



Cultural Appropriation and the Quest for Identity in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town*

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Abstract

Amos Tutuola's "The Palm Wine Drinkard And His Dead Palm Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town"(1952) is the first West African novel published in English outside Africa. The author attempted his debut novel as an introduction of the West African folk tradition and Yoruba culture to the Western readers and intellectuals. The novel was an instant hit due to the unconventional language and style employed by the author. The book was received with initial scepticism which turned to positive exaltation from the part of the readers and critics of the West. However, Tutuola had to face severe criticism and discernment from fellow African writers. This paper intends to carefully examine the postcolonial elements interspersed in this seemingly childlike narrative using the concepts of Appropriation, Abrogation and Bakhtin's philosophy; dislodge the underlying theme of the quest for African identity and subtle criticism of the Colonial regime through parody.

Keywords: Appropriation, Abrogation, Identity crisis, Ambivalence

The coming of age story of the palm wine drinkard set in 1952 Nigeria opens with the protagonist's description of his habit of chronic drinking which started in childhood. "I was a palm wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life." (P6) The language of the novel deviates from standard English. The error of word misuse adds humor to the narrative. For example, the verb 'work' is used to describe drinking. Several categories of errors are present throughout the novel like combining words, odd repetition, incorrect phrases, punctuation errors, idiom misuse, preposition misuse, faulty time relationships, and restrictive and non-restrictive clause confusion. The story is set in an indefinite past where the only currency that people know is Cowries, which is the currency of precolonial Africa. But, in a later stage, there is a careful reference made to the pound - "Now by that time and before we entered inside the white tree, we had sold our death to somebody at the door for the sum of £70:18:6d..." (P.62) which shows the transition of Nigeria to colonialism along with the Drinkard's growth to adulthood.

In the precolonial era, the inhabitants of the city of Ife, the drinkard's hometown, lead an organized life in towns separated by wild countryside known as the 'bush'. Each town was ruled by an Oba, the Oni of Oba being the supreme leader of all the Obas. Agriculture was the main occupation of the Ife people and Palm wine was their only beverage which is made from the sap of the palm tree. The Yoruba people believed in the existence of Orun (heaven) and Aife (Earth). Tutuola has cleverly inserted myth and fantasy to reflect this Yoruba universe of mystery and adventure. The tale of a psychedelic quest of a herculean hero to bring back his dead palm wine tapster from Dead's town signifies the power of the resistance of the Orient who is obliged to resort to realism and rationality, a trait of the Colonialist literature. The hero of the novel often resorts to a performance of magic which he calls Juju and which is taught to him by his father. "Immediately this old man told or promised me so, I went away, but after I had travelled about one mile away then I used one of my Juju and at once I changed into a very big bird and flew back to the roof of the old man's house..." (P.10)

One might dismiss the novel as a childlike rumble of mixed folklore and silly farce. But, a careful reading will reveal the concealed jibes at colonialism and the social conditions that it engendered. He has interjected subtle remarks on the equality of all human beings. "He told us that both white and black deads were living in the Dead's town, not a single alive was there at all" (p.92). It is interesting to note that this is the only instance in the novel where there is any remark on the different races, specifically the whites and blacks. With the careful use of sublimation and metonymy, he creates an episodic allegory through which he can vent out his personal frustrations with life under a colonial regime. The meaningless existence of the people of Ife under the colonists is represented by the unnamed protagonist, who despite being born in a well-to-do family and having all the comforts in life is able to find satisfaction only in drinking palm wine. As

absurd as it may sound, the central goal of his life which is also the motif in the novel is to bring back his dead palm wine tapster back to town from the 'Dead's town'. Unlike his father who is the richest man in town, the hero doesn't want to settle down or to get married and reproduce. He is therefore dissatisfied by the humdrum existence and the lack of conflict or tension. It is this condition of 'everyday life' that, according to Sartre is defined by "what it is not" (Sartre, 1956.) or "its negation, by forces and structures limiting freedom" (Snedeker, 1984, p.278). The people of Nigeria suffered cultural stigma and lack of agency which drove them to a state of dormancy for a period of more than one and a half century. Tutuola's narrative is a reawakening for this lost singularity.

The aspect of identity crisis can be seen in the act of camouflage performed by the hero when he comes face to face with any kind of threat or danger. "But before they could do that, I had changed myself into air, they could not trace me out again, but I was looking at them." Lacan (1977, p.99) views 'mimicry' as an appearance of 'camouflage'; arguing that 'mimicry' exposes an artificial image that is 'distinct' from reality. He likens it to the strategy of 'camouflage' that is adopted in human warfare, where nothing is visible to the enemy except 'camouflage', thereby misrepresenting true identity. This in turn creates 'ambivalence' and contradiction. Thus, 'camouflage' is not a matter of going with reality, but rather a matter of going against it. The constant recourse to supernatural abilities to obtain a fluid form and inconsistent identity can be interpreted as the hero's state of deprivation. He is continually going against reality which is a mark of the colonial experience. He is trying to subvert this sense of order and rationality which is unnatural being placed in a context of violence inflicted upon the minds of the colonized. According to theorists like D.E.S. Maxwell:

"A major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective relationship between self and place." (qtd. In Ashcroft 9)

The drinkard leads a life of quest and difficulty in the woods and finally returns to social acceptance. It is rather a quest for his own identity which he loses since the tapster is dead. He could not perceive himself as anything but a drunkard who is nothing without his wine or the tapster. Scholar David West has likened the 'palm wine' in the "Palm Wine Drinkard" to 'nommon' - "the expression of the life force which forms one's personality, and which remains even in the dead after they have become non-living" (West in Lindfors, p.84).

The conscious abrogation of the hierarchy of discourses is present in the language and form of the text. The author has used a distinct language which cannot be equated to the African pidgin or standard English, but, rather is an appropriation of an African literary form to English literary discourse. The process of Abrogation and appropriation, characteristic of the post-colonial text is already set in place and the text is being constructed within the post-colonial discourse, itself formulated within the political dialectic which brings it into being. The text is expressive of the oppressed position occupied by Africa in that discourse it countered by the larger political consequence of acquiring it. Despite the initial criticism faced from

African writers, it represents an advance by the appropriation of African oral narrative and folklore into English literary discourse. The post-colonial text, even when under the powerful suppression of the imperial discourse, may still show how the text's reproduction itself is as constitutive of its meaning as the formal levels of abrogation which it has achieved. Tutuola has succeeded in appropriating the discourse to his own use by distorting the ideal European language structure.

There has been an ongoing debate among the post-colonial writers regarding the use of appropriation. Tutuola was a member of the Mbari club, a group of artists and writers based in the Nigerian city of Ibadan in the 1960's. John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbe and Wole Soyinka are the club's other notable members. Some of the African writers like Achebe supports this Appropriation. He has said that "English is a gift that the colonisers left us". Whereas others such as Ngugi Tiongo argue that it is important for people of colour to write in their native languages. Babasola Johnson wrote that "the novel should not have been published at all...It is bad enough to attempt an African narrative in good English, it is worse to attempt it in Mr. Tutuola's strange lingo" (Johnson in Lindfors p.31). Lindfors points out the novels "neat cyclical superstructure" resting on a very loosely coordinated structure and relate Tutuola's art wholly to the African writer's improvisation of technique and material. This complex inner structure can be found in the works of major Nigerian novelists- Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, T.M. Aluko, Gabriel Okara. West African critics were sceptical about the west's reception and celebration of exoticism which would reaffirm their desire to see Africa as a land of backwardness and superstitions- creating a commodifiable version of Africanness; Tutuola being the naïve and natural African artist whose primitivism is of importance to the metropolitan consumers. Chinuezu in "Decolonising the Mind" speaks for Abrogation. He cites the examples of Caliban and Prospero to state that it is only the native elite left behind who are more attuned to Appropriating the western culture. They still represent the interests of the colonisers. He believes that it is the work of the post-colonial scholars and artists to use native knowledge and traditions to recreate a modern Africa. Tutuola's response to the debates regarding his book was that-

"Probably, if I had more education, that might change my writing or improve it or change it to another thing people would not admire; well, I cannot say. Perhaps with higher education, I might not be as popular a writer. I might not write folktales. I might not take it as anything important. I would take it as superstition and not write in that line."

The ambivalent identity of the subject is another post-colonial aspect in the novel. The hero doesn't exhibit any values of his native culture in the beginning. The character represents colonialist traits. He can be equated to a bourgeois exploiting the labour of his palm wine tapster. All he cares about even after finding the dead palm wine tapster under the palm tree is to drink the palm wine he had tapped even before burying his body. The utilitarian nature of the exploitative colonial regime is reflected in the behaviour of the drinkard. Tutuola creates a fictional world where states of existence like death and anxiety can be traded or rented like any commodity in a consumerist culture. It is only through his quest that the drinkard attains a self-realisation and learn to embrace his traditional values. The envy of the colonised and the corrupt

nature of the coloniser is portrayed through the narrative of the lady who followed a handsome stranger only to be deceived by his beauty.

“After I looked at him for so many hours, then I ran to a corner of the market and I cried for a few minutes because I thought within myself why was I not created with beauty as this gentleman, but when I remembered that he was only a skull, then I thanked God that He had created me without beauty, so I went back to him in the market, but I was still attracted by his beauty.” (p. 22)

According to James Clifford this ambivalence is an openness to accepting influences from both sides of colonialism- a fluid ambivalent space that plays both aspects of the binaries. The worldliness of Tutuola’s narrative can be understood only if the text is analysed placing it in the larger context of colonialism. By appropriating aspects of the African folklore and abrogating the western ideas of rationality and rules of the language, he has created this space of resistance. This power is his ability to record the native oral folk tales and disseminate it through the medium of writing. Tutuola was influenced by D.O. Fugunwa who used folklore in his writings such as “The Forest of the Thousand Demons” (1939), “The Forest of God” (1946) etcetera.

There are overtones of Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress” in Tutuola. He was familiar with Bunyan’s writings as a student. His use of capitalized headings such as “THE INVESTIGATOR’S WONDERFUL WORK IN THE SKULL’S FAMILY HOUSE” point to the influence of adventure books, eighteenth century novels or English-style newspaper and tabloids. He has used a few words like ‘telephone’, ‘football field’, ‘bomb’, ‘razor blade’ etc. to give these a negative connotation. This shows his unacceptance of the growing colonial environment or his inability to adapt to it. Bakhtin talks about the ‘carnavalesque’ in his “Problems of Dostoevsky” and its invoking to challenge the dominant social-political paradigm. When an artefact of the privileged English culture appears in the book, it becomes something of an oddity. This is the authors attempt to reclaim the centre of the discourse for himself and his culture. In the “Dialogical Imagination”, Bakhtin offers an explanation of the social function of parody. Forms like hyperbole, satire and anti-logic often prove more effective than realistic, customary, literary weapons. Realism reinforces dominant socio-political substructures by presenting the conventional perspective it offers as the only appropriate way of decoding reality.

The novel falls into the genre of fantasy literature. As stated by the author, it is inspired from Nigerian folklore and oral tales which he gathered and put under one title. The retelling of these stories can be interpreted as what Henry Louis Gates in his book *The Signifying Monkey* has dubbed as instances of ‘unmotivated signification’-pastiche or non critical parody which is used to establish a common cultural-narrative ground with a specific predicate work or literary tradition. It is set in a fictional town where supernatural beings and magical creatures live among humans. The narrative is independent of any historical references or mention of real events. It has created its own syntagmatic structure and coherence.

Ugandan author Taban Lo Liyong called Tutuola “a genius” and called him “the Father of Modern African literature”(118). Tutuola’s work laid the foundation of African writing in English, especially the part that

laid deeply buried in the substratum and psyche of African culture and imagination. His choice of the quest narrative, whether intentional or not, is one of the most common forms in the folk repertoire and is part of his culture and experience. He has successfully explored areas of human experience, using an appropriate dramatic metaphor and language which permit to tell him of life as it is.

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