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Taiwo Abioye

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# Resourcefulness of Rhetorical Questions in Ehusani's "A New Year Prayer for Peace"

Taiwo O. Abioye

## Abstract

This study examines the application of rhetorical questions (RQs) as a sophisticated stylistic device in literary genre. This is significant because language is the nexus of human empowerment that depicts how available linguistic resources are used to negotiate power relations and construct meaning. The study is a departure from conventional approaches to the subject in that it takes note of the frequency of occurrence and investigates, intrinsically the thematic and textual implications of RQs. It depicts the contextual appropriateness of RQs rather than as isolated maxims and reflects the level of textual cohesion. The study establishes the perlocutionary force of RQs over statements in the resolution of issues within the Nigerian socio-cultural setting.

**Key Words:** Rhetorical questions, content analysis, rhetorical strategies

## Introduction

Language has always depicted virtually everything a writer or speaker is saying in different situations. In politics, business, social, cultural and religious situations, the ability to use and manipulate language has always been seen as an asset. Indeed, it gives voice to our deepest feelings, emotions and desires. It is pertinent to examine language since RQs are presented to readers in a specific language, in this case, English. The rhetorical question (RQ), like other interrogatives, is structurally the same as any other question, Quirk, *et al* (1985: 804). This means that the syntactic structure of the RQ is usually similar to that of any other interrogative. The marked difference, however, is that the RQ is semantically or functionally a statement or a claim which has already known answers because the writer is ready to tell his readers the answer; or nobody, not even the writer, knows the answer. By exemplification, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar asks rhetorically:

Shall Caesar send a lie? Have I in conquest stretcht my arm so far  
To be afeard to tell greybeards the truth?... (Act II Scene II)

And at Caesar's funeral, Mark Antony asks:

Here was a Caesar, when comes such another?

### **Research Problem**

Scholars have argued that the RQ is that question that does not get a direct answer. RQs are a specialised stylistic device because statements and questions even though they are related, have different functions in language and communication. The reason is not far-fetched – the former gives information while the latter either asks for it or sometimes suggests an answer to it. The import of RQs is often not appreciated, yet its significance in both literary and every day discourse cannot be over-emphasised since it can enhance the relationship between writers and readers, particularly when there is a cornucopia of RQs; hence the need for this study. Several studies have examined the RQ (Yankah, 1994; van der Merwe, 2000), with a focus on its general functions, but often from a narrow literary point of view. However, this paper projects the import of RQs from an interdisciplinary perspective, explicating its resourcefulness and employable structural forms. This is the gap this paper intends to fill.

### **Background to the Study of Rhetorical Questions**

Rhetoric has been studied and practised by ancient Greeks since the 5th century BC. Systematic and scientific rhetoric was championed by Aristotle and later by Quintilian and Cicero. Aristotle's study of rhetoric was basically a practical analysis of how to construct a successful argument, as he considered all aspects of legal discourse, and how to present a persuasive legal argument. The Greeks were renowned for their art of public speaking, especially in the area of politics and legislation as some students were made to memorise their speeches and deliver them in special gatherings and in courts. Some of these people were called "persuaders" since they set out to persuade people to take sides with them. It laid the foundation for elegant, sophisticated, specialised and polished writing. Throughout European history, due to its association with democratic institutions, rhetoric is believed to flourish in open and democratic societies with such rights as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of political affiliations. In modern parlance, however, "rhetoric" is usually a pejorative term applied to language that seems pretentious, insincere, long-winded, sneaky, subtle, elaborate or intellectually vacuous. Thus, rhetoric relates



to the art of public speaking; and is characterised by language that is elevated and sometimes pompous in style. Having established what rhetoric is, let us examine the rhetorical question.

### **Rhetorical Questions**

Several scholars had earlier defined the rhetorical question as that question that does not expect an answer. Richards, Platt & Weber (1990:245) describe the RQ as: "a forceful statement which has the form of a question but which does not expect an answer". For instance, "What difference does it make?" Which may function like the statement: "It makes no difference". Ammer (1997) sees it as a question asked without expecting an answer but for the sake of persuasive effect rather than as a genuine request for information, the speaker implying that the answer is too obvious to require a reply or merely as a way of making a point. The expected answer is usually "yes" or "no." For example, "Can we agree that this will not happen again?"

Rhetorical questions encourage the listener to reflect on what the implied answer to the question would be. For instance, when a speaker states, "How much longer must our people endure this injustice?"; "How many times do I have to tell you to stop walking into the house with mud on your shoes?" No (formal) answer is expected; the purpose of this figure of speech is not to secure a response but to assert or deny a point implicitly. A rhetorical question may thus serve as a subtle way of insinuating an idea that might be challenged by an audience if asserted directly.

It is often an effective tool used particularly in law courts where lawyers try to establish facts through cross examination. Usually, leading questions such as "You were not at your duty post, were you?" are used. This type of question frequently suggests what the answer should be, along with the question being declaratory. Sometimes, a rhetorical question is asked only as a thought-provoking gesture or a way of stimulating discussion that does not necessarily require an answer. In fact, it is often a way of making a tentative statement but phrasing it in the form of a question. This occurs frequently in debates, particularly of a political nature, where it is used as a tool to avoid making an outright claim or declaration, but at the same time still being able to make a point. However, if the speaker is taken up on the point later, or it is proved that it was not accurate, the speaker can then claim it was only a question.

Such RQs are quite capable of inspiring new thoughts, ideas and even further debate. For example, "On whose side is the Yar'Adua government?" This is a rhetorical question that does not really have a concrete or measurable answer; the answer is often based on individual ideological leaning, bias (for or against), personal opinion and assessment. It is a clever way to avoid coming to an obvious conclusion, thus it is a means of achieving an emphasis stronger than a direct statement. Wales (1991), Bamisaye (1997), and Van der Merwe (2000) all share the same views about RQs.

The purpose of this study, however, is to closely examine the resourcefulness of RQs as a stylistic device, thus we shall dwell on Beekman and Callow's (1976), Cuddon's (1979) and Quirk *et al*'s (1985) ideas about RQ, among others. The RQ is usually presented in two forms, which could be either written or spoken: the distinction between the former and the latter is usually in the punctuation marks and the tone respectively. Quirk *et al* (1985: 825) observe that:

RQs are one of the two minor types of questions – the exclamatory and the rhetorical question. The RQ draws attention to the relationship between question and exclamation. There is also the rhetorical *wh* – question, which is equivalent to a statement in which the question (Q) element is replaced by a negative element: "Who knows/cares?" Which can be interpreted to mean "Nobody knows/cares" or "I don't know/care".

Then there is what is called rhetorical affirmation in the form of a rhetorical question whose answer is "yes, of course". For example: Is the sky blue? Is the Pope Catholic? Is the Earth round? The answer to a rhetorical question can also be "no!" or "never!" or "of course not", as in: "Are you mad?" Cuddon (1979: 571) defines RQ by type and lists five such types and features which are as follows:

- i. a question not expecting an answer, or one to which an answer is self-evident and which is used for stylistic effect especially when the speaker is trying to work up emotion;
- ii. a question where a writer argues with himself, and in a different way works upon the emotions of the reader;
- iii. a question whose answer is at once supplied by the writer;
- iv. a series of questions asked in quick succession for emphasis, and
- v. a question put to another person or to oneself which expresses



surprise, astonishment or anger, and which is not easily answered.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis was earlier seen as focusing on word counts which determined the occurrence of certain words and the frequency with which these words occurred in a text. It is a systematic approach that seeks to measure the patterns of meaning communicated through existing samples of language. It is also considered a scholarly methodology in the humanities by which texts are studied to determine or validate authorship and/or authenticity. Content analysis can be described as any methodological measurement applied to a test for social scientific purposes. Krippendorff (1980) sees it as a research technique for making replicable and valid references from data. Baran (2004), observes that content analysis is the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the content of communication.

However, content analysis extends far beyond plain word counts. Synonyms and homonyms, instances of use of anaphora and cataphora, metaphorical use of language, repetition, euphemism, etc., can be isolated in accordance to linguistic properties of a language. Weber (1990) argues that to make valid inferences from a text, it is important that the classification procedure be reliable in the sense of being consistent; this means different people will obtain the same result from the same text/content analysed at different times. Communication contents have dual meanings which are either manifest or latent. "Manifest" refers to what an author or speaker has written or said. This is the surface structure level of meaning, which may also be described as the denotative meaning, while "latent" describes the writer's/speaker's intention.

### **Method and Procedure of Data analysis**

The sample text is one of the scores of Fr George Ehusani's literary output available on his website. It consists of 28 sentences and 45 RQs out of which 22 were picked as a representative sample and presented on Table 1. The RQs were analysed and grouped structurally into 6, namely: RQT – RQs that begin with "What?"; RQY – RQs that begin with "Why?"; RQH – RQs that begin with "How?"; RQI – RQs that begin with "Is it?"; RQC – RQs that begin with "Can't you?"; RQD – RQs that begin with "Don't".

For the content analysis, the frequencies of occurrence were noted. Media effects theories, namely the uses and gratifications and the

agenda-setting theories were applied since the text was posted on the web to determine whether it meets the requirements and functions of media messages, which are basically to inform, educate and entertain. Linguistic items and cohesive ties that gave prominence to the text were also identified. Rhetorical strategies such as positive affirmation, exaggeration and insinuation used in the presentation of the meaning in each RQ were equally examined. All these are presented in Table 1. The contextual situation that informed the writing of the "Prayer" was equally identified, and findings on each group were discussed.

## Analysis and Discussion of RQs

TABLE 1: A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF PROMINENT FEATURES IN EHUSANI'S RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

RQ	STRUCTURAL FORMS OF RQ	*FQO %	COHESIVITIES/ LINGUISTIC ITEMS	RHETORICAL STRATEGIES
RQT	Rhetorical questions that begin with "what"	9 Times (21.4%)		
	What is the point in going to church or frequenting the mosque when our lives are not touched?		Church/Mosque lives not touched	Declarative, emphatic condemnation, inherent contradiction, repetition
	What is the point in offering sacrifices of peace when we have blood on our hands?		Sacrifice, peace, blood on our hands	
	What is the point in being religious and having no regard for human life?		No regard for human life	
	What is the point in dancing around your altar when our hearts are pulsating with hate?		Hearts, pulsating, hate	
RQY	Rhetorical questions that begin with "Why"	17 Times (40.4%)		
	Why, Lord, do you allow the devil to walk on our streets in broad daylight?		Devil, broad daylight	Plea for divine intervention, Repetition
	Why do you abandon us to our toil and tears?		Abandon, toil, tears	
	Why don't you intervene now for the love of your people?		Intervene, love	



	Ah Lord, <b>why</b> do you remain there in silence?		Remain in silence	
RQH	<b>Rhetorical questions that begin with "How"</b>	4 times (09.5%)		
	<b>How</b> can you lead us thus far and abandon us?		Lead, abandon	
	<b>How</b> can you turn your face away?		Turn your face	Plea for divine intervention, challenge, repetition
	<b>How</b> can you leave us to our own devices?		Leave, devices	
	Lord, <b>how</b> can you remain silent?		Remain silent	
RQI	<b>Rhetorical questions that begin with "Is it"</b>	4 times (09.5%)		
	<b>Is it</b> the kleptomania that characterises our national governance?		Kleptomania	Sarcasm, ridicule, repetition
	<b>Is it</b> the mutual acrimony, manipulation and subterfuge that define our political alliances?		Mutual acrimony	
	<b>Is it</b> the massive decay that is the lot of our social infrastructures?		Massive decay	
	<b>Is it</b> the internecine greed and callous exploitation that make up our economic relations?		Internecine greed	
RQC	<b>Rhetorical questions that begin with "Can't you"</b>	6 times (14.2%)		
	<b>Can't you</b> see that one half of our people are already drowned and the other half is swimming in		Drowned, swimming, wrong direction	Persuasion, to encourage

	the wrong direction?			reflection, repetition
	Can't you see that all the people are uptight?			
	Can't you do something dramatic as in the days of old?		Something dramatic	Biblical metaphor, plea for divine intervention.
	Can't you feel the tense vibrations everywhere in the land?		Tense vibrations	Repetition for emphasis
RQD	Rhetorical questions that begin with "Don't you"	2 times (05%)		
	Don't you care?		Care	Positive affirmation
	Don't tell me you do not know that it is easier for the Nigerian poor to get to heaven...?		Nigerian poor, heaven	Absurdity, insinuation

- FQO = Frequency of Occurrence
- RQT = RQs that begin with "What?"
- RQY = RQs that begin with "Why?"
- RQH = RQs that begin with "How?"
- RQI = RQs that begin with "Is it?"
- RQC = RQs that begin with "Can't you?"
- RQD = RQs that begin with "Don't"

### Contextual Situation and Content Analysis

This text was written at the end of year 2007 and it is entitled, "A New Year Prayer for Peace". At the beginning of a new year, people say special prayers to thank God for His blessings in the previous years and in anticipation of His continued blessings that year and in the years to come. This is one of such prayers. It is Biblical metaphor and a plea for divine intervention at the beginning of a new year, likening it to the experience the Apostles of Jesus had when they had toiled all night without catching any fish but when Jesus entered into their boat, their fortunes changed for good (Lk 5:1-6; Lk 8: 22-25). It depicts clearly the message contained in Isaiah 64: 1-5:

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,... For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you...(KJV).

For the content analysis aspect, when compared to the conventional style of writing, the frequency of occurrence of RQs in this article is on the high side (66%). The writer entreats God to "Visit us, Come down, look down, and intervene in our affairs" about 25 times. From Table 1, it is clear that out of the 42 RQs, RQY has the highest frequency (17; 40.4%) while RQD has the lowest (02; 05%). The tone of the text is light at the beginning, especially when he expresses his gratitude to God before the deluge or "litany" of questions. It is possible to see the article as blasphemous because it refers directly to God, who nobody dares to question. This is similar to David's questions at the height of his problems with King Saul in Ps 10:1-2 (KJV Bible) when he asks:

why dost thou stand afar off, O Lord?  
why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble?

### **Linguistic items and rhetorical strategies**

Linguistic items and cohesive ties that highlight the theme and equally give prominence to what the writer is foregrounding are identified in Table 1 and these are used in a sophisticated and authoritative way in this text. For instance, the choice of such words as "church, mosque, hate, peace, etc., in RQT (Table 1) point to inherent contradictions in both religions that preach peace but where adherents are always at each others throats. The rhetorical strategy is that of emphatic condemnation which dictates the tone. For RQY and RQH (Table 1), the linguistic items, cohesive ties and rhetorical strategy are a plea for divine intervention and this is emphasised by repetition. The sarcasm and ridicule in RQI (Table 1) is clear from the choice of "kleptomania, mutual acrimony, internecine greed, etc". Table 1 also shows that RQC is trying to persuade God to reflect on His relationship with Nigerians and "intervene" in the affairs of the nation, while in RQD, the first RQ is not an evaluation but a positive affirmation and a claim, while the second one shows the absurdity of the Nigerian situation (See Appendix). All these questions are meant to shake readers out of their state of complacency and stupor and the impact of the "deluge" of RQs is felt more with the repetition that runs throughout the text.



### **Media effect theories**

Because this text is available on the internet, it is believed that it was written for public consumption. This makes it possible to apply media effects theories to it in order to verify whether it meets the requirements and functions of media messages. The uses and gratifications theory is very relevant here because a lot of people are gratified by this text, as the writer objectively focuses on the different challenges facing the Nigerian nation in particular. The entire examples cited are incidents that have actually happened and are still happening and which have affected a lot of people. Besides, some of the crimes reported in the text are not restricted to Nigeria alone, they are global problems.

The agenda-setting theory is also relevant because issues raised in the text are still on the agenda of public discourse and will continue to be for years to come. Thus, the text gives prominence to what is considered as serious, while trivialities are down-played or backgrounded. However, it is the individual who determines whether the gratification is immediate or delayed. Also, the series of RQs ensures the active participation of the readers and this in turn strengthens the social interaction between the writer and his readers.

In the socio-cultural African context, it is not uncommon for a child to go to the father, thank him for his love and care and then make further demands. In Yoruba land, there is the saying that:

T' ómodé bá dúpé ore àná, árí òmíràn gbà (The child that expresses gratitude for a favour received yesterday would surely get more favours).

Thus, the text goes beyond thanking God; it reminds us or in this case, reinforces the belief in God as the Almighty and then seeks an affirmation that God is still in charge and that He has not abandoned Nigerians to their devices. Earlier, Yankah (op cit) identified the style of rhetoric as artful, witty language, metaphor, proverb, honorific terms of address, formulaic and politeness expression. This article on the one hand, is an aberration because of its seeming impolite tone and expressions.

On the other hand, the familial relationship between a father and child (now God and Ehusani) makes it necessary for the child to remind the Father that even if the son has failed in his filial responsibilities, the father should not abandon His child at this crucial time. It suggests a spiritual intimacy with God. It exemplifies and emblematises the political, religious and moral profligacy in the land.

The text clearly attests to the fact that the writer is neither rude nor blasphemous, as he appeals to the "Almighty Father, God of mercy and compassion, God of power and majesty, friend of the poor, Father of the orphan and defender of the widow..." to "come into our boat and rebuke the whirlwind of death in our land and let there be calm once again". It is a song of affirmation which is equally a confirmation of God's love and the strong belief that God is the only one who can solve these problems.

### Conclusion

This paper's major concern was to examine the resourcefulness of RQs in Ehusani's "A New Year Prayer for Peace", determine to what extent RQs were used (quantitative); how they were used and the effects of these (qualitative and evaluative assessments). The RQ is used to admonish, make a plea or request, commend or pay tribute, condemn or vilify as the case may be. It embellishes the level of language used and gives the text a polished, specialised and sophisticated elevation that is the hallmark of a good writer. It has more impact on the reader than a conventional statement as it comes out as a strategy used in marshalling evidence/facts/information in one's mind. It allows readers to participate by questioning their views/opinions thereby encouraging reflection within the reader/listener. RQs have been shown in this study as quite resourceful in more ways than one, which include being capable of giving implicit structure (sometimes) to messages. They can be used to generate or end discussions, provide reasons/answers, constitute opposition or reach reasonable conclusions. Readers and writers must recognise this resourcefulness of RQs in order to be able to achieve their purposes in reading and writing.

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#### **Appendix: Sample data – Excerpts of the RQs from "A New Year Prayer for Peace", 2007.**

Don't you care? How can you turn your face away? How can you lead us thus far and abandon us mid-stream? Lord, won't you visit us once again and intervene in our national affairs as you did in June, 1998, and bring back sanity to the people and restoration to the land? Why don't you descend from on high and calm the violent storm? But what is the difference anyway? What is the point in being religious and having no regard for human life? What is the point in knowing you if we are capable of slaughtering our brothers and sisters and setting



their oily bodies aflame? What is the point in worshipping you if we cannot recognise that all those created in your image are sacred and inviolable? What is the point in dancing around your altar when our hearts are pulsating with hate? What is the point in offering you sacrifices of peace when we have blood in our hands? Yes, what is the point in going to church or frequenting the mosque when our lives are not touched? Tell me, Lord, you are seeing all these empty rituals and do you keep silent? Can't you do something dramatic as in the days of old?... Don't tell me you do not know that it is easier for the Nigerian poor to get to heaven than to attempt to relocate to Britain or America? Why do you abandon us to our toil and tears?

Why, Lord, do you allow the devil to walk on our streets in broad daylight? Why must we witness in our own lifetime the actualisation of a people's collective death wish? Why does our generation have to contend with civil war, ethnic skirmishes, religious riots, and political banditry, armed robbery, hired assassinations, arson and sundry acts of terrorism? Why are we alive to witness this aberrant order where hell is constantly let loose on the populace? Why must we experience the most extreme demonstrations of human depravity within our short life-span? Lord, why keep us alive to witness the highest possible expression of sadism among those we call our people?

You know, Lord what a stupendously high price we have to pay to live in Nigeria at this time, and so how can you leave us to our own devices? Can't you see that one half of our people are already drowned and the other half is swimming in the wrong direction? Can't you see that the majority of our people are mad, while the rest have reached an advanced stage of depression? Can't you see that the adults are a lost generation, and the children are groping in the dark? Can't you feel the tense vibrations everywhere in the land? Can't you see that all the people are up-tight, as they exist in constant fear of death, which may descend on them anytime and from any direction? Why abandon us to our own devices when you know that at any moment a gang of armed robbers or a conspiracy of assassins, may subject one to summary execution in the presence of one's whimpering wife and children? Why abandon us to our own resources when you know that an ethnic bigot with an axe in the hand may cut off one's head for daring to live and earn a living outside one's ancestral home? Why don't you intervene quickly when you know that at any time a dutiful fanatic with a revolver in his hand may drag one out of sleep and blow one's brains off for

professing the wrong religion?

Lord, how can you remain silent when you know that a trigger-happy police constable with an AK47 rifle may spray the contents of his instrument of death upon one and paste trumped-up charges on the charred remains, and then call the press to help celebrate his victory? Why do you sit there in the comfort of your heaven and say that you are watching over us when you know that at any time an angry mob in the city may lynch one, make a bonfire of the body and parade the roasted but still smoking remains before the nation via national television? Why don't you come down to intervene when you know that at any time a ritual killer may hack one to death, remove one's vital parts, and abandon the decapitated body on the road for fast-moving vehicles to level down with the tar or for vultures to feed upon? Ah Lord, why do you remain there in silence when you know that at any time a drunken *molue* bus driver going at 150 kilometres an hour may dive into the lagoon dispatching all his passengers prematurely to face your eternal judgement? You know these Lord, so why leave us to our own devices? Why don't you intervene now for the love of your people? ... What quality of life do you expect us to live? Why keep us alive here when life is cheap and worthless? But what is there to be proud of today in this land? ... Is it the kleptomania that characterises our national governance or is it the mutual acrimony, manipulation and subterfuge that define our political alliances? Is it the internecine greed and callous exploitation that make up our economic relations or is it the massive decay that is the lot of our social infrastructures? Tell me, Lord, what is there to be proud of today in this land?