

Onitsha Market Literature: An Accepted Literary Subgenre or Fossilized Specie? A Formalist Approach to Ogali Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*

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Abstract

For years now literary exponents have faced the challenges and problems of establishing the true facts of genre studies and its various dimensions in literary theory and practice. This problem was in time past discussed from various perspectives in different places and periods. The case of Onitsha Market Literature and its attendant problems have often challenged critics over the years. As a subgenre of literature from a peculiar geographical location in West Africa, the usual question is if this literature qualifies as an acceptable and universally standard literature. Can a market based literature make a good and complete literature? What is the actual book length required to make a literary work complete? Is there any official language that qualifies a literary work as a standard or completely accepted literature? These are some of the questions that this paper answered. The study examined this specie of Onitsha Market literary subgenre and made a number of discoveries and a conclusion, pointing to the fact that Onitsha Market Literature is a literature of circumstance and situation.

Key words: Onitsha; Pamphlet; Literature; Ogali and Veronica

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INTRODUCTION

Onitsha Market Literature is a simplified, poorly written standard literature that does not develop properly to normal book size, but appeals to the reader, especially the sub literate class. The term is commonly applied to writings that can easily be read and dropped without much effort or stress. To consult other references like dictionary, encyclopedia or critical works are not common while reading these texts. This brand of books known as Onitsha Market Literature is not usually voluminous but short, direct and simple. The language is very easy to understand and the imagery used is very flowery, romantic and most often sexy. Onitsha market literature maintains an informal style, except when formal letter writing is involved.

Historically, Onitsha Market Literature started gaining access to Nigeria in the late forties and early fifties from the Indians and American traders. The first publication of this subgenre is believed to be in 1947 when Cyprian Ekwensi published his pamphlet *When Love Whispers*. The name "Onitsha Market Literature" was coined by Donatus Ibe Nwoga who gave the background and nature of this literature in an article published in *Transition*, IV, 19 (1965). According to Ernest Emenyonu (1991, p.127), there was in the 1940s, a popular circulation of some cheap foreign novelettes, especially of Indian and American origin. These were characterized by their simplicity of language and flashy romantic pictures of glamorous women being kissed by men on the covers. Many people especially teenagers, eagerly bought and read them and passed them on to their friends.

This background of the subgenre gave rise to the new tradition of writing pamphlet literature (which in most places is referred to as chap books) that circulated in and around the commercial city of Onitsha and later the whole Nigeria and also Africa. The Igbo (a tribe in West Africa where Onitsha market is situated) being very enterprising,

crafty and intelligent, embraced western education early with zeal and with the limited number of expert English language and literature teachers then within their reach, they embarked on experimenting with grammar and literary genres.

Without proper page set-up, cover design and colour separation, books were churned out in numbers by different people from different segments of the society. They wrote on all spheres of life: family, friendship, sex, love, history, philosophy, economy, disappointments, failures, marriage, the bizarre and anything that occurred to their mind. The books plot were not well developed, neither did they have any law guiding their production. Because of the inability of government to apply copyright laws on this class of publication, a published text could be duplicated in different places without anybody complaining over that infringement. It is evidenced from the works published that Onitsha Market Literature writers do not consider the brand or standard of English language used in accomplishing their writing – simple grammatical rules, punctuation, meaning of words and other features are thrown overboard, while strange coinages that are difficult to interpret are used in some books like Ogali Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*. The market for this literature was also favourable and writers in this subgenre made good living out of their works. It is this high level of successes that attracted the attention of scholars, both local and foreign, to delve into the study and further research in this area.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study looked at the various definitions of Onitsha Market Literature and from the sources, the following definitions were given. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, Onitsha Market Literature is a 20th – century genre of sentimental, moralistic novellas and pamphlets produced by a semiliterate school of writers (students, fledgling journalists, and taxi drivers) and sold at the bustling Onitsha Market in eastern Nigeria. (Online)

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes distinct characteristics of Onitsha Market literature, they include: (i) “a fascination with a westernized urban life and (ii) the desire to warn the newly arrived against the corruption and dangers that accompany it.” These characteristics depict the postcolonial nature of this literature. Obviously, Nigeria's exposure to colonialism and the after effects in those early days of post colonialism are what informed the idea of this study.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia is of the view that:

Onitsha Market Literature refers to a number of pamphlets, books and other publications sold at the Onitsha Market in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of it was written in pidgin and creole varieties of English. This form of literature is now interesting to researchers as a secondary source of information about social conditions of the time; general readers

can appreciate it for its creative use of colourful, non-standard English as well as its often racy plotlines. (Web)

For Indiana University:

Onitsha Market Literature is a term used to designate the popular pamphlets that were sold at the large market in Onitsha, Nigeria, in the middle decades of the 20th century. Written by and intended for “common” or “uneducated” people, this literature covered a range of genres including fiction, current events, plays, social advice, and language study. (Web)

The Indiana University claims to possess approximately One Hundred and Seventy of the Onitsha Market pamphlets. They announce the uncataloged and uncirculating nature of this literature but urged anyone that has interest in reading the books to consult them via the [Librarian for African Studies](#), Herman B. Wells Library E660.

2. SOME OF THE AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS OF THIS SUBGENRE

The authors and publishers of Onitsha Market Literature are many and they cut across all fields of human endeavor. They are usually sub literates and have urgent messages to pass across. The Indiana University claims to possess approximately 170 copies of this pamphlet literature and listed them in their network, [Librarian for African Studies](#). Some of the authors include:

Abiakam J. *The game of Love*. Onitsha, Nigeria: J.C. Brothers Bookshop

Adenuga Wale. *My daughter wants a job*. Ibadan: Nathasons Printers, 1967.

Adikaibe Donatus A. *Beware of expensive Ladies, learn speeches and toasts for all occasion, and general instructions for boys and girls*. Onitsha; Nigeria: Dona and Bros Bookshop.

Albert Miller O. *Rosemary and the taxi driver*. Onitsha: Chinyelu Printing Press.

Anyichie, J.A. Okeke. *Adventures of the four stars*. Onitsha: Highbred Maxweoll. Iguh Thomas. Agnes in the game of love. Onitsha : A. Onwudiwe & Sons.

Iguh Thomas. Alice in the romance of love. Onitsha: Appolos Brothers.

Iguh Thomas. The disappointed lover. Onitsha: A.N. Onwudiwe, obtainable from Gebo Brothers Bookshop.

Speedy Eric. Mabel the sweet honey that poured away. Onitsha: A Onwudiwe & Sons.

The Strongs Man of Pen. Life turns man up and down. Onitsha: Njoku & Sons Bookshop

Looking at the selected texts above, it is obvious that Onitsha Market Literature mostly lacks date of publication and publishers, they therefore lacked the reputation required to make for standard prints. Again their titles are

more of sentences than the recommended few number of words that should make for publishing a quality textbook.

3. METHODOLOGY

Going by what some critics say; literature does not only teach but pleases the reader, one major problem facing Onitsha Market literature is on the question of acceptability. While the term “Onitsha Market literature” is highly derogatory in some quarters, others accept it as a well crafted literature that uses foregrounding to accomplish its aims. The question then is on if Onitsha Market Literature could qualify and stand on its own as a trusted and well tested literature. This study uses the formalistic approach to dissect and synthesize the problem of Onitsha Market Literature. This approach has seriously influenced the critical approach in the modern period. Proponents of this approach have severally held that literature exists in its own world with its own kind of life and that “the high place of art is art, rather than the expression of social, religious, ethical, or political ideas (Scott, 1962). Due to the nature of literature, the

Misspelt Words

dramatise personal (p.2, Paragraph 3)

... he'll poor his uncooked English on us for ... pour his bad English... (p.7. Paragraph 2. Alice's speech)

His being a novelist is no grantis for ... gratis (p.12: last speech).

...romantic instint for romantic instinct (p.13: paragraph 1, Line 7)

The text is also full of wrong sentences. Some are similar to that of Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rival*: as a comedy, Mrs Malaprop is fond of committing grammatical blunders like misuse of “malevolence” for “benevolence” (p. 44), “illiterate” for “obliterate” (p.40) and “ineffectual” for “intellectual” (p.77). In *Veronica My Daughter*, Ogali wrote the following:

...old men thinks (wrong verb conjugation) for ...old men think. (See p.6: one but last paragraph)

Bomber Billy (a young student from one of the colleges in the neighboring town) says:

“As I was decending (for descending) from declivity yesterday...

The same character (Bomber Billy) is made to say, “I don't care what the mdedical” (for medical), by the author Ogali Ogali. There are many other such wrong uses of terms in the book, *Veronica My Daughter*. They Include:

4.2 Poor Punctuation

Many sentences are poorly punctuated in the play *Veronica My Daughter*. Such punctuation errors include:

No comma (p.16): In Veronica's room She is busy drafting a reply to Mike's letter Harry Enters and discusses the current events with VERONICA his sister.

No question mark (Ibid.): Come in Bro, why do you look so sad.

Use of capital letter in wrong places: Very unfortunately I could not visit you again yesterday

As Promised Am sure you actually expected me Pity! (Also note that the comma is omitted after “promised”, and full stop is omitted after “me”). (Ibid.)

research largely depends on the library and Internet sources.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Formalistic Analysis of Ogali Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*

Veronica My Daughter received the public attention much later after its first publication. Originally it circulated in the hands of the Onitsha Market readers without date of publication or a reputable publisher. Later, a Washington D.C. based publisher, Three Continents Press published it alongside other Onitsha Market plays and stories in 1980. *Veronica My Daughter* could qualify as a playlet, but some important features of this text make this idea a little problematic.

An analysis of this text, *Veronica My Daughter* shows that it has Forty-Eight pages. It lacks the normal Acts which most modern plays have, but runs in eight scenes. While some scenes are delineated with ‘Curtain Fall’, others go with “Exit All” and “Enter...”. The play contains many technical and grammatical errors. They include such examples as:

Right Words

for dramatis personae (from Latin; noun – all the characters in a play...)

Irregular use of pronoun “one”: “one may even die a miserable death should we be forced to separate.” (p.17)

Foregrounding: A style or a failure of the author in Ogali's *Veronica My Daughter*?

Foregrounding could be used in describing anything that is given prominence or particular distinction in a piece of writing or in art – work. *Oxford Learners Dictionary (International Student's Edition 2005)* defines foregrounding as giving “particular importance to something.” (p.582)

The Kazmig College Teacher in a lecture posted online on August 22, 2011 states that:

Foregrounding is the mother of literature, without foregrounding literature is not possible. It marks a line of distinguishing between ordinary text and literature. Foregrounding is charm,

attraction, beauty and mean (sic) of strenghtining (sic) the literature. Foregrounding is achieved by two methods "Deviation" and "Parrelism." (sic) Deviation is turning aside from a said norm or grammatical rule while parallelism is repatation (sic) of sound, structure, word or idea (eNotes.com)

Most of the sentences and vocabularies used in *Veronica My Daughter* completely deviated from the normal standard English. The question is if the sentences and vocabularies meet the purpose of foregrounding which is to sharpen reader's vision and understanding of event, feelings, circumstance, concept, etc. that the author wants to point out so as to achieve new clarity, epiphany or motivation, on the part of the readers. Krishnamurthy quoting Simpson is of the view that "foregrounding works in two ways: Firstly, by distortion against a norm and secondly, by imposing regularity in grammatical patterns over and above those designated by the language, which can be called repetition or parallelism. He further states that distortion can be studied under deviation which is of many kinds, lexical, grammatical, phonological, historical, graphological, semantic and others (Simpson and Leech in Krishnamurthy: web)

Veronica My Daughter seems to have had serious influence on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) drama entertainment programme "The Masquerade" which was championed by a Nigerian comedian, Chika Okpala (a.k.a. Zeburudaya Okorigwe Nwogbo, alias 4, p.30) This performing artist is fond of distorting the English language syntax, semantics, phonetics and lexis. In *Veronica My Daughter*, Chief Jombo consistently deviated from the normal English language by distorting his grammar. Examples:

What kind trouble be dis. My daughter gets strong ear too much. I flogam tire, no change talk tire, no change... (Ogali, n.d., p.7)

The sentence above could be properly written as: What kind of problem is this? My daughter is a very stubborn girl. All my flogging does not change her, neither does my bitter warnings. (p.7)

Another sentence by Chief Jombo while speaking to his wife Paulina is:

Chief Jombo: Wetin I sabi, you sabi grammar, me I sabi money pass you. I go tell you say money pass book. (Ogali, n.d., p.10)

Again, Ogali foregrounds this speech which could have easily been written this way,

Chief Jombo: What is my business? You are literate while I am into business, having acquired more money than your education.

The author purposely foregrounded these speeches to show the low level of education of the character, Chief Jombo, as well as to depict the type of materialistic society that Chief Jombo comes from. He makes caricature of his wife's English by telling her, "Go on, talk all the grammarian you sabi..." meaning, "Go ahead and speak all the grammar you know." (p.8)

Another peculiar character in *Veronica My Daughter* is Bombar Billy. Apart from the peculiarity of his name, Billy's role as 'a young student' in the play is quite unique just as his grammatical constructions and specially coined terminologies. Billy seems to coin new terms and also form his sentences outside the normal English accepted orthography. Being challenged by Veronica and her mother (Paulina) to be mindful of his grammar, Bombar Billy replies:

Look here! Are you promolltigating your exordition or articulating superficial sentimentality and amicable philosophical observation, beware of platitudeness and ponderosity and learn to respect my intergrity. (p.33)

Such terms as "promoltigating", "platitudeness" and "ponderosity" sound very much like malapropism. "Promoltigating" may possibly mean "promulgating" while "platitudeness" may mean "plenitudeness". The word platitude is a cliché that means an often – quoted saying that is supposed to be meaningful but has become fake or hackneyed through overuse. "Ponderosity" as used by Bombar Billy could stand from reflection or deep thought/imagination. Billy's sentences usually lose their meaning when used because of his complex coupled with half literacy.

When Bombar Billy was asked if he had consulted the Medical officer for treatment by John, his reply was:

Bombar Billy: ... this is nothing but a cocofied agency antispasimodical producing nothing but voscandium Miszcamdum and tiscoono. This medicine that I have in hand is called the Grand Electrical, Punchutica Demo scandium which cures all diseases incident to humanity. (Ogali, n.d., p.15)

Billy's terms above are more of the botanical names possibly borrowed by the author Ogali Ogali from their sources to depict a character who fits a sound academic in the time of writing this book. This character could assume another name of the "Professor" in the time that this pamphlet was published – at that time the university Professors were lowly paid and regarded as 'hungry people' that wore long ties. No wonder Chief Jombo (Veronica's father) prefers accepting higher bride from his friend, Chief Bassey, who offered two hundred pounds to marry Veronica against the paltry sum of thirty pounds paid by Mike, an amount approved by law.

There are other fore grounded features in this playlet which time and space cannot enable this volume to explore.

5. THE VALUES OF ONITSHA MARKET LITERATURE TO THE READING PUBLIC

Primarily Onitsha Market Literature contributed largely to the literacy level of majority of Nigerians at the time and dispensation in which it reigned. It yielded economic

resources to the writers at that time and so was a good source of employment. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is of the view that this literature to a large extent helped in addressing, “the immediate problem of how to live in a big city and how to reconcile rural values with a confusing cluster of new temptations and styles of living.” (Web) It equally contributed in building a bridge of understanding among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria through both social and linguistic orientation.

6. THE DISADVANTAGES OF ONITSHA MARKET LITERATURE

Majority of Nigerian students find it difficult to upgrade their communication to standard level due to the interference of Onitsha Market Literature in their formative years. This has adversely affected the Nigerian educational system. Some scholars are of the view that most corrupt practices by both youths and adults came from the impacts made by Onitsha Market Literature. Britannica states that, “traditional mores are often only halfheartedly upheld, and the old folk back in the village often become symbols of outdated ideas and are laughed at for their illiterate pidgin English.” (Web) Onitsha Market Literature has contributed largely in alienating Nigerians from their culture as the authors lacked the training to uphold culture but rather to the contrary, they project the admiration of the city life in their writing. This is a very negative side of Onitsha Market Literature as the writers lack the sense of commitment.

CONCLUSION

The question of acceptability or non-acceptability of Onitsha Market Literature lies on the reader and the context of the use. For a well balanced academic yes, this literature can serve as a good source of research, even up to the PhD level, but for a fragile and young developing mind/scholar, this literature can be poisonous as this class

believe that it cannot only corrupt the mind, but also distort the language of the reader.

As a subgenre, Onitsha Market Literature has come to stay. Even though it is not well regarded by serious minded scholars, it is still a good source of entertainment. Due to the foregrounding explored by the writers, it is a complete literature in its own world. There is the stigma attached to Onitsha Market Literature in some parts of Nigeria and the rest of the world due to the racial prejudice held against the Igbo (a major ethnic race in Nigeria in which the Onitsha Market is located), however this literature can be examined as a subgenre of literature, nothing more, nothing less. No scholar is perfect and Onitsha Market Literature is not different. It can still be improved upon in order to meet the expected standard or quality brand literature.

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