

Elegy as Self-Eulogy: A Deconstructive Analysis of Nana Asma’u’s “Elegy for Bello”

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Abstract

This paper offers a deconstructive reading of Nana Asma’u’s “Elegy for Bello” as the reflection of her own personal life. The virtues she extols for the deceased on the surface meaning of the text turn to be interpreted as self-admiration of her own personal characters and qualities. Derrida’s Deconstructive theory, then, provides other perspectives upon which to interpret the poem. An Elegy in this sense then turns to be read as a Semi-Autobiography; the persona does celebrate her personal values and establish her identity to the reader. People interpret themselves simply through mirroring themselves by eulogizing other people. Whatever one says about others returns to claim their position in them.

Keywords: Elegy, Eulogy, Dirge

INTRODUCTION

Deconstructive reading of Nana Asma’u’s “Elegy for Bello” comes with a slight shift from the ordinary meaning that readers normally find in Elegy, which is, mostly, to see how deeply the persona laments the deceased and how beautifully she celebrates the good virtues he lived by. This paper, on the contrary, attempts to look at the poem into a different perspective, which gives the work a semi-autobiographical meaning.

THE POET AND HER CONTEXT

Nana Asma’u Usman Danfodiyo (1793 - 1865) was a famous and remarkable female scholar in the pre-colonial Sokoto Cliphate, Northern Nigeria, and one of the giant female intellectuals of the nineteenth century. She was the daughter of the heroic Islamic revivalist and founder of the Sokoto Caliphate, Shaykh Usman Danfodio; a younger sister of a yet prolific and successor of the Shaykh, Sultan Muhammad Bello.

She was taught by her father, mother, her uncle, Shaykh Abdullahi Danfodiyo, her brother, Muhammad Bello, her husband Gidado, and a host of other recognized Islamic scholars. Her intellectual dexterity preceded the inception of Western education in Nigeria, and she had written widely across different genres in both religion and literature. Mika'il (1999) reported in Tsiga (2016) that "so far about ninety of her published works have been discovered by researchers in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa (Ajami), and Tomashek, the language spoken by the prominent scholars within her locality in her time. Sixty-two of these works are featured in a special book of The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u (Mark and Boyd, 1999)" (Tsiga, 2016: 22). Her intellectual prowess cannot be over emphasized; a woman that lived before the invention of the modern printing press to have published a vast number of texts that survived for more than two hundred years. Her writing includes: Madhu poetry, Odes, Elegy, of different length; for example, seventy-stanza ode. Among her Elegies are "Elegy for Gidado", "Elegy for Bello", "Elegy for Abd Allah", "Elegy for Zahrah", "Elegy for Hauwa", to mention but a few.

The Poem: "Elegy for Bello"

1 I rely on God the Enthroned, the Pure,
the Omnipotent,

To help me to accept what He has inflicted on
me.

May He help in my loneliness. Only God
Can ease this loneliness, for He is All-
Powerful.

God the Almighty can work all
things.

2 I rely on the most Excellent of mortals,
I invoke peace upon him, the exemplary one
The best of the best without limit.

Also, on his Relatives and Companions may
there fall

The peace of him whose
guidance illuminates our path.

3 Calling on him, I weep and compose
this poem

Shedding tears for the passing of the Caliph
I seek to soothe my heart

In this world of sadness and confusion

I relive the loss of my Shaykh.

4 I am alone, missing the eternal love,
the companionship

Of my brother, we were confidantes,

He was my mentor;

I shall never have that again.

I cannot tell all, but will
explain some points.

5 Restless and agitated I turn again to
God the Pure on whom I rely
I weep over my prayer beads
And when I try to sleep, I toss and turn
In grief as I remember Bello.

May God reunite us with
him.

6 Reunite me with him in the realms of
Heaven,
Oh God most Holy, Gracious, you can do
this.
My sins terrify me
But I still hope for your mercy.

For your Generosity is
limitless.

7 I am like a small chicken
Whose mother died, leaving him living
forlornly.
Or like someone abandoned in the
wilderness,
Howling until his ears are closed forever.

God alone can wipe away my
grief.

8 I am like an abandoned infant,
Left piteous and vulnerable,
Like a mother and father, he cared for me,
That is how I remember him.

Only the grace of God can help me.

9 He helped me in every respect as far as
my religion and my worldly affairs,
Everything, God knows, and so do the people.
He was my teacher.
He helped all people with their
affairs:

He had concern for their
welfare and he did things according to
Religion.

10 He was upright, exceedingly generous,
patient:
He spread learning and explained matters.
He was wise. He can turn back prodigals
And used his wits to remedy any situation.

Oh God help us, for You are
merciful.

11 In his day he was unique in his status
Among scholars and non-scholars alike.
He assuaged people's grief and fears,
He was a refuge, a haven

In our time. Listen to what I
say.

12 He had a fine character, he was
merciful to the poor, he honoured
And befriend people.
He was gracious to strangers and generous to
them,
Looked after their interest, fed them

It was his nature to be very generous.
13 He was never ill-tempered; he was pleasant to everyone;
Only if the law was broken did he become angry.
In that case he was implacable and could not be appeased.
When he regained equanimity, he was calm.

These were his characteristics from his boyhood.

14 Oh God bestow on him your blessings,
Your mercy and perfume him
In his grave with Your favors;
Light up his tomb; give him honor

For the honor of he who brings good tidings, I make my plea.

15 On the Day of Resurrection may he be saved
By the grace of the Prophet
And drink from the pool,
And be taken to Paradise the abode of the Prophet.

By the grace of Ahmad.

16 May he see the face of the Prophet the Chosen One,
And may he be with those who see God's Majesty.

May he be united with his father and mother and all Muslims

Who have followed Muhammad's way

In the name of Prophet our leader.

17 Let us pray that God will help us now that Bello is gone

And give victory to his successor.

May he have a long life

And defend religion, as Bello did

In the name of Prophet, I make this plea.

18 My poem is completed. May God accept it.

I give thanks

And invoke blessings on the Prophet,

His Companions and his Saints.

I ask for enlightenment through the Prophet.

19 Know that BISHRUNA is the year of the *Hijrah* of the Prophet

To al-Madinah, the date is fixed.

Count and see, take care. Reflect

You know where he went,

And remember "God is our helper." Here the poem is complete.

(Mark and Boyd, 1999: 50 - 52)

BRIEF ON THE PRIMARY TEXT

“Elegy for Bello” is originally written in two versions, one in Fulfulde and the other in Arabic; it is not known which was composed first, but both by Asma’u” (Mark and Boyd, 1999: 50). The poem is written to mourn the death of her brother. The deceased lived with the poet and his life, which the poet enjoys most; as in the fourth stanza, was an admirable one. “I am alone, missing the eternal love, the companionship/Of my brother, we were confidante/He was my mentor.” The poet bemoans the demise of her beloved brother whom she has no hope of return to reunite, but in Heaven; he had gone where father and mother had (since) gone: “May God reunite us with him/Reunite me with him in the realms of Heaven” (L 25 - 6). She is so vacant and lonely “like an abandoned infant/Left piteous and vulnerable/Like a mother and father he cared for me” (L 36 - 8).

The persona sympathizes not for herself alone but for the entire *Ummah* (people), for the magnificent virtues they enjoyed from Bello: “generosity”, “patience”, “friendliness” and he was “merciful to the poor”, “gracious to strangers”. So, she is not

only bemoaning to herself but condoling to others as well.

He was my teacher.

He helped all people with their affairs:

He had concern for their welfare and he did things according to Religion.

He was upright, exceedingly generous, patient:

He spread learning and explained matters.

He was wise. He can turn back prodigals

And used his wits to remedy any situation.

Oh God help us, for You are merciful.

In his day he was unique in his status

Among scholars and non-scholars alike.

He assuaged people’s grief and fears,

He was a refuge, a haven

Finally, she prays for him the eternal mercy of the Almighty God, for a fragrant grave, “drink from the pool/And be taken to Paradise the abode of the Prophet” (L 73 - 4). She has presented his good qualities before the Gracious God for Him to consider and reward him with His abundant blessings and quench his thirst in the Day of Resurrection.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since this paper stands to look at Nana Asma'u's "Elegy for Bello" through a different perspective, that is, to interpret the poem as a "Self-Eulogy" instead of the original intention of the poet as "Elegy." Therefore, the theory selected for this study is Deconstruction Theory. Deconstruction as a literary criticism "designates a theory and practice of reading that questions and claims to 'subvert' or 'undermine' the assumption that the system of language provides grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text" (Abrams Harpham, 2009: 69).

It is "grounded in the argument that uncertainty is inherent in the activity of making meaning through signs...The arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified makes the concept of meaning problematic, since meaning itself is not grounded in some absolute contact with reality, but is carried out in language (Majjama'a, 2012: 79), and no writer has authority over (the meaning of) what he/she writes as in language you can say one thing but it means another, or, Derrida's opt quoted there is nothing outside of text... the

absence of a transcendental signified extends infinitely the field and play of meaning. Hence Derrida in Bello-Kano (2012: 31) argues that deconstruction "poised between two interpretations of interpretation: one seeks...the origins of determinate object...the other, does not seek origins but affirms play" (Bello-Kano, 2012: 31).

"ELEGY OF BELLO" AS SELF-EULOGY

The first part of the poem which treats the main issue in the poem narrates the personal experience of the poet. Out of the nineteen stanzas of five lines each, the first eight stanzas are dedicated to the expression of the situation upon which the poet finds herself for the death of the Caliph.

I rely on God the Enthroned, the Pure, the Omnipotent, /To help me to accept what He has inflicted on me. /May He help in my loneliness. Only God/Can ease this loneliness, for He is All-Powerful (L 1 - 4).

After her testimony to the reliance on God, over what has befallen her, she seeks his help to ease her loneliness, for she is so confused: "I seek to soothe my heart/In this world of sadness and confusion/I relive the loss of my Shaykh" (L 13 - 15). Here she is in a reminiscence of her bitter experience over the missing of one so dear to her; one whose

lifestyle she admires and mentors. She tells the reader how much she has enjoyed living with him which is inexhaustibly beyond words.

I am alone missing the eternal love, the companionship

Of my brother, we were confidantes,

He was my mentor;

I shall never have that again.

I cannot tell all, but will explain some points (L 16 - 20).

The reminiscence of this eternal love makes her life so “restless, agitated,” sleepless nights in his remembrance, doing nothing but weeping over her “prayer beads.” Submitting to God in repentance then, she regains her composure and admits her hope for his mercy.

Therefore, her admittance to the deceased eternal love, companionship, and mentorship, grounds our argument that all what she later in the poem recounts about the personality of Bello, arguably reflect her own virtues. Being a Fulani woman and the concept of Stoicism, or humbleness, attributed to them which are as well in line with Islamic moral values, we can say that the poet is implicitly narrating her own values or admitting to continue living by

such good qualities (that she has learnt from him) beyond his life. So, she uses double narrative situation, in recounting her semi-autobiography. She employs the first-person autobiographical point of view to expound her previous experiences; and secondly by resorting to a third person point of view to project her present and future determination.

This poem is, in a way, a reflection of the person’s life in the “metaphoric man” (Jega, Bello-Kano and Saeed, 2003: 195), Bello, in the poem. The poet sneaks into the metaphoric man of exalted character and good virtues in both religious and social aspects of human endeavor. By celebrating the “poetic man”, the poet now celebrates herself and taking herself beyond the ordinary sphere. Instead of presenting Bello to the reader, Asma’u disguises and seeks to reunite with him and by reuniting they become one thing, “May God reunite me with him” (L 25). This philosophically signifies the existence of one other Bello and not the one in tomb, “Light up his tomb” (L 69), the “poetic one” that transcends into the persona. Why does the persona wish to reunite with Bello? This is probably because while he lived, they have shared such good virtues attributed to him as companions, “I am alone, missing the eternal

love, the companionship;” their separation is only a physical one but they are spiritually together: “Thy eternal love shall not fade” to borrow from Shakespeare.

Therefore, since they have eternal unity, we can say that Asma’u is extolling her own virtues in a metaphorical reflection. All what she says about Bello is, in a way, her own eulogy. “Truth” and “values” are relative and thus we interpret ourselves in others. Asma’u is able to identify such qualities in Bello relatively because of their presence in her; that is probably why they “were confidantes” (L 17).

Furthermore, by propagating that “He was my teacher/He helped all people with their affairs/He had concern with their welfare and he did things according to religion...”, in the second part of the poem, while immortalizing Bello, Asma’u now invites all people to come to her as far as helping them with their affairs” is concerned. I am here and “the same;” come and enjoy my “generosity,” I will “teach” you and “explain matters” to you from what I have learnt from him as a mentee; I “could turn back prodigals and use my “wits to remedy any situation...”

More so, instead of celebrating his death she epitomizes him and ascends him to an immortal realm. We only lost the flesh-and-blood Bello, but all what we enjoy from Bello still remains with us, as long as I live, he “shall not fade.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that the poem is divided into three parts; the first and most important part, narrates the persona’s past experiences through a reminiscent first-person point of view and the second, a third person narration explains and extols her virtues through her transcendental unity with the deceased; the third and the concluding part, also in the first-person point of view, sums up by immortalizing him by making a plea for an eternal rest to him. “...I make my plea. /On the Day of Resurrection may he be saved.../And drink from the pool.../And give victory to his successor. /May he have a long life/And defend religion, as Bello did.”

Therefore, Nana Asma’u’s “Elegy for Bello” is, in a way, a reflection of her virtuous life in the “metaphoric Bello” in the poem. Instead for Asma’u to lament the deceased, she rather extols her own virtues and assumes all what is admirable in Bello’s life is infused into her personal self. All the virtues celebrated in the

poem return to manifest in the persona's figure and hence the poem serves as semi-autobiography.

Deployment of practical deconstructive reading of the "Elegy" offers us an eye to see the poem beyond its original object and takes us into the practice of meaning making. This reading avers that human beings cannot see themselves but through their reflection on others. All what one can say about someone is, in some sense, a reflection and talking about themselves.

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