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Deconstructing Conceptual Metaphors in Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's Poetry

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Abstract   This paper examines the use of conceptual metaphors in the poetry of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, exploring how his metaphors reveal deep socio-political and existential meanings. The paper applies the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to deconstruct the cognitive processes underlying the metaphorical language in Mtshali's poetry. By examining "Sorrow" and "Weep not for a Warrior" as sample poems, this research identifies key metaphors related to oppression and resistance. The methodology is qualitative, engaging with intertextual references to South African history and culture. The findings reveal that Mtshali's metaphors function not only as literary devices but also as tools for cognitive and ideological engagement. This paper contributes to Literary Semantics by demonstrating how metaphor can serve as an interface between linguistic expression and socio-political experience in Mtshali's poetry, thereby offering new insights into the interplay between language, thought, and power in literature

Keywords   Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Literary Semantics, Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, apartheid poetry, cognitive linguistics, metaphorical deconstruction, socio-political oppression

1. Introduction

In literary creations, the intertwining of language, intentionality and ideology is realised deeply in the conceptualisation of the meaning extensions created by metaphors, a gateway to understanding a writer's craft and the socio-political currents of their era. This investigation delves deeply into this intricate relationship within the poetry of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, whose significance in the literary landscape of apartheid-era South Africa cannot be overemphasised.

Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's emergence as a towering figure in South African literature is largely due to his poignant depiction of the tumultuous socio-political landscape during apartheid. His verses serve as powerful conduits for themes of sorrow, struggle and resistance, providing rich material for analysis through the lens of contextualised metaphors, that is, a contextualised conceptualisation of metaphoric expressions.

At the heart of this study lies a meticulous exploration of metaphors within Mtshali's poetry, aiming to identify, describe, interpret and explain these features in detail. By selecting seminal works like "Sorrow" and "Weep Not for A Warrior" as sample texts, this paper ensures a comprehensive analysis representative of Mtshali's works and their thematic richness.

By situating Mtshali's metaphors within the broader context of intra-lingual properties and external factors, this study seeks to unearth the ideological underpinnings inherent in Mtshali's linguistic malapropisms.

Through rigorous analyses, this research aims to peel back the layers of meaning embedded in Mtshali's works, showcasing the integral role of metaphor in shaping his distinctive style. These meaning extensions not only enhance aesthetic expression but also serve as vehicles for articulating socio-political commentary, highlighting the intricate interplay between meaning and style, particularly in literary semantics in themes related to power dynamics.

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the complexities inherent in Mtshali's poetry, shedding light on how metaphor shapes the expressive landscape of his poetry. By pushing into this interplay between language, intentionality and ideology, the study enriches our understanding of literary discourse within the socio-political context of apartheid-era South Africa.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the role of metaphor in Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's poetry. It utilizes purposive sampling to select two representative poems, "Sorrow" and "Weep Not for A Warrior," from Mtshali's work. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher selects subjects most beneficial to the study (Patton, 2002, p. 230). This approach ensures that the selected poems are rich in content relevant to the study's objectives, providing a comprehensive basis for in-depth analyses.

1.1 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their work, Metaphors We Live By (1980). CMT, as propounded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5), posits that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." This implies that our thoughts as humans are deeply structured by metaphor, influencing how we perceive the world and communicate. Rather than being mere rhetorical devices, metaphors actively shape our perception, discretely guiding interpretations and emotional responses.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999, p. 3) state that "metaphor is not just a matter of language [colouration], but of thought and reason" (our parenthesis). In other words, metaphors are not just literary devices; they guide how we comprehend abstract concepts by shaping them into more familiar experiences in which case, two conceptual domains exist: the source and target. For example, in everyday speech, we say things like "she won the argument," drawing from the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). This phrase implies that arguing is combative rather than a collaborative exchange, subtly shaping our perception of discourse. The source domain happens to be the literal expression while the target domain is the conceptualised meaning generated within the context of discourse.

When applied to literature and to poetry in particular, CMT becomes a powerful tool for deciphering linguistic manipulations in literary semantics. Poets often employ metaphors not simply to convey meaning but also to evoke emotions and control the reader's perspective. In the case of Mtshali, a South African poet known for his evocative use of language, his metaphors serve as a lens through which social realities are reflected. By identifying the underlying conceptual metaphors in his poetry, we hope to reveal the implicit ideologies and power dynamics embedded in his work.

Take, for instance, how Lakoff and Turner (1989, p. 67) argue that poets creatively extend conventional metaphors to generate new insights. This means that while ordinary discourse might rely on conventional metaphors like LIFE IS A JOURNEY, a poet like Mtshali could manipulate this metaphor to expose the struggles of marginalised individuals, transforming it into LIFE IS A TUNNEL WITH NO EXIT. This meaning extension not only deepens emotional engagement but also directs the reader's interpretation in a particular direction.

Furthermore, Gerard Steen (2011, p. 12) highlights that metaphors in poetry can be "deliberate and strategic," aiming to challenge dominant worldviews. By applying CMT to Mtshali's poetry, we can uncover how his metaphors shape perceptions of oppression, identity, survival and power dynamics. For instance, if he metaphorically presents the social system as a CAGE, he is not simply describing confinement; he is framing existence within a structure that suppresses freedom, urging the reader to perceive injustice as inescapable.

In essence, CMT allows us to move beyond surface interpretations and engage with the deeper ideological currents within Mtshali's poetry. His metaphors are not random artistic choices but deliberate acts of linguistic manipulation that shape meaning, control perception, and provoke critical reflection. By decoding these metaphors, we access the poet's worldview and the discreet ways he uses language to capture the social realities of the South African apartheid.

1.2 A Review of Related Literature

Numerous scholarly investigations have been conducted on Mtshali's poetry, with Rob Gaylard, Abarowei Felicia and Karibi T. George among the proponents of his use of symbols and discourse to depict the struggles faced by oppressed individuals in South Africa under apartheid. One form of protest Mtahali employs is a narrative approach that portrays shared experiences of deprivation common among those who suffered under such conditions; this is evident in many of his poems (Karenisablog, 2017, n.p). Through Mtshali's work, readers are transported into a world that reflects the societal dynamics of South African apartheid. His writings provide an insightful commentary on the various hardships experienced by individuals during this period. The present study, however, aims to explore how Mtshali skilfully uses language to convey these difficult realities.

Zwelithini Leo Sibisi (2013) has a study showcasing how the poetry of Sepamla, Serote, Gwala and Mtshali (SSGM) exposed the extent to which oppressed individuals had internalized negative views about their identity. Sibisi posits that these poets serve as the conscience of oppressed people by revealing an accurate image of themselves. The study avers that the writing of SSGM not only raises awareness but also persuades readers to embrace Black Consciousness ideas concerning liberation struggles. According to Sibisi, this writing serves as psychological freedom from domination, fear and self-pity (p. 230). As laudable as the above study may be, this research focuses on Mtshali's metaphors in conveying this social conflict of power struggle.

According to Nesther Albert Alu (2011), Oswald Mtshali's second volume, entitled *Fireflames* (1980), exhibits a radical shift in tone that renders it both forceful and militant (104). In her view, Mtshali has skilfully depicted the dehumanization of oppressed individuals in a highly distinctive manner. He has captured the anguish experienced by working-class men and women who endure demeaning labour (109). However, Alu does not delve into the linguistic devices, as in the case of conceptual metaphors (CM), employed by Mtshali while portraying the degradation of oppressed people.

Khuliso Christian Nemadzivhanani (1991) examines the intricacies of artifice and signification in South African English poetry. According to Nemadzivhanani, post-Sharpeville South African poetry is characterized by distinct idiosyncrasies in style, form and subject matter that effectively convey the poets' intended messages (p. iv). This scholar also notes that a significant portion of South African poetry employs art as an instrument for social scrutiny (p. 7). In his analysis of Mtshali's works, Nemadzivhanani observes how the poet utilizes linguistic and stylistic devices to create protest statements in *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* while inciting active resistance among readers through *Fireflames*. Through this approach, Mtshali exposes the disparity between what currently exists and what should exist (p. 15). In contrast to Nemadzivhanani's perspective, our focus lies on Mtshali's strategic use of conceptual metaphor to critique power abuse and advocate for power contestation.

Holland's paper focuses on the language of conflict and commitment in South African poetry. According to Holland (1987), polished style is sacrificed to the aim of educating and stirring individuals out of apathy (p. 6). For Holland,

even more annoying to the liberal tradition than the subversion of form, is the 'impurity' of the English found in many poems which lack the formality of BBC English. Oswald Mtshali, however, argues against an ornate and lofty poetic style. He asserts that the English that [they] use in [their] poetry is not the Queen's language. It is the language of urgency.... (p. 11)

In contrast to Holland, we aim to conduct a comprehensive examination of the significance of the purportedly extinct language in South African poetry, particularly that of Mtshali. The objective of this essay is to enhance current literature by elucidating how the perceived impurities within Mtshali's poetic language serve ideological purposes.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor in Mtshali's Poetry

Mtshali's poetry is replete with various Conceptual Metaphors manifested in the form of linguistic disparities. Such arise when words are employed in an unsuitable category, leading to a distortion of meaning. This phenomenon has

been coined as misclassification by Leech, G. N. (1969), which pertains to substituting a word from another class or semantic field into a position designated for words belonging to a specific class. (p. 45)

In societies with visible disparities, the privileged few who hold power are inclined to misuse their authority, as they tend towards becoming despots in their pursuit of controlling or directing the masses according to their own whims. Mtshali employs Conceptual Metaphors in his poetry to depict the abuse of power by the dominant minority during South Africa's apartheid era. An excellent illustration of this can be seen in "Sorrow", and "Weep not for a warrior" poems featured in *Fireflames*, as demonstrated below as signals of power asymmetry and contestation.

2.1.2 Conceptual Metaphor and Power Asymmetry

Mtshali's 'Sorrow,' from his Fireflames demonstrates the use of conceptual metaphors in relaying power asymmetry as shown in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1:

> Sorrow is an eclipse
>
> over tear-stained window eyelets
>
> whose redness of million mournings
>
> and endless griefs make them smart
>
> as if red pepper was flung into the cornea
>
> causing the blindness of sheer indifference
>
> which precedes the callous sermons of demented men,
>
> men, drunk with power, who make more laws,
>
> laws steeped in a tub of madness,
>
> the madness which emanates from a marble heart (lines 1- 10)

The metaphor utilized here hinges on the application of collocational clashes, as exemplified in the equation of sorrow with eclipse (line 1); the depiction of mourning as red (line 3); the portrayal of grief as endless (line 4); the characterization of indifference as blind (line 6), and the allusion to sermons being callous (line 7). Additionally, these men are described as 'drunk with power' rather than wine (line 8); while their hearts are likened to marble statues (line 10).

These are metaphoric. A prominent aspect of metaphor involves conveying information without explicitly stating the words that carry it, thereby focusing on language within its context of use and implied meaning rather than the literal interpretation. Metaphor is closely linked with the addresser's intended meaning, where contextual relevance holds greater significance than linguistic information alone. The aforementioned misclassifications qualify as metaphors due to their ambiguity outside of their contextual usage. Without a shared background between the writer and the reader, the intended meaning may not be fully conceptualised or appreciated.

Sorrow cannot be compared with an *eclipse*, a form of darkness that occurs during the day. The human heart is not made of *marble* and *indifference* cannot be attributed with *blindness* as if it were animate. However, in a society where tyranny reigns unchecked like a monster, sorrow stems from the absence of sound reasoning (demented men). As Mtshali observes, 'the blindness of sheer indifference / ... precedes the callous sermons of demented men' (lines 6- 7), referring to those who suffer or exhibit cognitive insanity. When oppressed groups remain silent, abuse of power becomes inevitable. Therefore, 'the blindness of sheer indifference / ... precedes the callous sermons of demented men' (lines 6- 7).

Undoubtedly, the apparent clash of collocation in the use of 'callous sermons' (line 7) is deliberate. As per CMT, it serves as a social practice aimed at conveying the abuse of power prevalent in society, South African apartheid society in this case. Although sermons are not sentient beings and cannot be described as callous - which entails lacking empathy or concern for others' suffering, Mtshali's characterization of these men's sermons as such stems from their heartlessness and perpetration of power abuse. Sermons should ideally persuade, exhort and correct their audience. However, by labelling them callous, Mtshali critiques such speeches as deceitful and tyrannical. This reflects the suppressed anger arising from 'endless grief' (line 4) and tears shed by less powerful individuals who perceive those in positions of power to be heartless perpetrators bent on twisting people's arms through ill-intended preaching/persuasion.

Similarly expressed in 'the blindness of sheer indifference' (line 6), *indifference* is not human and thus cannot be blind. Metaphorically though, when indifference becomes blind, one tends to believe that powerless people permit abusive acts because they have become indifferent towards abusive societal happenings. In societies where

dissenting voices are subdued resulting in a lack of freedom of expression, abuse of power is constituted bringing about societal breakdowns. This leads to pain-filled lives full of grief-stricken individuals like those described in lines 1-5.

Similar to the example of callous sermons, Mtshali uses the term 'marble heart' as another form of conceptual metaphor to describe men who live devoid of empathy or conscience. The word 'marble' here serves as a metaphor for heartlessness and implies that these individuals lack emotions and disregard the suffering of others. In essence, it refers to those in society who mercilessly dehumanize marginalized groups with callousness and ruthlessness.

Lines 3, 4 and 5 substantiate the metaphorical connotation of 'eyelets.' The redness of these eyelets is a result of countless lamentations and innumerable sorrows which render them 'agitated' akin to the sensation arising from capsaicin (red pepper) being thrown into the cornea (line 5), leading to an insensitivity that culminates in utter apathy towards societal happenings (line 6). Further analysis reveals that the (South African) populace has endured such profound afflictions that they have become impassive towards their surroundings.

The metaphors are reinforced through the application of zeugma, which involves the linkage of meaning between a word or phrase that is used in both figurative and literal senses. Additionally, this is further strengthened by means of contrast, whereby the red eyelets are imbued with a sense of sophistication while simultaneously being rendered sightless due to sheer indifference.

It is worth mentioning that the metaphors in question are fortified by noteworthy chain lines, reminiscent of chain poems or verses. The passage 'demented men, / men, drunk with power, [men] who make more laws, / laws steeped in a tub of madness, / the madness which emanates from a marble heart' (lines 7-10) holds particular significance as it features the singular reference to a marble heart conceptualising the entire ruthless apartheid system. This section of chain lines employs captivating repetitions to sustain readers' and listeners' attention while simultaneously emphasizing unity and providing a repetitive rhythm. Lines 7 through 10 express an array of unpredictable concepts connected through associative language. 'Demented men,' 'mad laws,' and 'marble heart' all conceptualise South Africa's apartheid regime.

In summary, the initial portion of the excerpt delineates the populace's emotional state, while the latter part elucidates what led to such a mindset. The word 'sorrow' is described with such fervour that it assumes eclipsing powers over something - specifically, the *window eyelets*. This term holds paramount importance as it conveys both a literal and figurative meaning. In its literal sense, it creates an image of window perforations stained with tears, evoking a sense of suffering and isolation within enclosed spaces. However, at a deeper level, the poet employs conceptual metaphor by using little eyes to represent the oppressed in South Africa, and oppressed groups globally. So, 'window eyelets' symbolize physical apertures through which powerless individuals peep outside out of fear but also double as miniature windows into their minds eclipsed by sorrow.

As we delve deeper into the poem, we see that their struggle stems from the absence of laughter and the ring of gunfire.

Excerpt 2:

> No more is heard the ring of laughter in the land,
>
> only the ring of gunfire....
>
> the savage battle-cry smothers the quaking
>
> claypot consciences,
>
> and spills the calabashes of white bile (*Fireflames*, "sorrow" lines 11- 18)

Here, there is misclassification in the juxtaposition of 'laughter' and 'ring,' 'ring' and gunfire' (lines 11- 12); 'battle-cry' and 'smother' (line 16); 'claypot' and 'conscience' (line 17) and; 'white' and 'bile' (line 18).

When excerpt 1 describes their marble hearts, or a heart made of stone, we infer that laughter will no longer ring in the land. Instead, there will only be gunfire as those without conscience focus solely on killing. This is exemplified by the savage battle-cry which suffocates the claypot consciences (line. 17) and causes white bile to spill forth from calabashes. The term 'smother' refers to killing by suffocation, an act typically carried out by humans rather than a battle-cry. Thus, this passage employs conceptual metaphor through which the battle-cry (the source domain) symbolizes abuse of power (the target domain).

The connection between conscience and claypot lies in its fragility, as it is highly breakable for oppressors, tyrants and abusers of power. As such, conscience can be conceptualised in the breakability of a claypot that spills all over society when broken, like the calabashes of white bile' (line 18). Here we see the use of the clash *white bile* which connotes anger or hatred rather than its physiological meaning as either greenish or yellow when referring to an organ in the human body.

In a literal sense, this scattered anger denotes the result of power abuse in a society where victims are not discriminated against. In the framework of CMT, there exists a relationship between the colour *white* and *bile* representing aggression. The juxtaposition of these two elements effectively metaphorizes the underlying tension in racial conflicts. Figuratively speaking then, this bile represents instances where oppressive systems exert their power through throwing anger recklessly without considering those who suffer due to their actions, a tyrannous way of living indeed. Conceptual metaphor therefore occurs when language used by oppressors reinforces existing power dynamics while simultaneously silencing dissenting voices within marginalized communities.

2.1.3 Conceptual Metaphor and Power Contest

In the face of the egregious mistreatment suffered by the subjugated populace, Mtshali adroitly employs conceptual metaphors also in the form of collocational clashes in his poetry to convey a message of resistance against the abuse of power perpetrated by their oppressors. To combat any oppressive system that may exist across our planet, it is imperative for individuals to demonstrate immense courage rather than succumbing to despair. As such, in 'Weep not for a Warrior,' Mtshali asserts that

Excerpt 3:

> a warrior never perishes
>
> he is sustained by the glorious deeds of the departed;
>
> he eats the raw meat of fearlessness (lines 4-6).

The speaker's assertion that "a warrior never perishes" can be seen as a clear case of conceptual metaphor by its providing less information than expected. Typically, one might expect more elaboration or clarification on how a warrior never perishes, but the statement remains terse. Fearlessness, whether raw or cooked, is not a consumable item. This deliberate metaphorical juxtaposition serves to conceptualise the theme of courage necessary for every champion of freedom. The poem exemplifies motivational verse that inspires those who are oppressed. In metaphorical terms, fearlessness represents boldness, the primary weapon required to resist power abuse. The speaker firmly believes that their fight against oppression cannot be deterred by fear because

Excerpt 4:

> Fear has no roots
>
> strong enough to pierce
>
> the armoured heart of a man in bondage,
>
> whose unbridled anger tears the tiger from its liar (lines 11- 14).

The collocations of 'heart' and 'armour,' 'fear' and 'roots,' 'bridle' and 'anger' are clashes that emphasize the necessity of boldness in liberating oneself from all forms of bondage. In Mtshali's poem 'Sorrow,' where the oppressors possess a 'marble heart,' the oppressed require an 'armoured heart' in 'Weep not for a warrior' to contest it. This obscure metaphor is capable of being conceptualised thus: while the 'marble heart' targets the oppressor, the 'armoured heart' represents the oppressed who must guard themselves against an obnoxious system like the apartheid era.

According to Mtshali, individuals in bondage must equip themselves with an 'armoured heart' (13). While it may seem that this phrase refers to literal armour for the heart, it targets a situation where imprisonment and other forms of bondage can motivate victims to fight back even harder. To contest any oppressive system, those in bondage should not hold back, but instead unleash their anger like people facing imminent death who would 'tear the tiger from its liar' (line 14). Anger is personified here because it is incapable of tearing anything apart. This illustrates how rage and provocation are necessary tools for escaping intimidating systems rather than timidity or quiet acceptance. Inaction does not save anyone; only action does in quests for freedom.

The Lagos Lekki Toll Gate massacre of October 20th, 2020 serves as a reminder of how protests can reduce police brutality on Nigerian roads. Instead of harassing and molesting road users, police officers now approach them politely asking if they have *anything for the weekend* or requesting *water*. Therefore, the poet urges people not to retreat when oppressed because mere retreat is insufficient in effecting change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study probed into the intricate relationship between language, intentionality and ideology within the poetry of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, particularly focusing on the role of Conceptual Metaphor as a conduit for conveying his socio-political commentary. Through the lens of CMT and a meticulous examination of Mtshali's poetic compositions, this research elucidates how metaphor does not just serve the role of a mere rhetorical device but as a strategic tool of Mtshali's for highlighting power asymmetry and contestation in apartheid-era South Africa.

By analyzing "Sorrow" and "Weep Not for a Warrior," this study uncovered the nuanced layers of meaning embedded within Mtshali's works. Through metaphorical collocational clashes, Mtshali skillfully critiques power abuse while advocating for resistance and courage in the face of oppression. The findings of the research not only deepen our understanding of Mtshali's poetic style but also contribute to a broader comprehension of the socio-political dynamics inherent in literary discourse.

Moving forward, future studies on Mtshali's poetry could explore additional linguistic and stylistic devices employed by the poet, further elucidating the complexities of language use in his poetry. Additionally, comparative analyses with other poets of the apartheid era could provide valuable insights into the diverse strategies utilized by writers to navigate the socio-political landscape of South Africa. Overall, and through the lens of CMT, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Mtshali's poetry in illuminating the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities, both in the past and present.

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