

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE OGRE MOTIF: A THEMATIC APPROACH TO PURPLE HIBISCUS AND PETALS OF BLOOD

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Abstract: Ogre narratives have for a long time been a didactic, entertaining and historical tool in the preliterate Africa. It served as the curricula for both informal and non-formal education of the mentioned era. The post-colonial period that ushered in a literate Africa did not extinguish the existence of this genre but instead integrated it into its modern written materials such as the short story, the novel and the play. A close study of the modern African works reveals a consistency between the African novel and the oral narrative. The objective of this study was to critically analyse the themes in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Petals of Blood* with the aim of highlighting and relating them to the ogre motif. Such themes include; greed, cruelty, destruction, heroism, sexism, vengeance and victimization. This study benefited from descriptive research design that adopted a qualitative approach, its target population being all the texts authored by both Ngugi Wa Thiongó and Adichie Chimamanda. Purposive sampling was used to select the two texts of interest and from which primary data was collected. Close textual analysis was done with a view of getting enough data for the study and to describe the arguments relating to thematic trends of the ogre motif. The study revealed in its findings that modern African writings borrow heavily from the orate African literature. It revealed a consistency between the modern African writings and the preliterate orate African literature (otherwise known as orature) in terms of themes.

Keywords: Motif, orature, themes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

African oral literature as much as it entertained people served a much more core and indispensable role. It served as the curriculum of life for the people. It educated people informally on the dos and don'ts of life, passed on the people's history to the next generation, warned them, mocked the wayward, exhorted values and most especially brought people together. As such, Africans have communal squares, masquerades and festivals where a communal event, which is almost every event, happened. There are communal shrines, initiation and ritual objects. African lives are communal in nature and set up. This study was guided by the functionalist theory which was proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown (anthropologists). Functionalism is a school of thought that arose in the early 20th Century. Functionalism focuses on the functions performed in a society by social structures such as institutions, hierarchies and norms (Edwards, et al. 2023).

This theory therefore illustrates that oral literature serves a utilitarian function in a society. According to (Finegan, 2012) oral literature educates, upholds and mirrors elements of African folklore. This makes it utilitarian. Miruka (2005) offers three ways in which the oral narrative is useful. Firstly, oral literature is communal thus enables socialization. Secondly, it is mentally stimulating thus sharpens the cognitive human aspects and thirdly, it is didactic and thus it educates the society. He further adds that functionalism is by far the most persistent theory in the study of oral literature.

Along with the functionalist theory, this study also employed the Marxist theory. Marxism is a social, political, and economic philosophy whose proponent is Karl Marx. This theory brings to the fore the fact that capitalism creates a man-eat-man society by fabricating a social stratum of two classes, the bourgeoisie (the rich) and the proletariat (the poor). The Bourgeoisie controls the society and manipulates the systems to their own advantage while utilizing the poor in creating wealth. The rich control the means of production whereas the poor transform the

raw materials and commodities into valuable economic goods. The poor are the wealth creators who don't necessarily benefit from their own labour. They work readily as the labour force in factories, building constructions, and mining among others while earning very little. Due to the extremely exploitative nature of capitalism, workers reach their limits and begin to resent their employers. Consequently, there will arise a rebellion against the rich (Brock, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used contextual design to analyse the thematic consistencies between the ogre narratives and the modern African novel.

FINDINGS

The research findings indicated that a close thematic consistency between orature (African Oral literature) and modern (written) African literature. Themes such as greed, cruelty, sexism, destruction are borrowed from the ogre narrative.

THEMATIC CONSISTENCY

Having critically analysed *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie Chimamanda and *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi Wa Thiongó from the light of ogre motif, the study revealed close consistencies between the African oral narrative and modern African literature. It disclosed a close link between the old and the new, the new having borrowed heavily from the old. These consistencies were brought out by the two authors as evidenced in the themes discussed.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie Chimamanda uses characters who are either victims of the ogre or are ogre-like in themselves in the portrayal of cruelty, greed destruction, heroism, sexism, vengeance, and victimization. Cruelty is an inherent part of the ogre which cannot be altered since the ogre in itself knows no good and cannot conceive of any goodness within itself. Cruelty is a quality expressed in actions and directed towards a victim. Chimamanda creates cruel characters who are extremely and unbelievably cruel without the conscious intent to be cruel thereby making cruelty their nature rather than something that might change. These cruel actions are directed towards other characters who know nothing but goodness. As such the cruelty is more intense since the victims are helplessly good thus attracting more empathy from readers and heightening the gravity of the cruelty. Such cruelty is seen in the character of Eugene, the members of Eugene's Umunna and the government officials.

On the flip side of cruelty is victimization. The characters suffering the cruelty do not deserve the treatment and whatever triggers the cruelty is usually a minute negligible action which ought to be ignored. Characters victimized include Jaja, Kambili, Beatrice and Aunt Ifeoma. They each suffer cruelty as a result of an innocent act or an ill-conceived judgement by the cruel individual.

Christianity as a societal value serves a destructive purpose other than what it really ought to do. One's faith ideally is supposed to bring freedom and healing yet in the case of Eugene and his family, it does the exact opposite. It is a limiting factor that creates a semblance of imprisonment. Adichie interrogates the role of Christianity and its values in modern day Nigeria while blaming the elite society for propagating the oppressive extremist Christian fanaticism. In an attempt to impose Christian values on people, the propagators of the religious oppression such as Eugene end up destroying their loved ones physically, emotionally and psychologically. Beatrice loses two pregnancies in Eugene's hands.

All the destruction faced by the victims are as a result of acts of vengeance by the ogre-like individuals for an action they deem done against them. A few times in the book, Eugene takes revenge on God's behalf. He takes it upon himself to carry out the retributive justice of God. Brought to fore as well is the turpitude in the modern Nigerian government and its reprehensible exertions towards its people as seen in the management of Nsukka University which is a microcosm of how the entire country is run. A handful of incompetent individuals run down resources, the economy is run down, while some other individuals plan coups. Freedom of speech is curtailed and the daily papers have no media freedom. The bold ones are eliminated. As a result, the best brains are forced to immigrate to Europe or America for greener and safer pastures.

Patriarchy as a form of sexism is strongly interrogated in post-independent Nigeria. Chimamanda is puzzled that even with education and social advancement, women still face sexism. It seems sexism according to her will never end. The Igbo culture seems to go nowhere, the members of the Umunna speak louder than religion and education. It takes a bold step, what can be described as positive revenge, to fight against the cruel individuals. It can only be defeated through a decisive revolt and even violence to fight and overcome evil. Chimamanda borrows a leaf from the Marxist ideals by ending her novel in a bloody revolt in Eugene's household.

Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, was studied from the backdrop of the ogre motif by relating the themes in the story to the ogre narrative. The study revealed a significant relationship between the ogre narrative and the modern African narrative. The novel arguably examines the place of Africanism and nationalism in a post independent Kenya. In a stretch of over twelve years, the novel transits from the old Ilmorog to the New Ilmorog where modern structures, the New trans-African road and even modern lifestyle is enjoyed. This transition brings with it all the evils expected in a modern urban set up such as social stratification, prostitution, corruption and land grabbing.

The core issues of sexism, exploitative greed and destruction come disguised through the principal characters of Nderi, Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo whose various personalities undergo a complete metamorphosis at a pace almost directly proportionate to the alterations that happen in Ilmorog. The study reveals a gradual change of attitude which is attributed to their sit on the fence, indecisive disposition. Kimeria refuses to take sides for or against the fight for freedom. He instead selfishly makes his fortune by ferrying the fallen Mau-mau heroes' bodies for burials. His opportunistic nature comes to play when he lures a young Wanja into a love affair, impregnates her and later rapes her. He is to blame for the ruin that Wanja's life is exposed to. Ngugi uses his character to express his distaste for people who are undecided and he gives a penalty of death.

Nderi Wa Riera, an alumnus of Siriana, an old acquaintance of the lawyer and the initially a pro-African, and a nationalist is lured by the imperialists into business with them at the expense of his people. His greed outdoes his morals and thus he gets compromised. He sells out his morals and values for money. He is the epitome of greed and destruction. Nderi uses destructive vengeance to get his own back. He harnesses the KCO into his most dangerous weapon and afterwards uses it as a tool of vengeance. Ngugi's portrayal of this character is deeply borrowed from the African ogre narrative where the ogre itself is vengeful and schematic. The ending in *Petals of Blood* provided readers with a cathartic experience just the ogre narrative does. In all African ogre narratives, the ogre is defeated (usually by a heroic character) and the society gets to live happily ever after. Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo are killed in an arson at the end of the novel, a turn that provided a satisfaction to both readers and other characters in the text. Ngugi, by thus writing postulates that all evils in a society must be defeated by good.

In trying to put together the hermeneutics surrounding Eugene's character in *Purple Hibiscus*, one cannot help but feel relieved that he is finally out of the picture when he dies. Readers as well as characters in the text cannot find it in their hearts to feel sorry about his death. Only the narrator, Kambili, is sad. His zealous Catholicism drives him to extreme levels of intolerance. He is to blame for the gradual disintegration of his family. The writer prepares us for the eventuality of Eugene's life by introducing us to his hostile uncouth austere reprimands to his family members that rouses fury and agitation. When he dies, although it happens unexpectedly, readers experience a great sense of relief (catharsis). His cruel abuses have turned callous over time as he gradually turns into an inexorable fanatic brand of Catholicism. (Eyo Etim1, 2015)

CONCLUSION

The study analysed and the existence of the ogre motif in the two selected texts and concluded that there is a close link between modern African written forms and orature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While studying literature of African origin, it is important to consider and establish the hermeneutics from the background of African oral literature in order to fully grasp the meaning as intended by the author both consciously or unconsciously.

Eurocentric readers and critics should be informed by this study that African literature is not art for art sake as

was propagated by (Larson, 1979). It is rather served a utilitarian function as source a didactic, entertaining and historical societal tool.

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