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FOLK TALE IN NIGERIAN FICTION: ACHEBE, NWAPA AND ADICHIE

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ABSTRACT

This article projects the place of folk tale in Nigerian fiction. The study includes *things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe, *Efuru* of Flora Nwapa and *Purple Hibiscus* of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. All these Igbo novelists have used this technique of storytelling in their fiction only to prove their tradition of telling the stories as a means of amusement and to impart moral knowledge in children. Because of their tribal ancestry they have shown how it is a part of their daily life. Although Adichie's fiction belong to a different generation still she has continued the tradition and presented the ethnic way to tell the folk tales by the elders to the younger's in her fiction. By writing in English Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa have made African fiction a treasure house for the world to draw attention. Their writings have not only popularised Igbo people, their custom and tradition. Their use of proverb and stories relating to them and interpretation of dream also lead to folk tale. Again there are various types of folk tales who serve different purpose. This is the most common way in the above mentioned three novelists to put folk tales in their fiction.

Key words: Adichie, Achebe, Nwapa, folk tale, moral lesson, entertainment, tortoise, dog, spirit

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INTRODUCTION

Myths, legends and folk tales or in a single term oral literature are part of literature of all races. Oral literature provides material to write. Milan Parry has talked about two kinds of cultures of literature. One is oral and the other is written. He has also told oral literature always contribute to written narrative. The distinction between the two forms is presence of formality in written narratives. When myths, legends are concerned with history or explanation of natural phenomena, folk tales which come under oral tradition does not have historical relevance. The stories are designed for amusement or to give children moral lesson through entertainment. In the context of Africa it is meant for pastime of children who are getting tired after doing their day's work in field, in market or in the house. It is the means to bring sleep in the eyes of children. In the context of Achebe and Nwapa folk tales function in two ways: - to bring sleep and create amusement. But in case of Adichie it is only for passing the time on some occasion.

Oladele Taiwo has described five types of folk tales. Based on their themes the tales are categorised under five types.

- i. Tales of demon lovers with magic in them.
- ii. Tales about life, death and great forces of nature related to religion.
- iii. Moralistic fables.
- iv. Fertility tales.
- v. Trickster tales.

In the tales of demon lovers with magic in them, either God take part in their love affair or some kind of magical intervention bring happy or unhappy ending. This could also be categorized under folk tales. Only dexterous writers could use this raw material from which a story teller turns good literature and can use these stories in their literary creation as a device to let the people know about their custom and tradition and to strengthen their traditional life.

Mythic stories are related to the story of creation of the universe, heaven, earth, sky and human being on earth. They used this device to explain anything mysterious. Stories are framed to explain the mysterious aspect of Nature.

Moralistic fables are stories with moral lesson. It is the duty of the story teller to inculcate in the children the wisdom and custom of their society. Till now telling moralistic fable is a common instrument throughout the world to develop moral qualities in children.

Fertility tale is based on the attempt of infertile women who are in want of a child. Such stories deal with the attempt of the women to get children. Africa is a male dominated society and the practice of polygamy prevails there where barren ladies suffer a lot. To show this aspect of their society fertility tales are framed.

Trickster tales are the most traditional form of story in Africa. The story is related to Tortoise who is supposed to be wise. He also abuses it to cheat people and to protect himself.

Based on the above mentioned types of folk tales the writers have used the technique in their main plot. Although the stories do not contribute the main plot still it reflects their custom and tradition. According to Jeremy Harding,

Almost all writers of interest in Africa have incorporated elements of oral tradition into their work, often on ground that this is a moral and aesthetic necessity. (Harding, 4)

Kofi Awoonor through his writing has focused that orality is the store house which becomes the source for contemporary writing. He has urged to return back to tradition for inspiration.

Chinua Achebe is the doyen of modern African writing in English. In his novel he has used myths of creation and the Igbo's belief in Ani, Mmo, High God or Creator and Earth Mother and personal 'chi'. Apart from the beliefs there are certain other practices like offering kola nut and white clay to guests as a symbol of honour, respect and friendship.

Things fall Apart by Achebe includes the story of the Tortoise. Here Ekwefi is telling the story about the cracked shell of the Tortoise to Ezinma. One day all the birds are invited to sky for great feast. So, they all paint their bodies with red cam wood and make beautiful pattern on it. As the tortoise is prudent he discovers the fact. He wants to taste the foods because for a long time he has not eaten good food due to famine. So, he plans to join the birds in the sky. That's why he gives the proposal to the birds but they don't agree by telling him that he is a cunning person who will soon cheat them. But he defends himself in a sweet tongue by telling that he is now a changed person. So all agree to take him to sky by giving their feathers. On the great day he arrived first in the party and is also asked to speak first because he is a good orator. He tells them to take different names before the feast begins because it is a tradition. Everybody agree because they know that Tortoise travels many places and has idea about different customs. After giving everybody a name he takes the name "All of you". No one could understand the intrigue of the Tortoise then. When the hosts arrive the Tortoise thanks them on behalf of the birds. The hosts consider him the king because of his different look and eloquency. Then kola nuts are broken and eaten. When soup full of meat and fish, pounded yams, yams pottage full of fresh fish is brought before the guests, Tortoise asks the host for whom this feast is prepared. The man of sky replied 'for all of you'. He turns to the birds and tells it is meant for "All of you" means for the Tortoise himself and they will be served later. The host thinks it might be their custom that the king eats first.

Then the Tortoise eats the best part of and best amount. The birds become angry because the birds don't get food to eat although it is their feast. So, after the feast out of anger the birds took their entire feather. He remains helpless. He requests all the birds to give a message to his wife. No one become ready. Finally the parrot agrees. He tells the parrot to tell his wife to keep all the soft things to cover the compound so that when he will jump from the sky there will be no danger. The parrot promises to give his message to his wife. But out of anger he gives her a changed version of the message, instead of telling her to keep soft things he tells her to keep all the hardest things of the house in the compound. So, she keeps hoes, machetes, spears, guns and canon in the compound. When the Tortoise falls from the sky he falls on the ground with all the hardest things. So, his shell breaks into pieces. His wife brings a very great medicine man from the neighborhood who gathers the bits of shell and sticks them together. So it becomes rough.

This story can be categorized under the trickster tales which is based on the cunning nature of the Tortoise as well as under moralistic fables which at the end gives a moral. This story is delivered in a dramatic way where the listeners also participate. In folk tales folk songs are there. But in this story there in no song. But Ekwefi says there is no song in this tale.

This is the story where Igbo tradition is filled with. Here the animals are given human attribute just like they are applying cam wood paste on their body, they are eating all Igbo foods such as soup, pounded yam, yam potridge and the wife of Tortoise is also there who is using all human used articles like:- canon, machete, hoes, spears, guns etc.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the literary daughter of Achebe has followed him in all aspect. In her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* she has started the fist line from the title of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. The beginning sentence is not only a tribute to Achebe but also the same folk tale of his novel about the cracked shell of the Tortoise is also present in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* with a different colour and shade. In this novel Papa Nnukwu tells the story to all his grand children. Just like the earlier story famine in animal world also occurs in this story. So, all the male animals meet in one place to take some step to tackle the situation. In the meeting only the Dog is looking healthy. When the other animals ask him the reason he answers as usual he is eating feces. So they all decided to eat their mothers' flesh because they can't eat feces. Every week a mother is killed and they are eating it. Before the turn of the Dog's mother comes she dies of disease. The other animals when get the information came to help him but he denies their help. Few days later the Tortoise discovers the Dog singing to the sky. First he thinks the Dog has gone mad. Later he finds that he is singing.

"Nne,Nne, Mother, Mother."

"Njemanze!"

"Nne,Nne, I have come."

"Njemanze!"

"Nne,Nne, let down the rope. I have come."

"Njemanze!" (Adichie, 159)

Tortoise discovers the truth that the dog's mother has not died really. She has gone to live with her rich friends in the sky and feeds him regularly from the sky. This is the reason of his healthy body. Tortoise warns Dog that if he will not take him to sky he will tell it to everyone. So out of fear he always takes the Tortoise to the sky. But this is not liked by Dog's mother. One day to eat the portion of Dog also he goes to that bush and sings the way the Dog sings. In the meanwhile Dog reaches there and understands the conspiracy of the Tortoise and sings,

"Nne,Nne, Mother, Mother."

"Njemanze!" my cousins chorused.

"Nne,Nne, it is not your son coming up."

"Njemanze!"

"Nne,Nne, cut the rope. It is not your son coming up. It is the cunning tortoise."

"Njemanze!" (Adichie, 160)

So the Dog's mother cuts the rope and the Tortoise falls and his shell cracks.

In both the two novels Achebe and Adichie have used the term “cunning” repeatedly for the tortoise and the two stories in the novel have moral implication. But the contexts are different. They serve different function in these two novels. When in Achebe’s novel it is a regular habit of a child to listen story from her mother in the context of Adichie it is different the children hear they story by chance when they the light goes and their grandfather Papa Nnukwu was present there.

In the novel *Efuru* Eneke, the son of Ajanupu narrates a story of the woman whose daughter disobeys her and as a result marries a spirit. In the land of Idu-na-oba a woman lives with her beautiful daughter. She is so afraid that she never allow her daughter to go alone anywhere. One day she goes to market leaving her daughter alone in the house with strict instruction to finish her given work so that she cannot move anywhere. After sometimes her friends come and help her in her household work and everybody go to collect udara fruit far away. When they are busy in collecting fruit the fruit a fruit falls from the tree at the girl’s feet. She picks it and says, “my good udara, my good udara.”(107) In return the spirit shouts, “my good wife, my good wife” and pursues her. The girls come into the house and lock themselves. When the girl’s mother comes she sees the spirit outside and becomes bound to give her daughter to the spirit though she tries a lot by showing different girls. The spirit wants to take her to his world. But the girl requests him to visit her sisters Eke, Orié, Afo and Nkwo. She goes singing to her elder sister but she refuses to help her because she had not given her salt once. Orié also denies because she didn’t give her pepper and Afo denies because she didn’t give her pestle. Nkwo is very kind. She receives her. She serves maggot for the spirit in the darkness and anara fruit for her sister which is not known to the spirit. When the spirit fall asleep she brings banana leaves, puts them on the feet of the spirit so that he would feel that his wife is present there. After clearing everything from the house she poured kerosene on the roof and burns it and saves her sister.

This story is both a moral and fairy tale. In it there is other tale which proves the conventional belief of the Igbos about certain spirit and God. Here Uhamiri is the Goddesses of lake who is full of riches, wealth and beauty but barren. When the eponymous character dreams of her she is advised to keep fast and like her always remains barren. She is a lady in the image of Goddess Uhamiri.

Such use of folk tale or indigenous use of this particular technique makes candid comprehension of relationship between the writers to their tradition.

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