The Written Text in a Context of Orality: an Approach to the African Novel

O Texto Escrito no Contexto da Oralidade: uma Abordagem ao Romance Africano

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Summary

The purpose of this study is to show how the context of orality deeply influences the structure of the African novel, contributing to its identity. The first part of the paper serves as a support for the second one, in which it emphasizes that the African novel clearly portrays its cultural and political context. The second part, then, analyzes how characteristics of orality are manifested in the written work.

Resumo

O propósito deste estudo é mostrar como o contexto da oralidade influencia profundamente a estrutura do romance africano, contribuindo para a identidade deste. A primeira parte deste trabalho serve como apoio para a segunda, uma vez enfatizando que o romance africano retrata claramente seu contexto político e cultural. A segunda parte, pois, analisa como características da oralidade são manifestadas no texto escrito.

The purpose of this research paper is to show how the African novel has evolved in the twentieth century in terms of theme, style, purpose or objective, and form. With a focus on the latter, I will demonstrate how written form of certain novels creates a fictional representation of the external world and how it incorporates and reflects the African oral tradition.

The paper will be divided into two main segments. The first deals with the development of the African novel; it provides a theoretical framework and historical background for the second, which constitutes an analysis of three representative novels that contain basic characteristics of oral literature. Before outlining general features present in works, I would like to discuss two important aspects regarding the identity of the African novel.

The contemporary African novel of the second·half of the twentieth century and the early works, written during the first half of the century or before, derive from the European literary tradition. As Chidi Amuta explains, African writers were to a certain extent influenced by western novels, since these "formed part of the literature syllabus of colonialist education in different parts of Africa" (125). The African novel, however, is not a mere 'deviation' of the European novel. African writers have not simply copied European literary forms: they have adapted them to their own literary context. In other words, the written text in Africa is a product of its context, Obviously different from the European one.

Referring to the question of whether the African novel is the same as the western novel, Charles Larson indicates that there are similarities, but the African novel has developed its own peculiar characteristics, in that "in spite of the lack of several typical unities which are generally considered to hold the western novel together,

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that is, to give it its structural background, the African writer has created new unities which give his fiction form and pattern" (21). On the other hand, several critics have stated that the novel is the only literary genre which does not have African roots — in contrast to poetry and drama.[1] As Frantz Fanon has written, "we today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe (253)". The question that emerges here is: have African writers totally copied the novel as a literary genre, or have they simply borrowed the written form of the novel to function as concrete documentation for the oral narrative of the continent?

Based on the African oral tradition, it can be affirmed that the folk tale could very well have provided the 'seed' for the written novel of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. As McEwa notes, "novels ... depend before anything else on the art of story-telling" (28). The western influence should not be disregarded; however, the African novel may be seen as written and expanded versions of tales. Both the novel and the tale imply the narration of a story, and in this case, the role of the writer may be compared to that of the teller.

The fact that many novelists choose to write in European languages may occasionally lead to misinterpretation of their intentions. The use of a European language raises the question of identity, but it does not necessarily imply imitation of European models. In the same way that the African writer 'borrows' the novel as a literary genre, he also 'borrows' European languages as a vehicle for the creating of his texts. Amos Tutuola's The Palm-Wine Drinkard (1953) and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), for example, are written in the same language as that used by Charles Dickens and James Joyce. However it is rather a

modified usage of the English language, which is then adapted to African linguistic patterns. It is an innovated and innovative language: it allows the 'intrusion' of vernacular terms, as well as the imposition of a foreign syntax, through which musicality and rhythm overflow. Figures of speech, such as hyperbole, repetition and onomatopoeia are constantly present. It is through language structure that one of the most important features of orality is portrayed, that being the use of proverbs. This 'unusual' language indicates a need to read the novels in an also 'unusual' way. Although the language is western, the texts are not western and should not be read as such. All of this must be kept clearly in mind in order to avoid criticizing African fiction by looking at it through 'western eyes'. An unbiased approach is, thus, necessary.

The Rise of the Novel

From a chronological point of view, poetry was the first literary genre to appear in Africa, in terms of written literature. It was soon followed by the novel form, which representatively began to manifest itself in the early 1900's. Thomas Mofolo, a South African, published The Traveler of the East in 1906; several other works then followed. The first group of novels and novelists must be studied separately. They share common and unique characteristics, such as the praising of the colonizers and the changes brought by these, especially christ-ianity. Because of the small number of writers, there was hardly any competition among them, as regards publishing in Europe. Critics point out that the first African novels, considered to be artless and 'raw' narratives, were published in Europe due only to a certain 'paternalism' and hunger for exotica (Owomoyela 76).

In 1953, the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola published The Palm-Wine Drinkard. At that time, Europe was more aware of Africa and its literary development, and Tutuola's novel, at first criticized for being a series of episodic tales awkwardly arranged, was later praised for its narrative spontaneity and simplistic, but original and creative use of language. From then on, a series of other novels were published. An examination of general characteristics of African novels reveals that they tend toward realistc portrayals of specific settings and historical moments. Basically one may identify two distinct 'generations' of writers, each with its own particular features: a first one, grouping writers of the 1950's and 1960's; and a second, from the 1970's up to today — a generation of post-colonial writers. Each of these generations, although thematically different, is generally commited to a fictional representation of the external social and political situation.

Within the first generation of writers, a certain thematic change is evident. In the beginning of the 1950's novels tended to be documentations of African traditional life in a village, illustrating it with description of food, clothing, daily habits. Moving toward the period of independence of most British and French colonies, the 'literary mood' changed considerably. It was certainly a period of political excitement, and the focus was shifted from the traditional life to the turmoil of the quest for independence.

The decade of the sixties was undoubtedly one of nationalism, and the glory of the African past was praised. It was time to rediscover their values; the African essence had survived the years of colonialism. Consequently, the colonizer was seen as a disturbing and destructive element, and was many times even ridiculed. European materialism was put in stark contrast with the African

spiritualism, the latter being portrayed as ideal and worthy of reward.

The characters in the novels of that period are not very deeply developed, and as a result, the readers usually have an external view of them. They are mostly characterized by their actions, instead of thoughts; sometimes they are even defined by proverbs — a device which Chinua Achebe brilliantly exploits. This type of characterization is due to emphasis being placed more on the 'situational construction':[2] a group of people — rather than an individual — being affected by an event. This trend was, to a certain extent, an unconscious attitude on the part of the writers. The concept of membership of a group was embedded in their minds, and since literary production grows out of societal behavior, the situational construction was a natural consequence.

The structure of the novel was generally linear, with events following one another in chronological order, or, sometimes, it consisted of a series of stories or tales put together. The tone was a didactic one, and the novels were neither written nor read simply for the pleasure of the text itself: they were instructive too, used as a means of teaching a moral.

The 'documentary' style of African novels is another aspect worth mentioning. The eyes which supposedly see the events (the narrator) are now passing that information on to the readers. In order to create a relative distance between the narrator and what is being narrated (a distance which is implied by such narrative style), indirect speech, as well as third person narration, is preferred — as opposed to the use of dialogues in the text. The characters are seldom allowed speech, so that they do not interfere with the narrator's

documenting role, as Owomoyela remarks:

> Dialogue ... tends to confer the aura of the here and now on the story being told, since to give the characters speech is to give them life.

> ... The stories are better presented in the perfect tense and in the perfect *sense*; in other words, in the form of summary as opposed to actualizing dialogue. (80)

As the 1970's approached, both the content and the form of the novels gradually changed. Most colonies had already gained independence, a fact which caused strong impact on literary production, thematically speaking. The writers' focus shifts considerably towards the present, rather than the past, since the latter is no longer seen as a solution to present conflits. Worshipping the past, Africans were indeed worshipping freedom and independence, since it was only then that they had known and experienced such state. But independence is now a present condition, even if chimeric.[3] Social issues are now seen under a new light. For instance, the 1958 character Okonkwo, a central figure of the Umuofian clan in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, is replaced by the frivolous businessman El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* (1974). Polygyny is another example: portrayed as a natural phenomenon in Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) it begins to be seriously questioned in Mariana Bâ's *So long a Letter* (1980). With the emergence of the African bourgeoisie, topics such as politics and education became relevant. The novels presented scenes of cruelty and poverty, since "fictional realism (was) a contemporary and urgent art" (McEwan 127).

A new kind of setting is gradually introduced. Instead of villages and their compounds, the reader is now confronted with towns and their modern villas, apartments, cars, and several other indexes of

modernization brought from the west. Interacting with the new environment, characters were also approached in a different way. In contrast with the characters of the previous decades, they became more rounded and were allowed to speak more for themselves, instead of through the voice of a narrator. The situational plot gave way to the individual one, focusing now on the individual's psyche and his spiritual conflicts caused by the external world. The small parts (individuals) which together constituted a whole (community) are now seen separately. The characters are still engaged in society, but their inner conflicts are fore-grounded from the political scene. They are portrayed as brutalized by the circumstances and terribly alienated deep inside. The internal problems of a character (reflected externally on his relationship with the other characters) are often due to the impossibility of adjusting again to the African tradition after spending some time abroad. Pitifully, the character is caught half way through a journey, and unfortunately he can neither reach his final destiny nor return to his point of origin: he will never be totally western because he is African, and by the same token he cannot be totally African again since he has become partially 'westernized'. Thus, he becomes a foreigner in his own land and among his own people.

In summary, the prevailing tone in most contemporary African narrative is one of disillusionment, and even of a certain pessimism: "bitterness, disgust, and a lack of hesitancy to criticize the status quo, strongly identify the works of the most recent novelists" (Larson 245).

The aspects pointed out in this study are shared by the whole community of novelists in Africa, but these are only general characteristics. In a continent as large as Africa and one that is influenced by so many

different foreign cultures as it is, much diversity is encountered within it. Applied to literature, such diversity refers to a number of exceptions and unique characteristics among predominant features. In the specific case of South Africa, for instance, particular characteristics set the works apart from the African literary community in general. As regards themes, South African novelists are deeply engaged in the issue of apartheid and the fight against white supremacy. The novels are used as vehicles of political discourse by many writers. The language used by writers of South African origin differs somewhat from other anglophone writers, in that it presents fewer similarities to the African pattern, using, for example, less proverbs and 'showing instead close kinship with the language of American Blacks' (Owomo-yela 98).

In conclusion, not only orality, as we will see next, but also the political, social and cultural contexts have close relationship to and are therefore reflected in the written text. The novel, or in the greater scope literature in Africa, goes beyond 'art for art's sake'. It is significantly relevant to the African context and assumes a political function, inasmuch as it is a product of a given society.

Oral Literature and the Novel

The purpose of the second part of this study is to verify the existence of a common bond shared by the majority of novelists throughout the continent: the presence of oral literature in the written novels. Novelists coming from different regions and cultural backgrounds draw on the African oral tradition and rely on some of its characteristics to build the structure of their novels. In other words, orality is the context they share and reflect in their works.

Both written and oral literatures are provided with form and content. The basic difference is that the form and content of written literature appear as letters printed on paper, while in oral literature they depend exclusively on performance. African novelists draw on orality when creating their texts as far as they include in the novels different forms of oral literature, such as proverbs and songs; give fiction the same purpose of some forms of oral literature, such as the didacticism of folk tales and legends; or make explicit in novels the vital aspect of oral literature: performance. It is not my intention, however, to place more value on either oral or written literatures. Both co-exist nowadays, and if any kind of hierarchy is to be established between the two, it has to be necessarily a chronological one. Writing was brought into Africa by the colonizer, whereas the practice of oral literature is hundreds of years old among Africans.

The first novel chosen for analysis is *Xala*, by the Senegalese Sembène Ousmane. Published in 1974, it draws on an important aspect of oral art: the didacticism of folk tales. The next novel is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958. The Nigerian writer draws on orality in a way different from the author mentioned before. Instead of the moralizing tone of folk tales, Achebe uses throughout the novel one of several forms of oral literature: proverbs. Another characteristic of orality is present in Achebe's novel, as well as in the last novel chosen for analysis in this paper. Both *Things Fall Apart* and *Mayombe* (published in 1980) reflect the performance of oral literature. Despite very different settings— Pepetela's *Mayombe* takes place in an Angolan forest, while *Things Fall Apart* is set in a Nigerian village — the narrators of the two novels play the same role addressing the audience, as if orally telling the story. The choice of novels from varied geographic locations and from different times emphasizes how wide is the practice of drawing on oral art.

Ousmane's *Xala* is very similar in form (short narrative) to the African oral folk tale, and is, as well, characterized by its didacticism. With a modernized setting, *Xala's* instructional function is presented through the protagonist, who is part of the African bourgeoisie that emerged after the independence. El Hadji Abdou Kader Beyer, on the occasion of his third marriage, is assailed by the *xala* (impotence). He puts all the efforts he can into 'becoming a man' again, even at the cost of his wealth and business. El Hadji can only see El Hadji, feel El Hadji, think El Hadji. His 'Self' outgrows everything else to the point that he becomes the center of his own world. After bankruptcy, he is left helpless with his first wife. A beggar— who had in fact put a curse on him, causing his *xala* — is the only one who can restore his 'manhood'. Giving power to one who is, according to El Hadji's values, an outcast of society, Ousmane is teaching a lesson about life in an African society: selfishness and materialism are to be severely punished.

In *Things Fall Apart* the instructional objective is not so deeply developed as in the novel mentioned before. The characteristic of orality revealed in Chinua Achebe's work is the fact that the author includes forms of oral literature in the structure of the written work. The novel is an account of a character's tragedy. Regarded as a man of several qualities and a model for the village inhabitants, Okonkwo accidentally kills a member of his community, and therefore goes into exile. By the time of his return, Okonkwo becomes indignant at the Umuofians for having accepted the presence of the whites and their interference in matters that were

exclusively of the villagers. Without their support to reject the intruders, he desperately takes his own life.

A brilliant documentation of traditional life among Igbos, this novel, as well as others by Achebe, relies on the use of one of the forms of oral literature: the proverbs. Not only do they contextualize the novel within the African oral tradition; proverbs were also used as a device for description. The clan was characterized for being "like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another" (121); Obierika's son, Maduka, is defined in terms of his similarity to his father by the proverb "when mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth" (49). Besides proverbs, Achebe uses other forms of oral literature, such as songs (25, 36, 42, 83) and tales (38, 67), obtaining tremendous literary richness as a result.

Things Fall Apart also portrays the essential aspect of oral art, namely, its performance. The act of performing oral literature implies necessarily two opposite poles: the teller and the listener, both identified within Achebe's novel. The third person narrator created by the author in this novel clearly indicates that Okonkwo's story is not simply written, but it is being told to someone. The sentence structure is very similar to that of oral speech, as it is seen, for instance, in the way the following paragraph is introduced:

> *That was many years ago.*[4] Today Okonkwo was not bringing his mother home to be buried with her people. (91)

Achebe also makes use of the repetition of the conjunctions *and* and *but* to begin independent or main clauses, exactly as a speaker does when narrating an event, in order to give it continuity:

> But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. (87) And then came the clap of thunder.

Despite the change in theme, the next novel analysed shares the same aspect of oral narratives pointed out in *Thing Fall Apart*: *Mayombe's* narrators address the readers and establisha channel for communication, consequently resembling the performance of oral literature. Not surprisingly at all, Pepetela (pseudonym for Arthur Carlos Maurício Pestana dos Santos) won the Angolan National Award for Literature in 1980. Set in the forest which gave title to the book, the novel is a vivid portrayal of the fighters' conflicts caused by colonialism and tribalism. Trying to find strategies to abate the colonizer, they endure difficult times and must overcome their tribal differences.

Mayombe's narrative begins with a third person omniscient narrator, responsible for the diegetic level of the story. But often along the novel (15 times, to be more specific), a first person narrative takes place, before which is indicated 'I, THE NARRATOR, AM X' (X = variable character). The third person narrative is fragmented, but the story itself, in its diegetic level, is provided with continuity. What the first person narrators do is to retell, from a different perspective, the same thing the third person narrator had already told, or sometimes they simply add their point of view about what has been narrated. The third person narrative is alternated with first person micro-reports, which constitute the pseudo-diegetic level[5] of the novel. In this level the different narrators address the readers, as the teller addresses his audience, expecting some kind of response (verbalized or not). For example, when talking about tribalism in his micro-report, the character Miracle says:

> See how the Commander was so concerned about the hundred escudos of that Cabinda traitor? Didn't you ask why, didn't you wonder? Well, I will explain. (28)

Such indexes of an implied reader lead to an intentional engaging of the readers in a lively relationship with the text, as the audience is supposedly engaged in the act of telling.

The novels analysed in this study draw on orality basically in three different ways: related to the purpose of oral literature, to its form and to its performance. Other aspects of oral literature may also be found in the novels: for example, the characters in *Mayombe* are according to their position within their social cosmos, emphasizing the importance of membership of a group over individuality. They are named after their role and characteristic in the guerrilla group: Theoty, Political Commissar, Fearless, Operations Chief and Miracle, among others.

In the final analysis, African literature, still in its infancy in terms of written texts, is in a period of growth and transformation. It is therefore difficult to indicate the specific directions it will take as it evolves. Diverse tendencies such as focus on the present rather than on the past, use of a more cosmopolitan language, and inumerable other trends have emerged in this early phase of its growth. A certain unity, however, is created by the important characteristic of the orality that has continuously manifested itself in the written literature. The manifestation of the oral tradition in African novels comes to prove, also, the theses stated in the introduction of this paper: the novel in Africa is not a mere imitation of the European novel. Orality is the context in which African fiction grew, and consequently the former is reflected in the latter. ❑

NOTES

[1] See AMUTA (*Theory*, 1989) and DATHORNE (*African Literature*, 1976).

2 I am borrowing Larson's term. See *The Emergence*, 1972, p.19.

3 The adjective chimeric is used here since it is well known that although African nations achieved political independence, the very same economic and social structure of colonialism was maintained.

4 The italics are mine.

5 I am using Genette's terminology. Cf. Genett, *Narrative*, p.237.

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