



The importance of symbolism in African fictional works: The Palm wine Drinkard and secret lives by Amos Tutuola and Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

This article is about the study of *Symbolism in Fictional Works by Amos Tutuola and Ngugi wa-Thiong'o*. It is about to get ourselves to be apprehensive on both concepts in order to have a better use of this important concept. Highlighting new data of it suggesting a new approach to its use through study constitute my main objective. The present article is based on the symbolism in order to analyze and show realities of the two civilizations. Since some literary works' analysis is done by taking into account only westerners' view points, I will try to correct the false impression they have on African people in most African writings. Eventually, this article proves that some writers have a tendency to use both concepts according to the western point of view to express African realities in their literary works. I expect that, with this analysis many will realize that the unique way of enhancing the value of Africans' local realities in African literary works is to make them symbolically well understood as seen by African societies.

Keywords: symbolism, civilizations, African realities, culture

1. Introduction

Every community is identified by its culture and civilization. As far as African people are concerned, they developed specific way of literary works that distinguished them from the one of other people. The use of symbolism in either oral or written literature makes their fictional work different from those who are trained in western countries. The reason why I am writing the present article is that many people value or evaluates African fictional works based on the training received from Europe. Since this cannot expect a fair result from such attitude, it is necessary I work on symbolism focusing my analysis on two (2) famous African writers who skillfully use these two (2) notions in their fictional works mainly in Tutuola's *the Palm wine drinkard* and Ngugi's *Secret Lives*. Through the present work, I shall show what does the word symbolism mean, and what they specifically mean in African community. They are used in Africans folk tales to inform the other communities that black people think differently, love differently and appreciate differently things without falling into the trap of uncivilized or primitive people. The term pre-logic or primitive society may no more be attributed to black people when scholars approach and learn how specific these people were and remain till nowadays.

2. Methodology

The study is mainly a literature applied research one which is based on an extensive library research of published and unpublished materials. However, the study is also carried out according to the reader's response theory as a methodology which consists in the interpretation of Tutuola's and Ngugi's texts depending on the experience of the reader. Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Ngugi's

Secret Lives are my primary source of information in this article. All the concepts of African realities used as themes and techniques will be examined. My secondary source of information includes books consulted in the process of the study which are articles written on the authors which can be found in journals, seminars, projects. Among other sources I can mention Narang Harish's *Politics as Fiction: The Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, N. Dzobo's '*African Symbols and Proverbs as Sources of Knowledge' in Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*' or Achille Mbembe and Mitsch's '*Life, Sovereignty and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola*'. However, the major method I use in dealing with this research work is that of the reader-response theory which is according to Browse "*a theory, which gained prominence in the late 1960s, that focuses on the reader or audience reaction to a particular text, perhaps more than the text itself*".

3. Resultats

Symbolism is important devices for every reader to recognize in African literatures and to fully understand their contextual meanings. As it is written in literature, symbols are widely employed in various forms of African Oral Literature for probing deep literary, moral, and spiritual matters. These important notions stand for important devices some African writers skillfully use in their literary works since African literature refers to literature of and from Africa in the present context. While the European perception of literature generally refers to only written letters, the African concept includes both oral and written literature. On the whole, the purpose of this present study has been to show how the elements of "folklore" go into the making of the two works of fiction; *The Palm-Wine*

Drinkard and *Secret Lives* through the concept of Symbolism. The words symbolism has been defined from several points of views by different scholars, and it is shown that both *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *Secret Lives* have dealt with symbolic elements which well depict the political, social and spiritual factors highlighted by Amos Tutuola and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o at various events related to literature and to history.

From my personal reading of the selected corpus, I perceive my thought moving simultaneously in two directions. The first is the literal or surface level meaning whereas the other is inward or unrevealed level meaning, through which I try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make. In both cases I deal with symbolic elements and I have dealt with a series of such representations in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Secret lives*. Without any doubt, though the fictional works are presented as a refinement of African tales, they also reproduce the continent's historical phases. African novels reflect the image of the society and knowing that an image has an actual representation which is nothing but the actual society. What matter today are not only what they present in their works but mainly how they succeed in conveying their ideas with the "how" being more important than the "what". Symbolism has been throughout the works under study, the primarily ways on which stresses are laid in the present work to describe African past and present realities. So, most African literary productions can be fully understood if these two concepts are objects of literary studies.

Through this research work, I come up with the result that Ngũgĩ and Tutuola have, artfully, written texts that penetrate even the most insensible hearts of Africans to show what is not only Kenya's and Nigerian's realities and traditions but mainly the ill-treatment White people have laid upon the black community to abandon what they term "savage life". This situation really led Tutuola and Ngũgĩ to fight for the promotion of their cultures, for the independence of their countries, and of Africa at large, thus hoping to lead Africa to a sustainable development through literature. It is necessary to agree on the point that people don't always say what they mean and don't always mean what they say. An unreasonable thought can be used to express the reasonable one and this is what I implicitly pointed from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *Secret Lives* basing on symbolism.

However, the effectiveness of Tutuola and Ngũgĩ's methods of conveying their messages cannot be fully appreciated if readers fail to see the parallels between oral literature and written literature. Through my analysis I can assert that symbolism is devices that lead to the development and the assessment of Africans' cultures and traditions through literature. To reach that goal, Tutuola and Ngũgĩ have then worked to adopt good strategies for writing oral literature to prevent their readers from turning their back to their traditions and cultures that once symbolised their identity.

In *The Palm Wine Drinkard* for instance, Tutuola personifies many abstract concepts, such as "Dance, Song and Drum," but the personification of laughter is most intriguing. When laugh laughs, everyone laughs with it, including the narrator and his wife, almost despite themselves, as if against their will. Tutuola's work seeks to find a bridge between the change and the conservation, between life and death. Where he aims to criticize colonial conquest he also did, a sustenance he can use to accept the

inevitalities of life, not only welcoming them but, venturing out into the unknown in search of them, producing a society capable of enduring itself and so never dying a collective death.

In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, where all of them have a specific meaning and stand for something else.. As such here is what I can say about them along with their symbolical interpretation:

- Cowries, a means of exchange represents the money in African civilisation,
- The Dead's Town represents the western civilization,
- The pound/£ represents the invaders' currency,
- The magic egg represents the drinkard's power,
- The juju represents the traditional African power,
- The skull represents the British etc.

All these words listed above are useful symbols wisely used by Tutuolato build up and give meaning to his novel.

In Kongi's *Harvest*, the Rituals symbolically represented as symbol of transformation in Soyinka's drama: a study of Death and the king's horseman, *Kongi's Harvest* and the *Bacchae of Euripides*. Focusing on the use of ritual in three of his plays (*Death and the King's Horseman*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Bacchae of Euripides*) the study does two major things. The modern replacement for the traditional authority is also a kind of dictator. In *Kongi's Harvest* though Oba's power is curbed, his spiritual and moral grip is retained...*Kongi's Harvest* delves deep into the problem of the ruler of Isma. It is not only the traditional ruler Oba Danlola or the usurper Kongi.

Symbolism appears very important to African writers. It expresses our own realities and need to be encouraged in the study of literature. This is a way to safeguard the value African tradition. Even if everything is not good in African civilization, we need to separate the wheat from the chaff. Not only did mal authors defend symbolically the way African people lives a female writes interesting production through her novel *Efuru*. She mainly writes about women conditions.

African woman describes symbolically what happen in her own community to the world. The appearance of her hair ranges from straight, curly to kinky black and combed straight back. ^{[3][4]} Incorrectly, mostly western sources have suggested the name "Mami Wata" is pidgin English for "Mother Water". This is impossible as the deities existed in Africa long before colonization on the continent allowed English to infiltrate. The Mami Wata name is Ethiopian and Egyptian in origin and is linked to ancient African culture, spiritual belief systems, and folklore. The Ethiopian words "mama" indicated wisdom or truth while "uat-ur" meant ocean water. Additionally, in some early languages of the Sudan "wata" referred to a woman. Commonly thought to be a single entity, the term actually refers to a pantheon of African water deities. These African cultures were matriarchical and though "Mami Wata" can refer to males and females, they are most typically thought of as feminine and often take on a female form in art. ^[5]

The main character, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart* is often described in terms of fire and flames - his nickname is even 'Roaring Flame' - so, to him, fire symbolises potential, masculinity, and life. Okonkwo is a lot like a fire, really. He only ever allows himself to show one emotion: anger.

An Igbo fable concerning the tortoise and the birds has gained wide distribution because it occurs in the famous

novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.

The tortoise, which is a West African trickster figure, hears of a feast to be given by the sky-dwellers to the birds and persuades them to take him with them, winged in their feathers. There he tells the hosts that his name is 'All-of-you' and, when they provide the food with the assurance that 'This is for all of you', claims the entire feast. The enraged birds claim their feathers back and leave. Only the parrot will agree to take a message to the tortoise's wife to pull the bedding from his house and leave it on the ground. Instead the parrot tells her to bring out all the hard things so that when the tortoise jumps down its shell is broken. He survives, however, and the broken shell is glued together. This provides the explanation of why the tortoise's shell is so uneven. *The symbol of kola nut is expressed in Things Fall Apart as a model of African writers.* The inclusion of the kola nut ritual is an important part of Chinua Achebe's description of the Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart*. The kola nut is broken and eaten when a host welcomes a guest into his home, and it's a powerful symbol of mutual respect, community, hospitality and life when they are brought into a home. There are other things he used symbolically. Yams are grown to increase wealth and also to feed their family. They are a symbol of masculinity. The coco yams in *Things Fall Apart* symbolize wealth, manhood, and prosperity. In Chinua Achebe's novel, "*Things Fall Apart*", the python is presented as a sacred animal in Ibo culture, because it is literally a symbol of the god of water.... On page 117, Achebe writes, "Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia."

Wolé Soyinka depicts African culture showing Yoruba people situations through their culture and their relation with white people in Africa.

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Wole Soyinka a Nigerian writer, select his symbolically his characters to make his play more understandable to the users of his text.

The Jewel: Sidi is considered the Jewel of the village, exploited and exposed by the foreign photographer. Sidi was renowned for her beauty and was desired by many of the men in the village. Because of this, she was considered as the Jewel of the village.

The Lion: Baroka is the chief of the village and despite his age was still sexually active and still considered manly. Baroka was searching for a new wife, and won over Sidi with his manly ways. Baroka is compared to an African symbol for strength, the lion, which could be comparable to our bear.

Lakunle: Lakunle represents the influence of western society in the village. Lakunle was taught in a western style manner and tries to promote those ideas in the minds of his hometown villagers.

The Railroad: The railroad represents western civilization advancements in technology as well. It also is a reappearance of Lakunle's symbol. Thus it also represents the forcing of western ideas on the unwilling villagers.

Stamps: The stamps in which Baroka tempts Sidi to put her face on represent the falsehoods, which Baroka tempts Sidi with.

Photographer/magazine: The magazine symbolizes the reoccurring theme of technology and western culture dominating other cultures. The magazine was also the vector for Sidi's developing vein self-image.

Bridal Price: The bridal price represents the village's customs, which Lakunle feels are barbaric. Sidi's reluctance

to wed without the bridal price also represents her pride. Without a bridal price she believes she would be considered de-flowered.

Sadiku: Baroka's first wife, Sadiku, represents the initiation of Baroka's deceitful plan to win over Sidi. Sadiku symbolizes the gossipy woman who cannot hold her tongue.

Wrestling/Drums: The wrestling and drumming taking place in Baroka's house when Sidi enters are used to reinforce Baroka's established masculinity which he hides in order to rape Sidi.

Besides all this, Wole Soyinka presented a play predicting symbolically not only Nigerian but also all African countries' posterity at the eve of Nigerian Independence Day.

In South Africa Peter Abrahams makes use of the symbolism to describe the social situation existing in his country. Xuma falls in love with Eliza, which points out the clash between traditionalism and modernity. He desperately wants Eliza's love but she wants the comforts of a white man's life. It is Maisy, the simple happy girl who genuinely loves Xuma. The symbol of colour is also expressed in the same document to deal with African people and white people.

In *Mine Boy*, the readers learn about the story of the city and the customs. The customs are the black people whereas the city is the whites. When the white people came, they were welcomed by the blacks warmly. The whites seemed ungrateful but since they were quiet, they thought they would not cause any harm but with time, the whites changed and they destroyed their culture.

4. Discussion

The actual situation I am dealing with in the present research work is that many people ignore the good roles symbolism plays in the literary work. Without this, the explanation of African literary works won't be satisfactory. The definitions of the concept symbolism is necessary for further development and will make people reach not only the literal meanings but also the unrevealed level meanings. Symbolism is the applied use of symbols: iconic representations that carry particular meanings. The term "symbolism" is limited to be used in contrast to "*representationalism*"; defining the general directions of a linear spectrum - where in all symbolic concepts can be viewed in relation, and where changes in context may imply systemic changes to individual and collective definitions of symbols. It is also a figure of speech that is used when an author wants to create a certain mood or emotion in a work of literature. Symbolism is the use of an object, person, situation, or word to represent something else in literature. It can be used metaphorically or allegorically in a novel in order to enrich the message the author is conveying.

The concept of symbolism is perceived differently in African literature and in the fictional works. The emotional attitudes are generally attributed to African people whereas the reasonable ones are said to be western. Every analysis focuses is base one European criteria as far as literary devices are concerned. When we want to respect the identity and the culture of the writers, it will be advisable or preferable to consider the origin of the writers instead of blaming them because the work is different from what comes from abroad. It is common to African writer to use spontaneously symbolism to express themselves.

By so doing, it is normal that the use of symbolism in

African literary work could be more easily understood by the Black than any other people. We should avoid saying that what derives from Africa is pre-logic whereas the product from the colonizer are logic. Such behavior can be against the globalization nowadays. It is high time we separate the wheat from the chaff. African learns what is symbolic from the western by the other way round is complicated.

The way African people learn from overseas the same way what is good from Africa can be exported. Among many, the use of symbolism can be a matter of exchange as a cultural matter.

In any literary work, language is always the primary center of attention. This is because it is the vehicle that helps portraying the message and other stylistic beauties which in their turn help propagating and promoting the desired message of a writer. Language is used for many purposes and as far as it is concerned, it has a functional assumption which is the one which defines language as a form of communication. So, as literary work becomes an inevitable tool in the human society, a culture will not be complete without taking into account the creative works that serve different functions for the inhabitants of such a society. Language comes in here because it is the vehicle through which a society evolves and progresses.

As a result of this necessity, the abandonment of English in literary writing is highly debatable. As a result, I can affirm that Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* is heavily influenced by the writer's mother tongue and its oral tradition. I can even say that the English used in the work is a 'yorubaised' one. Quite a good number of Gabriel Okara's works is also highly hybridized. *The Forest of a Thousand Deemons*, Soyinka's interpretation of Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmole* is another extraordinary example where Soyinka deliberately transliterates his narratives.

At another level, given the Western reviews, it is not surprising that African intellectuals of the time saw Tutuola's works as bad for the race, believing that his stories mainly in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* showed Nigerians as illiterate and superstitious drunks. Actually, they worry that the novel confirms Europeans' racist "fantastic" concepts of Africa, "a continent of which they are profoundly ignorant."^[1] Some criticized his novels as unoriginal, labelling it as little more than a retelling of Yoruba tales heard in the village square. But, it is only later that Tutuola's works begin to rise in the general estimation. Critics begin to value Tutuola's literary style as a unique exploration of the possibilities of African folklore instead of the more typical realist imitation of European novels. Some even claim that the contributions Tutuola makes is to "kill for ever any idea that Africans are copyists of the cultures of other races."^[2]

Finally, to pay tribute to Tutuola, he is seen as a "pioneer of a new literary form, based on an ancient verbal style."^[3] As such, rather than seeing his books as mere imitation, critics begin to note that Tutuola has done a great deal "to impose an extra-ordinary unity upon his apparently random collection of traditional material" and that what may have started as "fragments of folklore, ritual and belief" had "all passed through the transmuting fire of an individual

imagination."^[4] Therefore, for the sake of safeguarding African traditional customs, values and cultures, here are the perspectives I can recommend to be taken into account so as to strengthen Tutuola's approaches as far as his objective of exposing African tales to the entire world:

First, by reading Tutuola's works, one can learn a lot about Nigeria and Africa. One can know about its people, their beliefs, their opinions and their aspirations. It is a must to read literature from Africa because Africa is being recognised increasingly as a continent whose destiny is crucial to the future of the planet. An understanding of its ecology, biodiversity and the condition of its people and their socio-political, economic and cultural institutions is becoming ever more fundamental to the advancement and consolidation of well-being, peace and tolerance in the world.

Next, through Tutuola's works, I am sure that the International Community becomes extremely well informed about Africa and its peoples and sensitive to its condition. As African countries move further along their historical timelines, distancing themselves from the colonial and post-Independence eras, opportunities are arising for African countries to reassert their national identities and to try to unify their resources, their economies and their aspirations within the framework of a single continent. As such, writers must commit themselves in the path of Tutuola's style.

Moreover, through Tutuola's works, I can say that it is compulsory for the elites to think about what parameters will best serve for writing, reading and studying African literatures in an English language that will be more helpful for the understanding of African literary works.

In Traditional Africa, it is relatively easy for poets and playwrights to communicate with their respective audiences. As such literary writings like poetry, plays and genres, in a word 'oratures' or literatures in their diffusions, are more closely associated with African cultures. However, in order to grasp the significance of African literary work by an African writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o gives his opinion about the use of an extremely clear language. He has become well-known in recent years for his stand in respect of Gikuyu, his mother tongue. Thus, in *Decolonising the Mind*, he says his "farewell to English."

As a writer's aim at reconstructing his community's identity following its contact with the western world which involves serious consideration, Ngũgĩ then sees language not only as the medium through which people identify and describe the world around them but also as the medium through which a culture perceives, constructs, revitalises and perpetuates itself. According to Ngũgĩ, the use of the Gikuyu language in literature is essential for the reconstruction of Gikuyu culture. In fact, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o considers the use of the English language in African literary works to be a threat to the survival of the Africa's pre-colonial cultures and customs. He perceives the continuing use of English in Africa as a "cultural bomb" in the sense that it destroys the collective memories of history and culture among the indigenous peoples and is a means of perpetuating the dominance of the former colonial masters. Thus, writing in African languages is, therefore, a way of saving African cultural identity.

In order to preserve Africans' values, some critics even support Ngũgĩ's perspective of using indigenous languages

¹ Lindfors Bernth, *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*. Washington: Three Continents Press, 1975, p. 41

² *Ibid*, p.44

³ *Ibid*, p.51

⁴ Staff Writer, "Portrait: A Life in the Bush of Ghosts". West Africa. Web: accessed 08/09/2014.

to relate African realities in literatures produced in Africa. Among these critics, I can mention the South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele who agrees and maintains that for African writers to write in English for an African readership is counter-productive. Thus, Mphahlele's African aesthetics require that literature by African writers which is addressed to African readers should be in their indigenous language so that awareness of their political and cultural identity is enhanced and consolidated. Elsewhere, supporting Ngũgĩ's approach, I can mention Charles Mungoshi a writer who has also been at the forefront of efforts to promote his first language, 'Shona', in Zimbabwe. His first novel *Makunun'unu maodzamwoyo* (1970) is in 'Shona' translated in the following: *Brooding Breeds Despair*.

In general, most of Ngũgĩ's fictional writing contain a great deal of autobiographical information, struggle for cultural freedom and self identity. Ngũgĩ himself actually expresses in his writings his own process of reappraisal and re-evaluation through which he reaches the conviction that the "Mau Mau" has been not only a heroic but also a very effective movement in the struggle for Gikuyu, Kenyan and African liberation. At the same time, Ngũgĩ presents a model in the continuing fight for social justice in the framework of the continuing class conflict.

Therefore, for the sake of supporting Ngũgĩ's approaches to decolonizing Africans' minds from what have been left into Africans by the colonizers, here are some perspectives which can be taken into account so as to strengthen Ngũgĩ's approaches as far as his objective of spiritual and mental liberation of the Africa continent is concerned: first, Africans must really start decolonizing they minds because every responsible decision starts from the believe system attitude. Next, to strengthen and make theeconomymore dynamic, Africans need to create local private sectors or enterprises instead of relying on foreign supports alone. Then, Africans must search for a new type of leadership so as to not merely copy others ways. After that, Educational system must be reviewed in order to give a special place to the African languages and its promotion in African schools. Finally, the African elites must think about which particular language can be chosen and used in order to have a specific language in Africa to reach the African audience.

5. Conclusion

All along this study, I can end up in saying that the purpose of this present study has been to show how the elements of folklore go into the making of the novel; *The Palm Wine Drinkard* through the concept of Symbolism.

On the whole, the novels of Tutuola have a deeper significance in the way the act of story-telling is well highlighted in the sense that their authors make readers feel how, in particular, Nigerian and African people, in general, must have felt under different circumstances in different time in this one continent. Besides, stories are found to play a set of functions to make moral and didactic comments, as a medium of entertainment, to spread knowledge about legends, mythological beings, disillusionments brought by independence and glories of the past.

African writers will be well understood if only if the use of the literarily devices symbolism is well mastered by both the writer and the reader. In that way they can participate in the development of literature. Our past can use the present vehicle to speak to its future. The African continent is unique for many reasons: our diverse landscapes, melting

pot of cultures, rich biodiversity, fertile soils and vast mineral wealth. We're the cradle of civilisation. We're home to the longest river, largest desert and fastest animal. Many know what to write but writers know how to write interesting texts about themselves in order to reveal their identities.

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