

ORAL TRADITION ADVENTURE AND STORYTELLING: A FORMALIST ANALYSIS OF OSITADINMA'S *TEETH OF A SNAIL*

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Abstract

Oral tradition as an important aspect of African culture plays a role in the upbringing and education of the youth. Cultural values, ethos and ethics of the people form a critical part of oral tradition. A people's values and ways of life are transmitted from generations through storytelling, folktales, myths and legends, among other cultural provisions. Some of these are done orally, while others are recorded in texts and printed materials, example of which is *Teeth of a Snail* by Ositadinma Amakeze. It is a short adventure fiction and folk story published in 2014. The text explores certain cultural values that guide adolescents against certain deviant behaviours and delinquencies. Using the formalist approach and storytelling techniques, such as narrative, dialogue, exposition, and description, the study makes a literary analysis of the events and incidences in the novel in relation to deviant characters, Nkuri and Udene. The paper specifically highlights curiosity as the impetus in the major characters' recklessness, and perilous undertakings. The use of rhetoric and internal structures such as proverbs, folktales, myths, paradox and other literary devices are formalist features are the tools of analysis that reveal the didactic nature of the narrative. The paper postulates that disobedience to the cultural ethics and norms may lead one into self-destruction.

Keywords: Adventure, Storytelling, Formalist Analysis, Internal Structures, Quest, Curiosity

Introduction

In *Teeth of a Snail* Ositadinma Amakeze craftily recreates the oral tradition of adventure and storytelling in a contemporary traditional African setting. The novel is seen to exhibit an exemplary creativity that re-establishes the aestheticism in African literary tradition. This confirms the postulation that 'from the beginning...the Nigerian novel has been traditional in so far as it has sought consciously to be art. It comes of age, that is, at the time it first impresses itself on the general consciousness, by taking place in a form which is also traditionally very important for a literary culture, the form of the heroic narrative in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*' (Akwanaya 5). *Teeth of a Snail* manifests intellectualism and literary talent as an adventure and folktale highlighting the critical colouration of the African novel of the 21st century. Following from this assertion, Tanure Ojaide in an essay, 'Literature in Africa and the Caribbean' believes that, 'Literature has been a major art form through which people exhibit their culture'. He goes on: 'In modern times, literature has become one of Africa's major contributions to the intellectual world' (Mario Azevedo 315). Therefore, the emerging perspectives of the 21st Century African literature and new stylistic and formal trend are propelled in this text.

As an adventure fiction, *Teeth of a Snail* is transposed with storytelling. Adventure, as fantasy or romance involves 'narratives in which a marvelous journey is the frame that accounts for structuration ... comprise mainly Tutuola's forest romances, like *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*, and *The Brave African Huntress*. The other important work in this mode is Cyprain Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*' (Akwanaya 10). Though the theme of adventure has been common since the earliest days of written fiction, it is observed that 'the verbal elaboration, the drama of the performance itself, everything intact which makes it a truly aesthetic product comes from the contemporary teller and his audience' (Finnegan 311). Adventure narratives are dominated by dangerous actions by the protagonist who has extraordinary traits, acting in an environment that is 'unstable; hence marvels and wonders are common place'. As Frye puts it, 'the hero of the romantic adventure story moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended....' (Akwanaya 10). The 21st Century African writer is seen to bring to bear in the narrative a combination of imagination, knowledge, fantastic

elements and techniques. These elements include the narrative styles, the use of language and the application of wit and ideas to create the required aesthetic effects.

Ojaide notes that ‘oral and written African literatures have flourished simultaneously on the continent. Despite the fact that the modern literature is written, the contemporary writer is carrying out the timeless mission of the oral artist of defending the cultural ethos of the people’ (Azevedo 325). Thus adventure fiction as an oral tradition has elements of storytelling as a propagation of cultural facts presenting as folktales or oral narratives. These are handed down through generations as fiction, form and content of contemporary African texts and novels. Therefore, ‘given that the key statement in the humanistic theory is that the work of art incorporates a value system which may be appropriated by the reader, a distinction is maintained between “content” and “form”. The mode of imitation need not be realistic provided it is suited to the content or intended meaning’ (Akwanya 65). The form and content are such as are exemplified in ‘Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to show that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had had poetry and, above all, they had dignity’ (Azevedo 319). Such values and philosophy of sacredness and respect for cultural elements are replicated in Amakeze’s text under study.

Crafted as an adventure fiction, *Teeth of a Snail* fits ‘Don D’Ammassa’s description in the *Introduction to the Encyclopedia of Adventure Fiction* as an event or series of events that happen outside the course of the protagonist’s ordinary life, usually accompanied by danger, often by physical action’ (Online). Actions in adventure stories are always characterized by speed and are exciting but risky and hazardous. They are mostly described and narrated such that ‘the cyclic pattern evolved partly from history and partly from legend’ (Ambrosini 38). Most often the consequences of the actions of the protagonist are uncertain and perilous. One of the Literatures in the genre of adventure is ‘Homer’s classic, the *Odyssey*, believed to have been written around 700.B.C. The hero Odysseus goes on a perilous decade-long quest to find his wife’ (Gardiner). Even though thousands of years have passed since that tale was first told, adventure fiction continues to be popular because of its timelessness. There are yet others: Tom Sawyer’s, Huckleberry Finn, and Don Quixote as classic heroic protagonists in adventure tales.

The tradition of compelling tales about heroic actions and adventures is as old as storytelling itself. The essay, ‘Through a Narratological Lens: An Analysis of Storytelling Elements in Award-Winning Advertisement’, highlights narrative as a method of communication that represents a sequence of events caused and experienced by characters. It stresses the fact that stories are narratives with plots and characters generating emotion in the narrator and audience’ (Kaliszewski 5). Stories therefore function in preserving traditions and cultural values so much so that throughout the ages people used stories and storytelling to understand their experience and social life. This makes storytelling to be more relevant in the contemporary milieu. Reflecting on the text as story, Cristina Atenie writes that, ‘*Teeth of a Snail* is an age-old story’ while Lasse Lau observes that, ‘Ositadinma zooms into a micro universe like in Persian films in making his story a universal tale’. Chidi Iloamaeke asserts that, ‘there are prose but this is a unique kind. There are expressions that modern day novels lack, there are artistic endowment the likes of Chinua Achebe showcases: Those are captured in *Teeth of a Snail*.

Formalism, which involves a close reading of the text is the standpoint of analysis for the paper. Thus it is observed that, ‘formalist critics believe that all information essential in the interpretation of a work must be found within the work’ (Skylar Hamilton Buris). Formalists approach therefore include the analysis of elements such as irony, setting, characters, narrative technique, point of view, imagery, and others, that combine to make a text literary. Formalism is then defined as ‘an interpretative approach that emphasizes literary form and the study of literary devices within the text’ (Sutrisimi). This approach advocates the autonomy of the text by highlighting the internal features of the text such as language, and other literary devices as already mentioned. This confirms the assertion that:

The notion is defined in terms of the rhetorical devices both the traditional ones like irony, imagery, symbol, and rhythm, and the ones that have developed with the novel, such as narrative techniques and point of view. Formalist criticism therefore analyses the work as language, but as one that is defamiliarized. Its sub-text is that literature works by denying

language its referential meaning, thereby constituting the work as a self-sufficient world. (Opata and Ohaegbu 62).

Formalism as a theory promotes a distinctive quality of literariness that focuses on the intrinsic nature of the text. The analysis of the novel is based on its internal structures including its content.

In *Semantics and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis* 'the formalist saw literature as autonomous, a system that is internally coherent, and subsisting in its own language alone. It is purely a creation of language, and differs from every other organization of language by reason of its form, its being as literature, which is determined by the literary elements that are held together in it' (Akwanyanya 147). Hence, this essay does a literary formalist analysis of *Teeth of a Snail* by focusing on the plot, using narrative techniques such as dialogue, exposition, and descriptive styles as the internal structures.

Formalists Analysis of *the Teeth of a Snail*

The plot of any adventure usually focuses on the actions of the hero. It equally narrates series of events held together by a combination of literary devices. 'The plot is however told as story, having four major features, a message, a conflict, characters and resolution' (Kalszewski Online). The plot of a text is achieved through textual narrative and descriptive modes, thus emphasizing the point that 'narrative modes could encompass some basic storytelling elements, including narrative point of view, narrative tense and narrative voice' (Hill, Online). *Teeth of a Snail* contains action, dialogue, description, exposition and thought trends, thus having its own balance of elements while highlighting the individuality of the artist's self-expression. The actions in the narrative are evaluated using the internal features of the text.

The opening lines of the text present a description of an action by one of the protagonists, Nkuri as 'he drew out the straw, and heavy headed termites clung furiously to its end. ... he scrapped them into a broken earthenware bowl, brought out more straws from the anthill, and harvested. One red headed termite slit the tip of his left index finger and few drops of blood squinted. He quickly cut free the mandibles with his teeth and smiled at the taste of his revenge' (*Teeth of a Snail* 1). The vividness of the action is achieved using well thought-out and clear language. Then the conversation between Udene and Nkuri further portrays the identity of the characters as they meet each other. 'Nkuri a *na-akurikasi obodo!* It isn't easy my brother. If not, why not? Since things have refused to happen, I have to happen. And if people begin to wonder, then I will begin to wander' (2). This conversation introduces the radical and reckless nature of the characters. Even as this is explained by Asika in the 'Forward' to this text that, 'Nkuri is well known as a destroyer, the one who makes the town ripples! His principles and belief in life are enshrined in those words' (vii). Similarly, the interactionist theorist emphasis on the importance of identity or the individual's self-concept as an important predictor of behaviour saying that, 'identities are motivational factors, (i.e; they cause behaviour) and identities develop in a process of social interaction emerging from relationships with others' (Broomfield and Thompson 23). The characters' self-identity and philosophy are captured through the use of dialogue. Hence, we hear Udene referring to himself as a 'leopard'. One that stalks like a lion scares the tigers and disperses a herd of elephants' (*Teeth of a Snail* 4). As the duo assume exaggerated names and powers, they, hitherto are propelled into recklessness and radicalism.

The movement between scenes and events in the unfolding story is relayed using exposition whereby, Udene and Nkuri:

Walked through the narrow path toward Amama River. Each step widened the greener and succulent leaf-littered path. A wrong location? Yes, they knew but they had not actually stepped out with plans to go anywhere. The tail of a black snake wriggled in swiftly as they approached. It was a rattlesnake! They gawked at each other, hesitated and went ahead. (*Teeth of a Snail* 9).

These horrific encounters do not deter their ambition, still, they wandered on, such that even the frightening rattle of the snake and other threatening sounds of wild animals and birds did not stop them. Various signs of bad omen and sights they encountered would have sent shivers down the spines of anyone, and make them reconsider their decision, but, propelled by unseen forces the deviants continued in their expedition.

Their decision to move on confirms the notion of ‘human life as a journey towards the ultimate goal of wholeness and self-realization.... The only way out is to go on the journey towards that far-off mysterious goal’ (Kaliszewski 12). It is at the point as this that Nkuri and Udene are overwhelmed with excitement and inquisitiveness and are ready for action in spite of the dangerous encounters with reptiles such as, stern looking alligator, python, *Eke ogba*, and the spirit of Amama. There are also the sacred birds shrieking. For example, ‘on a blighted lone branch of a far off tree that stood like death perched an elderly vulture that hid its baldhead across its thighs. It may have been thinking: “see no evil”, as the lads trudged on’ (*Teeth of a Snail* 13). These dangerous sights and happenstances are all characteristics of adventure. What these adventurers experience ironically propels their curiosity even further.

However, as the plot unfolds, there are periods of tension and conflict, danger, jittery and fear. Udene is troubled by the reality of their predicament as he gets covered and poisoned by spider cobweb, such that ‘he would scratch his swollen face for as long as the journey into the unknown lasted’ (14). This bitter experience signaled the beginning of the worst to come. Other dangerous experiences along their journey include the encounter with the monkey and some wide-nosed gorillas and chimps. And then the reality of the danger they face is starkly before them:

One would think that Nkuri and Udene did not know they should not have trod this lonely path at such a sacred hour! No! They knew. Even as children they had been informally instructed by folk tales that they were never to go to Amama River, especially at the time of *mgbachi* when spirits and wilderness beings rambled about. The seductive river glittered in the sun and beckoned on them to come. (*Teeth of a Snail* 22).

The adventurers are faced with a delicate choice to make, either to retreat or to fall to the seductive glare of the river enticing them to advance further. This force of attraction is perhaps explained by Akwanya when he says that, ‘the human world is seen as a field where forces are at work, specifically, the forces protecting and reinforcing the status quo, and those contesting the dominant power structure’ (Opata and Ohaegbu 65). The supernatural forces seem to prevail in this situation, pushing Nkuri and Udene to succumb to the lure of the warm inviting river.

The dangerous adventure being embarked on by the duo of Nkuri and Udene inspite of various warning signs lends credence to the saying that ‘the death that will kill a dog will first restrain it from perceiving the smell of excreta’ (*Teeth of a Snail* 22). This is the situation with the two characters as they eventually take to the path of exploit and ‘swam like water birds and submerged like crocodiles as if they had been born in the navel of *Onu Ezu*.... They swam to an isolated patch of land at the middle of the river and clung on the reeds to climb. It was slippery but where the mind is set, there the body follows’ (23). They moved on, plodded by curiosity. Curiosity is therefore postulated to be the impetus for the dangerous venture and also being ‘the most superficial of all the affections; it changes its object perpetually, it has an appetite which is very sharp, but very easily satisfied; and it has always an appearance of giddiness, restlessness and anxiety’ (Loewenstein 75). The quest to explore the *Onu-Ezu* River springs from excitement, desire and anxiety to know the unknown.

Internal Structures and Narrative Rhetorics

Internal structures and literary elements are considered as ‘the building blocks’ in formalist critical pattern. They are ‘the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured’ (Eagleton 79). These modes are known devices in literature and are trending in contemporary 21st century literary scenario. These structures include basic storytelling devices and narrative modes that work to make the tale a composite and balanced unit such as, language and syntax, proverbs, myths, flashbacks, rituals, among others. To Ojaide they, ‘enhance verbal communication, sometimes to make one an orator, and to sharpen one’s thinking skills’ (Azevedo 317). The verbal communication in the narrative is made clear by the use of these elements. He believes that the traditional African Literature is generally inclusive being:

A blending of traditional African “literary” techniques and borrowed European writing styles. Thus, the works of most of the best known African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi Wa Thiongo, have effectively combined the two worlds to bring out something which is simultaneously distinctively new and reflective of modern African. (320).

These literary techniques are creatively combined and are trending in Amakaeze's *Teeth of a Snail* seen in the careful use of devices to enhance the storyline.

There are various locations, some of them dangerous, in which actions happen, whereas 'the forest or grassland setting is the world in which many Africans live, and tales are meant to teach how one must treat others and the environment' (Azevedo 317). Umuezike is projected as the major setting of the event being the home town of Nkuri and Udene. It is a culturally religious place for people with the sense of sacredness of life. The people believe that 'life is sacred and blood was left to the gods. No one took his own life, unless he was ready to continue enmity with his ancestor and gods in the other world' (*Teeth of a Snail* 16). The adventure takes place in various other locations in the community, including the Amama River, the *Oma-uma acho okwu* forest which has a record of recurring misfortunes and strange incidences. It is said therefore about the forest 'that whoever ventured out of curiosity to trespass or traverse it, is on his own. The white missionary renamed it *Amama* because he could not pronounce the vernacular name. *Amama* eventually became the name by which the forest is known' (17). The sacredness of time and the location of the river and forest are likened to that of Uhamiri in Nwapa's *Idu* whereby, 'we do not see in the narrative any reference to a time when it might be permitted to visit Uhamiri's underwater home, but ...remarks suggest that some of the details pertaining to Uhamiri's dwelling are common knowledge' (Akwanya 22). Such is the situation with the Amama River, where it is expected that Nkuri and Udene should know better the dangers of exploring in the forbidden terrain of the river at an unholy hour of the day.

The language of the narrative involves the use of vernacular and proverbs. This highlights the postulation that 'syntax is another very important contributor to literariness. Frequent syntactic structures are encountered in literary works which would not occur in other forms of writing' (Akwanya 150). These structures including the proverbs have linguistic meaning. This is so being that 'in many African cultures, a feeling of language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverb' (Finnegan 380). There is a robust use of proverbs such as seen in the motivating allusion in vernacular, of Nkuri to his past exploits: '*Udene kara aka n'amapu ozu afo*', which transliterates to, 'yes, I am the one, the vulture that perforates the belly of an adult carcass' (*Teeth of a Snail* 23). Proverbs are equally known to be marked by 'terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor' (Finnegan 388). For example, as the saying goes, 'the fowl says it chuckles insects to death before it finally swallows' (*Teeth of a Snail* 25). This tells of the fact that the deviants are eventually caught up by the river as they remained impervious to caution. The dangerous consequence of the foolhardiness of the delinquents is captured thus, 'the death that will kill a dog will first restrain it from perceiving the smell of excreta' (22). These proverbs reveal the stubbornness and recklessness of Nkuri and Udene and their eventual destruction.

As the narrative is interspersed with proverbs it reveals the continued land dispute between Umuezu and Umuezike that had led to a clash that left many injured and crops devastated. This recklessness and consequent repercussion brought about by the land dispute is encapsulated in the saying, 'the ear that hears must not be as large as that of an elephant's ear nor should one answer *Okeke-nti-asaa* by name before he learns how to use his ears for the purpose for which they are meant' (*Teeth of a Snail* 47). The issue of land dispute is commonplace in traditional African literary scene. Its usual consequence is brought to the fore in the text, bearing in mind the fact that 'proverbs are closely interwoven with other aspects of linguistic and literary behaviour' (Finnegan 381). In between the adventurous narratives are folktales told to spice up and embellish the narrative. These come as myths and mystery tales, being described as 'narratives believed in some sense or the other to be true, and conceived with the origins of things in the activities of deities' (319). There are such mysterious stories as told about markets and spirits where one risks one's life by 'bending his head in between his legs within the market' (*Teeth of a Snail* 18). Then the story of a chimp that holds on to a baby named Chinwe for three days and the baby was found carefully foiled in tender leaves placed under an *udala* tree near Eke market before the busy market commenced. The mysterious happening here is that 'the measles and rashes on Chinwe...

were gone, with her skin looking smoother and healthier like that of a snail' (19). These are all internal structures that make the text whole.

The narrative in the text is punctuated with rituals and flashbacks. Nwoji's desperate search for the fruit of the womb is captured in a flashback:

Woman bring four matured eggs of a chameleon, and go to a four-crossed road at a sacred hour, and smash them to the ground! Call the four market days: Eke; Ori; Afo and Nkwo by name that they may know that their fame and name rely on the multitude of children born in front of them.... No one doubts the oracles, and Ayaka was one *dibia* whose words came undiluted from the gods' (32).

Nwoji's bitter experiences with death of her nine children are recapitulated in the story including her resolve not to carry anymore pregnancy. She reminisces that it was the carelessness of her husband who, under the influence of alcohol forced himself on her that resulted to the birth of Nkuri. Nwoji refused to accept the usual ritual in a bid to avert her child's death as prescribed by the medicine man. And it was reported, 'she rather would prefer death at that time than the heartbreak of having a baby on one arm, while standing by its grave' (32). Eventually, Nkuri was born and did not die but grows instead to be a deviant.

Nkuri's father, Ichoku is presented as a lazy man who talks too much. Nick-named after the parrot 'invite him to work and he would give reasons – like the dung of a duck- why he needed to make a quick exit. Hence, whenever he was sighted in his elements, conferencing with himself towards a folk's compound, the person only needed to lift up a hoe as that alone could make him steer away. He dreads the farm and farm implements,' (*Teeth of a Snail* 31). Ichoku's laziness is however likened to that of Unoka of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, who fears the farm and the sight of blood, as was reported of him, 'in his days he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow' (3). This reference highlights the intertextual relation of literary form in the text as it is in African literary phenomenon.

Hence 'the arduous and protracted outward journey balanced against a swift and eventless return journey is clearly a pattern which is conventional in the folktale, and shared by adventure sequence generally' (Akwanaya 23). Recounting the journey of the characters which are based on propelling curiosity in the character's action, yet, their desire to know about things that do not concern them motivates Nkuri and Udene to move beyond the safe precinct of the Amama River forest.

It is noted that 'curiosity causes people to expose themselves knowingly to terrible consequences' (Edelman). As they dived into the alluring river and swam across into the forest, in spite of the fearful encounters with swarm of crocodiles, Nkuri got caught up in the bowel of the Amama River which is, 'known to throw up a drowning victim three times from the deep before finally ingesting him or her to eternity. No one had ever escaped her amorous grip' (*Teeth of a Snail* 25). Such is the fate of Nkuri who struggles to free himself as he is already drowning in the river. Even Udene's effort to save him is scuttled and so, 'like a cannon shot, the still body of Nkuri rose the second time. Nkuri gets drawn by the river Amama while Udene his friend escaped, but is thrown into dementia. 'Udene lay bedraggled beneath a wild apple tree all alone. He was not breathing; he was not dead' (45). He is mysteriously discovered and resuscitated by a hunter, Ikeotuonye after several days of search by the family and community. Their fate reveals the consequences of unguarded quest.

Conclusion

Curiosity is identified as the driving force in the protagonists which has been 'consistently recognized as a critical motive that influences human behaviour in both positive and negative ways at all stages of the life cycle' (Loewenstein 75). The story and the consequence of reckless adventure presented in the text come to bare by means of the internal structure as major narrative techniques. The fact remains that the contemporary writer is carrying out the timeless mission of the oral artist of defending the cultural ethos of the people. Nkuri and Udene got themselves destroyed at the bottom of Amama River out of reckless and non-sanctioned behaviours.

The paradox in the title of the text however highlights the fact that delinquency and deviance are two negative traits to exhibit in a thoroughly African cultural milieu, as they are capable of causing irreparable damage to the delinquents or defaulters. Storytelling and other narrative techniques therefore, serve as avenues to teach and transmit old long cultural norms.

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