

Research Article

Aesthetic Portrayal of Food in Contemporary African Poetry

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Abstract

Contemporary African poets have artistically projected the import of African food into modern African literature; this representation has popularised and promoted some African meals by giving them global recognition. However, the portrayal of food in African literature, especially within poetry has little or no consideration scholarly. This is the critical lacuna that this study attempts to fill. This study, therefore, examines the literary aestheticism of food in some African poems with a view to establishing that the import of food in African poetry promotes the nourishment value of African dishes, projects the admiration of African food and widens the propagation of these dishes beyond African shores. The study employs purposive sampling of three African poems as its data. They are Oluwaseun Olutunbi's "Amala Dudu", John Onyeme's "Akpu, African Food" and Oyin Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)". These texts are subjected to critical textual analysis. The analysis will be influenced by Brad Kessler's model of Gastronomic Theory of literature as its theoretical framework. The essence of Gastronomic Theory is to establish the poetic devices that intrinsically orchestrate the various literary aesthetics through the import of food in the primary texts; it will also undergird the findings. Significantly, the findings reveal that aesthetics of admiration, nourishment and nostalgia emanate from the import of food in the selected African poems. Findings have also shown that the import of food in African poetry is a rich and multifaceted concept that reveals deep insights into the individual, social and communal contexts of African continent. Portrayal of food in African poetry, therefore, is an essential ointment to popularise African cuisine beyond the shores of Africa.

Keywords

African Dishes, Global Status, Tactile Qualities, Cultural Border

1. Introduction

Throughout the ages, food is known to be an integral substance that sustains the physical growth of human beings. Mintz and Du define food as a substance taken into the body to sustain growth, repair and for vital processes [13]. This view provides crystal credence to the physical and biological essentiality of food to entire mankind. Lupton [11] describes

food as a medium through which social relations are enacted and social boundaries are drawn. These above views equivocally portray the multifaceted nature of food as a substance of nutritional value and as a profound cultural and social edifice.

Food is a fundamental necessity for all living organisms; it

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provides the essential nutrients and energies required for the sustenance of life, growth and development. The concept of food is all-embracing as it creeps extensively into various disciplines offering different perspectives on its nature, composition and significance. Fischler highlights the cultural significance of food as he posits that food is not only a nutritional substance, but also a cultural artifact [7]. He argues that people's perception, preparation and consumption of food is greatly influenced by their cultural backgrounds and norms. This shows that the significance of food transcends its biological usefulness for it evolves a profound personification of cultural practices and beliefs.

1.1. African Perspectives of Food

Historically, food is sacrosanct to Africans. It is a central aspect of African culture as Africans see food as a means of cultural identity, force of cohesion and bonds. How food is prepared and consumed in Africa depicts some salient perspectives which may include spiritual, social and cultural inclinations. Osuji posits that food is a 'desideratum' in African philosophy with the conception of food being "spiritual when we consider the centrality of food in religious traditions around the world" [17]. Osuji's description of food as a 'desideratum' encapsulates the deep significance of food as a fundamental human need, a thing that human beings rely on for existence. This also depicts food as not just a physical necessity but something profoundly desired and valued by humans. Thus, in Africa, food is a well cherished and sought-after substance essential to human life, and is capable of reflecting human cultural and philosophical existence. Again, Osuji pontificates that food is sacred for two distinct functions: to quench the physical sensation of hunger and to symbolise cultural issues.

In tandem with Osuji's notion of food, Churchill depicts the cultural affinity of food in Africa as a crucial aspect of cultural identity. This emphasises that the type of food being consumed will identify the tribe or ethnic group that the consumer comes from. Churchill further advances his argument that in Africa "our food travels beyond and it's sought after, the diversity of our food is in each tribe; imagine hundreds of tribes that have a unique way they produce their food and make it for consumption" [4]. Churchill bases his position on the richness of the nutrients derivable from African food and the cultural uniqueness of the food that makes it a sought-after by Africans. He believes that in Africa, food plays a significant role in cultural identity and as a medium of expression of the rich African cultural heritage and mores; it is a way of expressing identity, sharing stories and connecting with one's community.

Moreover, Laudan connects the diversity in African food with the continent's vast geography and the unique histories of African various ethnic groups. He argues that African food is a product of the continent's diverse climates, cultures and histories, with each region developing its own distinct

culinary traditions [10]. Laudan is perhaps, being informed and influenced by Montanari who asserts that "African food is deeply rooted in the land, reflecting the unique environmental and cultural conditions of African region [14].

In congruous to Laudan's view of environmental and cultural affinity of food in Africa, Kittler and Sucher demonstrate and pep it up in their opinion that in many African communities, food is intrinsically linked to rituals, ceremonies and festive celebrations. They emphasise and reinforce the cultural role food plays in Africa. They further posit that how food is prepared, shared and eaten are often influenced by cultural and religious beliefs. They also see how meals are frequently shared communally as a process of strengthening social bonds and celebrating remarkable societal events. This practice is ideally imbued with symbolic connotations, reflecting the cosmological beliefs of the Africans [9]. Just like culture, African food tradition, is usually transited through generations with recipes and techniques that are carefully guarded and shared within families and communities. Sowthariya [21] affirms the influence of the generational spread of the African food traditions as he posits that this intergenerational exchange of knowledge will ensure the continuity of cultural heritage and the evolution of African food ways.

1.2. Food Representations in African Literature: An Overview

Olufunwa [16] and Edwin [5] postulate that food is a powerful symbol of social status and power dynamics in African literature. Their postulation respectively is on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, they identify the communal feasting and sharing of food in the text to reflect the hierarchical structure of Igbo society, and by extension, African society. To them, food and food habits are integral to the culture of society, for they provide an identity to that society. They believe Achebe employs descriptions of staple food items like yam, palm wine and kola nuts to evoke the rich cultural traditions of African society.

Worthy of note in the representation of food in African literature is the significant contributions of African female writers. Prominent African woman writers have used food to explore and propagate issues of gender agitations and domesticity. [2] and [6] through the instrumentality of food have reinforced woman's passionate condemnation of patriarchal hegemony that places woman as merely controller of the kitchen whose role is food preparation and consumption alone [16] Some female writers also portray food as a weapon of resistance and subversion where man's domination is being challenged. Take for instance in [3], the protagonist uses cooking and food to assert her agency and challenge her husband patriarchal tendencies. Food is being portrayed as a defensive mechanism by some female writers whose literary heroines uphold the belief that a woman who cooks better becomes the beneficiary of the husband's largesse and atten-

tion especially in polygamous setting.

It is pertinent to know that the artistic representation of food is a prominent feature in African poetry. African poets have been celebrating the cultural significance and the delights of African food in their poetry throughout the ages. Poetic language has been used to capture the aroma and texture of African food in Adeyemi's "This Morning a Fragrance" and Osman's "Chez Mousa". Agu [1] opines concerning Adeyemi and Osman that their poems afford the opportunity to illustrate a reading of African poetry language aesthetics which include the artistic representation of food and its preparation by scholars who have delved deeper into the role of culinary aesthetics in African literature. He exemplifies his argument:

Ojaide, for instance, argues that food and its preparation are important aspects of African culture that have found expression in African poetry. Another is Niyi Osundare whose poems often feature the preparation and consumption of food as a way of celebrating the richness of African culinary traditions. Biodun Jeyifo's poems present the poetic representation of food, is not merely a descriptive device, but a means of exploring the deeper cultural and social realities of African society. While Soyinka's poems often use food as a metaphor for the complexities of African identity and the challenges of postcolonial existence (45-46).

In alliance with Agu, Msiska, a Malawian poet buttresses the significance of food in African poetry as he comments that "the depiction of food in poetry is a way for poets to assert the cultural autonomy and artistic sophistication of African society in the face of colonial and neocolonial influences" [15]. Msiska believes that these food representations serve as a form of cultural resistance, challenging the stereotypes and misconception that have often been associated with African cuisine. [19] succinctly corroborates Msiska as he suggests that "culinary aesthetics in African poetry serve as a means of preserving and transmitting the knowledge and practice of African cuisine and culture to future generations (157).

2. Statement of the Problem

Having observed the scholastic concepts and views of critics and scholars on the import of food in African literature, it is obvious that there is a heavy emphasis on African food as a cultural artifact with little or no consideration for the literary aesthetics that are embedded in the use of food in African poetry. This is the critical lacuna this study attempts to fill. This study, therefore, examines the literary aestheticism of food in some African poems with a view to establishing that the import of food in African poetry promotes the nourishment value of African dishes, projects the admiration of African food and widens the propagation of these dishes beyond African shores.

3. Research Method

Our research instrument shall be the library. The study employs purposive sampling of three African poems as its data. They are Oluwaseun Olutunbi's "Amala Dudu", John Onyeme's "Akpu, African Food" and Oyin Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)". These texts are subjected to critical textual analysis. The analysis will be influenced by Brad Kessler's model of Gastronomic Theory of literature as its theoretical framework. The essence of Gastronomic Theory is to undergird the findings and to establish the poetic devices that orchestrate the various literary aesthetics that manifest in the primary texts which are aesthetics of admiration, nourishment and nostalgia.

4. Aesthetics of Admiration

Literary aestheticism emphasises the importance of beauty, form and style in literature; it prioritizes the aesthetic experience over moral, social or political messages. In essence, literary aestheticism celebrates the beauty and power of language exploring new ways to express the human experience and create unique subjective words. It is very expedient to begin the literary aestheticism in this study with aesthetics of admiration. The three selected poems aptly express a passionate and exquisite admiration, affection and adoration for the three Nigerian foods - *Amala Dudu*, *Akpu* and *Ikokore*. This manifests artistically through the use of a very striking imageries, it is nutritionally glaring that, the three African poets see the African foods as sources of comfort and joy.

Olutunbi's "Amala Dudu" opens with a heartfelt declaration of admiration and adoration:

How I crave you
And adore your profound beauty
I am drawn through space and time [20]

There is the imagery of admiration orchestrated by the extreme beauty and grandeur of *Amala Dudu*. The poet further creates an aura of admiration as he metaphorically describes a plate of *Amala Dudu* meal as a "mountain coated with molten magma" (line 10). The richness and the captivating nature of the food are being emphasised to create an irresistible attraction and unrivaled beauty. The admiration of the physical presence of the food is also being symbolized as mountain as it has an overwhelming tourist appeal like a real mountain. Through the use of metaphor and symbolism in the opening stanza, there is a vivid depiction of aesthetics of admiration.

Similarly, in the middle of the poem, the poet artistically creates an imagery of passionate admiration while describing how the meal is being eaten or consumed:

But with highly sanitized bare hands
Digging into the very foundations
Of the irresistible dark mould
Of Amala, abula and orisirisi [20]

These lines capture admirably the sensory faculty of eating

with the metaphorical phrase - “highly sanitized bare hands”, this highlights a personal and an intimate concatenation with the meal. The poet’s admiration and fascination are heightened with the use of “of irresistible dark mould”. This creates an imagery of a pleasant magical spell which portrays the meal as something that is both satisfactory and indulgent. Succinctly, through vivid imageries and elaborate metaphor, the poet, Olutunbi admires *Amala Dudu* as physical food and as a cherished and pleasant co-traveler in the journey of life.

In John Onyeme’s “Akpu, African Food”, the poet employs also the aesthetics of admiration in the first stanza to express a deep admiration and affection for *Akpu*, a traditional Nigerian dish made from fermented cassava. The exclamatory opening, “the heavy white joy” depicts a strong emotional feeling of admiration. It artistically establishes a tone of satisfaction, comfort, admiration and celebration. The poet further aesthetically eulogizes the meal in the opening of the third stanza of the poem”

You drive through the throat
Smoothly without accident
As if the throat is an express road
And you land with force on the floor of the stomach

These lines hyperbolically describe the passage of *Akpu* from the oesophagus to the final settlement in the stomach. The poet describes admirably the eating habit of *Akpu*, he emphasises lovingly the crudity and easiness that are attached to how to eat *Akpu*. The poet’s persona enjoys this habit admirably as it contradicts the Western habits of eating with spoon, knife and fork. This habit of eating without cutlery that is considered crude and uncivilised by Western civilisation, is being appreciated, admired and adored in lines 9-10 “You drive through the throat / Smoothly without accident”, this reinforces the enjoyable and pleasant nature of the meal.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet artistically creates an imagery of a profound admiration as it concludes:

No one will doubt your heaviness and ableness
You are the Lord of all lumpy food
Bless be the hands that made you

Above excerpt showcases the beauty, admiration and satisfaction that are accorded the food by the entire community. This underscores the enormity of its social and cultural significance to the members of the community. From this description, the culinary tradition of the meal is portrayed as something that is capable of fostering social bonds and shared joy.

Coming to Oyin Oludipe’s “Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)”, the poet employs imagery and symbolism to create a serene and beautiful atmosphere for a vivid depiction of admiration in the first two opening lines of the poem, “In the sedate corners of the swamp / We shall have entrails of ruptured..., these lines suggest an artistic creation of a pleasant and admirable setting for those that prepare and consume the meal. It is an apt imagery of admiration as it provides an invocation for the lovers of the meal, it also heralds the

communally derived satisfaction and joy in the production and eating of the meal.

The three poets have aesthetically created an imagery of admiration and beauty in the three poems respectively. The essence of this artistic creation is to depict the beauty and pleasantness of African dishes as sacrosanct and indelible throughout all the ages.

5. Aesthetics of Nourishment

The fundamental necessity of food is the production of nourishment to the body or person that consumes it. This encapsulates biologically the nutritional values that are embedded in different classes of food. If a meal is not nourishing, it becomes a poison to the eater or consumer and it cannot serve any nutritional purpose as it becomes injurious to human health. For food to be considered eatable, it must not be lethal to the consumers. In order to create a global recognition and an appeal for the consumption of *Amala Dudu*, *Akpu* and *Ikokore*, the three African foods in this study, the individual poets have poetically created aesthetics of nourishment for the African foods in this paper. They might have been informed by the biases of the Western world that underestimates African food and ways of life through the lens of colonialism, it could also be the urge of promoting African food tradition for global acceptance and recognition.

In Olutunbi’s “Amala Dudu”, the poet aesthetically creates an imagery of nourishment and the biological significance of the meal through a direct comparison, comparing the meal as something so high and elevated like a “mountain coated with molten magma / of spicy pepper and sumptuous flesh” (lines 11-12). This depicts that the magnitude and altitude of the utilitarian and nutritional values of the meal are of great importance with the phrase, “elevated like a mountain” whose contents are “spicy pepper and sumptuous flesh”. It is glaring that the contents of the mountain (the meal) are items of nourishment and nutritional substances that will benefit the various organs and parts of the body of the consumers. This metaphoric expression is aptly created to provide an imagery of great nutritional value and an accompaniment of nourishment.

Another striking aesthetics of nourishment is found in lines 20-21 in “Amala Dudu”, “Great chunks travelling obediently down my permissible guts / to the stomach abyss, knights tugging with meat”. These lines emphasise the digestive process of a meal and also the passage from the mouth and the final settlement in the belly. After complete digestion, converted food particles will move to where they are needed as nutrients that the poet artistically referred to as ‘travelling obediently down any permissible guts’. This provides credence to the view of [12] that “food is a complex and dynamic system of molecules, structure and processes that interact to create the flavors, textures and nutritional properties we experience” (4).

In the last stanza of the poem, “Amala Dudu”, there is an

imagery of nutritional satisfaction that is felt by the persona as it can be seen in the excerpt below:

So now, the mountain is leveled
I rise through no haste
Slowly expecting the morrow
That we may consummate our love in battle. [20]

There are two categories of satisfaction here, physical satisfaction which means the consumer's hunger has been quenched through the consumption of a mountain-like *Amala* and the psychological satisfaction that all nutritional values of the meal have been deposited into the belly or life of its consumer. This also suggests hope of strength and other food nutrients for the future. Thus, it is obvious that the preparation and consumption of *Amala* will give nourishment to the body for sustaining growth, repair and vital processes.

In the same vein, in John Onyeme's "Akpu, African Food", the poet makes use of imageries to drive home the nourishment or nutritional value of *Akpu*. In the opening of the second stanza, the poet employs metonymy to create an imagery of nourishment, "the lord of energy", this metonymic description has vividly showcased the nutritional significance of the meal and it emphasises the richness of the meal in carbohydrate which is the chief source of energy. This phrase, "the lord of energy" only depicts the nourishing qualities of the meal, it also indicates a sense of pride in the meal's ability to sustain and invigorate life.

Furthermore, *Akpu* is described as the provider of nutrients in the body in the excerpt below:

And you land with force in the floor of the stomach
As you stand donating power
To every part of the body [20]

These lines suggest the substantiality, ability and capability of *Akpu* to satisfy anger. Prominently, the lines suggest the nutritional abilities of *Akpu* to provide the basic nutrients of food to the consumer. The most striking phrase is "as you stand donating power". Here, *Akpu* has been personified onomatopoeically and it is seen with sensory organ to have the capacity of donating needed nutrients for growth and donating other vital tissues for the repair of the worn out tissues. Practically, these lines emphasise the aesthetics of nourishment in *Akpu*. It is very obvious that these lines have presented the integral role of the meal in shaping various aspects of human life, laying particular reference to its nourishment and nutritional values in term of production of energy and maintenance of tissues.

In Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)", the poem is very rich and versatile in sensory imageries, describing *Ikokore* as "a blanket of sweetened flesh" (line 4), "peppery torrents" (line 9) "invocation of seasons to / grace the deity tongue" (lines 13-14), these descriptions evoke the dish's texture, taste and nourishment. It is suffice that these descriptions have artistically highlighted the sensory pleasures and satisfaction that greeted the consumption of *Ikokore*. Similarly, they have portrayed the nutritional essentiality of the meal. Another area of portrayal of nourishment in "Ikokore (Water

Yam Porridge)" is in the phrase "the pot shall melt the crowd in crisis of taste" (line 12). The line vividly captures the nourishment and satisfaction that are perceived by members of the community through the production and consumption of *Ikokore*. The revealing poetic device is hyperbole which overstates the numbers of the people who used to consume the meal as crowd, "pot melting the crowd" this has a communal implication that the meal has the power to unite people and to foster a sense of belonging in the community.

6. Aesthetics of Nostalgia

It is expedient in this study that food can be used to symbolise love and comfort that a person has enjoyed at a particular time in the past whose memories of its enjoyment and consumption still remain evergreen. Food can also evoke a flood of memories. This is an illustration that there is an aestheticism of nostalgia in the literary representation of the selected poems in this study. Dovetailing from the above analysis, it is obvious that food has been portrayed as a substance that has a potential to trigger off nostalgia. Nostalgia is a sentimental longing or craving or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations. It can be triggered off by various stimuli like music, smell, photo, food, etc.

In Olutunbi's "Amala Dudu", there is an imagery of wistful longing for the consumption of *Amala* depicted in the opening in the first stanza of the poem:

How I crave you
And adore your profound beauty
I am drawn through space and time
On the wings of haste
To your existence daily [20]

The persona's expression of craving sets a tone of sentimental longing and desire, this connects with Kessler's argument that food serves as a stimulus of nostalgia, reminding individuals of past experiences. The persona further expresses cravingly that "I am drawn through space and time", this provides an imagery of nostalgia and suggests that the persona has traveled far away sometimes ago. Having been away through space and time, therefore, there is a distance between him and his favourite meal, *Amala Dudu*. "How I crave you" in line 1 is rhetorically indicating a profound emotional longing for the dish. Under close perusal, it shows there is a personal and cultural connect that is very significant between the persona and the meal. This nostalgic connection provides an evidence of [8] argument that food serves as a memory sensor that can easily transport back an individual to the significant and remarkable past moments in their lives.

Another phrase that creates an aestheticism of nostalgia is "I stood my ground silently" (line 13). The persona is euphemistic by the use of the word 'screaming' instead of rejoicing. Having cut away from the presence of *Amala* for considerable period, the persona now feels happy at the sight

of mountainous *Amala*. This line provides a kind of psychological solace to the persona as it helps him to identify his yearning in order to define himself and connect to his root. Artistically, it allows the persona to make sense of his past and the significance of the meal he has been longing for.

In Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)", there is an apt imagery of nostalgia from the opening of the first stanza:

In the sedate corners of the swamp
We shall have entrails of ruptured
Shells, marking the apartheid of buttered
Graves, a blanket of sweetened flesh [20]

The lines above provide an aura of nostalgia as the persona delves into the rich cultural and sensory experience surrounding the traditional dish of *Ikokore* made from water yam. The poem opens with a vivid imagery of the swamp where the dish is prepared; this artistically suggests a strong connection to nature and the earth. The phrase "In the sedate corners of the swamp" (line 1) sets a nostalgic craving for the setting where readers are invited into a world where food and nostalgia intersect. To a large extent, this excerpt suggests that *Ikokore* is not just a substance for sustenance but a ritualistic experience which the persona, perhaps might have been missing. The persona therefore grapples with the existential question pondering the nature of life and essence of taste. The poem concludes with a sense of justice and satisfaction as *Ikokore* is served, symbolising the culmination of the cooking process and the communal joy it brings. Therefore, the meal or food has been portrayed as a source of identity and the profound connection forged through shared culinary experiences. These are the psychological hallmarks or functions of nostalgia as posited by Parasecoli [18] that highlights the function of nostalgia to include provision of solace during wistful longing and fostering a sense of belonging in one's community.

Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)" employs symbolism of archaic stereotypes to convey the aesthetics of nostalgia notably in the poem. The archeological materials are "tusk of aged salt" (line 18) and "exiled limbs / of chicken and snail" (lines 20-21). They symbolise the importance of sourcing local ingredients, longing for one's roof and honouring traditional practices. In sum, Oludipe has presented *Ikokore* (food) as a vital component of human experiences, shaping identities and fostering connections within society.

7. Conclusion

The import of food in African poetry and its literary aestheticism have been explored through the instrumentality of vivid imageries and symbols as poetic devices in the three contemporary Nigerian poems. The study has significantly iterated the eruptions of artistic aesthetics of admiration, nourishment and nostalgia, and how they shape emotional attachments, identity and communal culinary experiences in Nigeria and by extension, Africa. The analysis of the selected poems: Olutunbi's "Amala Dudu", Onyeme's "Akpu,

African Food" and Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)" has demonstrated that the representation and consumption of food are sacrosanct in Africa. Oluwaseun Olutunbi has celebrated *Amala Dudu* through vivid metaphor and imagery, emphasising the alluring taste, nourishment and his profound admiration. Also, John Onyeme's "Akpu, African Food" has employed imagery to convey the meal's nutritional values and communal significance. Oyin Oludipe's "Ikokore (Water Yam Porridge)" artistically makes use of sensory-rich description to evoke special admiration, cultural and communal experiences surrounding the meal.

The effectiveness of the depiction of literary aesthetics through food imageries and symbols has laid credence to the fact that food in Africa is a potential tool for social status and power dynamics. Food representation has also shown that the import of food in African poetry is a rich and multifaceted concept that reveals deep insights into the individual, social and communal contexts of African continent.

Author Contributions

Taiwo Austin Stanley Osanyemi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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