

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

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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'iyāt* 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'iyāt, Ruba'iyāt, 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

وستترك هذا يضرم النار في الحشا** ألا فارحمني واقشعي ذلك السترا
 صليزي كثيرا في الـــــــوصال حياتنا** وفي الصد شرّ يفسد العيش والأمر
 لماذا إذا جنناك في غسق الدجى** لنسمع قول الـــــــود وسعتنا زجرا
 واعلم أن الـــــــحب شيء مقدّس** وقد وصفوا في الدهر أحواله شعرا

(Abubakar 'a' 2005, p.181)

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:

نزلت نزلت بسطح القمر** وفيت لـ "جون" وعده المنتظر
 يليق بنا أن نقوم احتراماً** لـــــــحق الجليل جليل القدر

(Galadanci, 1993, p.170)

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'iyat

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'iyāt

Al-Suba'iyat 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'iyat* (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'iyah* (four lines) to *Suba'iyāt* (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'iyaat* 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'iyaat* follows the traditional couplet system, the other *Suba'iyaat* 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.

أبليس رئيس موفق يقظ * ينقذنا من براثن الـجاني
 وليلة ظلمة أكابـدها * أبيتها مثل قلب شيطان
 سوادها مثل فحـمة منعت * لـخوفها من خروج فيران
 خيول هـذي البلاد جامحة * أعيت طويلا عقول فرسان
 كتائب القوم -أين قائدها- * تسير في الغي مثل حيران
 رجعت من (غانا) وهي تبهرني * نورًا وقومي في ظلمة العاني
 (Abubakar, 2008, p.120)

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 metaphoric expression in the poem where the poet likened our leaders to the uncontrollable horses whose uncontrollabness 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:

هدر البحر هائـجًا و غضوبًا * * وعتى الـمد كاسحا ومهيبا

إن في البحر في الهدوء متاعا ** ويـــــرى في عتوه مرهوبا
 جعل الناس كالطحالب يطفو ** ن خفافا لكي يذوقوا كربوا
 أيــــن منه طوفان نوح فقد أر ** بك رغم البيان حقا أدبيا؟
 وأباد الزلــــزال من دون إنذا ** ر نفوسا فكان يوما عصيبا
 قد رأينا مشاهد اليأس والتشـد ** ريد فوق التي تذوب القلوبا
 نكبات تــــدق (آسيا) دوما ** فعسى أن ترى الأمان قريبا
 (Abubakar, 2008, p.191)

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;

فصلوا الفقـــــر للشعـــــوب رداء ** وكسوهـــــم شـــــقاوة وبلاء
 خذلوهم فحملوا القدر المـــــحـــــم ** توم تقصـــــيرهم ورامو الثناء
 لا رعى الله عزهم وغـــــناهم ** كيف حازوا في العدم هذا الثراء؟
 طـــــفح الكيل يا إلهي فلا يـــــضـــــم ** مـــــر للفاشلين قلبـــــى رضاء
 جهـــــد (منديلا) لا يغيـــــر شينا ** وسيدـــــقون في الشـــــرايين داء
 هم صـــــناديد كالأراذل خلقا ** لا يـــــرومون للـــــبلاد نماء
 حكموا بالخداع مـــــثل الشياطين ** ن فخانوا أفريقيا الســـــوداء

(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.

About the Author:

Dr. AbdulRaheem is an Associate Professor of Arabic Literature and Literary criticism at Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria. He was formally head of Arabic and Literary studies department at Islamic University, Say, Niger Republic. Several academic articles have been published for him on Literature, Language Teaching and Comparative Literature in learned journals in Nigeria and Abroad.

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