Tale Motif as Metaphor in Nigerian Prose-Fiction: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow Of God*

By

Ben-Fred Ohia PhD
Department of English and Literary Studies,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
Phone: +2347062947849, +2348135087207, +2349078892171, +2349127000450
Email: ben-fred.ohia@ust.edu.ng

Abstract

Tale is one of the patterns used as a medium of information in Nigerian literature particularly the prose-fiction. It is one of the oral traditions adopted by modern Nigerian and African writers, using trickster figure that often manifests itself in free categories: animal, man and divinity and it is found in every culture all over the world. In many cases the tales manifest in folktales, songs, myths and legends to juxtapose the various Eurocentric and afro-centric values and create a hybridity that justifies the notion of cultural harmony. Many writers such as Isidore Okpewho, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and others categorise in different ways and draw materials from oral tradition in their works. This paper examines the use of traditional African mythopoeia (folklore) in assessing African ideological viewpoints in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow Of God*. It also assesses the use of the tale motif as metaphor assessing the path in Achebe's cultural activism in the domain of African myths, beliefs and cultural aesthetics. Thus, the paper discovers and brings to the fore the African ideology and values in the tale motif (pattern) used by Chinua Achebe in his two novels. This paper adopts the deconstruction theory to explicate Achebe's use of tale motif as metaphor in his two novels. The paper therefore concludes that the tale motif (tale pattern) in Nigerian literature has not deviated much from the tale pattern in traditional folktales. This means that the traditional tale's pattern is preserved in modern Nigerian fiction by Nigerian novelists in particular and African novelists generally.

Keywords: Tale Motif, Nigerian Prose-Fiction, Nigerian Novelists, Metaphor, Deconstructionism.

Introduction

For many renowned novelists there is usually a unique pattern that predominates their works. These patterns are fictionally utilised so much that they become a defining feature, if not the defining feature of their voices; a rare quality that is rooted in the idea of unity with regard to great art in Aristotelian/classical sense. This paper examines the tale in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow Of God* as a motif. Thus, the paper looks at it as multi-layered and multidimensional pattern that pervade Achebe's sensibility. In this regards, the paper will isolate and analyse its varied occurrences and implications in Achebe's fictional output.

One of the distinguishing factors that mark the works of Achebe as pre-independence/colonial Nigerian writer is the rootedness in socialist/cultural aesthetics. Rightly tagged "Alter-Native Tradition" by Aiyejina (1988). Achebe's literary oeuvre navigates the shores of prose-fiction. He believes as a writer that a good work of art, to borrow the words of Ngara (1990) "helps us to see more vividly the struggle between the forces of oppression and those of liberation and program (p.3). This stems from the condemnation of colonialism that dismissed with a wave of hand Nigerian native cultures and traditions, poor colonial leadership and insensitive economic policies of the colonial masters. Achebe has established a niche for himself as one of the major voices of culture affirmation in Africa through his numerous novels, foremost is his trilogy: *Thing Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer At Ease* (1961) and *Arrow Of God* (1964).

Achebe's foray into the prose-fiction genre has been widely acknowledged. The two novels analysed in this paper are profound in this thematic enterprise that rests not only in "story-telling" of the discarded traditional garb of his Igbo people of South-East Nigeria, but also assess the African/Nigerian people's ways of life/cultural heritage that have been relegated to the background by the intrusion of western orientation through colonialism. Various studies on his creative outputs in prose-fiction have focused mainly on the trilogy. He explores various African belief systems to interrogate and deconstruct several western-conditioned epistemologies about life and the universe.

In these novels, he merges the metaphysical and the physical together and creates a hybridity that conforms to African cultural values. For instance, Achebe crafted in *Things Fall Apart* concerning Obierika's response to Okonkwo on the killing of

Ikemoefuna. "What you have done will not please the earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole family" (Achebe 1958, p.46). To Achebe, therefore, all African traditional models that have been displaced by colonial ideals must be excavated and re-examined in the light of African cultural realities. Hence, he resonates the African tale pattern in the two novels. The aim of our discourse in this paper, therefore, is to establish Achebe's sense of solidarity for African beliefs and his interpretation of the universe to accommodate their ideological mooring that have been made parlous by colonialism. He foregrounds the African notion of spirits and ancestral mythopoeia.

Things Fall Apart And *Arrow Of God* As Deconstructional Discourses

In order for us to establish the notion of "tale pattern as a motif" in the context of this paper, there is the need for us to have an idea of the concept of deconstructionism as it constitutes the theoretical fulcrum of this paper. The adoption of the deconstruction theory in this paper is justifiable – it helps to investigate the hybrid consciousness that informs the creative activism of Achebe as a novelist. By deconstructional discourse, we mean an analytical and critical tool to tackle the problem of centre in the texts: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God.* The theory helps to place others and to fix things up. It is given this that the paper establishes the discountenance of the colonialists' assumption of the Igbo culture as being barbaric or non-existent as clearly stated in the two novels. It extricates the colonised people's ways of thinking from the history imperial ideological dominance in a manner that is aimed at developing the resources of their own histories and intellectual traditions.

This paper derives its resources from the theory of deconstructionism, which according to Leitch (1983) is the "reification into traditional or idle chatter be continually resisted, and when necessary, exposed" (p.72). In other words deconstructionism deals with "a hermeneutic project grounded in understanding of truth... as a-lethia – bringing into the open from hiddenness or oblivion... (Leich 2007, p.7). We can better understand the "deconstructive" tendencies of deconstruction in another sense. This is specifically in the negation of the set intention of the author. This implies that the text say many things at the same as is evident in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Derrida (1978) affirms that "the text tells a different story from what the writer consciously presents" (p.259).

As deconstructional discourses, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* leverage on African tales emphasising and substantiating the African belief that the spiritual and physical worlds constantly intermingle. The aim is to re-assert the African folk superstitions against western scientific models. For instance, the story of the great wrestler who conquered all the villages and threw everyman in the world but decided to move to the land of the spirits to wrestle is an apt clarification of African superstition and belief in the existence of two worlds – physical and spiritual. The story is thus presented in *Arrow of God* that "once there was a great wrestler whose back had never known the ground. He wrestled from village to village until he had thrown every man in the world. Then he decided that he must go and wrestle in the land of the spirits, and become champion there as well (Achebe 1964, p.26). Achebe has thus affirmed the place of African's traditional beliefs in the lives of Igbo people. Dash (1995) observes that in order to assert their nationalism to their cultures, African writers turn to "myths, legends and superstitions of the folks in order to isolate traces of the complex culture of survival which was the response of the dominated to their oppressors..." (p.200).

Tale Motif As Metaphor In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

In *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe artistically recreates the tale of the tortoise as a trickster figure, bringing allegory into the novel to represent humans with similar trickster way of life as the tortoise in the tale. However, tortoise had all the food prepared for the guests by the hosts as he asked to know whom the people of the sky prepared the food for. "But tortoise jumped to his feet and asked: "For whom have you prepared this feast?" "For all of you", replied the man. "You remember that my name is *All of you*. The custom here is to serve the spokesman first and others later. They will serve you when I have eaten" "he began to eat and the birds grumbled angrily" (Achebe 1958, p.69).

In the tale, the tortoise outwitted all the birds to attend their feast even with borrowed feathers. Although he is successful as a trickster, he is immediately buffeted with an instantaneous problem of the birds withdrawing their feathers from him. He tries to outsmart them the second time but fails through the smartness and wisdom of parrot in the tale. Ekwefi as the narrator puts it thus: "once upon a time, she began, all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky. They were very happy and began to prepare themselves for the great day. They painted

their bodies with red cam wood and drew beautify patterns on them with uli" (p.68).

At this time, the tortoise plans on the scheme to outwit the birds so to join them in the feast in the sky. He pretends to be a changed man because the birds suspect his mission as a mischief-maker. As a result of his sweet tongue, he convinced the birds in believing that he (tortoise) is a changed man. All the birds give tortoise a feather each. He is the first to arrive the sky for the meeting and the birds choose him as the spokesman for the great orator that tortoise is. "There is one important thing which we must not forget", he said as they flew on their way. "When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honour this age old custom" (Achebe 1958, p.68). All the birds are thrown into confusion because none of them has heard of this before but they respect tortoise as a widely travelled man who knew the customs of different people in different places. "And so they each took a new name. When they had all taken, Tortoise also took one. He was to be called *All Of You*" (Achebe 1958, p.68). Achebe's intellectualism and interest in African traditional folklore wears the garb of "return to the source", aimed at retelling the African ways of life through African cultural aesthetic medium to buttress the beauty of African oral tradition before destruction by colonialism.

Similarly in the spirit of invigorating African folktale in the prose-fiction genre, Achebe through Uchendu tells the story of the extinction of Abame clan. The story of mother-kite, her daughter, duckling and chick. In the tale, mother-kite sends her daughter to get food; in the process she takes a duckling whose mother never said anything. She returns the duckling and takes a chick whose mother was noisy. On interrogation by mother-kite, it is revealed that mother-duckling said nothing while mother-chick cried, raved and cursed daughter-kite. According to Uchendu in the novel, "mother-kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling, "you have done very well," said mother-kite to her daughter, "but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?" "It said nothing", replied the young kite. "It just walked away". "You must return the duckling", said mother-kite, "there is something ominous behind the silence" (Achebe 1958, Pp.98-99).

From this story, one can see an important aspect of Achebe's tale pattern in celebration of African cultural heritage, especially his juxtaposition of western (prose form) and African (oral tale) and ideological nuance.

The tale continues on how daughter-kite takes the chick from its mother and the consequence of the event. "And so daughter-kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead". "What did the mother of this chick do?" asked old kite. "It cried and raved and cursed me", said the young kite. "Then we can eat the chick", said her mother. "There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts" (Achebe 1958, p.99).

It is clear that the tale motif is a metaphor. The yoking together of these seemingly opposite ideological medels of prose and tale, explains Achebe's use of artistic paradox – a paradox that displaces the idea of superiority of one culture to another – for one thing, he priviledges the African cultural values above those of the west. Hence Obierika retorts: "Their clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake has turned the colour of blood. A great evil has come upon their land as the oracle had warned" (Achebe 1958, p.58). Furthermore, in *Arrow of God* with "the great wrestler tale", Achebe ontologises, the Igbo long held belief in the physical and spiritual worlds. He artistically creates a realistic world of the spirits with its champion wrestler and tries to describe the superiority of spirits over humans, chance the victory of spirit wrestler over his human challenger. He also reiterates the Igbo belief in personal god (chi). "So they sent him his personal god, a little wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth" (Achebe 1964, p.27). The hallmark of infusing oral tales in the novel is to teach morals as is characteristic of African tale. This tale expounds the fact that humans are a mere arrow in the bow of the gods, they prove superior in any encounter with humans. This is made explicit in the novel with the words of Achebe concerning Oduche locking the royal python in a box thus: who was Ezeulu to tell his deity how to fight the jealous cult of sacred pythons? It was a fight of the gods. He was a mere arrow in the bow of his god" (Achebe 1964, p.192).

The above tale tends to substantiate the assertion of Dada (1986) that: "oral tradition or folklore has had a very influence on the development of modern

African writing. Folklore motifs abound in African model as is evident from the profuse use of African imagery, proverbs, local customs and practices, beliefs, mystery, magic, witchcraft, axioms, adages, and social talents" (p.28). The view of Obiechinna (1967) on the above also deserves attention. According to him:

> "it is by incorporating the oral tradition of West Africa in their writings that they have largely succeeded in giving an air of authenticity to their writing and established a consciousness which is characteristically West African culture is that within it, oral tradition continues to exist side by side with encroaching literary tradition" (p.65).

The story of "Eneke Ntulukpa" narrated by Ugoye in *Arrow of God* is a good instance of African oral tradition in a literary tradition. In the story, a man had two wives and many children while the junior wife had only one child, the senior wife is wicked and envious similar to the tales of wicked step-mother in African oral tradition. "One day the man and his family went to work on their farm. This farm was at the boundary between the land of men and the land of spirits..." (Achebe 1964, Pp.190-191). There is another tale about "the big ukwa fruit and the king's son" with its solo and refrain pattern that was rendered by Obiageli, Nkechi, and Nwafo in the novel.

Obiageli: And who will punish this water for me?
E – e Nwaka Dimkpolo
Earth will dry up the water for me
E – e Nwaka Dimkpolo
Who will punish this earth for me?
Nkechi: "No, no, no, Nkechi broke in.

"What can happen to the earth, silly?" asked Nwafo. (Achebe 1964, p.65).

As a metaphoric assertion, the tale is an iconic signification of spiritual presences in the physical world. It is also a metaphor for the expression of imponderable phenomena. This is because man's memory is limited. Thus, man also re-creates that which may outlive him/her. Hence the idea of using tales becomes relevant even in highly literate and "sophisticated" world. People render tales to counter challenges of daily life. In many cases, the tale becomes a natural medium to relate events in sequence. Achebe has extensively explored the utilisation of the tale as a

motif; an instrument of expression in the two novels. He uses the tale motif to navigate the traditional and cultural nuances in the two novels – *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* respectively.

Conclusion

The tale motif as a metaphor in Nigerian prose-fiction has not deviated much from the tale-motif in Nigerian oral tradition folktales. In other words, Chinua Achebe has continued to fuse the traditional tale pattern in his novels. Apart from that, this paper has shown that oral tradition is a veritable source, fertile ground that Achebe often resorts to for his materials. These oral traditions of which the tale motif is a part are the sources which Achebe draws inspiration from. This is why Akyea (1975) observes that: "There is no doubt that for most African writers, oral traditional is the inspiration for much of their works (p.117). Achebe and other novelists, especially of the twenty-first century, who continue to adopt the resources of oral tradition to localise the content of their works should be applauded.

This trend will, more than ever before, lead to a new trend in African literature, contrary to Nnolim's charge to African writers of the twenty-first century to desist from doing so. According to Nnolim (2006), "The 21st century beckons Africans to embrace new challenges in this epoch of globalisation. If African literature in the 20th century suffered from imaginative timidity, it has no reason to be so confined in the 21st century. Our literature should no longer be contented to be fixated on our cultural moorings" (p.4).

From the foregoing, therefore, one can say that Nnolim is in a bid to take African literature back to "Egypt". But Achebe's thematic thrust in the novels is the re-assessment of African ideological index in the interpretation of the universal in the use of concrete tales. He has affirmed his position as a cultural nationalist whose hope is to bring to focus his people's belief systems. As Hale (2006) puts it, "we must deal with one of the most deeply rooted of these poisonous weeds – they belief that there was no writing in Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans" (p.11).

Recommendations

The understanding of traditional African culture with its attendant aesthetics is essential to understanding its art so as to better judge and enjoy it. In other words, part of the indices of using the African tale pattern as a motif in his two novels, Achebe explains the desire of the oppressed to look inward. Therefore, the paper recommends the use of the tales in African prose tradition as a call for reclamation of the African ways of doing things, telling the colonised people's story from their own perspective. The employment of the tale pattern in prose tradition contributes to the understanding of African religions, culture and tradition which for the bases of themes in the Nigeria prose fiction, hence it aids the spontaneous flow and expands the thematic and stylistic range of Achebe's prose narrative. It is also recommended for all African novelists as it sheds significant light on the writers' development as it destroys the pernicious effect of European colonialism on the Africans. It also encourages Nigerians to hold on to our traditional beliefs that there was literature, culture, tradition and African peculiar ways of doing things, telling stories prior to the arrival of Europeans. If these recommendations are kept, we could reach "the goal, recapture our lost humanity and re-establish the African personality and envision a new Africa.

References

Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart.* Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God.* Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Aiyejina, F. (1988). "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition. *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present* (1). Lagos: Guardian Literary Series.

Akyea, A. (1975). "Tradition in African Literature: J.P Clark". Christopher Heywood (ed.). *Perspectives in African Literature.* London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.

Dada, P. O. (1986), "The Tradition of the African Novel". S. O. Asein and A. O. Ashaolu (eds.). *Studies in the African Novel.* Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, Pp.27-36.

Dash, M. (1995). "Marvellous Realism: The Way Out Of Negritude". *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader.* London: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.). London: Routledge.

Hale, T. A. (2006). "Bursting at the seams: New Dimensions for African Literature in the 21st Century". *New Directions in African Literature 25,* Pp.10-21.

Nnolim, C. E. (2006). "African Literature in the 21st Century: Challenges For Writers And Critics". *New Directions in African Literature 25*, Pp.1-9.

Ngara, E. (1986). *Ideology and Form in African Poetry: Implications for Communication.* London: James Curry.

Nnolim, C. E. (2010). *Approaches to the African Novel: Essays In Analysis* Third Edition – Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.

Obiechinna, E. (1957). "Transition from Oral to Literary Tradition". *Presence Africane* 2(1), Pp.56-83.