

## **Lexico-Semantic Features and Rhetorical Devices in Joe Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts***

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### ***Abstract***

*This study is aimed at exploring meaning-conveying devices in Joe Ushie's anthology of poems, A Reign of Locusts. This would be in harmony with Geoffrey Hutchings' submission of stylistics as being fundamentally "concerned with meaning" (84). This approach at exploring meaning conveying devices entails looking at various linguistic resources such as lexis, syntax as well as other text-forming techniques and rhetorical strategies in selected poems from the text. A full understanding of a given text can only emerge when these devices, as they feature in the selected poems, are carefully examined. Our focus will be on a systematic examination of some of these aspects. The study will more specifically examine lexical manipulations and semantic subversions, the function of certain pronouns in the poems, as well as cohesive strategies as conveyors of meaning. Also, the nature of sense relations, metaphorical representations in the study texts, symbolism and dimensions of orality features in the poetry will be considered. This examination will be guided by insights from critical discourse analytical tool of stylistics.*

**Key Words:** Lexico-Semantic Features, Rhetorical Devices, Orality, Stylistics, *A Reign of Locusts*

### **Introduction**

Joe Ushie is a well-known Nigerian poet and scholar. His poetry, after a close and insightful reading, displays an obvious recreation of events that have taken place in the history of his immediate environment in particular, and his country, Nigeria, at large. Through his works, Ushie laments and challenges the ineptitude and failure of the political class. The poet also attempts to proffer possible solutions to envisaged problems. Joe Ushie produces patterns of experiences in his poems and these cannot be ignored if we are to understand, appreciate and meaningfully respond to the poems. In many of the poems, we are made to experience some deep, sensitive word manipulations and semantic subversions; paradigms of these will be drawn from the poems as we progress in this work. The poet has successfully crafted these aesthetic strategies into his poems for greater utilization of their full evocative power. Through his tactical manipulative style, the language of his poetry has expressed and showcased the interplay of language and its pertinence to social reality.

This study is interested in selected poems from Joe Ushie's poetry collection, *A Reign of Locusts*. Many of Ushie's poems in this collection are concerned with the plight of the ordinary man in contemporary Nigeria. This category of poems captures the socio-political situation in Nigeria in a particularly pathetic style.

*A Reign of Locusts* is divided into four sections and these are “Toward Canaan” (made up of twenty-three poems), “Back to the Hills and Vales” (which has eight poems), “Voices and Moods of Silent Wild and other Deep Matters” (constituted of sixteen poems) and “Returns” (with eight poems). Generally, the tone of each poem is mild but poignant. Each poetry text gives an insight into the chaotic state of the Nigerian social and economic life and the sufferings of the downtrodden. The poet carefully highlights the domination of the political scene by “the locusts” (18) who have eaten up the expected harvest and deprived the workers of a better life and the opportunity of evolving a viable political, economic and social culture based on noble principles of democracy. The poet describes and laments the hopelessness of the situation as the masses “...laboured for this dawn but in our victory dance the chameleon henchmen... have carried the day” (19). He highlights how the economic sweats that should have been a success and a victory for the workers translate into social decay as the “...brigands have cast us out” (19) using all kinds of means to frame, maim and marginalize the people and then ‘...bathe in the milk and honey’ (20) meant for the Nigerian citizenry. A case is highlighted in “the termitarium” which is one of the poems in the anthology when governments and certain individuals set up different social and political establishments and organizations like MAMSER and ABN which are meant to better the life of the masses but which end up becoming their bane. This is because leaders of such establishments and organizations use their positions for pervasive tendencies such as the entrenchment of inclement economic climate, misinformation and fake news generation, devaluation of human life and other manoeuvrings designed to truncate the true principles of democracy. Hence, the workers are described as ‘a famished flock of burden’ (21) who ‘...wander , still, ...outside our kingdom's gates’ (21)

### Conceptual Issues

A dominant conceptual issue in Joe Ushie's anthology is that of lexical playfulness. Joe Ushie employs this in advancing the tone of lamentation and pain in the collection. The word, “lexis”, means “word” in Greece. And words, whether content or lexical (example: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) or structural (example: prepositions, articles, conjunctions) play a significant role in the meaning of a text. Katie Wales (1989), for instance, observes that “lexis is the most important means we possess for expressing or encoding our ideas and experience” (12). An analysis of the lexical structure of any text, therefore, is capable of yielding insights into the meaning potential of the text.

In respect to rhetorical devices, Richard Bradford (1997) defines rhetoric as “the art of speech, an art concerned with the use of public speaking as a means of persuasion” (3). Kirsten Malmkjaer (1991) gives the meaning of rhetoric as the “theory or study of how, by means of what linguistic devices, a speaker or writer ... might best achieve”,

the goal of persuading “the law courts or large gatherings of people” (379). Linguistic stylistics, which began as a serious academic engagement in the twentieth century, is said to be an offshoot of rhetoric since both practices are concerned with how and what linguistic resources are cultivated to achieve an effect or a goal in a given text, oral or written. Classical rhetoric, as we know it today, was based on oral mode of communication of ancient Greeks and Romans. The devices employed by the classical rhetoricians or rhetors are, in the main, analogous to those of modern day African oral performances. For this reason, our understanding of rhetorical devices in this work would be interchangeable with orality features. Modern African poetry is said to have, as its most distinctive feature, an overwhelming presence of orality. Karin Barber (1995), in Irele (ed.) lends credence to this fact when she states that “orality has been singled out in much europhone criticism, as... a potent symbol of Africanity, an almost talismanic notion” (8).

In this study, our focus will specifically be on lexical manipulations and semantic subversions, the function of certain pronouns in the selected poems as well as cohesive strategies as conveyors of meaning. The ideological inclination of the poems shows most lucidly at the level of lexis. The entire lexical outlay will be subdivided into: creative lexical features and semantic subversion.

### **Creative Lexical Features in Selected Poems**

The expression, Creative Lexical Features, as employed in this essay, refers to borrowings from Nigeria's socio-cultural and political environments which are then incorporated into the genre of poetry and derivatives of verbs from acronyms and nouns. In the selected poems, words are coined, borrowed or derived through morphological processes to capture, ridicule or satirize events. Examples of borrowings found in the poem 'the termitarium' are; “ABN” and “MAMSER” (pp.19-20). The acronym, 'ABN' stands for “Association for Better Nigeria” in 'the termitarium', this acronym is, otherwise, known as 'Area Boys of Nigeria'. The expression, 'Area Boys', in Nigerian parlance, is employed to refer to riff-raffs, street or ghetto boys, school drop-outs and never-do-wells in the society. It may also refer to miscreants and vagabonds in the society. It is in this context that Ushie sees the activities of the organizers of the Association for Better Nigeria whose ultimate objective was to scuttle the true principles of democracy during the military era of General Sani Abacha; the true intention of the ABN was to ensure the entrenchment of militocracy whereby General Sani Abacha, the then Nigerian military Head of State was widely “sold” to the Nigerian populace to becoming President for life.

Another borrowing from the Nigerian political scene is the now moribund MAMSER. This acronym stands for Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reconstruction. It was a socio-political organization established by the Federal Government as a new approach to providing pragmatic solutions to issues that confronted the Nigerian masses, and to build citizens' capabilities for self-reliance, economic recovery and to contribute to social and political development of the nation. This soon nose-dived into another white-elephant project as the initiators of this exercise, in the course of time, like the previous ones, turned against its main goal to pervert economic justice,

devalue human capital development and, as a consequence, destroyed its set principles.

In 'Homage to the dragon', the following names are borrowed from the Nigerian socio-cultural environment: "Dele Giwa, Okolo, Tunde, Aminu, Tsaaior, Agba, Goka, Akpan, Tsakpati, Inegbe, Agbor, Edwin, Umaha..." (Pp. 23-24), to represent critical ethnic groups in Nigeria. In this poem, these socio-cultural tags are not mere arbitrary labels; they represent the deprived in all parts of Nigeria. They represent the northerners, southerners, easterners and westerners. Aside the geographical representation, these names also carry semantic imports and high cultural contents. A case in point is Dele Giwa, one of Nigeria's foremost journalists who was wiped off the surface of the earth through a letter bomb allegedly executed by the then military junta due to his radical, critical and objective journalistic posturing which was then considered a threat to the then military regime in Nigeria,

An example of derivatives of verbs from nouns is seen in 'the termitarium'. In the poem, words are coined, borrowed or derived through morphological processes to capture, ridicule or satirize events. The action word, 'dungeoned', in line 21 of the poem, 'the termitarium', (p. 19) is a verb derived from the noun 'dungeon', and it is used to refer to a dark underground room used as a prison. From its employment and usage, Ushie shows how the masses are incarcerated for negligible offences whereas the thieving elites who milk the nation dry are applauded and regaled with more juicy appointments.

### **Lexico-semantics subversions**

Lexico-semantic subversions, as employed in this study, refer to the use of words in certain contexts such that their meanings in those contexts become the opposite or a ridicule of their assumed conventional meaning. Insights from the deconstructionist theory would help in illuminating this stylistic strategy. Deconstruction, according to Abrams (1977), is "an interminable free-play of indeterminable meanings" (427). In some texts from Ushie's poetry, some items are used in a sense different from their conventional meanings. In order to understand how these words and expressions subvert their normal meanings, it will be necessary to relate discussions on them to their contexts in the poem since, according to J. R. Firth (1957), "the complete meaning of a word is always contextual, and no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously" (7). The expression, 'the workers', (pp. 19 and 20), for instance, occurs in the text as 'the workers build the empire' This is a defining characteristic of the brutal enslavement of the civil and public servants working tirelessly to build a viable economy while the proceeds of their labours are being shared among the rich and powerful in the society. Hence, "the workers" labours are sarcastically described and identified as "in this paradise of their sweat"(p. 19). The collocation of 'paradise' with 'sweat' and the initial deictic, 'their', discolours semantically the idea of 'paradise' in the poem.

In line 22, page 19, the 'labour unions' could be seen as the umbrella body, set up to speak for workers in the text but this same body is also being manipulated by people within the unions, speaking from both sides of their mouths. They are described in the

text as '... our silenced foes' within the labour unions, who eventually 'have carried the day' and the workers 'victory dance'. The 'chameleon henchmen' can also be seen as a satiric reference as they are further being described in the text 'as heroes of this victory they delayed'. This also connotes their ignorance of the transient nature of power. The 'Labour unions' is a term semantically adjusted in the poem to collocate with 'ABN lords' and 'grand-seers of MAMSER' who come in multicolours with diverse forms of activities, negatively conceived and this has led to the ultimate failure and eventual collapse of these bodies. This subversion becomes easily noticeable in lines 43 and 44 of page 20: 'Sheltered in our blood and sweat // They bathe in milk and honey'.

On page 20, line 32, '... those grand-seers of MAMSER' meant for the social and economic reconstruction is twisted to 'roaring hosanna at the capitol' (line 35). 'Roaring' is antonymous to noise, and hence, a negator of the original intention of the reconstruction to make life better for the workers. In the quest for workers' betterment through a recognized organ or body, the initiators and frontiers of these organs are ridiculed and subverted in the following words: 'chameleon henchmen, silenced foes, leprous colony of untired generals, scribes of the interim lie, arriviste mannequins, genocidal mattoid' (lines 25, 26, 29, 31, 36 and 37 of pages 19 and 20). The words, 'commonweal' and 'hewman' on pages 20 and 27, have skillful conflation of 'common' with 'weal' and 'hew' with 'man' to generate multiple and radically different meanings.

### **Functions of pronouns in the text**

Pronouns, according to F. Cornish (1986), are words used to avoid repetition by the "use of a semantically attenuated expression in place of a full lexical expression initially used"(1). When a pronoun is referring back to something, this kind of reference is known as anaphoric. But, when it refers to something coming later, it is known as cataphoric reference. When a reference takes us out of the text to search for meaning, relying on context, it is known as exophoric reference, but when it makes us stay within the text, not relying on external material, it is known as endophora. (see Ronald Carter *et al*, 2007:198). It is necessary to note that the type of cohesive link involving pronoun reference is an important element in the way texts work. Another type of reference which functions as a cohesive tie is expressed by articles such as 'the', 'that', 'their', 'here', and 'there'; these are known as deixis, "the term which linguists use to denote pointing expressions" (see Mick Short, 1998:269). For personal pronouns, demonstrative reference can be anaphoric or cataphoric. A distinguishing feature of deixis is that it functions exophorically, to be complete. Pronouns may also be used in a good number of ways; as markers of social class boundaries, how they mark associations with others or solidarity (in-group), and to indicate social distance or resentment (out-group). The following extracts from pages 19, 20 and 21 of the poetry text shall be used to start this analysis;

And our song saddens the termites  
Saddens the hills, saddens winds  
We toiled for a termitarium  
But brigands have cast us out

Remember us returning pebbles  
 For their swarms of pellets?  
 We sow the seeds,  
 They reap the fruits;  
 We hunt the game,  
 They eat the meal,  
 Their eyes perched at the dish  
 We wander, still,  
 Outside our kingdom's gates.

These lines, excerpted from Ushie's 'the termitarium', mark the dichotomy between the oppressive class and the oppressed. The use of personal pronouns 'our, we, us' highlights the plight of the Nigerian citizens who labour, but have nothing to show for it, hence, they are seen as 'a famished flock of burden' who 'wander, still' outside their kingdom's gate in search of greener pastures. The oppressed citizens are also likened to termites that toil but do not benefit from their own toil. Ushie tactically creates his idea of suffering on the verb 'saddens'. Through the use of the inclusive 'our, we, us', the poet has created an avenue that allows him to associate and identify with the oppressed citizens in their pains and as well share in their dehumanizing situation. From the excerpt, the deprived are also identified in the cataphoric nominal as, 'a famished flock of burden'. The poet allows the impact of the condition of the oppressed workers to reach the reader unmediated, and with greater objectivity in the portrayal of situations in the poem. We identify the occurrences of 'they' in the excerpts to represent the oppressor-class, which embraces both social class and strata. The deictic, 'their', in the excerpts '*their* swarms of pellets' and '*their* eyes perched at the dish' refers to the ruling class. The word, 'their', in the clause, '*their* swarms of pellets', discolours, semantically, the idea of 'swarms' in the poem. The poet imbues pronouns with emotive strength and makes them to take the subject position in each of the lines. The pronouns are not just discursively striking, they also capture the oppressor-class attitude and the sufferings of the downtrodden. The poet also demonstrates an empathic understanding of the distress oppressed. There is a relationship of solidarity both in affective and psychological domains, as can be inferred from the strategic activation of the inclusive pronoun, 'we', in the subjective position. Tanure Ojaide (1996) supports the role of this deictic as he maintains that "the frequent use of "we" shows that the poet's role is the public one of defending communal values" (27).

On page 17 of the poem, 'Ladder', and on pages 22, 23 and 24 of the poem, 'Homage to the dragon', the poet accuses the political leaders who stay aloof of the oppressed class in the following lines;

Where you wine and dine as god  
 Where you belch and hiss your scorn  
 Those blood stains of your boots  
 Those mementos  
 I shrank from you  
 Hitting your forehead

Was once far from me  
 Now I must scream  
 And my siblings: Okolo, Tunde ...

As the poet uses the article, 'you', in lines 4 and 5 of the poem, 'Ladder', he strengthens and confirms his group's anger at the out-group, the oppressor class whose economic excesses impoverish the citizens. There is the repetitive use of the word, 'those', in lines 19 and 20 of 'Homage to the dragon'. The use of the article, 'those', in these lines performs dual referential functions. It differentiates the poet's in-group from the out-group. The out-group which is the oppressor-class is captured by referential mechanism as 'those blood stains of your boots' This is cleverly depicted in negative light because of the sufferings and hardship which they have exposed the Nigerian citizens to. On page 22 of the same poem, lines 10 to 17, the poet employed the device of the first-person participant, represented by the article, 'I'. The poet says; 'I shrank from you...// hitting your forehead...// was once far from me' and 'now I must scream'. One notices the manipulation of the pronoun to depict the division and confrontation between the speaking voice of the poem represented by 'I' and 'me', as the oppressed, less-privileged and the oppressor, with the exophoric reference, 'you', as surrogate and including, in a sense, the invocative, 'my', of '... my siblings: Okolo, Tunde...'. This invocation seems more of a solidarity call and for moral courage than a mere attraction of attention. The employment of the personal pronoun 'I' according to Miriam Inegbe (2018) "makes the Actor completely integrated in the sojourner"(210). It is also worth noting how the poet has identified and fused with the people as the voice of the oppressed. Niyi Osundare (1981) describes this role in a more explicit way thus:

The closeness between the oral performer and his audience is reflected in his choice of lexical items ... In terms of personal deictics, he may employ "I" for himself, "you" for his audience, "we" to envelope both parties, and "they" and "them" for those who do not belong.(11)

The nominal elements recognized as standing for the oppressor-class are as follows:

*"the chameleon henchmen"*  
*"the multicolours of ABN lords"*  
*"that leprous colony of untired generals  
 roaring hosanna, grand-seers of MAMSER"*  
*"those arriviste mannequins"*  
*"that genocidal mattoid" (lines 25, 28, 29, 32, 35,36, 37).*

The above nominal elements occur in the third part of the poem, 'the termitarium', and they are generally devoid of deictic pronouns. Meanwhile, the nominal elements which stand for the oppressed in some of the poems are:

“workers, a famished flock of burden” (the termitarium)  
 “the toiling ants” (Ladder), and  
 “famished farmer, starving trader” (Homage to the dragon)”.

In the fifth part of the poem, 'Homage to the dragon', however, the silent missing voice of the poet emerges, no longer as an anonymous observer of events but as a part and parcel of the oppressed group. The following pronoun layout illustrates this; '...our second gruesome massacre' and 'when we all shrank'.

The structure of the deictic pronouns, emblemized in labour-related lexical items, and made manifest as *us-versus-they*, is expressed in the text to depict the tension between the oppressor and the oppressed. This structure of the 'us' and the 'they' also manifests in the lexical chain of the poem pertaining to torture and suffering. Paradigms of such words include; “build, toiled, maimed, murdered, dungeoned, laboured, writhe, roast, sow, hunt, sweat, blood, wander ” among others, all from 'the termitarium', “axe, blood stains, scars, dagger, grave, skulls, hawks, pecking, hang, battered, famished, starving, massacre”, from 'Homage to the dragon' and “toiling, blades, famine,” from 'Ladder'.

### **Metaphorical representations in the text**

Michael Halliday (1973) defines metaphor as a word “used for something resembling that which it usually refers to” (319). He goes further to expatiate that “metaphorical modes of expression are characteristic of all adult-language”. This remark by Halliday becomes even more significant in the case of poetry as an area of language use that thrives best in metaphor. Leech (1969) presents “notional classes of metaphor” (158) and explains each of the classes as follows:

- i). The concretive metaphor, which attributes concreteness or physical existence to an abstraction: 'the pain of separation', 'the light of learning', 'room for negotiation', etc.
- ii). 'The animistic metaphor, which attributes animate characteristics to the inanimate: 'an angry sky', 'graves yawned', 'the shoulder of the hill', etc.
- iii). 'The Humanizing (Anthropomorphic) metaphor', which attributes characteristics of humanity to what is not human: 'This friendly river', 'laughing valleys', etc.

Leech further explains that the above-mentioned 'notional classes' overlap since what is human suggests that it is also animate, and what is animate suggests concreteness. His procedures for the analysis of metaphor involve three aspects known as the vehicle, the tenor and the ground of metaphor. The 'tenor' is 'that which is actually under discussion' while the 'purported definition' is the metaphor's 'vehicle' that is 'the



image or analogue in terms of which the metaphor is represented'. The 'ground' is the characteristic or attribute shared by or common to both the tenor and the vehicle terms.

Through a careful manipulation of metaphors, Joe Ushie depicts the pains of exploitation of his people. Examples of human phenomena as victims to this terror and trauma come in these lines from the poem "Homage to the dragon":

"your reign is the rivers of blood" (p.23)

"your smiles are more deadly" (p. 23)

"ticking restlessly in your purse" (p.23)

"while your boots fed and farted" (p.24)

"sheltered in our blood and sweat" (p. 20)

"remember the many mouths// of the Scribes of the Interim lie" (p. 20)

"their eyes perched at the dish// of our sweat and blood" (p. 20)

"an endless eclipse for the wingless" (p. 18)

From the above excerpts, 'blood' becomes the representative metaphor for human victims. The 'smiles' in the line "your smiles are more deadly" rather than being seen as a literal image of bliss becomes a symbol of scorn, ridicule and cynicism, a subversion of its ordinary interpretation. The excerpt, 'ticking restlessly in your purse', presents transitions of many who were massacred by the ruling class. This line also shows how restless and eager the oppressors are, when plotting to devalue human life. Through a metaphorical representations, agents of squalor and treachery are established in the line, "while your boots fed and farted", highlighting how the oppressor class feed fat from the sweats of the down-todden. In the extract "sheltered in our blood and sweat", the word, 'sheltered', is the vehicle term while 'blood and sweat' are the tenor. In this line, also, we find the relics of torture, and an unending exploitation of the oppressed in different phases as the oppressors are 'sheltered in our blood and sweat'. The idea of metaphor is further elaborated upon in this line, 'in the labour Unions// as we laboured for this dawn'. The word, 'Labour', is the vehicle term while 'union' is the tenor. The ground is 'as we laboured for this dawn'. The line, 'an endless eclipse for the wingless', echoes the unending trauma and tragedies of the oppressed and the deprived, represented as wingless (the voiceless). There is also the deployment of humanizing metaphor, also known as personification in the line, "your reign is the rivers of blood// Running in the veins and arteries// Of our every street" (23). 'Your reign', with the phenomena in its environment, is the central symbol. This excerpt also gives the gory picture of the oppressor's reign as 'blood' an attribute of human circulating and 'running in the veins and arteries of our every street'.

### **Symbols as surrogates for suffering**

Symbolism is described by Katie Wales (1989) as "a sign, whether visual or verbal, which stands for something else within a speech community" (40). Wales goes on to provide, as an example, the cross as a symbol of Christianity and black garments as "a symbol of mourning" in British culture. Denys Thompson (1974) supports this assertion as he points out that "people derive their symbols from their experience and

their environment” (12). From these assertions, it becomes pellucid that symbols are more culture-sensitive and culture-oriented since they stand for something within a speech community. Symbols do not necessarily imply comparison like metaphor and may not necessarily be a linguistic sign.

In Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts*, the symbols in many of the poems are closely related to elements of brutality, squalor, exploitation, cannibalism, destruction and deprivation, thus serving as emblems of suffering. Other symbols include: erosion, b l a d e s , eskers, floods, epidemics, earthworm (from “Ladder”), ogres, locusts (from “A Reign of Locusts”), workers, brigands, sticks, swords, pellets, Giokoo, henchmen, generals, ogres, blood, sweat (from “the termitarium”), axe, blood, scars, dagger, grave, skulls, hawks, massacre (from “Homage to the dragon”), blood (from “Clifford Orji”), stones, dog, teeth, sword, tiger, claws, blood (from “Homo sappers”), etc. All these symbols suggest gory scenes. Murders and torture episodes are depicted immensely in the poetry text. This scene thus appears to justify the overwhelming presence of 'blood' in many of the poems in this collection.

The dominant symbols in Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* can be summarized as reflecting a predator-prey relationship, terror, labouring, torture, death, and a general atmosphere of fear and deprivation. The predator is the oppressor-class while the preyed upon is the down-trodden, the real victims. In few cases that we observed symbols of hope, specially in the establishments of organizations like ABN and MAMSER, such symbols soon peter out eventually to be symbols of squalor, hopelessness and decay.

There is a striking use of the symbol, 'locusts' in the poem, 'A Reign of Locusts' ( p . 18). Characteristically, the locust, as an insect, is well known for its destructive tendencies: it chews and destroys every valuable and, is, therefore, perceived as a symbol of squalor and deprivation in the poem. In 'Homage to the dragon' the 'hawks' as seen on page 23, lines 11 and 12: 'and the hawks pecking//at wayfarers at the hi-ways' symbolize and invoke a sense of cannibalism.

Other symbols that represent the down-trodden or victims of the “system” are seen in the poem, 'the termitarium'(p. 20) where the workers 'build the empire', 'sow the seeds', 'hunt the game' and the oppressors are seen carting everything away; as the poet puts it, 'their eyes perched at the dish// of our sweat and blood', thereby leaving the oppressed to 'wander, still'. Through the pervasive recourse to symbolism, Joe Ushie conceals his criticisms and disaffection with the system. Symbols, therefore, are used by a poet as self-protecting mechanisms.

### **Rhetorical devices**

According to Tanure Ojaide (1996), “Modern African poetry is, in a way, written oral literature” (33). Modern African poetry is said to have, as its most distinctive feature, an overwhelming presence of orality. Readings from Ushie's poetry shows a robust domination of oral tradition. The poems studied in *A Reign of Locusts* manifest such features of orality as flyting, the vocative, the deictic, to mention but a few, in a manner

of verbal renditions in a typical performer-audience setting. Walter Ong (1982) expatiates flyting to be “agonistic name-calling or vituperation”(45) while Miriam Inegbe (2024) refers to this as “vituperation—an abusive critical language, a laceration of some sort used to express bitter sentiment towards another”(216). The vocative, according to Katie Wales, refers “to a noun or noun phrase or proper name used in an address, separated... in writing by commas”(476). In oral communication, the vocative is used to attract the attention of the addressee.

Ushie's *A Reign of Locusts* is redolent in orality. Examples can be seen in the following lines: “...you belch and hiss your scorn”(Ladder, p.17), “...the scribes of the Interim lie”, “...those arriviste mannequins”, “...leprous colony of untired generals”(The termitarium, p.20), etc. The exophoric reference, 'you', in the line '... you belch and hiss your scorn', highlights the insult characteristic of the content of a 'flyting' text. The poet built in the lines to describe the oppressor class attitude. This strategy also tends to translate the text of a poem into a theatrical performance in which the two parties are presented as if physically present on the stage. The allusion to '...our harvest of a criss-cross// of weals on our backs for our wills?' (p. 19) aptly explains a moment of national stress, sacrifice, and torture as meted out on the oppressed through the '...swords of tyrants' men', (p.19) 'remember us framed at Giokoo, // then maimed or murdered'(p.19) of the workers in 'the termitarium'. This invokes that image of 'Giokoo' (p. 19), a place where the workers are framed, maimed or murdered. 'Giokoo', in this case therefore symbolizes a place of agony for the workers. The vituperative cognomens “into dust, these chameleons have bruised” and “as heroes of this victory they delayed”(p. 20) seen in the same poem 'the termitarium' also function as vocatives since they, too, address the interlocutor as if he were physically present at the scene. The use of the deictic elements as features of performance in the mode of an oral dramatic form is also observed in these lines:

“not when you accouter// for another round” (p. 22)  
 'the preacher and starving trader, // and my siblings...'(p. 23).

In the above lines, one identifies the deictics “you” and “my” illuminating the picture of the speaker and the addressee as in face-to-face relationship. Through the involvement of deictics such as we have seen above, the written poetic text is imbued with theatrical warmth and thus brought within the precincts of an oral performance in spite of its being written.

### Conclusion

The study discovers the use of the passive voice which facilitates the dropping of the logical subject from the clauses at the level of syntax. Pronouns were also examined as indices for ideological boundary between the oppressor and the oppressed. Another device observed, though not strictly syntactic, hangs on the use of the first-person pronoun “I”, as participant in the world of the oppressed. In addition to syntax, the poet's commitment to socio-political issues of his environment also exacted a strong influence on his lexical choice. This shows up in the aspect of symbolism. Various lexical items have been deployed as surrogates for suffering and torture in the text. The

poet, striving to communicate meaning most effectively, has also produced certain stylistically significant features. For instance, the poet employed lexico-semantic subversion as a protest communication strategy. This entails the creative twisting of a word to ridicule its conventional meaning. Finally, the essay looked at the various aspects of rhetorical features in the poetry which are often taken as markers of Africanness in modern African literature as found in the study text, *A Reign of Locusts*.

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