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Textual Foregrounding Techniques in Steve Chimombo's *Napolo and Other Poems*

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Abstract:

This paper primarily examines textual foregrounding elements (techniques) employed to exploit ecocritical issues in Steve Chimombo's selected *Napolo and Other Poems*. It argues that Steve Chimombo underpins foregrounding techniques in his poems through deviation and parallelism. Foregrounding as a form of textual patterning is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. Foregrounding uses "linguistic devices" or elements that make the expression stand out as "uncommon" in a text. The basic principle of foregrounding is that of "aesthetic communication". These linguistic devices include: deviations and parallelism. Deviations discussed in this paper include: lexical, graphological, semantic and phonological. Chimombo uses these techniques to advance environmental awareness. The paper has painted individuals who are in antagonism with the environment as ecoterrorists. Notably the paper has employed two theories; formalism and ecocriticism to bring to light its aspect of foregrounding.

Keywords: Foregrounding, Graphological, Semantic, Phonological, Lexical, Deviation, Parallelism.

1.1 Introduction

This paper primarily examines textual foregrounding elements (techniques) employed to exploit ecocritical issues in Steve Chimombo's selected *Napolo and Other Poems*. It argues that Steve Chimombo underpins foregrounding techniques in his poems through deviation and parallelism. Foregrounding is a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for

literary-aesthetic purposes (Simpson 50). Mukarovsky developed the formalist concept of 'defamiliarization' into a more systematic 'foregrounding' which he defined as 'the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components' (Selden et al 36). He also underlined the folly of excluding extra-literary factors from critical analysis. Since foregrounding is making things strange and to stand out, it has been stated that foregrounding is achieved in two ways, which is through deviation and parallelism. The analysis in this paper finds out the textual foregrounding elements in the following poems: "Usayelekele Mine", "Zomba Mountain", "Development from the Grave", "Napolo, Mvuu Camp", and "The Artists' Cenotaph".

1.2.1 Aspects of deviation

The foregrounded properties, or "artistic devices," which estrange poetic language are often described as "deviations" from ordinary language. Such deviations, which are analyzed most fully in the writings of Roman Jakobson, consist primarily in setting up and also violating patterns in the sound and syntax of poetic language — including patterns in speech sounds, grammatical constructions, rhythm, rhyme, and stanza forms — and also in setting up prominent recurrences of key words or images. (Abrams 103)

Therefore, deviation is a departure from the norm. It is one of the devices for foregrounding in a text or poetry. The Formalists saw literary language as a set of deviations from a norm, a kind of linguistic violence: literature is a "special" kind of language; in contrast to the "ordinary" language we commonly use (Terry 4). This paper will identify some of the deviations which are prominent in Steve Chimombo's *Napolo and other Poems*, which include: lexical, semantic, graphological and phonological.

2.2.2 Lexical deviation

Lexical deviation involves the use of words that do not exist in any language but these words have a special meaning. Lexical foregrounding is achieved through the compounding of words the poet uses. This technique helps the poet to express difficult feelings or unusual senses or images (Alazawi 44). Chimombo exploits this aspect vividly in his poem "Usayelekela Mine".

Usayelekele Mine
Usayelekele mine is not mine;
But you can buy me,

And of course the mine,
At the affordable price
Of deforming my children,
And, if any, my grandchildren,
With radioactive waste.
(Chimombo 133).

It is interesting to note that Chimombo has used neologism by coining the word “Usayelekela”. Probably, Chimombo is tries to mean “Kayelekera”. The poet makes the whole poem strange since one fails to associate the name to any of the mines in Malawian context. This corresponds to what Mukarovsky states that “literary language works in the opposite direction: it draws attention to perceptions by making them unfamiliar, in other words, defamiliarises them”. (Mukarovsky quoted in Selden 38).

Furthermore, Chimombo in the poem “Napolo” also employs neologism. This aspect is very evident in the second section of the poem comprising three subheadings; the metamorphosis, Napologia and the sons of Napolo.

Napologia
The man advised: to see
the teeth of Napolo is patience;
wait until Napolo has gone
and ululate: I am blessed.
The youth answered:
The goat delayed
got the lash on its behind;
when the sun shines
one knows Napolo has gone.
Then is the time to rejoice
(Chimombo 6).

In the extract, the heading of this stanza reads Napologia. This is an instance of Chimombo’s artistry where he coined a word which does not exist at all. Napologia is a word

which the poet bases its origin from Napolo, a Chichewa word which refers to the floods or bursting of a mountain. However, Magalasi has equated Napolo to a god which destroys, and then later went to sleep. However, Chimombo adds a “-gia” which means pain. Here, Chimombo is perhaps showing to us that Napolo is an epitome of pain in the masses.

In this poem, Chimombo can be characterized a derivative writer. It has been noted that the proverbs that he uses are not that original. However, “Napolo” is rich in oral forms. In the extract above, Chimombo uses a famous proverb that you should wait for water to pass to call yourself blessed. This then insinuates that his use of copied proverbs contributes to the use of deviation.

2.2.3 Semantic deviation

Leech calls semantic deviation as “tropes: foregrounded irregularities of content” (74). He believes that in all great poetry this irrational element is present. Since Steve Chimombo is characterized as one of the “great poets” in Malawi, his poems also harbour such oddities. Semantic deviation is an important element of poetic language that “poets and critics alike have tended to consider it the only thing that matters in poetry” (Leech 49). Pirnajmuddin and Medhat argue that the figurative meaning becomes necessary because the literal meaning gets absurd, that is to say, semantic deviation occurs when the literal interpretation of a sentence or a line of poetry is nonsensical (1331). In “Zomba Mountain”, Chimombo provides the historical perspective of Zomba Mountain in which he describes as having a beautiful scenery and a thick forest. He further posits that now the mountain is in ruins. The argument is further juxtaposed by alluding to the Great grandfather, who is dead but if he happens to resurrect, he would not recognize the mountain. It is also noted that the face of the mountain has been deformed to pave way for development. In stanza one, Chimombo writes:

I read your visage like verse
Savored your similes
Mined your metaphors
Wrapped in the roaring rivers (Chimombo 94)

In the above extract, the poet uses a simile “I read your visage like verse”. This is a clear sign of how Chimombo deviates from the normal form of language since conventionally, no person

can read the “visage” or “features” of a mountain as a “verse”. Just as Leech and Pirnajmuddin and Medhat put it: the literal interpretation of what Chimombo has put across here will be “nonsensical” or “absurd”. However, this means that the mountain in the first place was beautiful to the extent that the persona or speaker would get a lot of “similes” and “metaphors” from it. In the same vein, Chimombo artistically employs personification where he addresses the mountain using the second person pronoun. In so doing, Chimombo has referred to the mountain as an animate feature.

We no longer bury our corpses
Over there and away from us,
Overhung by weeping *nkhadzi* trees
Just as the missionaries advised us (Chimombo 62).

In the above poem, “Developments from the Grave”, Chimombo uses personification to show the reader how the “imported” traditions or beliefs perhaps harm or destroys the environment. The excerpt above demonstrates that now people “no longer bury corpses...over there and away from them [us]”. The “nkhanzi” tree which is common in graveyards becomes worried in fear of extinction. This has been seen where Chimombo is showing “nkhadzi” trees “weeping”. Literally, a tree cannot cry. Therefore, these trees have been given human traits of crying because crying is mostly associated with human beings. This suggests that the trees are lamenting since they are no longer protected. Due to our cultural beliefs, trees in the graveyard are protected in view of the fact that no one can cut down a tree from the graveyard, thus graveyards are considered sacred. Therefore, this brings to life a theme of environmental degradation.

In “Usayelekele Mine”, Chimombo employs the image of death. The poet expands this image where he infers that the persona boasts that he is a “strategic planner in corpses manufacture” (Chimombo 134). This on its own is a deviation. One cannot manufacture corpses in real sense. The poet therefore, affirms that the government is to blame for the deaths that are occurring in the country. This corresponds to the situation Malawi has been in during hard political times. There have been shortage of drugs in hospitals which lead to deaths of many people yet the funds are being diverted to sponsor political party rallies or mere corrupt individuals.

In the same poem, Chimombo is ironical, where he alludes that Usayelekele mine is not mine; /But you can buy me (Chimombo 133). This signifies that the leader is selling a thing which

does not belong to him or her. This is common to most African leaders who personalise state property. However, this is contrary to the Malawi government mining policy which states that:

The government of Malawi wishes to increase the current contribution of the minerals sector to the economy from 1 percent to 10 percent of the gross domestic product. To achieve this goal, the government aims at attracting both foreign and local investments in exploration and mining, and place emphasis on economic diversification, employment opportunities, improved balance of trade poverty reduction and economic growth [of Malawi] (Mines and Minerals Policy of Malawi 3).

Basing on the Mines and Minerals Policy of Malawi, the mine belongs to the state and it should contribute to the economic growth of the citizens. Nevertheless, Chimombo shows the leader as only having interest in his own economic affairs. The only thing the citizens are getting from the mine is “deformation”.

Further, in “Morning at Mvuu Camp”, Chimombo describes the experience which probably one is expected to get in the morning at the Mvuu Camp. The poem also describes the weather that one expects at the camp. Even though the camp is situated in one of the hottest districts, the weather is invigorating and excitingly chilly. The camp is situated in Liwonde along Shire River. The poet praises the scenery view of the camp and states that the camp has “honking hippos” that “serenade” the camp. Serenade according to *Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary* means “a song sung or played at night, especially by a lover outside the window of a woman he loves” (1072). This is an instance of personification. The hippos have been given the ability to sing. This then semantically deviates from the conventional use of language. However, the poem tries to let visitors be aware that the camp offers the best relaxation platform because of its richness in natural things such as the waters and the hippos thereby providing a cathartic effect. In the same poem, Chimombo says “the motor boats knives the grey waters” (Chimombo 127). This might probably raise a theme of pollution. “Knives” means to cut or to kill. Therefore, the boats are killing the grey waters perhaps by dropping oil residues.

2.2.4 Graphological deviation

According to Pirnajmuddin and Medhat, graphological deviation is defined as a type of deviation that is related to the poet's disregard of the rules of writing (56). It is the line -by-line

arrangement of the poem on the page with irregular margins. The graphological deviation or the special way of putting words and lines on the page may add a sort of second meaning to the original meaning of the verse. This is noted in “Usayelekele Mine” where Chimombo questions the authenticity of a mine which has drastic outcomes but nonetheless the mine is not owned by Malawians and no profits are seen. The poem is also raising an alarm that not all “development” activities are there to develop but some are there to destroy just like the mine itself. Probably, like in this case “the uranium” being mined is causing harm to the environment and also to the people who live around the area where the mine is situated. Chimombo here perhaps attacks the Bingu wa Muntharika’s regime of selling off the precious stones to the Europeans.

I am a past master in willful genocide,
 Strategic planners in corpses manufacture,
 Internal auditor in deadening opposition
 Expert at muzzling mediocre minds
 Fertilizing lapses in institutional memory
 Aware of Activities Against Development
 And let stage genealogical cul-de-sacs (Chimombo 134)

By studying the pattern of the poem “Usayelekele Mine”, in stanza four, the poet uses capital letters at the beginning of each word in line four. This however, is calling for the attention of the reader. It may perhaps be a caution to readers to be on the outlook of developmental activities that are being implemented in their communities since most of them are sugar coated, that is to say, the activities on the surface may seem so important but in actual sense they are there to lower development and in the process depleting the environment.

In the poem “The Artists’ Cenotaph”, there is an instance of graphological deviation. In this poem, the poet mourns the artists’ who are gone, the likes of Chilomo, Chisiza Jr, Chiwalo, Yekha and Madolo. The poet puts it clear in stanza three that “my eyes swell with welling tears/my chest churns our lamentation” (Chimombo 114). In the last stanza, Chimombo puts it that:

We sung the symphonies of the spheres
 As we ringed around the artists cenotaph,
 And the *aluso* sung back to us in tongues:
 WE ARE NOT DEAD! OUR WORKS LIVE ON! (Chimombo 117)

By studying the pattern of the poem, it is vivid that there is a word “aluso” italicised and in the last line all the words are in capital letters, which goes against the rule of writing and the pattern that the poem established. These words therefore have a special meaning. Probably the poet uses this to capture the voice of the dead.

2.2.5 Phonological deviation

This is the deviation in “sound or pronunciation which is done deliberately in regard to preserving the rhyme, as when the noun wind is pronounced like the verb wind” (Pirnajmuddin and Medhat 1331). Leech therefore considers the phonological deviation as “irregularities of pronunciation”. These “irregularities in pronunciation” can also be traced in some of Steve Chimombo poems. For example, in the following poem:

Great grandfather, founder of the clan
baskets of spirits under each arm
claimed your slopes for our village.
We spread between the green banks
of two rivers: Naisi and Naming'azi,
planted and reaped in the fields,
played and prayed in the forest.
hurted and hunted, lived and loved
under the giant gaze of your granite face.(Chimombo 94)

In the poem “Zomba Mountain”, Chimombo uses assonance. This is done when Chimombo explains to the reader how Zomba Mountain used to be the time when “great grandfather” was alive (Chimombo, 94). The persona expresses some of the activities they used to engage themselves in the mountain's forest. Perhaps, the mountain had enough trees (forest) and this suggest that there were animals in the forest and it might also mean that the gods or the spirits had somewhere to hide. This then means that the persona used to “played and prayed in the forest”, that is offering sacrifices to the gods in the mountain and children would go and have fun, probably, by eating wild fruits which the forest had to offer. Looking at the line “played and Prayed in the forest”, it should be noted that there is assonance and this is an irregularity in terms of phonology. This therefore shows that in the poem “Zomba Mountain”, Chimombo employs phonological

deviation to reveal how the persona and those who lived in the past used to do in the forest. This then brings into account the critical issue of environmental degradation.

2.3.0 Aspects of parallelism

Parallelism is defined as “where some features are held constant, usually structural features, while others, usually lexical items are varied (Short 1996). Parallelism is also defined as a ‘sameness’ between two sections of a text, and can be structural or semantic (Fabb 137). A rhetorical device characterised by over regularity or repetitive structures, for example rhyme, assonance, alliteration, meter, semantic symmetry, or antistrophe. However, parallelism is achieved in different ways, such as antithetic, synonym, synthetic, and climatic (Abrams 12).

2.3.1 Antithetic parallelism

Antithesis is a contrast or opposition in the meanings of contiguous phrases or clauses that manifest parallelism—that is, a similar word -order and structure—in their syntax (Abrams 12). In other words, antithetic parallelism is a type of parallelism where features prominently in wisdom literature, as a way to provide contrast between the wise and the foolish. Here, there is contradiction of ideas, words, and clauses within a balanced grammatical structure (Yankson 14). That is to say in a poem, a second line might contradict what the first line is communicating. Aristotle argues that the use of antithesis makes the audience to understand the point one is trying to make. In the first stanza of *Usayelekele Mine*, Chimombo uses antithesis and this is clearly seen in the following extraction:

Usayelekele mine is not mine;
 But you can buy me,
 And of course the mine,
 At the affordable price
 Of deforming my children,
 And, if any, my grandchildren,
 With radioactive waste
 (Chimombo 133).

In the above extract, Chimombo use antithesis where line 1 contradicts with line 2. Line 1 tells us that the mine does not belong to the persona but line 2 the same persona now says that he can sell the mine (but you can buy me). This is a deliberate move where is against, maybe, of

the idea that the mine has been sold. Even though everything is like that, the persona has sold the mine. Basing on the definition of antithetic parallelism provide here, it might mean that the poet, Chimombo, is showing the one selling the mine, probably the Bingu wa Muntharika administration, as unfair to Malawian citizenry. And this stanza further states that this mine has been sold at a very cheaper price, perhaps looking at what the country of the persona is getting and what the buyer is getting as profits this even adds that the seller is foolish. However, stanza 1 also touches on the issues of the environment where the mine is seen as a threat of deforming children with radioactive wastes.

2.3.2 Synthetic parallelism

Synthetic parallelism involves the following line adds information to the second line. The second line adds extra information to what has already been said in the first line. For instance in “Usayelekele Mine”, Chimombo uses antithesis in stanza five.

My previous posts and achievements:
Depletion of the lake fish,
Because I liberated the waters;
Deforestation of the mountains,
Because I condoned wood cutting;
Pollution of the ozone layer,
Because I permitted gas manufacture.
(Chimombo, 134)

In the above poem, it has been noted that Chimombo employs antithesis where line 3 is adding information to line 1. Where the lake fish is depleted since the persona liberates the waters where people or fishermen will fish without any regulations whatsoever. This is in line bringing into life the theme of environmental degradation. Our doings are harming nature corresponding to ecocritics argument that “nature is at once ‘together and apart’ with the human workings” (Ambika, 2). This collaborates well with what Chimombo posits here.

In the same extract, line 5 adds information to line 4 and line 7 adds information to line 6. All this is geared toward the fact that nature is in the processes of being crushed down by humans. It is clear in line 5 where the person is saying that he or she condoned (turn a blind eye

to) wood cutting and this in turn brings about deforestation. The poet is perhaps targeting those in power to regulate certain things, for example, the departments of aquaculture, forestry and environment are not doing their job to make sure that nature is looked at all times and to make sure there is sustainability so that the future generation should enjoy nature. Here Chimombo has complemented a claim that “ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (Glaser, 31).

This paper has incorporated both formalism and ecocriticism. Formalism is used in the context where the presentation uncovers or unearths the odd structures, words and phrases in Chimombo’s selected poems. The oddities have a different meaning to what they portray on the surface. This however, is in line with what the formalists Mukarovsky and Havranek believed that foregrounding is the function of poetic language to surprise the reader with a fresh and dynamic awareness of its linguistic medium, to “de-automatize” what was normally taken for granted, to exploit language aesthetically (Wales 182). The act of “de-automize” as used above is a conscious creative reality of language usage (which is) achieved by a variety of means, embedded in the term foregrounding (Wales 172). For instance, Chimombo has employed such techniques in his poem “usayekele mine” where he enstranges the poem by lexical deviation. Looking at the title of the poem, one would ask so many questions since the name used does not associate with any mines in Malawian context. Therefore, formalism is applicable to the analysis above.

The other theory used in this chapter is ecocriticism. Chimombo’s poems relates to nature. Since ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and nature through a range of approaches having little in common other than a shared concern with the environment (Glotfelty xix), Chimombo has touched on the idea that humans are harming or destroying nature or the environment. Ayinuola agrees with this notion by arguing that “the social ecological reader targets the power relationships, cultural and political intrigues at work in the process of decision-making that leads to socio-environmental problems” (38). This is what Chimombo presents in some of his selected poems. For example, in the poem “Developments from the graves” Chimombo shows “nkhadzi” tree crying. As noted above, this suggests that in most areas where there are trees, there is a grave yard. It clear that if people will no longer burry the corpses at the graveyard, trees will be destroyed. This, therefore, corresponds to the theory of ecocriticism since Chimombo relates his poem to the issues of the environment or landscape.

2.4.0 Conclusion

This paper has examined textual foregrounding elements (techniques) employed to exploit ecocritical issues in Steve Chimombo's selected *Napolo and Other Poems*. Its central argument is that Steve Chimombo underpins foregrounding techniques in his poems through deviation and parallelism. It has been noted that foregrounding as a form of textual patterning is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. The paper has also posited that foregrounding uses "linguistic devices" or elements that make the expression stand out as "uncommon" in a text. The basic principle of foregrounding is that of "aesthetic communication". These linguistic devices include: deviations and parallelism. Deviations discussed in this paper include: lexical, graphological, semantic and phonological. Chimombo uses these techniques to advance environmental awareness. The paper has painted individuals who are in antagonism with the environment as ecoterrorists. Notably the paper has employed two theories; formalism and ecocriticism to bring to light its aspect of foregrounding.

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