

## Poetics and the Study of (African) Literature: Forms and Functions of Language in Literary Criticism

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### ABSTRACT

*Most likely, many literary scholars first encounter the word poetics when reading Aristotle's celebrated treatise which attempts to give a descriptive template to (dramatic) literature. In modern times the word seems to have been transformed beyond the simplistic frame that Aristotle gave it. Interestingly, the emergence of the linguistic and critical avant-gardes like de Saussure, Chomsky, Jakobson, Halliday, Todorov, and Scholes, brought fresh and radical insights into the world of language/literary studies. Hence, as poetics is applied in linguistic/literary discourse today, it gives prominence to the study of language as a component of literature on one hand, and on the other, it provides indelible insights into what literature does to language expressions when they find definitive stance in the form. Considering poetics as indexical compass in the evaluation of literature, this essay probes into the applications of the term in literary criticism, taking-off from the standpoints of linguistic aestheticians who have somewhat attempted to apply it. The analogous result of this ambition is suggestive of literary theory. This then raises the question of the applicability of the several poetics-oriented theories to the evaluation of African literary aesthetics, which from the post colonial angle, is unparaphraseably extraneous to the scientific critical postulations of the West.*

*Key words: poetics; African; literary criticism; literature; forms and functions*

### INTRODUCTION

Todorov (1971) has identified three approaches in the study of literature in his essay *Comment Lire?* He labels these approaches as projection, commentary and poetics. As Scholes (1974) puts it, projection is a way of reading a literary text in the direction of the author or of society or some other object of interest to the critic while commentary is the complement of projection. Todorov explains that poetics is that approach to literature which “seeks the general principles that manifest themselves in particular works [of art]” (Scholes 1974:143). Poetics is therefore criticism oriented. Oyegoke (1980:19) recognizes this fact and he accurately posits that “literary theories [often generated by the workings of the literary critics] began under the label of poetics” and a discussion of poetics as a set of rules will ineluctably establish some basic theoretical frameworks for the interpretation of literature, a form which is perceived in this study as exhibiting diverse robust applications of the properties of language.

The conception of poetics as “the general principles” will indubitably necessitate a definition of the “principles” unmistakably abounding in literature. These principles are linguistic and extra-linguistic principles. Linguistic principles relate the literary outlook of a

work of art to the language components that dominate it while extra-linguistic principles account for the non-linguistic materials that festoon a work of art, whose meanings and interpretations transcend the knowledge of linguistics. For the analysis of a piece of literature in its extra-linguistic details for instance, a more elastic critical methodology is required since extra-linguistic details in literature form cohesive ties with extrinsic indices (Afolayan, 2009)

The discussion of poetics from the linguistic binoculars will constrain us to “present those concepts of modern linguistics that have influenced the study of literature” (Scholes 1974, p.143). Alternatively, the study of poetics from the extra linguistic angle will necessitate a study of the non-linguistic materials – literary, socio-cultural and historico-political – that constitute the non-linguistic textual materials whose meaning cannot be completely realized by mere “intrinsic righteousness” often recommended by the formalists. It is thus normal for linguists and literary critics alike to exhibit certain knowledge about the notion of poetics.

#### LINGUISTIC POETICS: FORM AND FUNCTIONS IN THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

Before the Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure popularized his idea that revolutionized the study of language, there was no real coordinated scientific study of language especially since the only yardstick for evaluation was supplied by the prescriptive modes of the Traditional Grammarians. Hence there was then no such thing as Modern Linguistics before Saussure.

Saussure’s postulations in *Cours de Linguistique Generale* broadened the view of language analysts to come after him and his towering influence still dominates in the scheme of language study. Saussure identified the distinction between what he called “langue” – system of language – and “parole”, “our individual utterances” (Scholes 1974, p.14). No utterance, to Saussure, is identifiable to a speaker who lacks the language system that governs its meaning, as such “no literary utterance, no work of literature can be meaningful if we lack a sense of this literary system into which it fits” (Scholes 1974, p.14). *Parole* is, therefore, a product of *langue* in which resides, the totality of the system that governs human verbal act. From this we know that Saussure recognizes that significance of *langue* as the poetics that moderates the use of language in realizing some verbal functions (spoken or written). The implications of Saussurean poetics on literary study are that:

1. Literary texts could be seen as manifestations of a literary system, thus making literary criticism more scientific.
2. The study of literature will be overwhelmed by skepticism about the appropriateness of historical, sociological and anthropological materials in the field of literary criticism.
3. Some non-theoretical critical approaches to literature (which may be useful in evaluation of African literature) will be simply regarded as “naive theories” of literary realism.

Such analytical standpoint as enumerated above led to the scholarship of structuralism which views literature as a system of signs. The structuralists, for instance, try to make plain the organizational codes that they believe regulate all literature and this is why most of them have often been accused of excessive ‘scientificism’ by the apologists of positivism.

Chomsky in 1957 later expanded on the structuralism by reactivating Saussure’s notion of *langue* as “competence”, which, to him, explains the sacrosanctity of the language system in the native speaker’s linguistic know-how. Friedrich (2007) accurately explains the aftermath of this Chomskyan revolution when he asserts:

Chomsky, however, not only challenges empiricist philosophical objections raised to his internalist and naturalistic approach to language, but at the same

time supports his own view of the nature of language with compelling evidence. Linguists, philosophers, cognitive scientists, and scholars interested in what the latest developments in the internalist and naturalistic study of language might imply for the philosophical study of this unique human possession and wishing to gain some insight into the philosophical debates on mind and language .... (157)

From the 1950s, the Chomskyan brand of linguistics has focused on a person's *knowledge of language*, that is, the unconscious mental knowledge that makes him a native speaker of a language. This innate, knowledge of language is called the speaker's linguistic *competence*, whereas his outward linguistic behavior which provides the linguist with observable data is called his linguistic *performance*.

Consequently to Chomsky, in the linguistic repertoire of a native speaker, lies the multi-directional speech system which is responsible for the horizon of his utterances. Though it may be argued that Chomskyan mode is too extraneous to the study of literature, its significance to literature lies in the fact that literature has to be considered, not as a collection of autonomous words but as “an order of words” (Frye 1957, p.17). Therefore, Chomskyan notion of “Syntactic Structure” or “Universal Grammar” will enable a perception of the indispensable scaffolding of sentences in the formal outlook and explanation of any literary text. Chomsky believes that all men share innate predisposition to organize their linguistic possibilities in a certain way and this includes the writer who assembles sentences to publicize a meaning which started as a personal feeling (Scholes 1974).

Chomsky's motivation for his theories, perhaps, lies in the need to find a rational (or scientific) explanation to the principles that govern in the formulation of the syntactic edifices that make up the verbal estate which exists either in spoken or written form. As such, Chomskyan structuralism seeks the poetics of syntactic form in a piece of communication outfit. Gullen thus believes that a direct reference to the Saussurean or Chomskyan initiatives in the explanation of poetics is worthwhile as he stresses that:

the theoretical orders of poetics should be viewed, at any movement in history, as essentially mental codes – with which practicing writer (the writer as individual, ...) comes to term though his writing. The structures of this order are no more alien to the poems he produces than the linguistic code is to the actual utterances in his speech (Gullen 1971, p. 390).

Another conceptual tool bequeathed to literary analysis by linguistics, according to Scholes, was supplied by Roman Jakobson. In *Linguistics and Poetics* and *The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles* – the two articles that have provided some powerful impetus to the linguistic study of literature – Jakobson was able to apply his “speculative intelligence” and “immense learning” to put in place some theoretical explanations to the notion of poetics of literature. In *Linguistic and Literature* Jakobson sees literature as a “verbal message” and poetic as primarily concerned with “the question, what makes a verbal message a work of art (1993:32). Though laying emphasis on poetry, Jakobson re-enacts the structuralist establishment in his belief that poetics deals with problem of verbal structure, just as painting is concerned with pictorial structure (1993:32). He identifies what he calls “synchronic poetics” as that aspect of literary studies which is the “selection of classics and their re-interpretation by a novel trend” (1993:32).

Also in *The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles*, Jakobson emphasizes the need for critics to demarcate the boundaries of metaphoric and metonymic textual agents in literature. Illustrating the distinction between these two literary tools, often misconstrued, Jakobson asserts:

The primacy to metaphoric process in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so called “realistic” trends which belongs to an intermediary stage between the decline of romanticism and the rise of symbolism and is opposed to both (1993:58–59).

Both synchronic poetics and metaphoric determinism are Jakobson’s way of explaining the poetics behind the linguistic relations in literary text. For Scholes, therefore.

Jakobson powerfully suggests that we need a poetics of both poetry and prose which will attend to the functioning of metaphor and metonymy of all levels and in all kinds of discourse (1974:22).

The poetics of literature, Jakobson believes lies in the “idea of linguists putting poetry [or prose] on the rack and forcing it to yield up its secret” (Scholes 1974, p.22). Consequently to him, “since linguistics is the global science of verbal structure, poetics may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics” (Jakobson 1993, p.32). The duo of Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, with a brigade of others like Boris Eikhenbaum, Osip Brik and Yury Tynyanov began the critical school of thought generally referred to as Russian Formalism, which was later to activate the critical voice of the New Critical School in America. Formalist poetics seeks poetic façade in the intrinsic linguistic/literary form mainly because its propagators (mentioned above) were primarily linguists who were interested in extending the field of linguistics to cover poetic language.

Jakobson, though, places very little premium on it; he presents “context” as the state of affairs which a communicative piece is all about. This then has a great influence on the parole of a literary text which to Halliday is “the operational unit of language” (1971:329). Where the text is fictional (or literature) there is a presentation of “an imaginary world which stands in some potentially discoverable relationship to our experiential world” in words (Scholes 1974, p.29). These words are believed to be supplied from the same systems, perhaps, put in place by the imposition of the context which makes the words share the same collocational range. This structuralist deduction was later to form a good background for the discourse analyst who believes that language performs its irresistible functions via the situational context.

Michael Halliday, another linguist whose interest is literature, prefers the term “function” to mean “the underlying set of laws by which signs are combined into meanings” (1971:329). In his own explanation,

The term function is used, in two distinct though related senses at two very different points in the description of language. First it is used in the sense of “grammatical” (or syntactic) functions, to refer to elements of linguistic structure such as actor and goal or subject and object.... Secondly, it is used to refer to the ‘function’ of language as a whole: for example in the well known work of Karl Buhler in which he proposes a three-way division of language function into the representational, the conative and the expressive (Halliday, 1971:326).

Using “function” in Buhler’s term, Halliday believes in a functional theory “which attempts to explain linguistic structure and linguistic phenomena, by reference to the notion that language plays a certain part in our lives” (1971:326). Coincidentally, that part of human linguistic endeavour which interests Halliday is literature, a field of humanity “where language is made to operate in its largesse” (Bamisaye and Afolayan 2006:111). Unlike the earlier structural linguists like Saussure and Jakobson who, in their respective analyses, seemed to sever the relationship between language in literature and the placement of

meaning, Halliday opines that the primary aim of language is the “expression of content or cognitive meaning” (1971:326). This is where he postulates that language performs “ideational” function which captures how the language user embodies his experience in language since it is language that lends structure to such experience.

Halliday also identifies the “inter-personal” function in which the language user fulfills the communicative righteousness and the human urge to “say” or do” something with language to provoke a positive or negative response. The function of language that is concerned with “the creation of text” Halliday labels as “textual” which makes him to recommend that the text is a functional-semantic concept, spoken or written, not definable by size. This categorization according to Halliday, encapsulates Homer’s epic or other genres of literature which evidently display in their forms textual agents that relate syntagmatically and paradigmatically to make compact meaning.

The third function – textual – suggests that Halliday understands the centrality of the speaker’s (or writer’s)/listener’s (or reader’s) experiences, which range from linguistic to non-linguistic, in “the expression of certain fundamental logical relations such as are encoded in a language” (1971:328). To him the form of coordination entrenched in the text is often “derived from an aspect of the speaker’s experience” only that this and other such relations

are realized through the medium of a particular type of structural mechanism which takes them out of the domain of experience to form a functional neutral ‘logical’ component in the total spectrum of meanings (1971:329).

Hence, “a functional theory of language is a theory about meaning, not [just] about words or constructions” (Halliday 1971, p.329). In attempting the synergy of the lexico-semantic relations in a text, one does not only consider those *foregrounded* words which are patterned into certain prominence in the text but the “motivation” of such prominence and how “such prominence contribute to the writer’s total meaning” (1971:334).

Hallidayan systemic functional approach to the study of literary text entrenched the centrality of meaning in its structure, making the text the super-ordinate workable structure of structures in which a constellation of meanings interact to provide a super meaning. As Opara (2005) explains the scheme, “this model relates structural analyses to meaning and social context” (119).

Halliday’s propagation of functionalism in language properties sheds more light on the workings of this essay, especially as we also believe that there is a control center for the linguistic icons that festoon the textual world, especially as the choices of the icons are not haphazard but predicted upon the text producer’s (writer’s) linguistic and non-linguistic experiences. Hence, there is the assumption that “linguistic items and processes (in a literary text) occur as connected parts of an ordered system” (Opara, 2005:119). This “ordered system” suggests aesthetics when the focus is literature, a field which imposes certain innumerable functions and meta-functions on textual iconographs whose meanings are centripetally connected to a core.

A piece of literature, irrespective of its size or theme is often considered as a text in which meaning-carrying agents relate syntagmatically or paradigmatically to present certain meaning (Afolayan & Owoeye 2004). Serres defines a text as “a system of laws” and criticism “a generalized physics” that describes the state of the text (cited in Fashina 1993:11). For any criticism to flourish, therefore, the state of the system that produces the “system of laws” is necessarily of importance when any literary piece is subjected to critical analysis. In the case of literature, which, according to Fashina (1993:14) belongs to the same continuums of knowledge with science, certain knowledge about nature and being are “conditioned by the phenomenon of language” which may be literary or scientific and whatever the situation, “we need to decipher this language using appropriate formula”

(Fashina 1993, p.11). This “appropriate formula,” we believe, is predicated upon a critic’s recognition of the system of poetics that governs the literature and its criticism. Therefore, because of the colossal nature of literature as a system of systems, we have been mandated to look at its poetics from the binoculars of linguistically biased scholars and philologists from Saussure to Halliday. These scholars evolved the prominent field of stylistics – a field which is a marriage of literature and linguistic analysis in quest for an author’s style – with the belief that the linguists are also impeccable stake-holders in the field of literature. With this view, it is hoped that we can maintain a balance in this paper by drawing from the theoretical tools of linguistics, where necessary, since the hegemonic influence of language in literature is indubitable.

Poetics as expressed earlier has two angles to it – linguistic and extra-linguistic – and we believe that so far justice has been done to the linguistic angle since some linguists’ contributions to its explanations have been considered. At this juncture, it will suffice to consider the extra-linguistic angle to the notion of poetics in literature. This will entail a review of the critical suggestions and postulations of the earlier critics/philosophers who have reacted to literature from different impulses. These critics/philosophers, in their reactions gave elaborate insights, which attach the sublimity of the physiology of literature, not only to the language properties in a literary text but also to something outside it. This we may refer to as literary poetics to mean the system of laws that is responsible for the interpretative explanation of both the linguistic and the non-linguistic materials that make up a text.

#### LITERARY POETICS: A HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

A simple and literal definition of poetics as “a theory of poetry” as *Webster Dictionary of English Language* posits may confine the concept to literary studies alone. But the initial portrayal of some linguists’ explanations, or complications, of poetics as put forward above will unarguably correct the myopia that such a limited definition can cause. Poetics as it is applied in literary discourse may be credited to Aristotle’s celebrated critical material, *Poetics*, subtitled as *On the Art of Poetry*. Even though Aristotle’s material was translated to mean “poetics” the nitty-gritty of the material suggests the author’s intention to describe “a system of literary laws” guiding literature as he states in his thesis that

Under the general heading of the art of poetry [poetry was the general name for literature in Aristotle’s time], I propose not only to speak about the art itself, but also to discuss various kinds of poetry and their characteristic functions, the types of plot-structure that are required if a poem is to succeed, the number of its constituted parts and similarly any other matter, that may be relevant to a study of the kind. I shall begin in the natural way, that is by going back to first principles (Dorsch 1982:31)

From the last sentence of this excerpt, it is obvious that Aristotle understood that if he had to succeed in actualizing his intention, he had to revert to certain “first principles”, perhaps, which had guided the creation of the genres he intended to evaluate in his treatise. We can also conclude that the mention of “first principles” suggests that the notion of poetics as the law of system of literature pre-existed Aristotle himself whose treatise was taken as a set of literary litany by many critics to come after him.

Aristotle, though provided a better insight to poetics, did not originate the idea that the word portrays. Before Aristotle, or even Plato who is regarded as the father of criticism, Homer and Hesoid had, in various attempts of literary commentary, regarded literature as a product of “divine inspiration” Perhaps, guided by the recommendation of the divine inspiration, both philosophers, Xenophanes and Heraclitus had attempted to analyse Homer’s passages by finding fault in them. The kind of “fault-finding” analysis common in the

classical time might have given rise to literary criticism, especially with the belief that literature performed the specific function of giving pleasure and “to pass on the message breathed into the poet [writer] by the muse” (Dorsch 1982, p.07).

Plato, though he wrote poetry and prose himself, recommended the extermination of all creativity purposively centered on literature. To him,

God is perfectly good, and therefore both changeless and incapable of deceit, but the poets often show Him as falling short in these respects: they misrepresent god and heroes ‘like a portrait painter who fails to catch a likeness’ and thus in the theological sense they are unsuitable preceptors (Dorsch 1982:11)

Perhaps the motivation to view literature this way was provided by Plato’s belief in the inefficiency of the mimetic poetics which is the explanation for “what the poet does when he is not speaking in his own person, as he does in lyric, ...” and “by the use of direct speech in drama or in parts of epic, represents or impersonates another person” (Dorsch 1982, p.11). Plato though repudiates the idea of literary creativity with the belief that poets compose their works not with the influence of wisdom but “by the reason of some natural endowment and under the power of non-rational inspiration”, accepts that there is something that guides the production of any literature. Plato faults the idea of the illusive perception of nature as reality because “everything that exists, or happens, in the world is [itself] an imperfect copy of an ideal object or action or state that has an ideal existence beyond this world” (Dorsch 1982, p.13). Hence he concludes, “the productions of the poets [and artists] are therefore imitations of imperfect copies of an ideal life; they are third-hand and unreal, and can teach us nothing of value about life” (Dorsch 1982, p.12). Plato’s animadversion on poets and poetry though may be adjudged reductive in nature, reveals that the productions of most literary practitioners are guided by the principles of poetics as he saw certain creative matrixes which are the determinants for the artist’s creative indices.

Aristotle makes a spirited effort in *Poetics* where his commitment gives meaning to the rules that govern literature in his time. Like Plato, Aristotle believes that the production of literature is governed by imitation. One therefore discovers that Aristotle’s main intention was to describe and define what have been most effective in the practices of the best poets and playwrights, and, perhaps, to suggest what he regarded as the best procedure. Even as somewhat apart as the summations of Plato and Aristotle are, both of them recognize the fact that what governs the “law of literature” is itself outside literature and this is what explains the spirit behind its production.

Plato, for instance, believes that “the work of poetry should be judged by the truth to life” basically because of the pleasure it gives. Aristotle in his own argument asserts that poetry is more concerned with the ultimate truth. From the classical notions of “truth to life” and “ultimate truth” we may infer that literature aims at a certain “truth” and the totality of this imposes certain formal prominence on it. This, we believe, is a critic’s watchword. Criticism, as such, cannot be carried out successfully except, of course, the aesthetic poetics of the literary text in question is understood. The poetics itself is better understood when the “atmosphere” that supplied the literary piece is ably considered. This atmosphere we may call *metapoetic*, a term chosen to explain those factors extraneous to literature that are responsible for its poetics. Hence, criticism as a field requires a more coordinated effort of intelligence in its practice of interpreting literature especially since there is that task of oscillating between the poetic and metapoetic text icons often imposed on a critic.

To leave the classical realm to the modern era of literary studies, one discovers several interpretations to the notion of poetics. Genette, for instance, establishes that literature “can be constituted in accordance with a simple process” by which texts are “ordered into a coherent system” (1993:74). Genette seems to break away from the classical rudimentary

“theory of genre” promulgated by Plato and the classical philosophers who followed him. For him, “where the classical sought, above all, true resemblance, we [referring to the modern critics] seek, on the contrary, a radical originality and an absolute creation” (1993:75). Questioning the formalist notion of structural hypothesis which often follows “literature in its overall evolution while making synchronic cuts at various stages and comparing the tables one with another”, Genette does not see literature as that static monolith of structures which confines hermeneutic activities to the structural outlook alone. Hence, he concludes.

This continuing adventure ought to make us more attentive to certain episodes in the past: we cannot go on speaking of literature as if its existences were self-evident, as if relation to the world and to men had never varied (1993:76)

Therefore to Genette, the poetics of literature are adaptable to history and myth because, for him, citing Tomachevski, “each work finds itself oriented in relation to the literary milieu, and each element in relation to the whole work” (1993:75).

By the time radical writers and thinkers like Derrida joined the train of literary critics the formalists’ excessive celebration of form and structure had already been deconstructed and the “structurality of structures” in the evaluation of literature can be called for questioning. Wolfgang Iser, for instance, in his phenomenological approach to literature believes that emphasis must be laid on the fact that in the consideration of any literary work, “one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the action involved in responding to the text” (1993:212). Hence he believes “the literary text has two poles which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader” (1993:212). Iser’s piece of advice to critics is that

a literary text must, therefore, be conceived in such a way that it will engage the readers’ imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative (1993:213).

This view is apparently shared by Paul Sartre in “Why Write?” where he asserts,

But the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected activities necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the minds (1972:370).

Our perception of poetics as a system of law is lent substantive credence by Northrop Frye in his popular, but radical, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), a book that has established him as “one of the most original and influential of modern critics” (Lodge 1972, p.421). Frye is outstanding among the extant literary critics in his view that true criticism hinges on that which can only be attained

by assuming a total coherence in criticism based on a hypothesis about literature itself, and the primary source of the coherence . . . is the recurrence, with various degrees of ‘displacement’ of certain archetypes of all period and culture (Lodge, 1972, p.421).

This is because, to him, as we have already cited, literature “is not [just] a piled aggregate of “works” but an order of words”. Poetics is therefore to Frye “a theory whose principles apply to a whole of literature and account for a type of critical procedure” and this can only be achieved, *inter alia*, when we “get rid of meaningless criticism, or talking about literature in a way that cannot help build up a systematic structure of knowledge” (1957:17-18). Poetics



thus strike Frye as “rules of critical procedure, and law, in the sense of patterns of observed phenomena, of literary practice” (1957:26).

#### POETICS AND THE CRITICISM OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

The elaborate review of scholarly attempts at defining poetics from Saussurean “structuralism” to Hallidayan “functionalism”; or from Plato’s idealist poetics to Frye’s ‘Anatomy of Criticism’ has imposed certain pragmatic conclusion on us. Hence, it is possible to divide these definitive attempts into two such that we could have those that perceive poetics as “the general principles that manifest in literature” and the ones that perceive it as “rules of critical procedure”. It is therefore possible to postulate that poetics is of two varieties. These varieties are aesthetic poetics and critical poetics.

By Aesthetic poetics we refer to that aspect of literary study whose interest is in the finding of the literary principles that unarguably built a work of art. Aesthetic poetics sees through an author’s work to discover, from certain formal prominences of the work, those factors – linguistic and non-linguistic – which are responsible for why (or how) the author has written the work. To the structuralist or formalist poetics, the *how* appears more important than the *why* of a work of literature especially if we go by the structuralist’s/formalist’s assumption that “it is the systems of organization that are important [since] what we do is always a matter of selection within a given construct” (Siegel, n.d). The manifestation of poetics here, therefore, is not as a set of analytical theories but as a set of formal properties that determine the “texture” of a literary work, hence linguistic poetics. The glorified study of linguistic poetics as popularized by the like of I.A. Richards, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shlovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Grigory Vinokur and others brought many scientific connotations that confine literary well-formedness to the whims of structuro-linguistic compactness de-emphasizing the fact that what evolved the aesthetics of a work of art has literary tropes that have correlation with several extra-linguistic artifacts. Hence, the most appropriate of all criticisms will not limit itself to the dictates of linguistic poetics alone.

Critical poetics explain poetics as a set of rules (laws) that guide a critic in his evaluation of a text. These rules manifest as theories that form the scaffold of conceptualization in the evaluation of literary works. For a critic then, both varieties of poetics – linguistic and extra-linguistic – are compulsory since the understanding of the aesthetic poetics is a catalyst to determining the appropriate literary theory of evaluation. Criticism therefore, requires a “more exacting effort of intelligence” from a critic, first, to interpret the aesthetic poetics of the literature he evaluates and second, to discern, and administer the applicable theory (or theories) of literature.

The question agitating many minds among the literary scholars of African literature has been, how many of the “unAfrican products” of critical poetics can appropriately interpret African literature? Today, the criticism of African literature seems to start and end with the theories and meta-theories supplied by the western critics. Even when D.H Rawlinson agrees that “a critic, however competent” can only “suggest, persuade, put things in a fresh light,” [and] “it is always left to us to try to listen . . . to make an act of self-explanation”, why must the Eurocentric views of criticism usurp, totally, the criticism of African literature? (1971:XI).

The intention to view all literatures as one structure as provided by the hermeneutic activities of literary criticism is the “study of genres and the connections which govern their production and reception” (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 1993, p. 62). Hence, many structuralist

critics of literature erroneously assume that African literature can often be worked on by any of the structuralist critical modes since

in a way, the ‘literature’ of mankind as a whole (that is to say, the way in which written works are organized in men’s minds) can be regarded as being constituted in accordance with a similar process – bearing in mind the crude simplification that is involved. . . . (Genette 1993, p.74)

Here, we believe that such assumption that “all literature is either *Iliad* or an *Odyssey*” credited to Querean is quite nondescript and logical. Consequently, this paper sees African literature as a peculiar genre which deserves that literary license of autonomy, perhaps on the basis that

the relationship between African literature and world literature should be seen in the same light as that between African culture and world culture. African culture makes its own contribution to world culture. Just because Africa was colonized and influenced by European, African culture should not be taken as part of European culture. (Ngara 1982, p.08).

It is in the light of this that we seek to define certain “prominences” in the African novel, which should ordinarily insulate the genre from the domineering influences of the western critical modes. These prominences are, by and large, the non-linguistic icons which make the African literature a unique form from the European or the American literature. These icons must make significant and appropriate semantic impression on the Eurocentric critics of African literature if their assumptions on the literature are to be regarded as “genuine and free from European prejudices about Africa and African art” (Ngara 1982, p.08). African literature is as such a unique form which cannot be absolutely appreciated with any prior understanding of *Odyssey* or *Iliad* which evolved from an alien composition of aesthetic knowledge.

Absolute currency with the historico-political factors that constitute themselves as ebullient raw materials to the African writers will aid an unhindered critical sojourn. This is mainly because, as Dasylyva puts it, “the writer is to be understood ... as a member of a society, and like any member of the society, partakes of the observable experience(s) of the society (Dasylyva 2003 p.201). Dasylyva says that the writer,

unlike other members of the society, explores and examines these experiences, in a specialized creative manner and, with the sole aim of sourcing for relevant materials from the pool of experiences (201).

Also elsewhere in an article titled “Pragma-criticism: An Afrocentric Reaction to the Bolekaja Agenda” we express a critical opinion that it appears rather difficult to devise acceptable model for the aspired theory of the African literature. So it has also been to find Eurocentric explanations for a good number of the myth-chronic literary artifacts in the form (Afolayan 2010). This, as we note, is a confirmation that both the postulations of the Eurocentric and Afrocentric critics have remarkable loop-holes even in spite of their laudable arguments. It is on this premise that we have adopted the “situationalist” posture, which radiates in a *democratic* and expansionist position

that transcends formal postulations of the Classical or the non-Classical poetics. This is an indication that critical chauvinism is far from the idea entrenched ... as it is obvious that we have drawn copiously from both the Western and African critical submissions. The commitment has therefore, been to present the “European Poetics” as not wholly accommodating to the African literary evolutions, at least with respect to the African novel (100).

Interestingly from the allusion above, we can infer two probabilities. There is first the syllogism: “no literacy no modern African literature”. This has imposed on us, the idea that the expatriate theories can flourish, to some extent, in the discourse of African literature. Secondly, there is, however, the fact that the western critics, or their Eurocentric African supporters cannot be absolutely right in submitting an African literary form that evolved from an alien topography to the whims of what emanated in reaction to the art-for-art aesthetics. This paper therefore, avoids an exhibition of absolute Afrocentric temper which is prone to extremism. The dialectical strategy adopted here attempts to balance the extreme Eurocentric stances of the objectivists’ poetics (which tend to de-historicize African art by laying emphasis on its structure and form), and the radical Afrocentric ones. The result of this is what we label “Afriurocentricism” which is a fusion of both “centrics,” irrespective of their nuances.

## CONCLUSION

In prosecuting the thesis of this research, we provide revealing explanations on the dividing line between the linguistic notion of poetics and the literary angle to it. This explanation reveals to us that the two angles to poetics are indications of the two types of criticism – those that restrict their analysis to forms and structures and those that relate literary forms and structures to what is outside them. While the former remains more glued to the structure of the text agents that relate in literary form-giving, the latter erases the static taxonomies of the former by giving way to “dynamic model” of evaluation which allows criticism to assume a position that literature is genetically linked to certain extrinsic form-giving properties. In this study, we re-echo the contextualist’s posture which has always put us in the middle ground between of the *Afro* and *Euro* “centrics”. Notably, because Ngara has advised that in searching for an ideal poetics for the African literature we must search for those solutions which, though not specifically African, will nevertheless do justice to African works of Art and this is simply the reason we have recommended the context-sensitive poetics for the literature, at least guided by Scholes assertion that no work of literature can be meaningful if we lack a sense of the literary system into which it fits (Ngara 1987, Scholes 1974).

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