

Griotization and (Re)Structuring of the African Novel: Form, Technique and Style in Achebe's Creative Works

Uwa, John Olatunde
University of Lagos
uwa.jmo@gmail.com

Abstract

The need to look at the fictive 'works of Chinua Achebe through a pragmatic dissemination of the general laws guiding the operation and interplay of various structures of the works of art, particularly as they relate to one another in a realistic manner will be the main focus of this paper. The portrayal of reality for which Achebe has, and will continue to receive accolades does not necessarily inhere in Achebe's (re)presentation of realistic individuals grappling with the barriers in both their physical and metaphysical ambience, or in the linguistic structures that so uniquely characterize Achebe as a master story-teller, but also in the relationship that exists between Achebe's realistic portrayals as indicators by which realism in the African novel may be interpreted. Therefore, the idea that the intrinsic formal structures or elements of analysis are the only valid approach in the appreciation of the works of art and indeed African literature must be re-examined. This is exactly what Achebe achieved in his creative vision when he engaged a narrator who is both anonymous and a griot – the type that we find in a typical African story-telling setting, to provide valid examples which show that he is a creative intelligence whose artistic temperament is greatly influenced by his African world view. Evidence thus abounds to prove that Achebe's fictive enterprise provides planks by which the structuralist paradigm for interpreting the works of art may be (re)structured. This essay will explicate how Achebe's works,

especially his novels, resonate a possibility that 'structural imagination' is the artist's ability to conjure up elements of structuralist aesthetics from both established norms and the cultural background of the artist through the penetration of allegories, images, fables, symbolism, metaphor and myth of African literature and culture.

Introduction

This paper will examine Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* with the intent of enunciating how he balances form and content, or how he achieves meaning through the deployment of cultural codes that are distinct to the African ambience which he projects. To achieve this clarification, there may be need to examine the inter-relationship between the various cultural codes which help to create or form meaning in the selected novels of Achebe. So Achebe's penetration of the cultural metaphor, myth, language and gods of his world-view to create meaning shall be some of the concerns in this paper. However, considerations will also focus on his restructuring of the novel form through a 'griot' narrator in a typical African story-telling setting to give his novel an African essence.

When Obi Wali in his controversial essay 'The Dead End of African Literature' suggested the use of indigenous African languages as the linguistic medium for African Literature, one would have expected the structuralist approach in the criticism of African Literature to blossom. This sentiment which is also shared by Mowah (1997) is foregrounded in the aspect of structuralist discourse that accommodates signification and other linguistic codes and symbols of African literature as an organic whole. A structuralist reading of Achebe's novels suggests that there is a conscious or unconscious effort by the writer to correct the notion of critics like Charles Larson who opined that the African novel is more centred on content than on form. With this kind of

assumption still deeply entrenched, there may be need in this paper to examine the manner in which Achebe presents his thematic concerns to establish ground for the affirmation that literary portrayals are informed by the interplay of both an objective and a coherent system.

In trying to broaden the understanding of Achebe's creative intelligence through defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluation of his selected novels, there may be some need to perceive the novels as the functional interplay and 'constructive linkage' through which the various devices that characterize the works of literature are assembled. By constructive linkage, this paper is implying the interplay of linguistic inversion whose meaning may be appreciated under distinctive contexts. A strong contention in this paper is that 'constructive linkage' also inheres in the cultural and referential codes that are internal in literary works.

Structuralist Poetics: The Major Statements

Since the objective of this paper is to establish structuralist credentials of Achebe's novels, it is important for us to take a second look at some of the major statements which situate, modify and interrogate structuralism as an interpretive tool in criticism. A precursor of structuralism as linguistic science which builds on the signifier (sound image) and the signified (concept) is Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's postulations which show literary criticism to be a scientific enterprise, suggests that there is an arbitrary relationship between the signifying sound and the signified concept. The implication for criticism is that meaning cannot only be perceived as a cultural unit, but there is also a suggestion that when a signifier is altered, there is a preservation of its differences with other signifiers. One would therefore have to look at the functionality of meaning rather than its natural occurrence on a sign, which makes language a system of 'interrelated items' (Mowah

3). It is this Saussurian postulation that informed Claude Levi-Strauss' system of binary opposition which studies myth through the reading of the metaphoric elements of a narrative and the semi logical structuring of a plot system. In his essay 'Do Dual Organizations Exist?' Levi-Strauss avers that the relationship between binary oppositions is expressed in the opposition between man and woman and other 'contraries'. Myth and poetry in his opinion are 'complementary terms' (202 – 221). Myths are therefore signifiers of past events which are given life through the use of metaphor. Metaphor and metonymy are the two binary oppositions through which deeper meaning is provided the work of art. Metaphor pervades the narrative background of Achebe's novels under reference; and these metaphors which we have to penetrate for total understanding of the African novels are signifying binaries which are in opposition with other metonymy. Levi-Strauss' assertion that there is an opposition between metaphor and metonymy reinforces this point.

In spite of Levi-Strauss' postulation, Mowah suggested that while it may be necessary to use linguistic method in analyzing linguistic materials 'it is equally important to bear in mind that the special functions linguistic materials acquire when they are organized as literature must be analyzed too' (7). By this token, Mowah is pointing a finger in the direction of 'literary structuralism' which was expounded upon by critics like Michael Riffaterre, Van Dijk, and Roland Barthes. These theorists argue that there is a system of correspondence which, though often ignored, contributes to the linguistic structure of a literary text. Thus, in the appreciation of the structural elements of both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the critic must also give some considerations to the 'special functions' which the deployed cultural codes play in the generation of meaning.

In his essay titled, 'On the Foundation of Poetics...' Van Dijk provides rules by which the ignored system of correspondence in a

literary text may be accounted for as indicator which gives deeper insight into meaning. He uses the rules of literary and non-literary reading to explain this point. In other words, the way a literary text like *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God* may be read will be different from the way a non-literary text like a science textbook and social newspaper may be read. This is so because, apart from the linguistic code that some structuralists insist upon, certain other codes which we have mentioned as cultural codes abound in both novels. Understanding these codes and the patterns of their application will broaden the scope of signifiers and what they signify. On his part, Roland Barthes identifies functional codes that help in the generation of meaning in literature (7). Barthes identifies five codes by which a literary text may be understood, namely proairectic, semi code, hermeneutic, symbolic and the referential codes. The proairectic code helps the reader to understand the plot of a text; the semi code provides the reader with a format for understanding the linguistic elements that relate to characters in a text, the hermeneutic code is concerned with the logic of questions and answers, 'suspense and peripatetic', the symbolic code helps in the understanding of symbolic and thematic underpinnings of a text; while the fifth which is very important in the understanding of Achebe's novels is the referential code. The referential code is derived from the cultural background in which the literary text is situated. The implication for a structuralist critique of the selected novels is that, the cultural background is a legitimate component in the generation of meaning. At such a level of analysis, one discovers that the referential code will help to illuminate cultural models as 'sources of meaning and coherence'. For its own part, Jonathan Culler's structuralist poetics highlights the critic's critical perspective and the kind of text being analyzed. He emphasizes the importance of the narrative voice in situating the literary text as a 'communicative circuit'. And as suggested elsewhere in this paper,

Achebe's anonymous narrator will form some of the matrix by which structuralist reading of the text may be derived.

In Africa, critics like Sunday Anozie in *Structural models and African Poetics* (1981), Abiodun Jeyifo, Abiola Irele (1986), Anthony Appiah's *'Structuralist Criticism in African Fiction'* (1981) and Frank Uche Mowah's *A Structuralist Discourse on African Literature* (1997) have made great efforts in situating structuralism within the African world view. One interesting exposition of Anozie which Mowah identifies is the concept of 'Structuralist imagination'. However, Mowah argues that Anozie's failure to give a conclusive explanation to the concept makes its application quite taxing. Using *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, this paper will prove that the 'structuralist imagination' of Achebe, prefixes on his ability to perceive relevant elements of codes and structure from the African cultural background as indicators of structuralist presence in African literature.

In spite of the weakness in Anozie's structuralist poetics, there are sufficient possibilities in his postulation that may be useful in the structuralist reading of a text. One of such possibilities which this paper will explore is Anozie's revealing concept of 'the poetics of the mask.' This concept may be used in understanding the literary paradigm which the African novel has come to engender. So, by drawing upon relevant concepts of Van Dijk, Barthes and Anozie, attention will be drawn to the essential cultural elements which create a logical ordering of the African novel as a structural entity.

Balancing Aesthetics and Meaning

Though there is nothing really wrong with the pursuit of meaning in the criticism of African literature, it is important to understand, not just the aesthetic imports, but also the meaning of the aesthetic inclusions. The aesthetics of the selected novels which are manifested in Achebe's deployment of myth, metaphor, allegories,

symbolism and other cultural codes which are well woven by a borrowed linguistic medium into African signifiers must be deeply analyzed in order to attain its African essence.

Largely due to the huge repertory of cultural material in Achebe's two cultural novels, some critics have hinged the main thematic concerns of the novels on cultural conflict; this is without due consideration of the cultural codes that evince far reaching meaning and the constant concerns of the human irony of the two texts. However, under a postmodernist re-reading of the texts, especially the type that a structuralist reading entails, cultural conflict will become a peripheral concern. A re-reading of the novels from a structuralist perspective reveals a conscious and unconscious effort by the writer to establish cultural codes which help to confront and explain the paradox and ironies of existence in Igbo cultural cosmos. Some of these codes, which cultural aestheticians like Chinweizu and Okpaku have referred to as African aesthetic, are represented by Achebe as mask, Ogbanje, yam, the deities, chief priest, full moon etc. The masked Egwugwu for example is employed in *Things Fall Apart* as an epistemic subway which provides deeper insight into the spirituality and sacredness of the Igbo cultural traditions. In *Arrow of God*, the mask is deployed as an aesthetic device that connects the living to the metaphysical essence. This point is explained in the zest with which Obika carries the 'Ogbazulobodo'. The Ogbazulobodo is a signifier which signifies the point of convergence between the physical and the metaphysical. Once Obika carries the Ogbazulobodo, two personalities are established in him. One is his physical essence, and the other is a metaphysical presence, the same presence which gives him vigour, even as a sick man, to perform the ritual; and immediately he drops the Ogbazulobodo, that spirit leaves him and he is found dead. The narrative voice establishes this assumption when we are intimated that Obika 'felt like two separate persons, one running above the other' (226).

Structurally speaking, the mask can be perceived as a semiotic imagery of the Igbo metaphysical essence. The oral aesthetics of the mask as a metaphor for justice and truth also is moreover not to be ignored as a structural element that gives meaning to the binary opposition between man and his society. In *Things Fall Apart*, the sacredness of the Egwugwu as a metaphor for justice and truth is illuminated in the aftermath of Enoch's unmasking of it in broad daylight. The mask thus presents a paradigm by which we can evaluate the opposition between good and evil. The voice of the masked spirit is therefore a physical manifestation of the Igbo Justice System, and not just a linguistic code.

Another cultural code that evinces meaning is the ritual associated with marriage ceremonies in *Things Fall Apart*. The negotiation of bride price as symbolized by broomsticks, the ritual presentation of native chalk and other practices are signifiers of traditional bonding practice whose understanding lies deep beneath the linguistic elements. In a typical Igbo cultural setting which Achebe presents in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, moonlight nights and full moons are occasions of joy for both adults and children. On such occasions, the villages are usually thrown agog with festivals and wrestling bouts. A typical Igbo society is materialistic in orientation. This is evident in the relationship between the people and their gods. Even the white man's religion gains prominence, not out of superiority but out of its materialist undertone. The paradoxical illustration of the life of Nwakibie and Unoka alludes to this materialistic orientation of Igbo society. Symbols like three huge barns of yams, nine wives, thirty children and the quest of the highest title which a man can take in the clan, are signifiers of respect and well-being. Unoka's life on the other hand, represents one of the ironies of human existence and the matrix by which failure is implied in a typical Igbo setting. From the Igbo world view, Unoka's life negates the standard by which success may be measured. Structurally speaking, Unoka, Nwakibie,

Moonlight marriage ceremonies, the mask and even the destruction of Ebo's Ikenga for which Akukalia is shot dead, and the killing and attempted killing of a sacred python as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are signifiers which signify only the linguistic signs which they represent. However, the application of Barthes, Van Dijk and Culler's structuralist poetics, which looks at the text beyond the linguistic elements into the cultural codes and other essential features of a literary text, suggest that the signifiers which Achebe presents in the selected novels, speak of a deeper meaning than that which it signifies as a linguistic entity. These signifiers give the critics of the novels descriptive imageries, and at the same time, authenticate the African essence of the novels.

It is the deeper implication of what Unoka and Nwakibie signify that predetermines Okonkwo's unconscious perception of material impoverishment, physical disposition and valour as the parameters to judge success and failure. This type of cultural code creates another signifier (fear) in Okonkwo's unconscious.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are of key importance in situating the African novel as a structural edifice with distinct and unique codes. They show that the structural elements that give meaning to the African novel are deeply enshrined in the understanding of African cultural codes. By implication, any serious evaluation of the African novel from a structuralist perspective must be hinged on the understanding that the African novel pragmatically operates on peculiar signifiers that link to other signifiers in a continuum whose meaning inheres in their metonymic and metaphorical elements.

The interplay between metonymic and metaphorical elements in the determination of meaning is given imaginative picture in the presentation of Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* as half spirit and half human (*Okala mmadu Okla mmuo*) and the priestess of Agbala who connects to the metaphysical realm when she is in her element. The description of the shrine of Agbala (15) and the shrine of Ulu (209)

speaks of an African essence whose meanings are deeply entrenched far beyond the linguistic semantics of the signifier, and that which is signified. This kind of picture validates the African spiritual and metaphysical essence through which a connection between the ancestors and their human agents is established. This connection is further given significance through the understanding of the chants, incantations, sacrifices and songs. Understanding these signifiers will then provide planks for identifying formal elements of the novels like fable, folklore allegory and symbols that are unique to the African novel. It is this complex movement of signifiers that gives significance to the socio-political, cultural and religious issues of Achebe's cultural novels which any human society may grapple with. One implication of this kind of reading of the selected texts and, indeed, African literature generally is that meaning can basically be achieved by combining, for analysis, both the formal elements of the text and the cultural codes based on the context and domain. This is exactly what Mowah implies when he suggests, referring to Isidore Okpewho (1997), that:

...as long as the literary object is a product of society, it necessarily possesses 'ethno-graphic information' about society. This meaning and signification of an African literary text can be reached not only by synchronic analysis but also through a thorough examination of historical and cultural contingencies (23).

Clearly, more issues than just the intrinsic linguistic features of a text need to be taken into cognizance in the derivation of meaning. So the primary objective of structuralist reading of a literary text is to create a situation in which the internal structure and working of a text can combine to create meaning.

Structuring the African Novel: Character, Language and Narrator

In attempting to re-create the African essence, the writer must not only communicate his characters' attitudes, values and

priorities ... but also the subtleties of their indigenous speech: their peculiar rhythms, images, repetitions, and so forth (Norman Stokle: 112).

The statement above is a reaction to the sudden explosion of interest on the part of African writers to 'Africanize' the novel form by creating an African essence in it. As he rightly pointed out, recreating the African essence entails the application of distinct indigenous African elements to the novel form. And since the essence of the paper is to provide a structuralist reading of Achebe's novels by paying attention to the distinct cultural elements that help to create African cultural signifiers, there may be need to examine the very language of Achebe's novels which appears to make up a specific set of signifiers; by this examination, some significance is given to the novels.

In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe engages a narrative voice and characters whose language readily helps us to understand their personalities. The language of both texts is well spiced with proverbs and local imageries that give signification to socio-cultural experience of the Igbo society which Achebe represents. According to Austine Nwagbara, Achebe's application of the English language in his novel is the 'most outstanding feature of his style and obviously one of his most significant contributions to the development of a distinct Nigerian literary aesthetic' (122). What we may have come to identify as the unique linguistic feature of Achebe's literary works is his artistic infusion into English Language, 'non-English linguistics and discourse' to create an African aesthetic which Emenyonu (1995) terms '...English in the hands of a non-native speaker' (330).

In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* Achebe defines the 'English of African literature' by employing style and technique that blends English syntax and African discourse to evolve what may be termed 'hybrid'. In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic social space like Nigeria, communicating across the board is one mark by which

great works of art are identified. Achebe proves to be in this class by developing a discursive and linguistic template that appeals to a collective unconscious. By poking on diverse interplaying discourse of both his local ambient and the European Pseudo-Christian and cultural inventions, Achebe evolved a new paradigmatic canvas by which we may judge aesthetics in the literary structure of the African novel. Two linguistic features that highlight the uniqueness of Achebe's language in the selected novels are proverbs and imageries. Proverbs which Achebe himself tells us are like the palm oil with which words are eaten, permeate both novels to provide cultural essence. The cultural nature of Achebe's proverbs is reinforced in the use of local imageries to give a realistic portrayal and authenticity to the African novel.

At the deeper level of structuralist discourse, especially as recommended by Culler, Barthes and Van Dijk, it may be discerned that Achebe's language at the background level suggests that two quintessential signifiers plague the larger African society in the quest for essence. One is the unifying element and the other is the disintegrating element. In *Things Fall Apart*, the introductory landscape which Achebe presents is a signifier of the need for Africans to be united as they strive for self-assertion and realization. In *Arrow of God* the background signifier, signifies the elements that provoke disintegration among a people that are united. This disintegration is signified by the rivalry between Ezidemili and Ezeulu. Nwaka is only being used as a medium to prevent direct confrontation between Ezeulu and Ezidemili. On a particular occasion it becomes clear that Nwaka is only a tool in the hands of Ezidemili just like Ezeulu claims to be a tool in the hands of the gods.

Has anybody ever asked why the head of the priest of Ulu is removed from the body at death and hung up in the shrine? asked Ezidemili rather abruptly... Nwaka had no answer to it... Every boy in Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers

long ago. But Idemili was there at the beginning of things. Nobody made it... when I die I am not buried in the earth because the earth and the sky are two different things (41).

The feud between Ezeulu and Ezidemili, and other characters, who are their loyalists, is a practical illustration of the suggestion that characters give life and meaning to a literary text. But how do they help to evoke force and meaning in a literary text? Is it just by acting out the roles assigned to them by the writer? Or is it by their utterances which help to create the linguistic structure of the text? Is it by identifying character type and the roles they play? When Culler (23) gives a structuralist argument that characters form the overriding force in the work of fiction, he is obviously implying that the interplay between characters in a work of fiction helps to generate meaning in the work. Therefore, while these characters may be signifiers in a binary opposition, the understanding of the interplay between them may also be seen as signifiers, signifying various meanings in the text. So, to understand how the characters relate to form meaning, one must understand the function of characters as an important aspect in the verbal structure of the text. By this token, meaning in *Arrow of God* can also be derived through the understanding of the function of Ezeulu as a protagonist, in relation to the function of other antagonists like Nwaka and Ezidemili. This kind of relationship which helps to generate meaning in the work of art is what structuralists refer to as 'binary opposition'. This is not different from what William Blake characterises as 'contraries'. These contraries in existential discourse help to provide meaning for the paradox of human existence which Achebe encapsulates in the two novels, where other characters in binary opposition are the freeborn and the outcast, the missionary and the traditional priest, benevolent spirit and the malevolent spirit, the living and the dead, the rich and the poor, Umuaro and Okperi etc.

Another structural element that evinces meaning in the texts is the narrator, or the narrative voice. What makes Achebe stand out as a narrative intelligence is his deployment of an anonymous narrative voice that is almost completely distanced from the human drama of the texts. One of the strategies which Achebe employed in his Africanist vision of the novel is what Norman Stokle refers to as the 'griotization of the narrator'. A griot narrator is like a chronicler; among other functions, he gives account of tribal history. It is usually this kind of narrator that we find in a typical African story-telling session. By creating an imaginative picture of a narrator in the reader, Achebe places his narrators in front of us like a griot so that their presence is constantly felt; however, he masks the narrators, so that no matter how much the audience/reader may try to unravel their identity it still remains largely speculative. Achebe may have engaged anonymous narrators in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* as a matter of aesthetics or neutrality; however, the way the narrators go about their narrative responsibilities shows that they are aware of a viewing or listening presence.

One of the most remarkable elements of *Arrow of God*, and to some extent *Things Fall Apart*, is the continuous deployment of ironies. This is made possible by the anonymous narrators who allow their characters to interact freely without intruding. The characters are freely allowed to interact with one another and their environment while the narrators only tell us what each of them does not know about themselves, other multiple perspectives and moral centres. It is these multiple perspectives which Achebe present to his readers through his narrators that open up vistas for the re-reading of the novels even after 50 years. The narrators are not unaware of the narrative becoming boring at some point, so they employ humour to bring to their audience/readers the limit of human understanding. The characters become aware of this limit only after it is already too late. At that point, the narrators walk away, allowing the audience/readers to decide the cause of the

tragic background of the novel from the multiple perspectives and moral centres.

Work Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. London: Heinemann, 1986.
- . *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1956.
- Anozie, Sunday. *Structuralist Models and African Poetics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Awosika, Olawale. *Form and Technique in the African Novel*. Ibadan: Sam Bookman, 1997.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z. Systematic Analysis of Balzac's 'Sarrazine'*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 1974.
- Cullar, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca New York: Cornell Uni. Press, 1975.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Positions* (1972). Trans. Alan Bass. London: Athlone Press, 1981.
- . *Of Grammatology* (1974). Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins Uni. Press. 1976.
- De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Trans. Peter Owens. London: Fontana Books, 1974.
- Echeruo, MJC. 'Chinua Achebe'. *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*. Eds. Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1975.
- Jakobson, Roman with Hale, Morris. *Fundamentals of Language Part 11*. The Hague, Junna Linguarum, and Paris: Monton, 1956.
- Jayifo, Biodun. 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika'. *Chinua Achebe: A Celebration*. Eds. Kinsten Holst Petersen and Anne Ruthereford.
- Larson, Charles. *The Emergence of the African Novel*. Bloomington: Indiana Uni. Press, 1972.
- Levis-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. New York, Basic Book Pub. 1963.



AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING
NUMBER 52, 01 NOVEMBER 2014
ISSN 0331-0566

- Mowah, Frank Uche. *Structuralist Discourse on African Literature*. Ibadan, Stirling-Horden, 1997.
- Nwagbara, Austin. Ed. 'Mbari Heritage and Chinua Achebe's Plurilingual Aesthetics'. *Discourses and Interactions in Language and Literature*. Lagos: Pumark, 2010.
- Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press, 1975.
- Okpewho, Isodore. 'Poetry and Patterns: structural Analysis of an Ijo Creation Myth.' *Journal of African Folklore*. Vol.92, 1979.
- Van Dijk, Tenn A. 'On the Foundation of Poetics. Methodological Prolegomena to a Generative Grammar of a Literary Text.' *Poetics*. Vol.5 1072.