

## A Stylistic Analysis of Gabriel Okara's *The Call of The River Nun*

Samuel Oyeyemi Agbeleoba Ph.D<sup>1\*</sup>, Felicia Bosede Kehinde Fasae Ph.D<sup>2</sup>, Oluwabukola Orebe<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and Literary Studies, Ekiti State University, 362103, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Management Sciences (Office and Information Management) Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti

<sup>3</sup>Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti

DOI: [10.36348/sijll.2023.v06i12.008](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2023.v06i12.008)

| Received: 12.10.2023 | Accepted: 16.11.2023 | Published: 30.12.2023

\*Corresponding author: Samuel Oyeyemi Agbeleoba

Department of English and Literary Studies, Ekiti State University, 362103, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti, Nigeria

### Abstract

Gabriel Okara's poem "The Call of the River Nun" is a profound exploration of the intricate relationship between the speaker and the natural world, particularly the river. This study employs a Functional Stylistic approach to dissect the linguistic and thematic nuances embedded within the poem. Through an examination of contextual variations, registers, and communicative functions, this analysis unveils the dynamic evolution of the speaker's connection with the river, culminating in a contemplation of life's transient nature and a quest for spiritual insight. The poem initiates with a direct acknowledgment of the river's call, establishing a context of auditory perception and suggesting a spiritual connection between the speaker and nature. As the poem progresses, the language evolves, reflecting a deepening emotional attachment to the river and a yearning for intimate communion. The poem transitions to a dynamic context, emphasizing the river's role as a driving force in the speaker's journey through life. In the final stanzas, the poem contemplates the passage of time and the approaching culmination of the speaker's journey. The sea-bird call emerges as a metaphor for transition, signifying the impending conclusion of a cycle. The language becomes symbolic and metaphysical, reflecting the speaker's contemplation of life's transient nature and the pursuit of spiritual insight. This Functional Stylistic analysis illuminates the intricate interplay between language, emotion, and the natural world in Okara's evocative poem. It underscores the transformative power of the river's call and the profound existential questions it raises. Ultimately, this study offers a deeper understanding of the poem's thematic concerns and the role of language in conveying those concerns, providing insights into Okara's skillful use of stylistic elements to evoke a spiritual connection with nature.

**Keywords:** Gabriel Okara; functional stylistics, contextual variation; register and tone; communicative functions.

**Copyright © 2023 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

### INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Okara, a distinguished figure in Nigerian literature, holds a prominent place in the annals of African poetry. His works, characterized by their evocative language and profound thematic depth, have resonated with readers across generations. Among his notable contributions, "The Call of the River Nun" stands as a seminal piece, capturing the essence of cultural identity, memory, and the evolving dynamics of postcolonial Nigeria.

This study embarks on a comprehensive stylistic analysis of Okara's iconic poem, aiming to dissect the linguistic and literary elements that imbue "The Call of the River Nun" with its distinctive artistic resonance. By employing a stylistic framework, we delve into the intricacies of Okara's language choices, discerning how they serve to shape the thematic contours

and aesthetic impact of the poem. Through a meticulous examination of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic features, this research endeavors to shed light on the nuanced craftsmanship that underlies Okara's poetic oeuvre.

Gabriel Okara emerged as a pivotal figure in the early postcolonial literary landscape of Nigeria. Born in 1921 in the Niger Delta region, Okara bore witness to the profound sociopolitical transformations that swept through Nigeria during the latter half of the 20th century. His experiences, intertwined with the complex tapestry of colonialism, independence, and nation-building, infuse his poetry with a unique blend of introspection and socio-cultural commentary.

"The Call of the River Nun," published in 1953, represents a poignant exploration of Okara's personal and collective history. Set against the backdrop of the

Niger Delta, the poem oscillates between the tranquil beauty of the riverine landscape and the undercurrents of cultural dislocation brought about by modernity. Through vivid imagery, Okara navigates the realms of memory, identity, and the tension between tradition and progress.

Furthermore, this study situates Okara's work within the broader context of Nigerian literature and the postcolonial discourse. It seeks to unravel the ways in which Okara's artistic vision intersects with the larger narrative of decolonization, nationhood, and cultural resilience. By examining the intricate interplay of linguistic devices and thematic concerns in "The Call of the River Nun," we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of Okara's enduring significance in the realm of African poetry and postcolonial studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun" has been a subject of critical examination within the realm of African and postcolonial literature. Scholars have approached Okara's work from various angles, exploring themes, stylistic choices, and the broader cultural and historical contexts. This literature review provides an overview of key studies and analyses related to Okara's poetry, with a specific focus on "The Call of the River Nun."

Several scholars have acknowledged Gabriel Okara as a pivotal figure in Nigerian poetry. Soyinka (1986) and Eze (2008) acknowledge his unique voice and exploration of complex themes which have solidified his place in the canon of Nigerian literature. Ugorji (2012) sees Okara's use of language and stylistic devices has been a focal point of many studies. Researchers have examined the phonological elements, including rhythm and rhyme, as well as the semantic layers, such as metaphor and symbolism, in "The Call of the River Nun".

Earlier, Ogundipe-Leslie, (1994) had acknowledged the thematic concerns of cultural identity, nostalgia, and the interplay between tradition and modernity in Okara's poetry. He explored how these themes resonate within "The Call of the River Nun" and its broader cultural implications. Okara's works are situated within the larger discourse of postcolonial literature. Adesanmi, (2014) examines how his poetry engages with the legacy of colonialism and the quest for cultural autonomy and resilience in the face of external influences.

One thing is peculiar to scholars who have explored Okara's works at one time or the other. They believe that there is an exploration of the enduring legacy of Okara's poetry in contemporary African literature (Ugorji, 2012; Gikandi, 2002).

## Framework

For the purpose of this study, we adopt Functional Stylistics as the theoretical framework for conducting a stylistic analysis of Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun." Functional Stylistics is a linguistic framework that focuses on how language functions in different contexts and for different purposes. It seeks to understand how language choices are influenced by the specific communicative goals of the speaker or writer, as well as the social, cultural, and situational context in which the communication takes place.

This framework emphasizes the communicative function of language and how language choices are influenced by context, purpose, and audience. The tenets of the functional stylistics include contextual analysis, which considers the socio-cultural and historical context in which the poem was written. How do these contextual factors influence Okara's language choices? For example, how does the postcolonial context of Nigeria impact the themes and linguistic features of the poem?

It also gives us opportunity to look at the purpose and intention, audience awareness, register and tone, rhetorical devices, sentence structure and syntax as well as cohesion and coherence as explored by the poet. This framework is particularly useful for examining how the linguistic elements work together to create meaning within the broader context of the poem.

Overall, Functional Stylistics provides a framework for analyzing how language serves a purpose in communication, taking into account the broader context and the intentions of the communicator. It is widely used in various fields, including linguistics, literature studies, rhetoric, and communication studies, to understand how language functions in different textual and spoken contexts.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

*The Call of the River Nun* by Gabriel Okara

I hear your call!

I hear it far away;

I hear it break the circle of these crouching hills.

I want to view your face again and feel your cold embrace; or at your brim to set myself and inhale your breath;

or like the trees,

to watch my mirrored self unfold and span my days with song from the lips of dawn.

I hear your lapping call!

I hear it coming through;

invoking the ghost of a child

listening, where river birds hail your silver-surfaced flow.

My river's calling too!

Its ceaseless flow impels  
my found'ring canoe down

its inevitable course.

And each dying year  
brings near the sea-bird call,  
the final call that  
stills the crested waves  
and breaks in two the curtain  
of silence of my upturned canoe.  
O incomprehensible God!  
Shall my pilot be  
my inborn stars to that  
final call to Thee.  
O my river's complex course?

### Analysis

This poem is made up of six stanzas and analyzed using the lens of the functional stylistics through the contextual variation, register and tone, and communicative functions.

#### Stanza 1:

*I hear your call!  
I hear it far away;  
I hear it break the circle of these crouching hills.*

**Contextual Variation:** The speaker addresses the call of the river, establishing a context of auditory perception. The call is portrayed as distant yet powerful enough to break through the natural barriers of the hills.

**Register and Tone:** The language is direct and declarative, reflecting a sense of urgency and attentiveness to the call. The tone is one of acknowledgment and responsiveness to the river's call.

**Communicative Functions:** The speaker's acknowledgment of the call serves the function of acknowledging a connection or summons from the river. It conveys a sense of receptivity to the natural environment.

#### Stanza 2:

*I want to view your face again and feel your cold  
embrace; or at your brim to set myself and inhale your  
breath;  
or like the trees,  
to watch my mirrored self unfold and span my days with  
song from the lips of dawn.*

**Contextual Variation:** The speaker expresses a desire for visual, tactile, and sensory experiences with the river. The river is personified, suggesting a deep emotional connection.

**Register and Tone:** The language becomes more elaborate and sensory, reflecting the speaker's longing for a profound connection with the river. The tone is one of yearning and intimacy.

**Communicative Functions:** The speaker's expressions of desire serve the function of conveying a

strong emotional attachment to the river. It expresses a yearning for a deeper engagement with nature.

#### Stanza 3:

*I hear your lapping call!  
I hear it coming through;  
invoking the ghost of a child  
listening, where river birds hail your silver-surfaced  
flow.*

**Contextual Variation:** The speaker continues to focus on the auditory experience of the river's call. The river is personified further, suggesting a dynamic and living presence.

**Register and Tone:** The language remains attentive and receptive to the call, highlighting the speaker's heightened sensitivity to the river's presence. The tone is one of reverence and awe.

**Communicative Functions:** The speaker's descriptions of hearing the call serve the function of evoking a sense of nostalgia and wonder. It portrays a spiritual or transcendent connection with the river.

#### Stanza 4:

*My river's calling too!  
Its ceaseless flow impels  
my found'ring canoe down  
its inevitable course.*

**Contextual Variation:** The speaker now shifts to a more dynamic and action-oriented context, emphasizing the river's continuous movement and its impact on the speaker's journey.

**Register and Tone:** The language becomes more dynamic, reflecting the speaker's active engagement with the river's flow. The tone is one of acceptance and acknowledgment of the river's influence.

**Communicative Functions:** The speaker's acknowledgment of the river's call serves the function of recognizing the inevitability of the river's course and its influence on the speaker's journey.

#### Stanza 5:

*And each dying year  
brings near the sea-bird call,  
the final call that  
stills the crested waves  
and breaks in two the curtain  
of silence of my upturned canoe.*

**Contextual Variation:** The speaker introduces a metaphor of the sea-bird call as a symbol of transition and culmination, suggesting the approaching end of a cycle.

Register and Tone: The language becomes more symbolic and metaphorical, signifying a deeper reflection on the passage of time and the eventual conclusion of a journey. The tone is one of contemplation and anticipation.

Communicative Functions: The speaker's reflection on the passing of time and the sea-bird call serves the function of acknowledging the transient nature of life's journey and the approaching culmination.

#### Stanza 6:

*O incomprehensible God!  
Shall my pilot be  
my inborn stars to that  
final call to Thee.  
O my river's complex course?*

Contextual Variation: The speaker addresses the divine in a contemplative and introspective context, pondering the guidance needed for the ultimate transition.

Register and Tone: The language becomes more introspective and philosophical, reflecting the speaker's contemplation of existential questions. The tone is one of spiritual inquiry and introspection.

Communicative Functions: The speaker's address to the divine and reflection on guidance serve the function of grappling with profound existential questions and seeking spiritual insight.

## DISCUSSION

Gabriel Okara's poem, "The Call of the River Nun," employs a Functional Stylistic approach to evoke a profound connection between the speaker and the natural world. Through varying contexts, registers, and communicative functions, the poem navigates themes of introspection, existential questioning, and a spiritual yearning for transcendence.

In the first stanza, the speaker acknowledges the river's call with a sense of reverence. The language is direct, reflecting a responsive attitude towards nature. The call of the river is presented as a powerful force capable of transcending geographical barriers. This establishes a context of auditory perception and suggests a spiritual connection between the speaker and the river.

As the poem progresses, the speaker's desires evolve, reflecting a deeper yearning for intimacy with the river. The language becomes more sensory and emotive, emphasizing the speaker's longing to experience the river on a profound level. This shift in register and tone highlights the speaker's growing emotional attachment to the natural world, portraying the river as a source of solace and self-discovery.

The poem also introduces a dynamic context of action, as the speaker acknowledges the river's ceaseless flow. This emphasizes the river's role as a driving force, influencing the speaker's journey through life. The language becomes more dynamic and reflects the speaker's acceptance of the river's inevitable course.

In the final stanzas, the poem contemplates the passage of time and the approaching culmination of the speaker's journey. The sea-bird call is introduced as a metaphor for transition, signifying the impending conclusion of a cycle. The language becomes more symbolic and metaphysical, reflecting the speaker's contemplation of life's transient nature and the quest for spiritual insight.

## CONCLUSION

In "The Call of the River Nun," Gabriel Okara masterfully employs a Functional Stylistic approach to convey the speaker's evolving relationship with the river and the broader existential questions raised by the natural world. Through varying contexts, registers, and communicative functions, the poem navigates themes of introspection, longing, and a spiritual yearning for transcendence.

The use of language reflects the speaker's deep connection with the river, portraying it as a source of solace and self-discovery. The poem's dynamic shifts in context and tone emphasize the ever-changing nature of life's journey and the inevitability of transition. Ultimately, the Functional Stylistic analysis illuminates the intricate interplay between language, emotion, and the natural world in Okara's evocative poem.

## REFERENCES

- Adesanmi, P. (2014). *You're not a country, Africa!* Penguin Canada.
- Appiah-Adjei, D. (2016) *Review of the call of river nun by Gabriel Okara*. ROSS Press.
- Bella, R. N. (1991). *Beyond belief*. London: California Press
- Eggs, S. (2004). *An Introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. Continuum.
- Eggs, S., & Slade, D. (1997). *Analysing casual conversation*. Cassell.
- Fawcett, R. P. (2000). *Language and world: A Defence of linguistic idealism*. Routledge.
- Eze, C. (2008). *Gabriel Okara: The poet and his politics*. Spectrum Books.
- Falconer, R. (2006). African realism and international relations: Gabriel Okara's poetry. *African Identities*, 4(2), 223-237.
- Gikandi, S. (2002). *Maps of englishness: Writing identity in the culture of colonialism*. Columbia University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: the social interpretation of language and meaning*. Edward Arnold.

- Ngara, E. (1990) *Ideology & thought In African poetry, implication for communication*. London: James Currey.
- Obiechina, E. (1975). *Culture, tradition, and society in the West African novel*. Cambridge University Press.
- Okara, G. (1953). *The call of the river nun*. Black Orpheus.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (1994). *Re-creating ourselves: African women & critical transformations*. Africa World Press.
- Ogunleye, F. (1991). Towards african literary independence: A dialogue with Gabriel Okara. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 26(1), 9-20.
- Soyinka, W. (1986). *Myth, literature and the African world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ugorji, E. (2012). *Gabriel Okara: The poet, the man*. Annang Scholar.