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Symbols and Images as Literary Devices in Selected Nigerian Folktales

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Abstract

*Folktales, by their defining traits, seem to share striking resemblance with the short story genre of the mainstream literature. In both structure and motif, short stories like Chinua Achebe's *The Sacrificial Egg* (1959), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Loko Town* (1966), and Uche Okeke's *Tales of Land of Death* (1971) are considered inspirationally pulled from the traditional repertory of folk narratives. In spite of the established modes of convergence between folktale and the short story however, the former seems to receive little attention, consequently dismissed as an entertaining social frivolity in literary discourse. Oftentimes, literary critics hiss the folktale with an air of condescension – it is too banal to deserve any serious attention. In this paper I will like to argue that when a folktale is appreciated/read beyond the textual surface, there is the possibility of unearthing a treasure of meaning which could otherwise have been ignored by a casual audience. Using Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'depth semantics' and Northrop Frye's 'theory of symbol', the paper strives to excavate the symbolic meaning, carefully embedded in some selected Nigerian folktales. Lastly, the paper notes that the symbols and images are not exhausted or even properly contained in their existential representation; for they embody human meanings which are not tied to time and space.*

Keywords: Folktales, Symbols, Images, Meaning, Representation, Literary, Audience

Introduction

Societies all over the world, irrespective of their perceived technological advancement, have a celebrated and sacred history of oral narrative. This is not surprising, as from time immemorial, man has used various methods to pass across tales of myth, legends, proverbs and fables to give meaning to the various aspects of his environment. From pictographs to clay tablets, to oral tradition and now written tradition, literature has always been the realm of ideas and creativity. Thus, the literary materials for folktales have been in existence from the beginning of recorded time. These materials consist of the remnants, relics and shards of human experiences. Folktales in this regard, serve as a mirror that portrays the way and life of the people who produce them. They do present insights into the values and beliefs of the people. Such folktales, whether they are stories of the sky and earth, stories of great deeds of warriors or queens, or stories of battles or morality, are all concerned with our humanity. They reflect our attempts to place ourselves in the galaxy and to explain our very existence. Like the minds that hold and receive them, folktales themselves change and evolve overtime, reflecting the particular histories of the people who preserve them. In them can be read the story of the minds that created them, because the human mind could not have developed the way it had without the oral traditions and the folktales that underline them.

The narratives spring from our desire to share an experience or pass information. It is therefore, the repository of society's customs, language, beliefs, crafts, etc. Bascom argues that "Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. They may or may not have happened and they are not to be taken seriously" (97). Emeabe is also of the opinion that "folktale is a story originating among a particular people handed down in oral and recently in written form from one generation to another" (79). The folktale portrays the values and belief systems of the people. Oral narratives therefore connect people to their environment. Folktales are usually for entertainment and they are seldom openly or obviously didactic. But they routinely embrace the breadth of human experience, providing emotional excursions into experiences that shape audiences and reveal to them the contexts of the world in which they live, as well as their place in those worlds. For many people around the world, their first understanding of what life is all about begins with their familiarity with the morals of the oral tale. In Nigeria, the situation is almost the same, because for many generations the moonlight folktales meant for children have become the bedrock of their social, psychological and ethical development. This proves that folktales are ancient, relying on emotion-evoking images that come from the past, yet they are always contemporary, constructing around those ancient images the world of the present. These images from the past become a storyteller's means of exploring and shaping the audience's experience of the world. To all these must be added the fact that if a member of the audience cannot move beyond the literal level of the story, then the power of the tale is denied him.

Sequel to the invention of print, folktales have been collected and published in different parts of the world; a development that Ong referred to as "secondary orality" (47). Long after they have been pinned down to writing, the authors of those generational folktales remain anonymous. A folktale therefore belongs to its communal origin even where its elements have changed by different narrators who introduced one form of embellishment or the other as the story is retold time and again across generations. This makes it humanly impossible to ascribe the authorship of folktale to one individual. As a matter of fact, most folktales have composite authorship.

Symbols as Literary Devices in Folktales

Over time, humans have found meaning through the creation and interpretation of symbols and images in both folktales and highbrow literature. Those symbols have taken many forms and shapes; and they thus constitute an integral part of literary creation and critical analysis. In his *Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbol*, Northrop Frye broadly defines symbol as "any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention" (71). A symbol in this regard, is any structure of signification because every symbol is a sign or a particular linguistic expression that

expresses, conveys, or communicates a meaning. For instance, a word, a phrase, a number, a sound, or an image used with some kind of special reference are all symbols when they are distinguishable elements in critical discourse/analysis hence their representation of different concepts in the imaginations of mankind. This is an eloquent testimony that throughout human cultural tradition, there have been identifiable symbols which occupy prominent positions in both folktales and highbrow literature. In the words of Akwanya such symbols “are native to humanity and are traced to the moment in the evolution of consciousness when language, myth, and art form one undivided unity” (37). Although every symbol calls for an interpretation, there is no universally acceptable method of interpretation that is sufficient to completely uncover the real meaning of a symbol. As Paul Ricoeur puts it “there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation” (28). Consequently, there arises a conflict of interpretation which represents two opposite polarities: on one pole, there is the hermeneutics that demystifies and reduces any form of illusions that cloud over the real meanings of symbols; on the other hand, there is the hermeneutics that seeks to recover and restore the real meanings of symbols. In all these, the truth remains that humans have found meaning through the creation and interpretation of such symbols. Those symbols, as earlier observed, can take many forms: images, names, events, and sounds; and our encounter with them in literary work(s) is as 'a representation' (Akwanya 18). However, a symbol only carries/represents whatever meaning the reader assigns to it. In this sense, almost anything can be a symbol – as long as the reader interprets it as signifying something beyond its literal meaning.

In his view, Ricoeur stresses that “I define symbol as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (17). However, while every symbol is a sign, Ricoeur argues that “not every sign is a symbol” (19). This is because, whereas mere signs hold only manifest meaning, symbols on the contrary carry much deeper, latent meanings behind the patent ones. This is the reason opacity characterizes all symbols because their latent meaning is not directly manifested nor is it immediately discernable. In any event, observes Ricoeur, “this opacity constitutes the depth of the symbol” and indicates that every symbol is “an enigma” in the sense that they are something like puzzle which challenges the interpreting intelligence to penetrate into its depth “slowly and with difficulty” (20).

Ricoeur's perception of symbols leads inevitably to his treatment of interpretation when he observes “where symbols are involved, interpretation becomes necessary” (23). He also holds that “symbols and interpretation are correlative concepts in as much as the symbol gives rise to thought” (24).

Highlighting his view of interpretation, Ricouer declares that “interpretation is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” (26). Simply put, interpretation is the process of deciphering the meaning of symbols. The goal of interpretation therefore, is to have the hidden meaning of symbols unearthed, brought to limelight, and understood. It is the conviction of the present study that the symbol which calls for interpretation is indeed saying something truthful, meaningful and worthwhile. The first folk narrative presents a very typical portrayal of the symbolic cat that shares similar characteristics with the ancient Greek goddess Artemis, who commands power and authority with cruelty and destructiveness. Consider the following folktale entitled “*Who Will Bell the Cat?*”, transcribed and translated into the English language by Bukar Usman in his *Selection of Nigerian Folktales: Themes and Settings*.

Tale 1: Who Will Bell the Cat?

One evening in the Rats kingdom, after everyone was back from the farm, the king sent a message to the rats, to gather at the palace. The message was successfully delivered and the rats gathered in the palace as their king had demanded. They were served Kola nuts and alligator pepper and the king told them that the meeting was about the frequent attacks of the cat. The rats made several suggestions on how to get rid of the cat and one of the suggestions was that they had to bell the cat so that whenever it was coming to attack, the rats would hear the sound of the bell from a distance and go into hiding.

“The question is who will bell the cat?” the king asked. No one answered and even the king did not volunteer to do so. While they were still in the meeting, the cat showed up and the rats, including their king, ran for their lives. As no rat could bell the cat, the cat continued to go after rats, till this day. (680)

Deep below the surface meaning of the narrative, which seemingly centers on dilemma of rats in the animal kingdom, there lies a deeper meaning in the symbolic representation of generic evil. As clearly demonstrated by the naïve reluctance of the rats to confront the monstrous cat and change the natural order of things, the former continue to remain in their comfort zone and share optimism that things will work out just fine. This equally connotes to human behavior, as the presence of the cat in the above tale is nothing short of symbolic representation. The application of such symbol to deduce possible meaning, oftentimes at a level beyond the textual surface, has been the major concern of *Myth Criticism*. In the words of Akwanya, “readers encounter symbols like the rough beast, the red dragon, the knowledge seeker, and the year god as representation which embody meaning” (38). The red dragon, as the biblical tradition has it, represents the symbol of wanton destruction, arrogant

opposition, blind hatred and monstrous egoism. As a symbolic representation of generic evil, the image of red dragon has continued to occupy significant space and gain relative popularity in literature of different traditions across culture. From Seneca's *Octavia* to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and the tale under scrutiny, the symbolic red dragon keeps on recurring in creative imaginations; creating infinite space for comparative literature, attuned to humanity in different historical epochs. In the current we can safely infer that the cat ably represents a villain, which in the words of Akwanya “stands for something: opposition to the will of god” (39). Though fictionally narrated with relatively simple plot structure and theme, the above tale explicates the transcendent realm of human existence. Symbolically considered, the cat occupies a supernatural realm that connotes the existence of, perhaps, the inevitability of death which all mankind detest. In spite of this inevitability however, man always does little or nothing to arrest the menace. The cat seems capable only of discussing ideas but quite incapable of executing actions. The death, symbolically represented by the cat, has been and forever will, remain a recurrent motif in the animal kingdom; as attempts to confront the monstrous cat will always end in futility.

Tale 2: The Ants' Many Wars

Once upon a time, a tree was colonized by ants. They lived inside the tree and only came out to gather food and drag inside the tree. They did this all through the dry season but during the rainy season they stayed inside the tree whenever it was raining. The ants didn't like sharing the tree with any other creature. The ants declared war against any other living thing which attempted to dwell on the tree.

If they noticed that a bird was trying to share the tree with them, they would wait until the bird was asleep. They would sneak into the nest, bite the bird and the bird would wake up in pains and fly away. The bird would not return to its nest on the tree again. They chased away many birds, lizards and squirrels.

There was a time when there was continuous rainfall and water flooded everywhere. The ants couldn't come out of the tree. After the rain had stopped and the water on the earth had subsided, the ants came out of the tree and were surprised to see some mushrooms that had grown on some spots on the trunk of the tree. The ants were not happy. They resolved to do what they could, to remove the mushrooms from the tree. They ate the portion of the trunk of the tree where the mushroom were from inside, for many days, until the portion fell off with the mushrooms attached to it. This created a hollow on the trunk of the tree. The ants didn't bother about that but were happy the mushrooms were no longer sharing the tree with them.

Not long after, the tree was troubled by wind and it fell because of the hollow that was created on its trunk. The ants were rendered homeless. They became sorrowful and went in search of another place to live. (673-674)

Trees, as sacred symbols that have endured many seasons, have continued to feature prominently in many African folk narratives. Their presence however, is for a number of reasons: as they signify myriad concepts during pre-literate era. Moreover, the solitary existence of trees like baobab carries with it the symbolic power of individuality attuned to Herbert Spencer's idea of 'Survival of the fittest' where shared communal value is absent, as clearly demonstrated in western literary productions like Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground*. As seen in tale 2 above, such isolation has its own consequence: one of which is the inability to withstand pressure from the outside world. The tree would have fared better if it had formed part of a densely forest. The tale equally demonstrates collective cruelty of the ants against external forces – the mushrooms. The appearance of the mushrooms in the trunk of the tree is indeed symbolic which always defines the symbiotic nature of both humans and animals. As a result of the heavy downpour, an alien has emerged to complete and perfect the plants life-circle. Such appearance, just like the creation myth of Adam, evokes jealousy and hatred, consequently leads to the destructions of an entire kingdom. The tree, in this regard, assumes the symbolic meaning of the paradise garden inhabited only by the chosen ones; out of the blue, there emerges the undesirable mushrooms which have to be uprooted at all cost. In the end, the mushrooms were destroyed and the ants were equally forced to evict their cherished abode hence they were also doomed to perish. This is so true of human existence. In many instances, humans tend to create problems for themselves by attempting to change the status quo or change the natural order of things.

Tale 3: The Tongue

Once upon a time, a chief told one of his servants to bring him the best meat from the market and the servant brought him a tongue. The next day, the chief told the servant to bring him the worst meat from the market. The servant brought a tongue again.

The chief exclaimed, “What! When I asked for the best meat, you brought me a tongue and then, you bring me the same thing for the worst meat”. The servant said, “Sometimes a man is very unhappy because of his tongue and sometimes his tongue makes him happy”. The chief said, “You are right. Let us be masters of our tongue”. (606)

The above tale is indeed a parable from which quite a number of possible interpretations could be derived especially when the central character (the tongue) is considered a symbol. As one of the most powerful organs in human body, the appearance of the tongue in the above tale carries with it a number of meanings. It has

been generally established that the tongue can make or mar a person's life depending on how it is put to use. In many religious scriptures, the tongue is considered the most powerful or awful organ that can easily attract the bounties or incur the wrath of the Creator. Little wonder, when the king sent for the best meat, he was given the tongue, and the same was supplied to him when he ordered for the worst meat. Being the most important organ in the entire human body, the appearance of the tongue in this regard can carry with it a symbolic meaning of the paradox of life. The deeper morale is that in spite of its imperfection, life could be a heaven on earth; just as it could turn out to be a living hell, depending on how we decide to live it. The tongue can also assume the paradoxical nature of sweet and bitter attuned to our daily existence as humans. With sweet melodies of lies, a tongue could turn out to be the sweetest organ in the entire human body. However, when the tongue is made to pronounce the truth, it could be the most bitter organ of all human organs. Not surprising, the popular saying "truth is bitter". Indeed, the tongue is so powerful that it could be used to spare or terminate life. For example, the judges use their tongues to sentence convicts to either death row or life imprisonment. They could also use the same to set them free. By and large, the tongue in the above parable is a symbolic representation of life and its endless circle of imperfections.

Tale 4: The Unforgiving Rat

There was a lizard who stole other animal's food. Because of it, the animals ensured they hide their food. The lizard stole a rat's yam. The rat sighted it and as it was about to catch it, the lizard ran away. The rat chased it, the lizard ran away. The rat chased it and was met by a hen.

"What are you running after"? The hen asked the rat. The rat told the hen, it was running after the lizard that stole its food. The hen advised the rat to forgive the lizard, that if it continued to run after the lizard, it might run into a problem. The rat ignored the hen's advice and continued to run after the lizard. A snake saw the rat and also asked it, what it was running after. The rat told the snake what the lizard did. The snake advised the rat to desist from chasing the lizard, that the lizard was evil. The rat ignored the snake's advice, also and continued to chase the lizard. Several other animals halted it, and advised it to forgive the lizard and stop chasing it, but the rat ignored their advice and kept on chasing the lizard. As it kept on chasing the lizard, the rat fell into a deep pit. The pit was so deep, that the rat could not climb out. It sighted the hen as it passed by the mouth of the pit and pleaded with it to help it out. The hen laughed, and reminded the rat, that it had advised it to stop chasing the lizard, but it refused. Several other animals also passed by and the rat pleaded with them to help it out of the pit, but they all refused. Some laughed while others scolded it for causing its own predicament.

The cat passed by and the rat, also pleaded that it should help it out of the pit. The cat let down a rope for the rat to climb out of the pit. As the rat came out of the pit, the cat grabbed it and ate it up. That was how the unforgiving rat died.

(521-522)

From religious scriptures to literary productions, the need for forgiveness has been with us since the beginning of recorded times. For example, we read in the poem of the greatest English poet of all times: Alexander Pope that “To err is human; to forgive, divine”; a maxim that has become almost a forgotten reality in today's world of vengeance and bitterness. The same injunction could be found in one of the most celebrated Shakespearean plays – *The Tempest* where the playwright lays bare the need to embrace the spirit of forgiveness in all its ramifications. Based on the storyline of tale 4 above, we can possibly deduce a symbolic meaning from the encounter between the chasing rat and the chased lizard which eventually leads to the devouring of the former. The storyline revolves around a relentless chase for vengeance attuned to man's innate desire for evil. The pit, as described above, is a symbolic abode of all evil deeds. It bears striking resemblance with hell fire. The constant pursuit of the rat signifies blind hatred and evil-infested ego attached to seeking revenge. The pit in this respect has been artistically invented by tale-narrator to symbolize the depth of what humans' experience, that is, the inability to forgive or heed advice. Not too long after the rat jumps into the pit, it quickly gets back to its senses and starts looking for help. That is so true of human nature. In spite of the warning signs and signals, man is always doomed to transgress.

Tale 5: Boomerang Upon Boomerang

One day, animals in the forest called a meeting to hear what each animal didn't like. They were tired of animals annoying each other every day. If each animal knew what the other didn't like and stopped doing it, there would be peace, they reasoned.

The wolf warned that it liked eating meat everyday and would not like any law which would stop it from accessing meat in the forest. The tiger said it didn't like disturbance. The lion said it didn't like animals raising dust in its domain. The snake said it didn't like anyone stepping on its tail. Every animal made known to the assembly what it didn't like and the meeting came to an end.

One day, the wolf was coming from the forest clutching a freshly-killed rabbit between its teeth. As it ran beside the tiger's house, it laughed excitedly and disturbed the tiger who didn't like noise-making around its house. Rising up angrily, the tiger jumped out and attacked the wolf.

While the tiger and the wolf struggled before the wolf was killed, a lot of dust was raised. The lion who didn't like dust in its neighborhood was attracted to the scene. “Why did you raise dust all over the place when you know I don't like dust?” the furious lion asked. It pounced on the tiger and killed it.

As the lion turned to go, it stepped on the snake's tail. The snake gave it a

terrible bite. The lion pierced its paws into the snake's head and killed it. Trying to return to its den, the lion noticed that it was too weakened by the snake's poison to move its limbs. It collapsed beside the snake and died. (79)

In this final tale, we are confronted with human being's constant attempt to perfect nature. The animal kingdom depicted above seems similar to today's United Nations where a plethora of treaties, truces and peace accords were constantly signed and enacted into law, yet little progress is being made in respect of global harmony. It is the law of nature that all creatures cannot live in eternal harmony. In the process of coexistence or co-habitation, certain lines may inevitably be crossed, as evidenced in the above tale. In most cases, the root cause of such conflict is neither political nor economic, but just natural. We all have our likes and dislikes; for peace to reign therefore, we must respect and appreciate such differences. All animals in the above tale are, in a way, symbolic representations of the dynamism of human nature and behavior; expecting them to share similar worldview and interest is indeed erroneous, hence the unavoidable conflict that oftentimes leaves destructions and deaths on its trail.

Conclusion

From folktales to highbrow literature, symbols and images have always been the cornerstone of literary productions. Oftentimes, the symbols are carefully embellished to evoke discussion beyond and outside the literary text. By default, a symbol can carry as many as possible meanings and interpretations the reader can ascribe to it. As it defies single universal interpretation, finite sets of meaning could be deduced from a single symbol; making worthwhile comparison with the outside reality, a possibility. Through rigorous analysis of some selected Nigerian folktales, the paper has established the veracity of symbols and images as tools for excavating certain universal archetypes that broadens the understanding of our common humanity and enables us cross the boundaries of time, place, and space.

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