Non-Religious Themes in Nigerian Poetry of Arabic Expression: A Study of Selected Poems from Isa Abubakar's Al-Suba’iyyāt

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Abstract
The study of Arabic in Nigeria has always been associated with the religion of Islam. The use of Arabic language for literary expression has therefore been appreciated from the perspective of its religious value. Contemporary Nigerian users of Arabic have however diversified their areas of human interests which had led to the production of literary works in Arabic that have little or nothing to do with the religion of Islam. These include national and global issues in the three major genres of literature, namely: Poetry, Prose and Drama. One of the most leading Nigerian poets in Arabic is Isa Abubakar who has two collections of poems to his credit. The first is Ar-Riyadh (the Gardens) while the second one is named Al-Suba’iyyāt which means Odes comprising seven line each. This article intends to study four poems in the second collection that touch on national and global issues from the perspective of a Nigerian Poet using Arabic for expression. The study includes translation and appreciation of, and commentary on each poem. This is in addition to a short biography of the poet and a general review of the work.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, Suba’iyyāt, Ruba’iyyāt, Poetry, Arabic
Introduction

The study of Arabic in Nigeria like in any other non-Arabic speaking country is always associated with Islam. Its spread in Nigeria is however due to many other purposes apart from religion. These include historical (Dike, 1965, p.32) cultural (Abubakar, 1972, p.10) and diplomatic factors.

With the study and mastery of the language in Nigeria as a result of constant and continuous development of its curricula, Nigerians naturally began to respond to their environment through writing about their experiences which at the initial stage were a reflection of the religious training they have undergone. Most of the early writings were, therefore, on religious themes. This is not to say that mundane matters were not discussed at all. By the expansion of scholarship in Arabic through establishment of schools and introduction of Arabic and Islamic studies in the curricula of different institutions including Universities coupled with the admission of Nigerian students into Arab and Western Universities for degrees in Arabic, the perception in Nigeria is being repositioned to see Arabic not only as a language of Islam but also as a utility language for all purposes including Nigerian literature. This development gave birth to a new trend in the study and utilization of the language. As the study of the language and its literature continues to develop, so its utility expands and a new nomenclature was introduced. Today, we have Nigerian literature in Arabic as against Arabic literature in Nigeria.

The phrase “Nigerian literature in Arabic” is relatively new in the Nigerian literary circle as the popular phrase commonly used by writers was ‘Arabic Literature in Nigeria’. It was in 2001, a scholar of Arabic, M. G Raji of Ahmadu Bello University published an article entitled ‘The birth of Nigerian literature in Arabic’. Raji (2001, p.228) saw the birth from the activities and efforts of Nigerian users of the Arabic language to demonstrate their writings in line with the freedom winds blowing all over the Muslims countries which emphasize national consciousness as against religious awareness. He says “…it was the study of the language and literature in this secular context, reinforced by the modernization of the pre-colonial tradition Islamic life, culture and scholarship that eventually gave birth to Nigerian literature in Arabic instead of the English, Hausa Ibo or Yoruba literary tradition”.

While the present writer agrees almost in totality with Raji, the issue of modernization, secularity and decolonization upon which he premised his idea, needs further clarification. This is because ever before the colonial era when Arabic was the official language in some parts of the country, nationalistic ideas were reflected in the writing of Nigerian users of Arabic. For example, Sheikh Adam Al-Ilory quoted a letter (a literary genre in Arabic) written by the king of Borno to Sultan Adhair Al-Barquqi condemning the acts of some Arabs who had come to Borno and misbehaved in the land (Al-Ilory, ND, pp.35-38).

Furthermore, rather than ascribing the whole phenomenon to secularity, the language mastery as a result of intensive training in language acquisition in Arabic schools and universities must have played its role in the diversification of literary exposition. This is because ability to use language effectively and powerfully enhances desire and will to put into writing thoughts, imagination, and emotions which any good literature would require and contain.

In recent times, therefore, some Arabic literary works of Nigerian authorship have begun to attract the attention of literary critics in the Arab world as well as in Nigeria. This appreciation has, however, been confined to only scholars of Arabic. In other words, language continues to be a major barrier in appreciating the quality of our literary artists using Arabic as a medium. While there are a few prose works and drama, poetry still remains the most celebrated literary genre in
Nigerian literature of Arabic expression. Most of these poems are, however, either religious or close to religious themes which even if translated into English may not attract the attention of non-adherents.

This paper therefore intends to expose some selected poems that are basically non-religious in the works of one of the leading poets of Arabic in Nigeria through translation and appreciation of and commentary on his selected poems.

Poetry In Nigerian Arabic Literature

Poetry is the most popular literary genre in Arabic literature. Right from time immemorial, Arabic poetry has been the major if not only literary genre that was highly celebrated by the Arabs. A poet was so highly regarded that when one emerged in a community, feasts would be made, the women of the tribe would join together in bands playing lutes as they do during bridals and the men and boys would congratulate one another (Al-Maslut, 1973, p.207)

This important literary genre has been defined as a measured and rhymed speech. (Azzayyat, ND, p.28) This shows that poetry in Arabic goes with some kind of measurement and rhyme which later led to the discovery of sixteen types of meters in Arabic poetry by Khalil ibn Ahmad. The principal meters include (the perfect Kamil), the Ample (Wafir), the long (Tawil), the wide (Basit), the light (Khafif) and several more. (Nicholson, 1976, p.75) A complete poem following any of those meters in its composition is referred to as Qasidah which means an Ode, the only form or rather any finished type of poetry that existed in what, for want of a better word may be called The classical period of Arabic literature (Nicholson, 1976, p.76). Each one consists of verses (abyat, sing bayt) which Arberry describes as a unit of composition made up of two hemistiches or misra and the rhyme so enunciated is maintained throughout the ensuing poem. (Arberry, 1965, p.6) Such poetic tradition continues, despite observed difficulty and rigidity in its practice. This has led some critics to write against the system which led to what is today known as free-verse. The free verse, despite Western influence and its practice by some modern poets in the Arab world, did not actually get the expected support by the Arab readership. (Al-Dasuqy, 1970, p.302)

The traditional system of poem composition, therefore, continues to be used by Nigerian users of Arabic. It is, however noteworthy that the Nigerian Arabic scholarship has invented another meter in addition to the already known 16 meters discussed earlier. This meter called ‘al karim’ (the benevolent) was invented by Ruqayyah, grandmother of Sheikh Usman bin Fodio (Al-Ilory, ND, p.10) and she had an ode using the meter. The present writer is, however, not aware of any other Nigerian poet that used the meter. This shows the rigid stickiness of Nigerian Arabic poets to the traditional sixteen meters.

Furthermore, major themes in traditional Arabic literature continued to be pursued by the Nigerian poets. These include elegy, eulogy, love poem, description, heroic poem and satire, though the motive in any of the themes in Nigerian context is different from that of the Arabs. For example, the eulogy in Arab literature may be for a King or a ruler with the aim of drawing some material benefit, while in Nigeria it is to appreciate the contribution of great scholars or exalting the position of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).

With the exposure of Nigerian scholars of Arabic to modern civilization, various themes and issues different from the traditional ones are tackled. For example, Isa Abubakar in another collection of his has this to say about love:

لقد حزَّ الله الخمور كذا السكَّ..** عوضوني مـنها بشتقتي ذي الخمرا فلا ذني لـي بعد إذا جئت يا منى ** لأنـِـــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــ~~ار

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God has forbidden alcohol and intoxicants
But has replaced them for me with your lips
There is no sin, therefore, if I come oh Munah!
To drink from that wine.
Your reluctance burns like fire in the heart
Please have mercy and be more courteous
Come close as our life is in the closeness
While turning away spoils the matter and life
Why is it that when we come in the night
You shower abuses and blames
Oh my love, love is essential
And through ages it has been exalted in poetry.

The poet in the forgoing verses has succeeded not only in raising the average readers’ sentiments towards love he also pacified people with religious sentiments, having started with God and what He has forbidden. He, however, left nobody in doubt that he knows what is right and what is wrong. Another great poet was Justice Umar Ibrahim from Zaria who praised the historical landmark of United State of America when she successfully launched the first rocket into the moon in 1969. He composed an acrostic poem part of which goes as follows:

You landed, you landed on the surface of the moon
You fulfilled the promise of John (Kennedy)
It is worth standing for as a mark of respect
For the great and esteemed position

The poem is acrostic because the first letters of the verses spelt the names of the Americans that first landed on the moon. They are Neil Armstrong, Edwin Adrian and Michael Collins.

About The Poet and Al-Suba’iyyat

The Poet

Isa Alabi Abubakar received his early Arabic and Islamic education at Arabic Training Center (Markaz), Agege where he completed his Junior Arabic Secondary section (I’dadiyyah) and Senior Arabic Secondary section (thanawiyyah) under the tutelage of Sheikh Adam Abdullah al-Ilory the prolific writer, historian, linguist and Islamist. He later proceeded to Bayero University in Kano where he obtained Diploma in Arabic, Hausa and Islamic Studies. He thereafter gained admission into the University of Ilorin where he bagged his first Degree in Arabic language and literature.
He went back to Bayero University for his Masters program after which he was employed by Usmanu Danfodiyo University in Sokoto. After teaching for about a decade in the university, he was appointed at the University of Ilorin in 1994 and he has since been teaching Arabic literature at the University. His poetic talents had started to show from Arabic Training Center Agege where in addition to his natural endowment, there was a conducive atmosphere for teaching and training to nurture talents. By the end of his training in the other various institutions, he has actually become a prominent and famous poet recognized locally and globally having got some of his poetic works published in Nigeria and some Arab countries. Some critics have pointed to the environmental factors that are responsible for his prowess in poetry. The factors include his study at Markaz, University of Ilorin, his sojourn at Usman Danfodio Sokoto and Bayero University and stay in his hometown, Ilorin. (Jimba, 2008, p.15) The beauty and musical melody of his poems has made Universities to encourage students to research into his works at all levels, Bachelors degree, Master’s and PhD and on different themes. This is in addition to several published academic papers in learned journals on his works. He has got two large collections of Arabic poems to his credit.

Al-Suba’iyyāt

Al-Suba’iyyat is a singular word for subaiyyaat which literally means in Arabic seven lines. Al-subaiyyāt written by Isa Abubakar is a collection of poems that consists of seven-line poems on different themes. The literary work is a product of the influence of similar poetic works written by other poets in the past. There was one written by Omar al-Khayyam, the Persian mathematician and astronomer, named Ruba’iyyat (the four-line or Quadruplet poem). This work is one of the world’s best known works of poetry. It is in view of its beauty and quality that the work was translated into many languages of the world. In the 1850s an English poet and translator Edward Fitzgerald reworked and molded Omar’s work in to rhymed verse and tried to preserve the spirit of the original if not its precise meaning Fitzgerald published his translation in 1859 but it was not until the second edition appeared in 1886 that the poetry gained immense popularity (Encyclopedia Britanica, Vol. 23, p.823). This great literary work did not influence Western literature only but its influence on the eastern literatures including Arabic literature is incontrovertible. One of such influences was seen in the poem of al-Bustaniyy who converted the Ruba’iyyah (four lines) to Suba’iyyāt (seven-line poem). (Abubakar ‘b’ 2008, p.140). Isa Abubakar himself did not hide his sources of inspiration for this type of poem when he called the attention of the readers to two different Subaiyyat that had influence on him. The first one was composed by Iliya Abu Madi (Jimba, 2008, p.13) while the other one was authored by Muhammad Ash-hary (Abubakar, 2008, p.183) It is, therefore, not strange to have a Nigerian poet of Arabic composing poems in that style.

Isa Abubakar’s Suba’iyyaat which is first of its kind in the Nigerian literary circle (Jimba, 2008, p.15) is composed of one hundred and seventy (170) poems where the poet touched on different personal and human encounters ranging from local to National and intercontinental issues.

It is, however, observed that while our poet’s Suba’iyyaat follows the traditional couplet system, the other Suba’iyyaat followed one line system. This pre-supposes that Isa Abubakar is heavily inclined to the traditional Qasidah form which is also followed by many other Nigerian poets in Arabic medium.
Analysis Of Selected Poems
The first poem is titled “the terrorists”. It goes thus:

لىظًا اًشػـــت فٟ لٍـــــٛة اٌؼجبد
**لأعبٌـــــــــــــــــــــــــــٛا اٌذِبء فٟ وً ٚاد**
و١ف رذم١ك ِب ٠شِٚـــــْٛ ثبلإس
**ـؼت إدـــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــشاصٖ ثغبساد ػبد**
أٞ شٟء ٠ب لَٛ أ
**ـظ اٌزٟ ٠ض٘مٛٔـــــــــــــــــــــــٙب ثفغبد؟**
أٞ د٠ٓ دػب إٌٝ اٌؼٕف ٚاٌزّـ
**ـث١ً ثبلأثش٠ب ٌٕ١ً اٌــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــّشاد؟**
لبرً الله ِٓ ٠شجــــــــــــــــــــغ فٟ وـ
**ـً ِىبْ رشــــــــــــــــــــذد الأٚغـــــــــبد**
إّْ إس٘بثــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــُٙ ٠ف١ذ ػذٚ
**الله ِٓ لجً ض١ـــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــشٖ ٌٍؼجبد**
(Abubakar, 2008, p.65)

They threw terror in the hearts of people
They shed blood in all places
How achievable is their goal with terror
Or demolishing the security gates of cities
What is never achievable with peace
May be difficult to achieve by attacks of the aggressors
What is more precious, o people, than
The life they terminate with impunity
Which religion calls to callousness and killing of the innocent
In order to get the goal,
May the Almighty wage war against who encourages
The heartlessness of the senseless
Their terrorist attacks are beneficial only to the enemies of God
In addition to their havoc to the servants of God

Appreciation
The issue of terrorism has become a household concern in every country today. Several governments have been trying to combat the menace in order to get peace which is a prerequisite for development. Despite the fact that the terrorists cut across political, religious and ideological boundaries, Muslims have been the target of accusations. But here is a poet that can also be regarded as a “Muslim Scholar” expressing disgust and sorrow about the activities of the terrorists. His condemnation of the acts has been literarily expressed in three ways. First, the shedding of blood and the throwing of fear in the hearts of people which any reasonable human being must abhor. Secondly, in a questioning technique, he was pointing to the unattainability of the goals of the terrorists which is another way of condemning the acts. Questioning technique also shows the high level of worry in the heart of the poet. Despite the fact that he knows that no religion encourages terrorism, he was still asking which religion supports terrorist acts in order to express his complete disgust and abhorrence. The third way of condemning terrorism is by showering curses on the perpetrators of the acts because they are terrorizing the servants of God.

Although the appreciation of the language aspect of the poem may be difficult as each language has its devices in expressing ideas and feelings, the musical impact of *ad* with which each line of the poem ends ‘rawiyy’ is noteworthy. This is because such ‘rawiyy’ when the poem is put in the song form, gives sounds of sorrow and lamentation.

The second poem is entitled ‘our country and darkness’. It goes thus:

بلادنا والظلم ســـــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــــ١بْ
**وأمّ هذا الف١٦٣مةاد أٜ٢ان١ي**
Our country and darkness are the same
About this matter of corruption I’m fed up
Where is the lucky and conscious leader
To rescue us from the dens of the criminals
How many dark nights like the heart of the devil
I have encountered and slept in them
They are as black as charcoal
Which even prevent rats to come out
Horses of the country are uncontrollable
They have for long weakened the horsemen’s intelligence
Battalions of people are going in wrong ways
They are moving on aimlessly
Where is their leader?
From Ghana I returned overwhelmed by her light
While my people are languishing in darkness.

Appreciation

The issue of electricity in Nigeria has become a great if not the greatest problem facing
the country. Many successive governments have promised to face the problem head long. Nigerians are each time disappointed by the result of each effort despite huge amount of money
being invested in the sector. It is now clear to all Nigerians that the inability of governments to
get a lasting solution to the epileptic nature of electricity in the country is as a result of stinking
corruption that has eaten deep into the fabric of the society.

This is what the poet is talking about by first taking darkness to be synonymous to
Nigeria. What can be darker than darkness? This is immediately followed by expressing disgust
about the level of corruption of which he is fed up. In the second line, he considered the people
at the helm of affairs as criminals.

The darkness in the country is likened to the heart of devils. This simile is horrific and
frightening. The nights are so dark that the nocturnal animals are frightened to go out because of
the intensity of the darkness.

There is a metaphorical expression in the poem where the poet likened our leaders to the
uncontrollable horses whose uncontrollableness has defied all solutions. This is what he means by
saying “They have for long weakened the horsemen’s intelligence. Expressing his
disappointment further, he compared the situation he saw in Ghana with what he met in Nigeria
when he came back from sabbatical leave. What an expression of hopelessness in Nigerian
future.

The third poem is titled Asian Calamity; it goes thus:
The sea surged in annoyance
Tsunami transgressed in fierceness
There is joy in the sea when quite
It becomes horror when it transgresses
It turns men like water moss
Floating to taste grief
What is Noah’s flood
It has upset the rhetoric of a literary artist
The earthquake has destroyed without notice
Souls, the day was a bad day
We see misery, banishment
That is more than what hearts can absorb
Calamities hitting Asian always
May she taste tranquility.

Appreciation

Tsunami disaster is one of the world worst calamities. It has caused untold hardship to humanity in the Asian continent. The whole world responded to the event in different ways to assist the people of the area. This human disaster has aroused the emotion and feelings of the poet to which he responded in this poem.

The poet succeeded in describing the situation as grievous and unprecedented. It is a beautiful literary device to use personification in describing event as done in this poem. The sea is annoyed and transgressed.

The scene was a complete horror seeing dead bodies floating like water moss on the sea. The use of annoyance and transgression is also similar to a Quranic expression when Almighty God was talking about Tufan (Noah’s deluge) thus: “when the water transgressed, we carried you (mankind) in the floating (ship)” (Quran 69 verse 11). This type of device is known in Arabic Rhetoric as Iqtibas. (Lit; taking light from a place). It means that the poet has taken part of the beauty of the Quran to express himself. The catastrophe is beyond the descriptive ability of any literary artist or any orator. He finally prayed for the continent to taste peace and tranquility.

The fourth poem is titled ‘Combating Poverty in Africa’. It goes thus;

(Translation: Abubakar, 2008, p.196)
Poverty is cut like a suit for people
Clothed in misfortune and travails
Disgrace sets in, yet ascribed to fate
With wrongdoings they expect praise
May their majesty and riches perish
How manage they amass huge wealth in penury
The scale has become light
My heart never wishes them well
Mandela’s efforts did not change anything
They will remain a disease in the veins
They are heads bankrupt in character
They never think of progress for the people
They rule with deceit like devils
And betray the black race

The background to this poem was according to the poet about a gathering which Nelson Mandela addressed in London on combating poverty in Africa. The poet sees the corruption of African leaders as disheartening. He likened the leaders to tailors who have cut cloth and suit of poverty and penury for African people. The use of cloth and suit here to show overwhelming poverty in Africa is a literary device known as *Kinaya* otherwise called allusion. How it was possible for Africa to be in this level of deprivation was because of high level of corruption which African leaders have institutionalized. This is in addition to injustice and inequitable share of natural resources. The poet could not hide his feelings against the leaders by showering curses on them that their honour and majesty may never be protected. He also laments how deceitful the leaders are and likens them to devils as they betrayed the black race. Bad leaders in Africa must be fought first if we want to combat poverty successfully in the continent.

**Conclusion**

An attempt has been made in this paper to expose the poetic artistry of Nigerian poet of Arabic medium. The analysis of some selected poems has shown the beauty and high quality of Nigerian poetic repository in Arabic language. We have also seen the concern of those poets for national and global issues which have been the major focus of this paper. It was also observed in the paper that despite efforts by some literary critics to condemn traditional poetic style which is *Qasidah* form and despite the fact that changes have come over Arabic poetry even in Arab countries, most Nigerian poets still use the traditional style. It is the submission of the present writer that the poets should free themselves a little bit from the rigidity of the prosody and fashion out poetic style that will conform to Nigerian poetic styles like in English, Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo. This will go a long way in lifting Arabic poetry in Nigeria from the present state of rigidity and imitation. This submission can only actualize its aim by expanding the curriculum of Arabic Studies to include more studies in Nigerian literatures.

Finally, the study of Arabic in Nigeria should be encouraged at all levels irrespective of its association with Islam in view of the contribution of the language to the socio-cultural and educational development of the country over a millenium.
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