

THE AFRICAN NOVEL AND THE INTEGRATION OF ORAL LORES: AN EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN “LIT-ORAL-TURE”

Sola Afolayan
University of Ado Ekiti
Nigeria
afolayanhod@yahoo.com)

Abstract

*From a study of the African novel, one notices the possibility of establishing some intertextual connections among the extant African narratives. This is because the African novel is a hybrid genre that ineluctably presents contexts that are cut out of certain religio-political and social essences that are peculiarly African. Apart from this, African literature is further made distinctive by the indigenous oral-loric outlook of the African world-view which embellishes the thematic contents for the most African writers whose interest is the reflection of the pre-colonial contexts. It is thus possible to establish inevitable intertextual connectives spreading among some of the existing literary narratives that form the canon of the African novel. This essay thus sets out to evaluate such level of connectedness between the works of two Nigerian novelists – Fagunwa and Tutuola - by externalizing their unmistakable reliance on the indigenous oral artefacts which are often found to festoon them. With this commitment, we hope to explicate Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* as an evident recapitulation of the oral artifacts that gave vent to Fagunwa’s first two novels. This, we hope, will help us draw unparaphraseable intertextual relationship between the literary topographies of the two authors. By prosecuting what we set as goal in this essay, it is believed that we can successfully establish the skilful interplay of oral features in the African novel.*

(Key Words: African Novel, African Literature, Afrincan Narratives, Oral Lores).

INTRODUCTION

Intertextuality establishes that literature does not evolve from a vacuum because it depends on the realities of the enabling milieu and the precursor text (Kehinde, 2003). These ‘realities’ the African novelist surreptitiously converts to “realism”, which, according to Oyegoke, “is not real reality but affected reality in prose literature” (2006:03). The novelist thus depends on some tacit conversion of extant (hypo) texts – oral or written – worked into his make-believe textual world of thematic and conceptual relations. The converted text is adjudged oral when we refer to the “glittering amalgam of traditional epics, folk traditions, legend, myths, folktales and history of the people”, and written when we refer to any of the already published literatures expressed in any of the three genres – drama prose and poetry (Kehinde, 2003:161).

These texts form the existing traditions for any African novelist when he tries to evolve a creative piece. Using either the indigenous or western language, the African novelist uncontrollably produces a unique piece of literature. Oftentimes

when he writes with his non-native language, say English for instance, his aesthetic piece is unique basically because he would have ended up exploiting, quoting Igboanusi, “two or more linguistic or cultural resources” which will result in the emergence of “a new literary and stylistic convention, which deviates from the literary and linguistic tradition of the native English [or any western language] speaker” (2002:06). Ferris Jr aptly buttresses this:

One might argue that the modern African novel is a unique literary phenomenon that blends two distinct traditions – native oral and foreign written literature. It is therefore a critical distortion to expect the product to conform to a European genre that developed in a merely literary tradition (*The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 86. p. 30).

This essay attempts an evaluative study of the African novel as evident transmutation of the extant African autochthonous mythical materials that have, *ab initio*, framed the novelist’s psyche. This research interest restricts us to suitable corollaries like Fagunwa’s *The Forest of A Thousand Daemons*, and Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* which are evident evolutions from the Yoruba oral cosmology.

TUTUOLA AND FAGUNWA: UNDERSTANDING THEIR AESTHETICS

In his treatment of literary symbols in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye looks beyond the usual harmonic and rhythmic interplay of signs in textual structures by establishing intertextual connections between a text and some extra linguistic indices outside it. This is why he expresses the need for any critic to treat textual symbols as archetypes of myth especially when such have been established as exhibiting certain interconnectedness with similar symbols adorning other autochthonous texts. Frye thus establishes instances of “verbatim copyright” of certain mythical materials in a literary work.

It is with this frame of mind that we seek to establish the novels, to be discussed here, as conspicuously indebted to the traditional lores of the people. No doubt, Tutuola and Fagunwa have the manifestation of this indebtedness in their novels. This is why Ferris Jr. would say of Tutuola, for instance, that he “skilfully laced together the myths and folktale of his people” and we would establish, unequivocally, that Tutuola’s first and second novels appear as the authors attempt to reproduce Fagunwa’s earlier efforts in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and *The Forest of God* (*The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 86. p. 28). Lindfors, in “Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa”, also strengthens this assumption by evincing Tutuola’s debt to Fagunwa.

The striking resemblance in Tutuola’s first two novels and Fagunwa’s first two lies in the authors’ penchant to “recreate oral traditions and articulate the philosophy behind their usage.” (Ferris Jr. in *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 86 :28). This is perhaps because of the need for the African writer to

look back on the community from which he emerges and explain the psychology and philosophy behind African thought while taking his place in the

modern world” (Ferris Jr. in *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol.86: 28).

Basically as at the time Tutuola wrote his novels, the belief in ghosts, spirits and gnomes held sway. Tutuola himself admitted, “I believe in ghost. If a ghost did not exist, there would be no name for it But people these days don’t believe it” (cited in Fox, *Research in African literature*, Vol. 29: 207). This is why, perhaps, he had mailed some paintings he had claimed were “photographs of spirits from the bush in Nigeria” to one of his intending publishers to engender a kind of believability for his story (Palmer, 1982). Hence, when he eventually got his novels published, many of the non African readers treated his novels, especially *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, with a high level of verisimilitude because they believed Tutuola had given a true representation of Africa in them.

Not minding the grammatical shortcomings and unorthodox plot formation that inundate *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, this study seeks to establish the text’s indebtedness to some hypotexts which are believed to have supplied Tutuola’s artistic initiatives. These hypotexts, for Tutuola, are the autochthonous oral folklorish materials and Fagunwa’s novels which constitute themselves into worthwhile literary antecedents. The syllogism therefore is, if Tutuola was inspired by Fagunwa’s works, and there is that unmistakable resonance of the Yoruba oral artefacts in his, both authors have the same source in the Yoruba pre-colonial superstitious world view.

There are echoes of transcendentalism in the Yoruba folktales which form the primary hypotext for Tutuola, and perhaps Fagunwa his mentor. It is only in recognition of this that one can properly construe Tutuola’s commitment. *The Palm Wine Drinkard* will always defy classification by any meretricious criticism which fails to recognize, like Afolayan, that the novel is a product of “mutated folktales” rendered in a kind of “Yoruba English” (cited in Heywood, 1971:49). The basic similarity that *The Palm Wine Drinkard* shares with its hypotext is noticeable in the way the author tries to evolve a “macro moral” from the labyrinth of disjointed episodes in the (mis)adventure of the “father of gods”, the narrator who seeks to recover the “irretrievable”.

Thus, contrary to Rodman’s portrayal of Tutuola as “a true primitive” we consider him a quite sophisticated writer in the way he deviates from the traditional literary standards by blending the transcendentals of “the wild bush” and the “land of the dead” with trappings of modernity (Rodman, 1982). Palmer explains further:

It is in a way such as this that Tutuola clearly adapts and transforms the inherited stories, welding them into the framework of the themes of his own books. Skillful story teller that he is, the additions not only depth the meaning, but also heighten suspense, create humour and fascination, and generally attempt to capture the spirit of folktales as they are actually told (1982:18).

This, perhaps, is because Tutuola set out to achieve certain desires. These desires may not be unconnected with what he said when asked by Fox to state why he wrote his novels. Tutuola implied he wrote to entertain and teach the European something about Africa. Hence like any African folklore, which constitutes his primary hypotexts, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* performs the dual function of educating and entertaining. This is

why Fox believes that “Tutuola would have liked the neologism edutainment” as qualification for his work (*Research in African Literature*, Vol. 29: 205).

It is most likely in a bid to fascinate his expected audiences that Tutuola weaves the substances from the transcendental and pre-historic African world with those of the technological world. But unknown to him, a grotesque literary form which would be begging for classification was in the making and Tobias would conclude “By no stretch of the imagination can *The Palm Wine Drinkard* be considered a novel in the classical sense” (*Research in African literature*, Vol. 30 No 2: 69). Palmer further buttresses the novel’s uniqueness:

It is an integral part of Tutuola’s handling of the traditional that he quite unashamedly incorporates into it [*The Palm Wine Drinkard*] elements from the modern technological world, thus importing new vitality and interest. Moving with perfect ease within the imaginary fantastic world of the traditional, he is yet able to endow his creatives with modernistic trappings, thus attuning them to modern sensibility (1982:18).

Tutuola thus seems to infiltrate his narratives with modern concepts like television, telephone, football field tumblers, chocolate, ice cream *et cetera*. This, to Palmer, is anachronistic. However, a closer look reveals that this is what enables Tutuola to produce a “defamiliarized” version of the existing Yoruba folklorish materials. This version neither blends perfectly into the narrative formula of the autochthonous oral rendition nor fits into the matrix of the narratological formula of the western fictional standard. In spite of the classification problem that bedevils *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, it still tilts more towards the African orature than towards any known western narrative formula.

Palmer also tells us that Tutuola’s world appears more exaggerated and fantastic than the setting of any folktale could be. This is indubitable. This attribute Tutuola must have developed from imitating the habits of the African eloquent story tellers whose virtuosity is often known from their abilities to create and exaggerate a transcendental world. This is not peculiar to Tutuola because it is true that “the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail to its shell” and “even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind” (Iyasere in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 13 No1, 1975:107). This is why it is very easy and logical to establish an enduring hypotext for Tutuola’s *The Palm-wine Drunkard*, and Fagunwa’s *A Forest of a Thousand Daemons* in the Yoruba folkloric materials. This then proves, according to Agatucci, that

One cannot study African literatures without studying the particular cultures and orature on which African writers draw... for their narratives and values, for their narrative structures and plots, for their rhythms and styles for their images and metaphors, for their artistic and ethical principles (“African Storytelling: An Introduction”<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/afirstory.htm>).

One of the popular proofs of Tutuola’s indebtedness to the Yoruba folk material as typified by *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, is his story of the “Complete

Gentlemen". This particular story had existed in many versions within the African story-telling traditions to teach certain morals in a bid to discourage a daughter's obstinacy towards her parents, especially in matters of marriage choices. It is therefore not contestable that Tutuola uses "a story that is very widespread in Nigerian folklore" (Armstrong in *Callaloo* No 8/10:167). The story of the Complete Gentleman is the story of an obstinate daughter who decides to settle for a stranger she meets at the market, as his wife, instead of marrying her parents' choice. In Tutuola's version of the story,

This lady was very beautiful as an angel but no man could convince her for marriage. So one day she went to the market as she was doing before, or to sell her articles as usual, on that market day. She saw a curious creature in the market but she did not know where that man came from and never knew him before (*The Palm Wine Drinkard*: 18)

Tutuola's version of the story tells us that the Complete Gentleman turns out to be a skull which often visits the market with "rented human parts". That the lady eventually faces the harsh reality of having fallen cheaply for a grotesque skull, after playing "hard to get," serves enough lesson for other obstinate and proud marriageable girls. Such stories as this have been commonplace in the Yoruba narrative vogue basically to caution errant youths.

To further buttress that the story of the Complete Gentleman does not emanate from what Larson refers to as "Tutuola myth," we can make reference to Herskovit and Herskovits' *Dahomean Narrative* (1958) in which the same story is titled "Chosen Suitor". The moral to be evoked from this story, according to Herskovit and Herskovit, lies in why it is germane for one to listen "to the advice of one's father". T. M. Aluko's version in *One Man One Matchet* evolves a similar moral because the girl's experience teaches us that "every girl must marry whichever man her parents ask her to marry." One may, at times, wonder why such a story is necessary.

The environment from which Tutuola wrote was familiar with many moonlight entertainments, one of which is moonlight storytelling. This was an environment where children and adults gathered, on daily basis, at nights, not to watch television but, to listen to fabricated stories that were modified and handed from generations to generations. These stories, *alo a'pagbe*, as they are called in Yoruba, were used to thrill the people before they went to sleep. Because of the popularity of this tradition, schools' curricula even had slots for story-telling to fascinate the pupils, and teachers were evaluated not only based on their pedagogical abilities but also on their level of proficiency in story telling. This was why Tutuola, and perhaps Fagunwa, wrote the way they did, working the already popular *alo a'pagbe* into their narratives.

Tutuola probably knew that the same home audience that was fascinated by Fagunwa was likely going to constitute a part of the audience for his *The Palm-wine Drinkard*. He knew that his success might be predicated upon his ability to festoon his narrative with "sub-stories" that were drawn from the existing oral traditional narratives. This is why many of the stories in Tutuola's world are identified as replications of various unpublished versions of the same old stories that have almost become clichés in the Yoruba oral narrative scenes. For instance, a semblance of the

story of the Complete Gentleman is common among the Oyo/Osun people of Nigeria. This is a version titled “The Princess and the Hoe Seller”. In this version a princess makes a choice of a mysterious hoe seller, who always visits the market from an unknown abode, as her husband. The princess is not moved by the man’s threats and warnings as expressed in the following song:

Solo: Omo idan dehin le hin mi (2ce)
 Chr.: Dehin o dehin
 Solo: B’o ba dehin, oo kan odo Aro
 Chr.: Dehin o dehin
 Solo: B’o ba dehin, oo kan odo Eje
 Chr.: Dehin o dehin
 Solo: Pasan teere n be lenkulee mi o
 Chr.: Dehin o dehin
 Solo: Omo idan dehin lehin mi o
 Chr.: Dehin o dehin etc.

Meaning

Solo: Fare damsel retreat from me (2ce)
 Chr.: Retreat o’ retreat
 Solo: If you refuse you’ll cross the dark river
 Chr.: Retreat o’ retreat
 Solo: If you refuse you’ll cross the red river
 Chr.: Retreat o’ retreat
 Solo: Be warned, scourging flagella flay at my yard
 Chr.: Retreat o’ retreat
 Solo: Fare damsel retreat from me
 Chr.: Retreat o’ retreat

The princess, according to the story, proceeds with the man to the forest where she experiences the man’s bizarre being as he turns to a lion, scurrilously hitching to devour her. She is saved by a brave hunter who shoots the lion dead.

Armstrong adds to the existing versions of the same story of the Complete Gentleman an Idoma version:

I have recorded an Idoma folktale from Oturkpo District, Oturkpo Division, Benue – Plateau State, from a very fine and very traditional storyteller, Omale Udo. In the Idoma version, the mysterious stranger is dressed-up excrement, [not a skull or lion] who must return the borrowed clothes and body parts; and the girl is not rescued, but turns into a fly, who remains wedded to faeces. It is clear then that both Tutuola and Ogunmola [who adapted *The Palm-wine Drunkard* to a play titled, *Omuti*], in making their own adaptation were drawing on their own memory of the [same] story (*Callaloo* No 8/10: 167).

Basically, this version shares a remarkable semblance with Tutuola’s or all the other versions of the same story. Stories like this were teleological within the African setting that Tutuola and other African writers were familiar with. They were meant to

teach certain morals, and to explain some superstitious mysteries. For instance, all the version of the story reveal certain superstitious beliefs about the market place, which most Africans believe is often replete with all manners of creatures including ghost and non-human creatures that masquerade as human beings and leave their abodes to trade with human beings. The redolence of the market with human and gnostic creatures is a popular superstition in the Yoruba cosmology. Thus in bringing the story of the Complete Gentleman into his creative world, Tutuola seems to utilize as trajectory the Yoruba oral artefacts in the developmental fixities of his narratives. He sets his protagonist on a quest with the belief in what “old people were saying that the whole people who had died in this world did not go to heaven directly” (*The Palm-wine Drinkard*: 9).

This summarily explains why Tutuola utterance is not to be taken too seriously when he said “I believe that ghosts exist. If a ghost did not exist, there would be no name for it.” This is so because it would be wrong to accept that Tutuola wrote about ghost just merely because there was a name for it. He wrote about ghosts and “curious creatures” unequivocally because the belief in them forms a part of the Yoruba, or by extension, African tradition. To Fox, Tutuola’s own syllogism that if ghost did not exist, then, there would be no name for it is naïve especially since language can “fictionalize” by having words for imaginary things. To confirm this position, Fox says:

I have heard Africans with advanced university education tell me, with regards to this or that “magical” occurrence, that it must be true because it is so widely believed. And there is no doubt that Tutuola is among the believers. On another occasion, for example, he told us that ancient Yoruba belief contains idea that everyone originally was located as two, and that the other (spiritual) self, or doppelganger is known as the supreme second (*Research in African Literature* Vol 29: 207).

Therefore, whatever exists in Tutuola’s world of the Complete Gentleman is easily understood by the Yoruba reader.

Tutuola also borrows the anthropomorphic realism of the Yoruba folktales and mythology by creating a super-human character who is blessed with the abundance of Juju – African magical power – and mystical power with which the many magical transformations in the text are possible. This special power, Tutuola extends to the other “curious” characters in his novel. This is perhaps why the drinkard’s mysterious child possesses the power to foment as much troubles, even as an infant, and to resurrect as a “half bodied baby” after having been burnt to ashes.

Again we reckon with the fact that the story of the “half bodied baby” as presented in *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* is not totally Tutuolan. The same story is contained in the myriad of stories told to the brave hunters by Iragbeje at Oke Langbodo in Fagunwa’s *The Forest of the Thousand Daemons*. As such, Tutuola’s Zurrjir is a reincarnation of Fagunwa’s Ajantala. Tutuola’s indebtedness to Fagunwa is further reinforced in the following excerpt from *The Forest of A Thousand Daemons*

Once a woman gave birth to a child, a very beautiful child, but no sooner was the child born

than he began speaking loud in these words, ‘Ha! is this how the world is? Why did I ever come? I had no idea it was such a rotten place. I thought the world would be as spotless as heaven! Ha! just look at the pit and look at the mound! Look at the cow dung in the middle of the town! Look at the dirt in the open. I have surely had it, I won’t be long returning to heaven, no doubt about that. (106).

This is no doubt why Adeniji simply concludes, when he discovers the intimacy between Ajantala and Zurrjir, that

Undoubtedly, Zurrjir is based on Ajantala and, like him, is depicted as an agent of societal destruction. His demonic inclinations are borne out of an emotional deficiency; he finds it impossible to love his fellow men, not even his parents. Consequently, he cannot relate harmoniously to them. (in Ezeigbo and Aribisala, 2006:196)

Whereby Fagunwa brings his own version as a moral elucidation for why some animals stay in the bush and some stay as domestic animals at homes, Tutuola seems to re-invent the mythical and superstitious world of the Yoruba which shared the belief that there are some superhuman children.

CONCLUSION

This essay attempted to showcase the intertextual relationship that exists between Tutuola’s novel and that of Fagunwa. This relationship lies in the authors’ choices of hypotexts. Through these novels, we discover that the condensed orality in the African novel structurally “transmogrifies” or “defamiliarizes” it to a unique piece of hybrid nature. Hence, the term “*litorature*” may better account for the oral tendencies and the foregrounded western literary formula in the instance of the African novel. We can therefore prove that countless numbers of the African novel in the category of *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and *The Forest of A Thousand Daemons* exhibit this trait of orality only that it is difficult to do justice to these within the space provided here. This is why our selected corollaries here are to be regarded as mere specimens of a canon. At least from the analysis so far made, it is clear that “suspension of belief” is a problem within the African fictional world since an average African reader appreciates that there is negligible difference between the real Africa and the imagined one in the fictional world

In Ngugi’s opinion, for instance, the written word [often] imitates the spoken word” and this may be the logical reason behind the assumption of Chinwizu and company that the oral-loric values are the enduring antecedents for the African novel. Even at quarters where this radical proposition is unfashionable, the facts still remain that the oral artefacts supply the early African novelist his literary raw-materials. This has been proved by the works of African fiction pedigrees like Achebe, Soyinka, Laye, Asare *et cetera* which exhibit the quintessentially “African” aesthetic standard. With this, the fact has been further established that an African novelist may be, quoting Ngugi, only “a stammer who tries to find articulate speech in scribbled words (1981:97).”

Hence, it is elegant to stress that the modern African writer does not create in the same context as his western counterpart who has a matrix into which he has to work his creativity. When the African novelist sets out to evolve his piece, he is always armed with the sophisticated linguistic gadget provided by the western literary tradition basically because he relies on the western type of literacy (and in some cases the western languages) to accentuate his artistic contrivance. But most remarkably, the literary tradition he evolves is not western since he must blend two distinct literary traditions by shuffling the materials of the “native oral” and “foreign written literature” to evolve his aesthetics in which the native ingredients inundate and tame the foreign influences.

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