

Disguising corruption as poverty: A formalist reading of Philip Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty" (2012)

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Abstract

What does 'ambassadors of poverty' mean in Philip Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty"? Drawing on formalism as a critical perspective which has rarely been given attention in the literature, this paper undertakes a reading of Umeh's poem as a critical literary work that satirizes the systemic corrupt acts and complicit roles of political leaders within the Nigerian geopolitical setting. The paper argues that the symbolic ambassadors of poverty are corrupt politicians who amass wealth meant for the development of the nation-state, Nigeria. The paper specifically explores the poetic form, stylistic elements, and linguistic devices that unravel the corruption thematic. This critical perspective underscores the diversification of analytical perspectives in deconstructing poetic meaning, but also presents a text-immanent pedagogical relevance to teaching and learning of African poetry.

Keywords: ambassadors, corruption, formalism, poverty, politicians

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1. Introduction

This paper examines Philip Umeh’s “Ambassadors of Poverty” as a political satire from the perspective of Formalism, which has received rare critical attention in the scholarship. Philip Umeh’s “Ambassadors of Poverty” highlights how poverty pervades Nigerian society and, by extension, Africa, resulting from unfaithful and corrupt political leaders. Therefore, it condemns these leaders and the elites who enrich themselves while neglecting the welfare of their citizens. These leaders transfer wealth abroad, engage in corruption, and misuse public resources, thereby deepening the woes of the masses. The poet portrays them as hypocritical patriots who profess to serve the people, but end up undermining national development. He ridicules these entities and offers several suggestions for change and betterment. Umeh can pass his intended message to the wider society through the use of various techniques enclosed in the poem.

“Ambassadors of Poverty” has attracted significant literary appreciations since its publication in 2012. Studies have explored the themes of corruption, greed, and a failed state within the context of Nigeria from varied theoretical-analytical perspectives. For instance, Robert, Anura, and Ijarw (2018) examine corruption in the text through the use of the neo-Marxist political theory to reveal that Philip Umeh’s poem is a revolutionary poetic satire that calls for change from bad leadership/failed public representation to the supposed one. It awakens the impoverished Nigerian (African) masses to the need to fight against oppressive and despotic leadership rather than playing on with such leaders anyhow. He sympathizes with the masses on the man-tailored undue predicaments, while informing the elites of their failure as well as the dire need to turn a new leaf, as all their current deeds are sins against the state and its people. He also upholds “Nigerianity”/Africanity–originality, advocating a retrace to the good abandoned indigenous ways/systems of life that obtained in classical times in Nigeria and Africa at large.

Mpotsiah (2018) uses the Marxist framework to examine corruption in the poem to reveal that Umeh’s poem has become a cyclic epoch to lift the veil of this societal ill, which hides the beauty of Africa. The analysis reveals corruption, which has bedeviled the hearts of the leaders in Africa, and how serious it is, if certain measures are not taken to avert this social problem among our political leaders. Mwinwelle, Adukpo, and Kantorgorje (2021) examine the communicative implications underpinning the use of parallelism and semantic deviation in the poem by situating the analysis within the linguistic and stylistic framework of Leech and Short. The analysis of the two linguistic features demonstrates that there exists a nexus between literary works and issues that affect the daily lives of people in society. The poet makes effective use of parallelism to foreground the unfair treatment African leaders unleash on their people, resulting in the pathetic socio-economic conditions of the African people. Forms of semantic deviation are also used to achieve varied stylistic effects: to tease African leaders who pretend to be serving the interests of the people, yet are very selfish, corrupt, and negligent; to unearth the double standards of African leaders, which construe them as untruthful and disloyal; to project the theme of economic hardship; to magnify the effect of the corrupt practices of African leaders on their people. The study concludes that literary works such as poems are potent instruments that are subtly used to expose and condemn the ills of society.

From the foregoing review, there is a rare critical attention given to a formalist reading of the poem. The present paper, therefore, fills the gap by drawing on Formalistic criticism to analyze the formal structures and their stylistic significance in Umeh’s poem. By closely reading Umeh’s poem, the objective of the paper is to examine the poetic form as well as the use of devices to interrogate the thematic concerns of corruption. Through this stylistic device, the meaning and effects of the poem would be better appreciated. Pedagogically, a formalist approach presents a replicable model for teaching poetry analysis through close reading of textual features. This method emphasizes how form, such as punctuation absence and irregular line lengths, affects meaning. The paper also offers a framework for classroom activities focused on grammatical structures, like noun phrases and relative

clauses, as tools for exploring themes in African poetry.

2. Theoretical Framework: Formalism

The paper applies formalism as the theoretical framework for the analysis of Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty." Not only this, but it also applies formalism as a relevant pedagogical approach for the reading and interpretation of African poetry. Formalism, the theory of "art for art's sake" (Faniran & Adetuyi, 2017, p. 2), is an approach to literary criticism that emphasizes a text's structural organization and stylistic components. Thus, this approach highlights the importance of form and structure in understanding the message of a piece of art. Formalists believe that a text is an independent work of art that has been carefully created to provide a distinctive artistic experience (Bula, 2016; Samee & Arslan, 2024); hence, treats it as a distinct object and foreground it as an autonomous whole whose meaning is to be derived from its internal structure (Abrams & Harpham, 2014). Formalism as a school of criticism may also be defined as a way of understanding art or literature primarily through its techniques rather than as a mere vehicle for personal expression or moral and political doctrines (Drabble, 2000). Central to this theory is the conviction that the meaning and value of literary work reside within its formal elements hidden inside it (Oladeji & Shehu, 2025), which is only unearthed through a systematic technique of close textual analysis (Samee & Arslan, 2024).

In view of the above, formalism considers examination of every component, from the language used to the text's structure and organization, that influences meaning generated from the text (Samee & Arslan, 2024; Faniran & Adetuyi, 2017; Klarer, 2004). An independent-mindedness is also strongly encouraged when engaging in formalistic analysis. Sulistyorini (2007) claims that Roland Barthes' article *The Death of the Author* supports this view of Formalists. According to them, the work begins with the death of the author. This is the reason the author's intention, the historical setting, biographical information, the work's cultural context, and sociological information, which are the trappings of sociological criticism, are not considered (Bula, 2015).

Görmez and Beyoğlu (2022) push the argument further by maintaining that for Formalists, the author's attitude toward reality is not necessary. Instead, his attitude towards language is essential, and their focus on the formal qualities of literature is based on the belief that such qualities are the ones providing the literature. For them, the purpose of literary work is not to reflect reality but to make it perceived differently. In essence, formalist criticism is intrinsic criticism, rather than extrinsic. It is therefore not out of place to say that formalism is the opinion that formal structure should be projected or represented rather than the contextual structure (Faniran & Adetuyi, 2017). Neglecting the formal elements of a text to define its literariness risks undermining the artistic integrity of literature (Dunmade, 2019). Based on these, it could be maintained that a literary text is the sole object of critical engagement. It is worthy to note that the formal features embedded in a literary text, however, are usually not examined in isolation, because formalist critics believe that what gives a literary text its special status as art is how all its elements work together to create the reader's total experience and to bring out the aesthetic qualities of it.

Formalism emerged in Russia and Poland in the 1910s as a literary movement and a school of literary theory from the discussions between OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in Saint Petersburg and the Linguistic Department of Moscow. There are two major strands of Formalism: Russian Formalism and New Criticism (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022). The Russian Formalism, a group of young scholars, including Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, sought to establish a scientific method of literary study by isolating the qualities that render a text literary. This led to the concept of "literariness" (as cited in Oladeji & Shehu, 2025, p. 155), which is made clearer through the use of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) introduced by Shklovsky (1917), described in "*Iskusstvo kak priem*" (original title)

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects. 'Unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Shklovsky, 1917). Defamiliarization means people experiencing the ordinary through artistic language. Thus, the artist changes the

normal form of perception and reveals the world as a work through an unusual language. This literary device emphasizes the distinction between literary language and everyday discourse (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022). For Russian Formalists, form is not merely a container for content; it is the very essence of the literary work. The narrative devices, poetic structure, and linguistic patterns are not secondary to meaning but are themselves the primary conveyors of significance (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). Although the Russian Formalists argued that the form is more valuable than the content, Aristotle, in *Poetics*, attributes the poem's success not to the subject but to the way the matter is handled.

If a poet arranges the tirades denoting the characters, one after the other, in a linguistic expression and thoughts appropriate to them, he will not have fulfilled the duty we set before the tragedy. A tragedy that is weak in terms of all these elements but has a story (mythos) and is based on the [appropriate and natural] connection of events is a far superior tragedy to the other (Aristotle, 2013). This excerpt lays emphasis on the elements of language use and the inner harmony of the works. In line with Culler's (2007) viewpoint that to consider a text as literature is to ask about the contribution of its parts to the effect of the whole, this paper locates the meaning and significance of "Ambassadors of Poverty" within the boundaries of the text itself. The study, therefore, dwells on Formalism, intending to reveal how the formal devices used by the poet map out violence, thereby underscoring the artist's revelatory self-sufficiency of the work. Particularly to analyze the formal structures and stylistic features of the selected poems. By employing close reading and attending to devices, the study investigates how the internal elements of the poems shape their thematic concerns and aesthetic effects. The framework underscores the idea that meaning is not imported into a literary text from external sources but emerges through the interplay of its formal components.

New Criticism gained prominence in the United States and Britain through figures such as I. A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and W. K. Wimsatt. They extended the formalist impulse by focusing on the text's capacity for organic unity—the harmonious interrelation of its parts. Central to New Criticism are the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy introduced by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1949. The intentional fallacy warns against equating a work's meaning with the author's intent, while the affective fallacy cautions against judging a work based on the (Oladeji & Shehu, 2025). For them, literature should be studied for the way literary language differs from ordinary practical language and for the unique truths conveyed only through such literary language (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). Notwithstanding arising in different intellectual and cultural contexts, Russian Formalism and New Criticism have some resemblance regarding how literary texts should be analyzed. It is observed that both groups of critics are not in favor of the external influence on literary readings. They, however, favor intrinsic analysis. Again, both share an interest in the type of language that makes it different from the ordinary use of language. Rivkin and Ryan (2017) observe that the language used in literary works allows poetry to be both concrete and specific as well as universal and general. It is again seen that both advocate the autonomous nature of a text and consider it as a self-contained object.

Formalism has several criticisms levelled against it. One, formalists have often been criticized for being incomprehensible. Boris Eikhenbaum mentions that they are frequently accused as a result of their lack of clarity or the inadequacy of their principles, for indifference to general questions of aesthetics, sociology, psychology, and so on (Eikhenbaum, 1926). Two, while the Formalists maintain that the focus of literature is on the literary, their desire to make it independent from other sciences is considered to isolate literature. This is because Formalists want to make literature a single disciplinary approach. With is they are criticized for being indifferent to local problems, which is one of the reasons people always need literature (Dziemidok, 1993; Babak, 2019). This entrenched position taken by Formalists breaks away from the age-old essence of literature: a tool to represent society.

Three, a problem that stands out in Formalism is the relationship between form and content, which has always been an essential dilemma in literature and philosophy. It dates back to Hegel's philosophy. Hegel defines philosophy as two aspects of a dialectical whole, not separate form and content. While content expresses existence, form is described as self-reflection. It is argued that the distinction between form and content is not absolute (Chan,

2019).

Despite the various criticisms, the approach has been adopted by various critics in their literary works. Abdullah, Mahmood, and Ali (2022) studied *Formalism as a Linguistics Theory: A Comparative Stylistic Analysis of Poetic Literature*. They worked on "When I have fears" by John Keats and "Sonnet 18" by William Shakespeare, which were written in different centuries. This study is carried out to find out how the form of the sixteenth-century sonnet is consistent with the eighteenth-century text. The comparative stylistic analysis reveals that though both poems stand centuries apart in terms of their production, it becomes vivid that Keats prefers the linguistic choice of Shakespeare. It is further revealed that both poems are similar in the use of metaphors, similes, and imagery, which have been used by the poets to achieve the same literary objectives. Faniran and Adetuyi (2017) analyzed Wole Soyinka's "Abiku", using the formalist approach. It is revealed through the analysis that the poet has made use of a rank shift. This syntactic modification breaks the existing linguistic rules to create new ones for specific stylistic effects. It is further revealed that simple sentence analysis of SPCA and the advantage of the elasticity of the noun phrase or nominal group to create a uniqueness of form in literature, which makes it difficult for anyone who cannot read beyond the lines to lose the beauty of his poems. Again, all the images used in the poem create a picture of horror. Structurally, it is shown that the complexity of the poem is evident in Soyinka's language, with the poem arranged into quatrains. Soyinka's use of language, the authors note, is highly technical. Not only this but also, sometimes, Soyinka makes his verses rather obscure and incomprehensible. There is also an abrupt opening of the poem with structural inversion, which is a signal of his style of language complexity. The poet also adopts the use of rhetorical questions to bring out the theme and meaning of the poem. The questioning eventually introduces the narrative lyric and dictates the sad tone of the poem. They again reveal that imagery and a sad tone are used by the poet. In conclusion, Soyinka showcases a proven mark of eclectic creativity with elements similar to Aristotle's traditions and change.

Oladeji and Shehu (2025) engage in a formalist reading of Rasaan Malik Gbolahan's "The Other Names of Grief" (2020) to explore how poetic devices—imagery, repetition, tone, diction, rhythm, mood, and structure—coalesce to portray the theme of violence and contribute to the aesthetic beauty of the collection. The study demonstrates that the internal architecture of the poems is not only central to their aesthetic appeal but also to their emotional resonance. Ultimately, the paper reaffirms the value of literature as a self-sufficient artistic creation and accentuates the critical potency of close reading in uncovering the layered meanings embedded within poetic language. The paper again demonstrates that "The Other Names of Grief" deserves to be read primarily through the lens of its artistic construction rather than external affiliations to prevent the external factors from overshadowing the aesthetic and structural features that give literature its distinctive identity. Ultimately, this study advocates a return to the intrinsic features of literature as a basis for interpretation. Literature, first and foremost, is art—and its critical evaluation must begin with an appreciation of the form, language, and technique that constitute its aesthetic core.

Asika, Ifechelobi, and Akabuike (2015) conducted a Formalist Reading of Helon Habila's "Waiting for an Angel" to examine the work's literariness and to highlight the narrative techniques, diction, point of view, and other elements that make the novel an interesting literary work. The paper concludes that the plot and the narrative techniques were well handled to give a sense of unity, suspense, and stylistic effect in the work. It is again shown that the use of multiple method points of view is vital, as it helps the writer to narrate the story based on the experiences of the characters from different parts of the country in order to make the story believable and convincing. About diction, it is evident that the writer uses coinage to introduce new words: kakistocracy, militocracy, and Kleptocracy to give insight into the brutal and devilish nature of the military leaders. Again, so many ideas were expressed by the writer with symbolism, allusions, and words, which require a deep knowledge of what they connote and represent a deep knowledge of several levels of meaning inherent in the literary text. The paper concludes that these techniques are richly harnessed and explored by the writer and that they are combined effectively to contribute to the success of the literary piece, and how these elements serve as keys to unlocking hidden textual meanings in the novel from a formalist point of view.

3. Data and Method

The primary data for this paper is Philip Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty." This poem presents a nuanced thematic pattern of corruption as a major subject matter, which has rarely been discussed in the literature. Again, there is a noticeable absence of a formalistic critical appreciation of this thematic preoccupation, which Umeh constructs through various linguistic and stylistic elements. These prime reasons informed the choice and selection criteria of the poem for the analysis. The paper is qualitative, employing a close reading approach to Umeh's poem by paying attention to the textual form as the underpinning analytical criterion of formalism (Guerin et al., 2005). This involves exploring the use of stylistic and linguistic elements that construct the nuanced corruption theme.

4. Analysis and Discussions

The formalist assumption is that the form of the text sufficiently provides its meaning and interpretation (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017; Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022). Based on this notion, the analysis of Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty" would be undergirded by this principle of formalism. As a long narrative, Umeh's poem is constructed using visual imagery to satirize the systemic political corruption in Nigeria, which is disguised metaphorically as "poverty."

4.1 Poetic Form and Structure

Structurally, the poem is a free verse without a fixed rhyme scheme, structured into nine stanzas. The absence of rhyme mirrors the disorderliness caused by the unfaithful leaders. The irregularity in the length of the lines again reflects the instability created in the corrupt country. Lines such as "All of us whose inactions / Steal our collective joy" (lines 83–84) flow without a predictable pattern, echoing the unpredictable harm caused by both active corruption and societal complicity. Consequently, enjambment reflects the ongoing and pervasive effect of corruption, leaving no moment of pause for relief or detachment. This viewpoint resonates with the formalistic notion that the purpose of literary work is not to reflect reality but to make it perceived differently, as the form itself becomes the meaning (Görmez & Beyoğlu, 2022).

Punctuation marks are mostly used in any discourse to provide clarity and logical sequencing. It is, however, observed that Umeh's poem is without end marks, which is a deviation from the normal ways of constructing sentences. It is important to maintain that this deliberate deviation, where one line runs into the next without any interruption, reflects the unending nature of corruption depicted in the poem. In effect, this structure is a realistic reflection of the poem's dominant theme: corruption, suggesting that it operates without limits or clear boundaries. It could again be said that the absence of punctuation in this poem produces a sense of system breakdown in society. This situation symbolizes a society in which order and morality have collapsed as a result of corruptible leaders. While reading the poem, the audience is forced to quickly rush through the lines without pauses. This form of reading, in effect, creates a breathlessness in the reader. It could be interpreted as the poet's frustration and anger that cannot be contained anymore. It is equally important to state that the lack of end marks contributes to the orality of the poem since it resembles a spoken discourse purposively meant for a collective protest or a collective outcry against the unscrupulous leaders and their evil acts.

4.2 Stylistic Devices

Emerging from the form of the poem, "Ambassadors of Poverty," Umeh employs varied stylistic devices depicting how the leaders are corrupt and the impact of this social canker on the ordinary citizenry in society. The utilization of stylistic elements to convey meaning reflects the assertion of Mwinwelle, Adukpo, and Kantorgorje (2021) that the use of imagery and linguistic devices foregrounds the socio-economic conditions of the people and exposes the contradictions of leadership. The poet uses imagery to vividly portray the harsh conditions that result from the corruption and mismanagement of the leadership. Through striking visual descriptions, the reader is made to imagine the awful living conditions of the masses. Examples of such expressions are: "With death traps for

roads" (line 35), "Mud for water" (line 36), and "Candle for light" (line 37). These images depict a society deprived of basic infrastructure and social amenities for improved living and sustenance such as good roads, clean water, and electricity. In a similar vein, Umeh presents a disturbing image of poor educational conditions in the line "Underneath trees as schools" (line 38). Through these images, the poet demonstrates how corruption translates into suffering and a deplorable condition that the citizens find themselves in (Oladeji & Shehu, 2025).

Moreover, symbolism is used to play a significant role in conveying the poem's message. Some expressions symbolically represent exploitation and national betrayal. For example, the line "With their head abroad / And anus at home" (lines 3–4) symbolically depicts leaders who amass national wealth and invest it overseas while leaving suffering and waste for their citizens at home. The "head abroad" represents loyalty to foreign interests, whereas the "anus at home" symbolizes the degradation experienced by the people. This symbolic significance is attested in the literature, where Mpotsiah (2018) asserts that corruption hides the beauty of Africa and reflects a systemic exploitation of resources.

Another prominent stylistic device in the poem is repetition. The phrase "Ambassadors of poverty are" appears repeatedly throughout the poem, for instance in lines 1, 9, 19, 27, 42, 55, 64, 75, and 82. This repeated structure functions as a refrain that introduces different categories of individuals responsible for sustaining poverty. Through this repetition, the poet identifies corrupt leaders, economic elites, political manipulators, unemployed youths, and even passive citizens as contributors to the problem. Consequently, the repetition reinforces the central argument that poverty is perpetuated by multiple actors within society. Moreover, the poem includes repeated words that reinforce the idea of lost purpose among some members of society. Examples are "Without motives, without vision, without mission" (line 66). The repetition of the preposition "without" emphasizes the absence of direction and responsibility among figures who have become instruments in the hands of corrupt politicians.

The poem also contains elements of paradox, which highlight the contradictions in the behavior of corrupt leaders. One notable example is the phrase "patriots in reverse order" (line 5). Normally, patriots are expected to protect the interests of their nation. However, in this case, the individuals who claim to be patriots actually undermine national development. This paradox emphasizes the hypocrisy inherent in corrupt political leadership. Equally important is the use of sarcasm, which enables the poet to ridicule corrupt leaders. For example, the phrase "The saviors of the people" (line 10) is clearly sarcastic because the individuals described are actually responsible for the suffering of the masses. Through this sarcastic expression, the poet exposes the reality underground. Closely related to sarcasm is irony, which appears repeatedly in the poem. The ironic description "The saviors of the people" (line 10) contrasts sharply with the evidence of corruption and exploitation presented throughout the poem. Another example is the phrase "Patriots in reverse order" (line 5), which ironically portrays leaders who claim to defend national interests but instead destroy them.

Umeh equally employs metaphor to deepen the poem's meaning. The title itself, "Ambassadors of Poverty," metaphorically describes individuals who actively promote and represent poverty. Just as ambassadors represent their nations abroad, these individuals represent and spread poverty within society. Another metaphor appears in the phrase "kleptomaniac fingers" (line 13), which metaphorically depicts corrupt officials as habitual thieves who cannot resist stealing public resources. The poem also contains euphemisms to highlight corruption. For instance, the phrase "rip-offs" (line 31) refers to acts of financial exploitation and embezzlement. By presenting corruption through this slightly softened expression, the poet ironically draws attention to how such crimes are often trivialized in political discourse. These stylistic choices strengthen the poem's satirical tone and reinforce its condemnation of corrupt leadership and societal complacency.

4.3 The Use of Grammatical Structures

From a formalistic perspective (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017), a poet makes extensive use of different grammatical structures to reinforce his criticism. These structures allow the poet to expose the agents and consequences of corruption while maintaining a consistent, severe tone throughout the poem. Umeh uses noun phrases to identify

the different groups of people responsible for promoting this awful activity. An example is “Ambassadors of poverty are...”, which has been repeated in lines 1, 9, 19, 27, 42, 55, 64, 75, and 82. Others are “The corrupt masters of the economy” (line 2), “Office loafers in the guise of workers” (line 11), and “Barons of incompetence” (line 12). These phrases serve to categorize corrupt leaders and officials, portraying them as selfish individuals who possess power but fail to serve the public interest. Through this structure, the poet is able to identify those who contribute to the economic and moral decline of society. Furthermore, the poem employs a prepositional phrase to highlight the living conditions influenced by corruption and poor governance. For example, the poet writes “In shallow graves” (line 52). This prepositional phrase shows the masses suffer neglect and death. Contrary to this is the phrase “In air-conditioned chambers” (line 29), which shows how the political leaders enjoy comfort and luxury. These grammatical structures draw the attention of the audience to the gap between the ruling class and the oppressed population, as well as the social inequality created in society by the unfaithful political leaders.

The poet not only uses phrases but also uses different types of clauses to reinforce his criticism of corruption and social injustice and stylistically describes the activities of corrupt leaders, explains their effects on society, and highlights the suffering of the masses. To begin with, the poem contains relative clauses, which function to give more information about the nouns they modify. Relative clauses are typically introduced by relative pronouns such as *who*, *which*, or *that*. A clear example is “Who boosts the economy of their colonial order (line 7). This modifies the noun phrase “Determined merchants of loots” (line 6). This relative clause explains the activities of these corrupt elites, suggesting that they channel national wealth into foreign systems instead of developing their own country. In doing so, the poet highlights how corruption enriches external economies while leaving citizens impoverished. Another example is “Those who antecedents / Have lost the spark to inspire” (lines 78–79). Here, the clause “who antecedents have lost the spark to inspire” describes leaders who do not have any vision to guide their people. The clause suggests that corruption has eradicated their capacity as leaders who have been elected to help society develop.

Furthermore, the poem contains adverbial clauses, which provide information about purpose, reason, or circumstance. These clauses help explain the motives behind corrupt actions. A noticeable example is “As the corpses of their able-bodied men / Women and children lie un-mourn / In shallow graves” (lines 50–52). The clause beginning with “As” functions as an adverbial clause of circumstance. This shows the consequences of corruption. It highlights how the struggle for power among elites results in the death and suffering of innocent citizens: men, women, and children. There is also the use of noun clauses. An example is seen in this excerpt: “Because of what we should do / Which we never do” (lines 85–86). The clause “what we should do” functions as a noun clause because it acts as the object of the preposition “of.” This clause suggests the responsibilities that citizens neglect. The second clause, “which we never do,” further emphasizes society’s failure to take action against corruption.

4.4 Keywords Depicting Corruption

It is also observed that the poem contains key words to convey the nature and the devastating effects of corruption on society. For instance, the word “corrupt” (line 2) is used to label leaders whose ultimate aim is to abuse the power entrusted to their hands to exploit national resources. There is also the use of “incompetence” (line 12) to highlight the ineffectiveness of the leaders in ruling the land as expected. “Loafers” (line 11), “steal” (line 84), and “rip-offs” (line 31) further emphasize the moral decadence of the leaders, and also how exploitative they are. It is interesting to note that Umeh has again used words to depict how these corruptible acts translate into human suffering. Notable among them are “impoverish” (line 8), “hungry” (lines 22, 69), and “fasting” (line 40). Furthermore, the poet employs specific verbal terms to depict the actions of corrupt leaders. For example, the words *boost*, *reduce* and *steal*, as captured in “*Boost* the economy of their colonial order” (lines 7–8), “*Reduce* their people’s expectation to nothingness” (lines 76–77), and “*Steal* our collective joy” (line 84), demonstrate how they manipulate and exploit the resources that belong to the larger society. These words are harsh and condemnatory, on the part of the poet, to showcase his pent-up anger toward the perpetrators of this evil social canker.

5. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a formalist reading of Umeh's "Ambassadors of Poverty" (2012). Within the formalistic assumption, a text's form is sufficient to provide an in-depth interpretation. Based on this theoretical assumption, this paper focuses on the form and structure of Umeh's poetic work by specifically examining the use of linguistic elements to construct the ideas of corruption within the Nigerian geopolitical context. From the analysis, it is revealed that the poetic form, imagery, repetition, symbolism, and grammatical patterns function as intrinsic devices that underscore the theme of corruption and societal decay in the poem. The stylistic implication of this analysis is that a poem's meaning and significance are embedded within its formal structures and stylistic elements. Therefore, the paper reiterates that from a formalistic perspective, a literary text such as "Ambassadors of Poverty" is a self-sufficient artistic construction whose meaning arises through the relationship between its internal constituents. This poem is a powerful manifesto against the systemic and complicit acts of corruption within the African setting, and underscores the aesthetic and communicative power of literary form.

The paper has a pedagogical implication. Thus, the formalist analysis suggests that when applied in the literature classrooms, learners can learn of (i) the emotional impact of the absence of punctuation markers in poems, and (ii) teachers can teach grammatical structures as stylistic choices. Comparing poems through formal and biographical lenses, and utilizing Western theoretical frameworks to teach African poetry without reducing it to solely political or historical commentary, fosters a strong appreciation of both literary artistry and social critique. Therefore, the formalism approach offers teachers and learners alike a seamless, manageable approach to literary analysis and interpretation by restricting focus to observable textual elements such as word choice, sentence structure, imagery, and punctuation.

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