

Discourse Patterning in Chinua Achebe's
Anthills of the Savannah and Thomas Pynchon's
The Crying of Lot 49

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Abstract

A large body of literary criticism has accumulated over the decades on the study of Chinua Achebe's fiction by African and non-African scholars. The preoccupations of these scholars are expressed in anthologies of literary criticism, scholarly journals, book chapters, and literary reviews. Some of the issues examined generally revolve around Achebe's concern with the Igbo world view, and the attendant problem of European encounter with Africa. But this critical discussion takes a different perspective from the usual study of Achebe's works especially *Anthills of the Savannah*. This paper critically examines the centrality of discourse patterns in the production and criticism of literature. Discourse patterning is the means through which a work of literature is realised as a semantic unit. The principal means through which the text is realised as a weave work is through



repetitions. This study will discuss Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* by close study of various aspects of repetition such as the conversion and expansion of mythic structures, metaphoric structures and intertextual relations.

Introduction

The concept of discourse pattern is an idea that has gained much traction in literary criticism especially among poststructuralist critics. This idea of discourse patterning marks a decisive point of demarcation between the traditional literary critics and the modern critics. For the traditional critics, the author is seen as the organizing principle of a work of art. But in modern critical discourse, one observes a common concern to dismantle the author as the ontological configuration of a literary work. This deconstructive approach has given rise to the famous essay of Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1977). As Barthes forcefully argues in this essay,

A text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (146).

According to Barthes, no text is an island by itself. Every text is a conglomeration of other textual relationships which surpass the conscious awareness of the writer. In other words, every text of literature is constituted as an autonomous verbal structure which has given itself a prior right of existence. In his seminal works Jacques Lacan points to this self-constituting power in literary discourse. This he attributes to literature with reference to the phenomenon of the unconscious. In the *Language of the*

unconscious according to Lacan, the signifier is freed from any fixed reference to a signifier. Each signifier refers to other signifiers in an endless chain of discursive play. The signifiers are not attached to any determinate truth outside the discursive play of language. This very movement of the signifier at the level of unconscious association is accountable for discourse patterning. It must be admitted that this account of Lacan is similar to that of J. Hillis Miller. In his work, *Fiction and Repetition* (1982), Miller posits that the unconscious is the cause of repetition in a literary work. Thus we read that:

The unconscious human state of illusion is the cause of repetition. It is the cause which drives the characters to live as they do. At the same time it is the cause which leads the narrator to interpret the story he tells as a sequence of repetitions. When in fact nothing repeats, and each person, event, or thing remains stubbornly closed in on itself, as itself (13).

The notion of the radical intransitivity of a literary work is encountered in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where he argues that the verbal structure is marked by precipitous existence. In this mode of existence literature is organized around the concept of 'literariness' (Donald Morton 65). This drawing of attention to itself is what Roman Jakobson refers to as the poetic function, that is, the work of art is characterized by its formal structures. As Jakobson further elaborates, 'on every level of language the essence of poetic art consists of recurrent returns' (145). Further elucidating his position, Tzvetan Todorov as discussed by Akwanya in *Verbal Structure* (2004) maintains that literature is full of repetition which underscores the idea of discourse patterning. Thus we read,



We usually don't realise just how repetitive, or rather how redundant, fiction is... [A]t one point conversation may be reproduced in its entirety; at another, it may be alluded to briefly; action may be observed from several different points of view: it can be recounted in the future, in the present, and in the past. In addition, all these parameters can be combined (259).

Thus parallelism, parody, repetition, conversion and expansion are all patterns that draw attention to literature as a verbal art. Discourse patterning in modern epistemology is the 'eternal recurrence of the same' (Nietzsche). It is pertinent to take into consideration also the contribution of Riffaterre. In *Semiotics of Poetry* Riffaterre argues that the language of a literary text functions according to a predictable pattern within the semiotic system of poetry. This functioning of the poetic text he defines as follows,

Poetic discourse is the equivalent established between a word and a text, or a text and another in which case the word will text. The poem results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex and non-literary periphrasis. The matrix is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, not appear in the text. It is always actualized in successive variants: the form of these variants is governed by the first or primary actualization, the model. Matrix, model and text are variants of the same structure (19).

For Riffaterre a work of literature is created by a constant tension and shifting away from the matrix which is usually the repressed structure. Thus any poem is a deviation from a single image. It is

this matrix or kernel that produces the poem. This we shall examine in the work before us.

Criticism of the Texts

In *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Crying of Lot 49* the discourse pattern consists of conversion and expansion of Idemili sequence and the bone motif respectively. In *Anthills of the Savannah* the ur-narrative from which the narrative proliferates is the myth of Idemili. It is to this sequence that all incidents are referred for significance and intelligibility. As we read from the discourse of the omniscient narrator,

At first that holy lake was the sole shrine to Idemili. But as people multiplied and spread across the world they built little shrines farther away from the lake wherever they found food, land, and water and settled. Still their numbers continued to increase and outstrip the provision of every new settlement; and so the search for land and water also continued.

As it happened, good land was more plentiful than good water and before long some hamlets too far from streams and springs were relieving their burning thirst with the juice of banana stems in the worst year of dry weather. Idemili, travelling through the country disguised as a hunter, saw this and on her return sent a stream from her lake to snake through the parched settlements all the way to Orimili, the great river which in generations to come strange foreigners would search out and rename the Niger (103).

In this context the Idemili sequence serves as a reflection on the right use of power. The almighty has to exercise power diligently by providing water for the people so that they will not die of thirst. In the narrative structure of *Anthills of the savannah* the mythic structure of Idemili sequence is converted and expanded



AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING
 NUMBER 51, 01 JULY 2014
 ISSN 0331-0566

in what Levi-Strauss calls ‘Symmetrical Series’ (cited in Akwanya 151). The outer ring of the narrative is just the reverse of the mythic sequence of Idemili. In the government of General Sam, he has to stop the water projects in Abazon because the people refuse to give him their mandate. This very people of Abazon have been suffering from drought for a long time. As the leader of Abazon narrates their plight,

But that was not the end. More shifting-eyes people came and said: because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not (127).

In the two sequences we read, that of Idemili encounter with people of the arid region and that of General Sam, the recurring motif is the issue of water which occupies the attention of the participants. At a party at John Kent’s house, the same issue exercises the consciousness of the participants. The dialogue between John Kent and his visitor Dick centres on water. Thus we read,

‘Oh, that. No, we didn’t do anything. That was the trouble. A delegation arrived at the Presidential Palace from Abazon – you know the drought place – and none of us knew they were coming. Naughty, isn’t it? So His Excellency gets mad at us?’

‘That’s beautiful’, says Mad Medico and then turning to Dick he plays the knowing old coaster to a ruddy new comer. Abazon is in the north-west and has had no rain for a year. So the poor devils up there send a delegation to ask His Excellency to give them rain (57).

In this instance of discourse the participants are concerned with the same issue of water which has its source from the mythic deposit of Idemili sequence. This issue of water is variously repeated in their discourse. However, for Chris, he has a first-hand experience of the issue; while for Kent it is a way for him to impress his visitor, Dick.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* the discourse pattern centres on the conversion and expansion of the bone motif. The first time the bone motif occurs in the discourse is in a television commercial for Fangoso Lagoons, a new housing development. As Metzger observes,

It has to be laced by canals with private boats, a floating social hall in the middle of an artificial lake, at the bottom of which lay restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and freezes from the Canaries, real human skeletons from Italy; giant clam shells from Indonesia – all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts (31).

In this commercial advert for Fangoso Lagoon the bone acquires a semantic density in that it is a bone that is imported from Italy for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts. It acquires further semantic density in the commercial in *The Cashiered Movie* by association with Beaconfield cigarettes. The high quality of the Beaconfield cigarette is its composition with bone charcoal. 'Into the commercial break now roared a deafening ad for Beaconfield cigarettes, whose attractiveness lay in their filter's use of bone charcoal, the very best' (34). While Oedipa Maas and Metzger are travelling for the ancillary letter to inventory the assets of Pierce Inverarity, Metzger meets Manny Di Presso, a co-actor and a lawyer. In the ensuing dialogue Di Presso says that he is bringing a suit against Pierce Inverarity for supply of bone charcoal which

Pierce has not paid for. In their conversation we get the facts of the matter,

‘Tell me about the lawsuit’, Metzger said, trying with both hands to keep his hair in place.

‘You’ve been into Inveracity’s books’, Di Presso said, ‘you know the Beaconsfield filter thing’. Metzger made a noncommittal move. ‘Bone charcoal’, Oedipa remembered. ‘Yeah, well Tony Jaguar, my client, supplied some bones’, said Di Presso,’ he alleges. Inverarity never paid him. That’s what it’s is about’ (60)

The bones which Di Presso alleges that his client supplied to Pierce is harvested from Italy where the German soldiers had the hit American army. After the war Tony Jaguar who knows about it has harvested it.

But they (American soldiers) died, every one, dumbly, without a trace or a word. One day the Germans came down from the cliffs, and their enlisted men put all the bodies that were on the beach into the lake, along with what weapons and other materials were no longer of use to either side. Presently the bodies sank; and stayed where they were till the early ‘50’s, when Tony Jaguar, who’d been a corporal in an Italian outfit attached to the German force at Lago di Pieta and knew about what was at the bottom, decided along with some colleagues to see what he could salvage. All they managed to come up with was bones (62).

In the dialogue between Di Presso and Metzger the bones belong to dead American soldiers. However while this conversation is going on, the Paranoid group eavesdropping get interested and one of them remarks that the bones of the soldiers resemble those of the lost battalion in *The Courier’s Tragedy*.

'You know, blokes,' remarked one of the girls, a long-waisted, brown-haired lovely in a black knit leotard and pointed sneakers, 'this all has a most bizarre resemblance to that ill, ill Jacobean revenge play we went to last week.'

'*The Courier's Tragedy*,' said Miles, 'she's right. The same kind of kinky thing, you know. Bones of lost battalion, in lake, fished up, turned into charcoal – ' (63)

In *The Courier Tragedy* attended by the Paranoids, the bones in question consist of the remains of the lost battalion which are fished up and later turned into a charcoal. But in *The Courier Tragedy* which is directed by Driblette, the recurrence of the bone is enacted with a slight shift in meaning. Instead, the bodies of fifty young men of Faggio murdered by Angelo and thrown into the lake, are later turned into charcoal and then ink.

Niccolo read us excerpts from at all, but now miraculously a long confession by Angelo of all his crimes, closing with the revelation of what really happened to the lost Guard of Faggio. They were – surprise – every one massacred by Angelo and thrown in the lake. Later on their bones were fished up again and made into charcoal, and the charcoal into ink (74).

In *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Crying of Lot 49* repetition of the basic ideas that form the matrix of discourse forms an integral aspect of the discourse pattern. Parallelism within a dialogue with one speaker producing a text which is parallel to that of another speaker forms an aspect of discourse pattern. After *The Courier's Tragedy*, Oedipa Maas is very curious. She wants to find out something about the play. In two separate instances with Metzger the same idea of Oedipa Maas's curiosity is repeated. In the first instance of the narration which is encapsulated in the dialogue between Metzger and Oedipa Maas we read:



According to the programme, *The Courier's Tragedy* had been directed by one Randolph Driblette. He had also played the part of Gennaro the winner. 'Look, Metzger,' Oedipa said, 'come on backstage with me.'

'You know one of them?' said Metzger, anxious to leave.

'I want to find out something. I want to talk to Driblette.'

'Oh, about the bones.' He had a brooding look. Oedipa said, 'I don't know. It just has me uneasy. The two things, so close' (75).

On the other hand, if we turn to page seventy-six we see the same pattern of curiosity repeated.

She looked around for words, feeling helpless. 'What then?'

Metzger challenged, getting to his feet, looming. 'What?'

'I don't know,' she said, a little desperate. 'Metzger, don't harass me. Be on my side.'

'Against whom?' inquired Metzger, putting on shades.

'I want to see if there's a connection. I'm curious.'

'Yes, you're curious,' Metzger said (76).

One observes a sense of urgency and curiosity in the dialogue between Metzger and Oedipa Maas. While Metzger is showing a sense of reluctance Oedipa Maas shows a sense of curiosity to make a mental connection between the series of bones she has encountered.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the fact that Beatrice has an honours degree in English is repeated twice by Mad Medico and General Sam. At the get together party at Medico's residence, John Kent reminds Dick that Ikem is a good poet. By way of compliment John Kent tells Dick that Beatrice has a first class honours in English.

'Yes, John told me what a fine poet you are. I'm ashamed to say I haven't yet read anything of yours but I certainly will now.'

'Take your time,' says Ikem. 'And remember MM is not a disinterested witness. I did him a good turn.'

'And I didn't tell you either,' said MM, 'that girl there sitting meekly and called Beatrice took a walloping honours degree in English from London University. She is better at it than either of us, I can assure you.' (62).

At the Presidential Retreat in Abichi, Sam mentions to Miss Cranford of the American United Press that Beatrice Okoh has a first class honours degree in English.

Meanwhile His Excellency was literally reciting my CV. 'Lou, this is one of the most brilliant daughters of this country, Beatrice Okoh. She is a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance--the only person in the service, male or female, with a first-class honours in English. And not from a local university but from Queen Mary College, University of London. Our Beatrice beat the English to their game. We're very proud of her' (75)

However according to Roman Jakobson, one of the primary characteristics of verbal art is that it draws attention to its formal structure. Using the notion of markedness Jacobson suggests that there are six functions of verbal behaviour and that in verbal arts the poetic function is dominant. The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Furthermore he maintains that the production of language involves two processes, that of selection and combination. Selection is the axis of selecting linguistic items from a range of possible options such as sound, syllable, and morpheme, word or phrases from a range of possible items in language, while combination is the placement of one linguistic item after another in a sequence. In *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Crying of Lot 49* the repetition of metaphoric structures forms a pattern of discourse.



In *The Crying of Lot 49* the metaphors of the posthorn, waste, and Paranoid form a cluster in discourse organization. The metaphor of the Paranoid first enters the discourse of Miles at Echo court when Oedipa Maas visits the hotel. The metaphor of Paranoid is used in this context to designate the singing group which Miles belongs to:

'It's lovely,' said Oedipa, 'but why do you sing with an English accent when you don't talk that way?'

'It's this group I'm in,' Miles explained, 'the Paranoids. We're new yet (27).

On another occasion we see Oedipa Maas using the same metaphor to rebuke Miles when he makes a sexual advance on her. Apart from the metaphor of the paranoid, the muted posthorn is repeated in the work. In *The Crying of Lot 49* the posthorn appears first at The Scope.

- WASTE? Oedipa wondered. Beneath the notice, faintly in pencil, was a symbol she'd never seen before, a loop, triangle and trapezoid (52).

The muted posthorn also appears on the latrine wall at The Scope as a secret symbol used by the Tristero organization for their communication. In her encounter with the third sex, the Lavender Crowd, Oedipa Maas sports the muted posthorn. This group which identifies itself as Arnold Snarb is a homosexual group. They use the symbol of muted posthorn as a mark of identification among their members. At the Golden Park, Oedipa Maas encounters a group of children dreaming the gathering. There among the children is spotted the image of the posthorn.

The night was empty of all terror for them, they had inside their circles an imaginary fire, and needed nothing but their own unpenetrated sense of community. They knew about the

post horn, but nothing of the chalked game Oedipa had seen on the sidewalk (118).

Among the children the posthorn is something that brings them together to play. At the same time, it is a mark of defiance against parental control. For the anarchists who believe in another world where revolution breaks out spontaneously and leaderless, the posthorn is a sign of communication. In another repetition of the posthorn, it is a symbol of identification for the delinquent youths.

Riding in a bus full of Negroes going to the graveyard, Oedipal Maas sees another repetition of the posthorn attached to the back seat of a car. In a Laundromat at Fillmore the image of the posthorn is attached to the bulletin board. On a latrine wall is an advert by AC-DC, standing for Alameda Country Death Cult, alongside this advert is the image of the muted posthorn.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the metaphor of the sun is repeated in the discourses of Chris, Ikem, Beatrice, and the narrator. The first time it is used is in the discourse of Chris,

But His Excellency speaks instead. And not even to him the latest offender but still to me. And he is almost friendly and conciliatory, the amazing man. In that instant the day changes. The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud, we are relieved and immediately celebrating (3).

In the daily affairs of government of General Sam the moment depends on the mood of His Excellency. Instead of rebuking the latest offender the Minister of Education, Sam withdraws his comment. This mood of Sam is captured by the metaphoric configuration of the sun. However in another instant Ikem identifies the sun as an enemy.

The sun in April is an enemy though the weatherman on television reciting mechanically the words of his foreign mentor tells you it will be fire all over the country. Fire! We



have been slowly steamed into well-done mutton since February and all the oafs on our public payroll tell us we are doing just fine! No my dear countrymen. This is Brigadier Misfortune of the Wilting 202 Brigade telling you you are not fine. No my dear countrymen, you will not be fine until you can overthrow the wild Sun of April (27-28)

Unlike Chris's idea of the sun as friendly and conciliatory, the sun in Ikem's discourse is identified as an enemy which needs to be overthrown. In this context one observes a semantic change from a small letter to a capital letter in the word *sun*. For there to be peace this sun has to be overthrown. In another instance where the metaphor is repeated, Ikem attributes his victory to the activity of the Sun. In 'Hymn to the Sun', Ikem uses the metaphor of the sun to reflect on the plight of the Abazon people. In chapter eight of *Anthills of the Savannah* another sense of repetition of the sun is encountered. Here the metaphor of the sun is used as a means of transportation for the Almighty to make contact with the earth:

In the beginning Power rampaged through our world naked. So the Almighty looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the sun saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili (103).

In the narration of the Abazon delegation to the government the metaphor of the sun is used to refer to General Sam. As the leader of the delegation puts it, 'so we came to Bassa to say our own yes and perhaps the work in our bore-holes will start again and we will not all perish from the anger of the sun' (127). The delegation of the Abazon has come to visit General Sam to pledge their support to his government so that he will restore their water bore-hole.

Apart from the metaphoric structure forming a pattern of discourse in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Crying of Lot 49*

intertextuality forms another pattern. Every narrative contains other narratives no matter how continuous or full it may seem to be. In other words, all utterances, all signs are texts whose meanings are produced in the total network of language. This concept of intertextuality is succinctly discussed by Soller as follows,

Every text situates itself at the junction of several texts of which it is at once the rereading, the accentuation, the condensation, the displacement and the inwardness [Profondeur]. In a certain way, the worth of a text's action amounts to its integration and destruction of other texts (quoted in Christopher Nash, 151).

This idea of intertextuality demonstrates the text's belongingness to a literary tradition. The uniqueness of a work of literature involves its bonding with the fabrics of tradition. This tradition as Pierre Macherey has argued in *A Theory of Literary Production* is thoroughly alive and renewable in works of literature. Thus we read, 'a book never arrives unaccompanied; it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them' (53). The full import of this is that a work of art arises from a literary culture. Without this interaction with a literary culture it may not be possible to produce any new work of art. In T.S.Eliot and Samuel Beckett we see this aspect of renewal in the literary tradition. In a conversation with Stetson in 'The Waste Land' we read,

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
 Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
 Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? (1:71-3).

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* we read as follow,

Hamm: Did your seeds come up?
 Clov: No.



Hamm: Did they scratch round them to see if they had sprouted?

Clov: They haven't sprouted.

Hamm: Perhaps it's still too early.

Clov: If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. (Violently). They'll never sprout. 1039-1040).

The two texts are not a question of one influencing the other either Beckett or Eliot. Rather it is a question of language renewing itself in a work of art. Language in this context is expansive, absorbing the whole of the literary tradition. As Michel Foucault puts it, 'language accumulates an ineluctable memory which does not even know itself as a memory' (300).

In *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The Crying of Lot 49* one hears the echoes of literary tradition as part of discourse patterning. To some extent in *The Crying of Lot 49* one reads echoes of the myth of Narcissus, of a beautiful youth who looks at himself in a pool of water but is unable to capture his image in the stream. In Oedipa Maas there is this constant looking at herself in the mirror but she is unable to capture her image in the mirror. Also the name Oedipa Maas connects with the name Oedipus Rex. We discover that the two texts share a lot in common. It is concerned with quest motif. Oedipus is in search to discover the murderer of the late king while Oedipa Maas is in a quest to unravel the mystery surrounding the estate of a millionaire.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* one reads the echoes of Mephistopheles in the text where Beatrice raises doubt that an officer can greet her let alone be polite to her after searching her house. She likens to this act of politeness Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles in this context is recuperated from literary achieve to demonstrate that Beatrice is doubtful of the soldier's intentions. One reads of Idemili whose origin is not explained but

a direct appropriation of *Arrow of God* and other cultural texts where it has been used.

Conclusion

At this point one may argue that the whole idea of discourse patterning presupposes that writing of literary works is not a conscious engagement of a writer. Friedrich Nietzsche insists that the artist is not the foundation, ground or origin of artistic creation but the medium through which the primal force of life finds its most powerful expression. 'But in so far as the subject is an artist', Nietzsche explains, 'he is already liberated from his individual will and has become a medium through which the only truly existent subject celebrates his redemption through illusion' (Spinks, 25). What is encountered in a work of art is the primal force of Dionysius, which Freud and some others may refer to as an unconscious process. This world of literature is a verbal universe which has nothing before or after it. As Lee Spinks puts it, 'we cannot claim that it has a moral or humanitarian function' (25). It is language reflecting on itself the strange configuration of things. As Harold Bloom has argued, 'poems are not things but only words that refer to other words, and those words refer to still other words, and so on, into the densely overpopulated world of literary language (24). Literature is all about language, where words interconnect with one another to form a pattern, at times crossing one another. In other words, a work of art has an ontological configuration of its own, that is, a work of literature is cut off from anything external to it. By means of discourse pattern language proliferates endlessly to form a work of literature. Besides, discourse patterning marks the distinguishing feature that differentiates literature from other forms of writing.



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