literary tradition. He represents some social facts which existed before in the Ewe culture. In so doing, he intends

The appearance of the preceding verses epitomizes the poet's freedom and will to cease with the literary "collective uses". Behind this pictorial representation of the Ghanaian social reality, the reader sees the shadow of a dissident or a political opponent in the poem. This hybrid writing is the hidden face of the political and social crisis which corrodes the post-independent Ghanaian society. Words, verses and punctuations are not in the appropriate position. The convention gives way to innovation or renew. Thus, evil becomes good and immorality becomes the social norm. As such, the fragmentary aspect of Anyidoho's poem reveals itself to the reader. Furthermore, the reader notices the presence of fractured verses, verses with no form or semantic value in several poems of *A Harvest of our Dreams*. By implication, the textual or structural disorder must be read as a duplication of the social disorder because the narrative structure of a literary text constitutes a homogenous universe which imitates and reproduces the social reality of the referential society. For Zima (2000), the poet relates historical events and he pretends that his words correspond to reality. In the classical poetic tradition, the association of a given word and a certain meaning is conventional. The reader presumes that the longue strife between naturalists and conventionalists is over with the new literary and poetic vision like the one of Anyidoho and many other African postmodern writers. Anyidoho introduces in his writing a new poetic discourse whose confusion can hid the real novelty. To better understand the orientation of the meaning in Anyidoho's poetic discourse, the prosodic rape and the affirmation of Ewe cultural identity need to be examined.

III- The prosodic rape and the affirmation of the Ewe cultural identity

This sections aims to show that Anyidoho refuses to walk in the footsteps of prosody. This passage of "My Mailman Friend Was Here" reveals that his writing is an artistic dramatization.

Old De Boy Kodzo

I write you long long tam, I no dey hear from you.

I say me I go write you somting small again.

Dem tell me say you too come for varsity

Me I say tank Gods! Old De Boy too icome for where

dem say all de small peoplo mas come and make dem

big peoplo. But lak I say som tam before de sodza peoplo (33)

The analysis of the above passage highlights the hybridity of Anyidoho's poems. The language in this poem is not an academic one: it is rather a broken English or Ghanaian pidgin English. The poet uses many languages to convey his message. For example, the use of "De" in the poem is both a French and Spanish word. But it is indeed an aspect of old English. Moreover, the poet represents sounds in the poem: "De, tam, dey, somting, Dem, peoplo, lak, som..." instead of English words such as "The, time, they, something, them, people, lack, some...". The sentence structure and grammar are ridiculed. Consequently, it is not easy to see the semantics of the verse 2: "I write you long long tam, I no dey hear from", verse 4: "Dem tell me say you too come for varsity, verse 5: "Me I say tank Gods! Old De Boy too icode for where". With reference to what is said before, Anyidoho's poetic work is firstly dedicated to his people and Africans who easily understand his codes of communication. On top of the bizarre aspect of this form of writing, one can see the commitment of the poet to make his art more accessible to all social categories.

The choice of this fragmentary writing is the manifestation of the decolonized people's freedom of speech. Anyidoho creates a specific poetry and an African- English language which can translate African realities and sensibilities. In Anyidoho's work, the refusal of the principles of prosody is ideological. As Gérard Genette puts it "Ce frottement du langage littéraire et du langage critique à pour effet non pas de dégager le « sens » d'une œuvre, mais de reconstituer les règles et contraintes d'élaboration de ce sens, autrement dit, sa technique de signification" (1966, 187). The poet utilizes his pen to reveal himself to this community and the rest of the world. Poetry enables Anyidoho to better understand himself, his environment and his alter ego. Zima is taking about this paramount importance of writing when he writes:

L'écriture pouvait être considérée comme fondement du moi idéal (Ichideal), vers lequel s'orientent l'auteur et le narrateur. En tant que production littéraire ou artistique elle fait partie de l'univers maternel (...). Dans le contexte sociologique, l'écriture apparaît comme la valeur esthétique retrouvée comme l'alternative authentique de la conversation médiatisée par la valeur d'échange. Autrement dit : à l'opposition structurante entre parole et écriture correspond, au niveau sociologique, celle entre la valeur d'échange et la valeur d'usage. (Zima, 2000, 199)

From several imaginary realities, Anyidoho deploys an ideology or rather an everlasting quest of genuine values whose articulation actualizes a kind of "common living place" which aims at sensitizing and mobilizing Ewe people around a common ideal: political

change. As Michel Simon puts it, “ideology is a discourse, a doctrine, or a program. (...) Ideology is also a symbol; a sign of rallying, (...) a fighting song (...).”(1978, 6). Beyond the hybridity of Anyidoho’s poetic writing, “people are invited to adopt new ways of fighting” (Frantz Fanon, 1975, 80). The poet uses poetry to unite his people in their fight against the ruling class. The worst enemy of the nation is the junta on power. The army is on power after a successful coup d’état against Nkrumah. The poet severely castigates the military administration of this chaotic period of Ghanaian society in the poem “Libation” (58). This military era is dramatized as “a social anomaly”. The dehumanization of man becomes worse under the military reign. People are astonished and disappointed because their national savior has become a monster that feeds itself on blood. In such context, people believe that their salvation will come from their traditional god “Avakpata-Avazoli” as it clearly appears in the poem “Libation”:

Avakpata-Avazoli deliver me
deliver me across my joy
unto the kindness of The Vampire
My blood may quench her thirst for other souls
Let not this blood clot upon your love
I am strangling my joy within the bosom of your peace
(...)
with the fierceness of my soul
deliver me deliver me
across my joy unto the kindness of The Vampire (58)

In this poem, Avakpata-Avazoli, the traditional god plays a significant role in the collective consciousness of Ewe people. This way, the poem starts and closes on an invocation dedicated to this deity. Avakpata-Avazoli is omniscient and omnipresent in the daily life of Ewe people. He is seen as a refuge of the poor and the downtrodden. The repetition of “deliver me” of verses 1, 2 and 15 show that people are in quest of a new messiah. The lexemes: “Vampires”, “thirst”, “blood”, “orphan”, “torments”, “fierceness” and “madness” symbolize horror, malice, animalism and immorality of the military power which is compared to a vampire. The form of writing of the nominal phrase “The Vampire” reveals that the leaders are worse than beasts. The writing of desire and the desire of knowledge are interrelated Anyidoho’s work (Blanchot, 1980, 71).

The poet’s refusal to follow the rules of prosody is in way a silent revolt of the poet against the ruling class. In fact, the reader’s contempt vis à vis the Anyidoho’s poetry, symbolizes the disgust of the Ghanaian political opponent vis-à-vis the military regime. The artistic rebellion is the visible part of the social revolt against fake-saviors, the military and their allies. Anyidoho’s poetic innovation opens the gate to a new literary form. In this view, Victor Chklovski asserts that “le mot en perdant la « forme » parcourt l’immuable chemin de la poésie à la prose. Actuellement le vieil art est mort et le nouveau n’est pas encore né, les choses elles aussi sont mortes et nous avons perdu la sensation du monde” (1985, 33). By implication, the poet is sure that his people can survive or overcome the predicaments of the military regime. Anyidoho turns himself into a “troubadour”. The lexeme “troubadour” is a sign the poet uses to convey a message or to share knowledge with other people (Eco, 1988, 31). He proposes resistance as the sure way to overcome suffering:

A troubadour, I traverse all my land
exploring all her wide-flung parts with zest
(...)
and I have laughed, distaining those who banned
inquired and movement, delighting in the test
of will when doomed by saracened arrest,
choosing, like unarmed thumb simply to stand.
(...)
Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.
(...)
But somehow we survive
severance, deprivation, loss.
(...)

most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror
rendered unlovely and unlovable;
sundered are we and all our passionate surrender
but somehow tenderness survives (Brutus, 1963, 52-53)

Finally, in his poems, Anyidoho behaves like the South African poet, Dennis Brutus, the voice of the oppressed people. As a troubadour or a “Love singer”, he travels throughout the Ewe world to promote non-violent values such as love, brotherhood, tenderness, perseverance, togetherness, and reciprocity. The respect of these cardinal values is important for the survival and maintenance of social peace. In a fractured society like the one in Anyidoho’s poems, violence breeds violence. Consequently, the poet thinks that to solve the social crisis of his community, violence must give way to peace, love and unity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let say that Anyidoho’s poetry is a complete art. His poetic output is aesthetic because it comprises good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Prosodic elements such as inflexion, tone, tonality, intonation, stress, rhyme, modulation and punctuation abound in many of his poems. In the poems analyzed in the essay, the use of prosody is turned into a childish writing. The reader also notices that many poems do not give a damn to the rules of prosody. Anyidoho succeeds in translating Ewe funeral songs into written poems by combining academic English and pidgin. All in all, he uses poetry as a weapon against violence, force and brutality the ruling system.

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