The Influence of the Igbo Narrative Plot Structure on Pita Nwana's *Omenuko* and Other Igbo Novels

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Abstract

There has been a lot of scholarly debate concerning the plot of many Igbo written narratives centred around the colonial era, particularly in regard to the outcome of the central figures of their stories. Writers like Chinua Achebe have largely been criticised or supported for the constant tragic downfall of the heroes of their stories. Using the Structuralist and Archetypal theories, this paper seeks to examine the thought processes behind the creation of such narratives. Given that the Igbo oral tradition serves as a reservoir from which myth, symbols, archetypes and the likes are collected in order to form these stories, findings reveal a consistent narrative structure that is also present in these oral narratives, which is in turn translated into writing. This paper concludes therefore that the narrative styles of the most popular Igbo novels are not just the product of the individual decisions of their writers, but they are also reflective of the structural and archetypal narratives which have guided Igbo traditions till today.

Keywords: Plot, Structure, Hero, Novel, Igbo

Introduction

Before the contribution of Pita Nwana's *Omenuko* to the development of Igbo literature is discussed fully, it is important to understand the factors that caused him to write the novel.

The novel, *Omenuko,* was published in 1933 and rose to popularity after winning the first prize in an all-Africa literary contest in indigenous African languages hosted by the Institute for African Languages and Cultures. Before this period, the advent of Christianity had provided the platform for stories like this and others, to be produced and preserved in written English. This is not to say that there was no form of writing before this period as an ancient form of writing called *Nsibidi* which is majorly for religious purposes, had been practiced among the Igbo and some other cultures in the southern region of Nigeria. The English language, however, also played a role in relating those stories to a wider non-Igbo speaking audience. As Emenyonu (2020) puts it:

> Probably, the single most enduring contribution of the Christian missionaries was that they provided the Igbo with the tool for preserving their literature in writing, and thus helped decisively to bring about the emergence of written Igbo literature. (p. xiii)

It was not surprising then, that this novel later paved the way for not only Igbo novels to be written in English, but also for a more definite grammatical system of the Igbo language to emerge. Thus, in the mid-1930s, during an expedition by the colonialist British headed by Professor Ida Ward, it was noted that there was an already established "natural koine" for the Igbo language which had been influenced by this novel, and subsequent ones produced (Azuonye, 707). The publication of *Omenuko* in 1933, helped promote its popularity among the Igbo people of the Eastern region of Nigeria. It was read in homes and in schools, and told as stories after it was published, revised and republished by different publishing houses. It has also been made into songs and films. With his book as the best-seller among the Igbo for more than three decades, Pita Nwana can be described as the father of the Igbo novel.

Theoretical Framework

Given the emphasis of this study on the narrative structure of novels from a culturally homogenous area, the theories adopted for this study are Claude Levi-Strauss' Structuralist theory and Carl Jung's Archetypal theory. According to the online *Britannica*:

> Structuralism, in cultural anthropology, the school of thought developed by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which cultures, viewed as systems, are analyzed in terms of the structural relations among their elements. According to Lévi-Strauss's theories, universal patterns in cultural systems are products of the invariant structure of the human mind.

The initial structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure applied mainly to the study and view of language as an established system made up of the various combinations of signs, symbols and other communication codes. In applying structuralism to anthropology, Levi-Strauss (1955) in his article, "The Structural Study of Myth", explains the initial dilemma of ancient philosophers on the relationships between sounds and their meanings, stating the following:

> Their attempt, however, was thwarted from the very beginning by the fact that the same sounds were equally present in other languages though the meaning they conveyed was entirely different. The contradiction was surmounted only by the discovery that it is the combination of sounds, not the sounds in themselves, which provides the significant data (p. 429).

Interestingly, Levi-Strauss also uses this argument to fault Jung's Archetypal theory with claims that it makes the same initial mistakes that the early linguists made "that a sound may possess a certain affinity with a meaning" (429). As much as there are many fundamental similarities in human behavioural patterns as Levi-Strauss' structuralism suggests, these behavioural patterns are often formed or adjusted according to the existing myths across diverse cultures. It does not account for the fact that even these similar behaviours might consist of aspects which are more prominent in some cultures than the other. For example, humans of a certain culture, may be more or less merciful towards a crime such as petty theft, than

humans of another culture, depending on the level of tolerance cultivated through their separate myths.

Pietikainen (1998) in explaining Jung's psychology, states that "…archetypes are biologically inherited supra-individual predispositions of the collective unconscious…" (p. 325). He further explains that they:

> … can be understood as culturally determined functionary forms organizing and structuring certain aspects of man's cultural activity, namely those predominantly noon-cognitive (for example, emotional, numinous, pathological) mental aspects of human life, which remain more or less unarticulated due to their non-discursive nature (p. 325).

Jung's Archetypal theory therefore focuses on the prototype images and thought patterns which are innate to the consciousness of humans, and which always find expression in human behaviour. In this case, the myths and symbols have a more definite interpretation through which life is understood. In his article, "The Archetypes of Literature", Northrop Frye argues that there are many recurring motifs in the creation of literature across time and he suggests that the presence of an archetype in literature is inevitable as it is there to facilitate a unified approach to literary criticism. According to Frye (1951), "This inductive movement towards the archetype is a process of backing up, as it were, from structural analysis, as we back up from a painting if we want to see composition instead of brushwork" (P. 100).

Levi-Strauss' Structuralism is useful in analysing the structural composition of *Omenuko* and its relationship with other Igbo novels, while Jung's Archetype will be useful in analysing the collective consciousness behind these structural compositions.

Omenuko and the Igbo Narrative Plot Structure

The novel, *Omenuko,* is not alone as an Igbo classic. There is another novel, *Ala Bingo* by D.N Achara which was published in 1937. Allen (2003) in his article, "Igbo Literature", in the *Encyclopedia of African Literature,* adds another novel published

much later in 1963 which is Leopold Bell-Gam's *Ije Idumodu Jere*. This is debatable, due to the number of years between the publication of this novel and the previous classics, especially given the fact that another classic, *Things fall Apa*rt, had been published by this time and had gained widespread popularity. The novel, *Ije Odumodu Jere,* will instead be considered alongside the novels to which *Omenuko* has contributed in the establishment of what has become Igbo literature. Allen continues, saying that they are "the founders of Igbo written literature and their works… constitute the origins and foundations of the modern Igbo novel. Any serious study of Igbo literature in the twenty-first century must invariably begin with them" (p. 326). After the survey of flagship Igbo novels, however, *Omenuko* comes top in the study of written Igbo literature. About Nwana, Allen says:

> By accident or design, he defined the nature, form and tone of the Igbo novel, and set the pace that is still followed today by subsequent Igbo writers. His novel *Omenuko,* therefore, deserves the close critical attention of a pace-setter and the mainspring of a literary tradition (p. 326).

Omenuko positively affected the Igbo people of Nigeria. It contributed to the development of Igbo literature and had a significant effect on the publications made of Igbo literature. There are certain features which have been quite consistent in the subsequent novels published after 1933. These features are seen in the narrative style, the plot and the characterisation of the stories. They also show similar influences from the Igbo culture and society, as well as, causes of conflict and climatic conditions. These similarities are discussed in this essay.

Like many Igbo novels after it, *Omenuko* drew from real life situations and actual happenings in the traditional Igbo society. Many of these novels start with actual Igbo societal systems and end with the coming of the colonialist British which marks the height of conflict in the plot of the narrative. *Omenuko* for instance, draws from the real story of the existence of Chief Igwegbe Odum of Ndizuogu who was presumed to have lived from about 1860 to 1940. The novel combines this Chief's biography with some elements of fiction. This feature is again seen in subsequent Igbo novels published after 1933. To understand the complete biography of Chief

Igwegbe Odum, is to understand the plot structure of *Omenuko*, with a broader perspective and additional influence on the Igbo literature. According to Raphael Njoku, "The biography of Igwegbe Odum speaks in many ways to the collective historical experience of slavery and abolition, colonialism, social change and cultural dilemmas, and the link between economic power and political machinations.
(27)
Having established the background of the novel, its similarities with its successors and archetypes are examined subsequently.

Many scholars in different articles on *Omenuko* and its effect on the Igbo society, agree on its influences both on the reading culture of the Igbo and the contributions it has made to the development of Igbo literature. It is also observed that many scholars agree on *Omenuko*'s profound influence on the works of Chinua Achebe. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published 25 years later bears striking resemblances as does his next novel, *Arrow of God*. It is argued that after the publication of *Omenuko*, the next Igbo novel in popularity is Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which has gained the attention of not only the Igbo, but of Nigerians and scholars worldwide. Its popularity is speculated to surpass some of the subsequent novels and stories published by Achebe in terms of influence on the development of Igbo literature. The next story with the most profound influences from *Omenuko* is Leopold Bell-Gam's *Ije Odumodu Jere* published in 1963. These narratives have gone a long way to influence the Igbo written literature and the literary creative style of the Igbo people.

The Hero

This paper calls attention to the many similarities between the oral and written Igbo narratives and folktales and one of the major similarities is the Igbo hero. In his article titled, "The Archetypal Hero in Igbo Oral Narratives", Azuonye (2002) explains that "The hero is a universal archetype which lives in the collective unconscious of humanity, from where it is projected in the appropriate circumstances" (p. 21). This archetype which resides in the consciousness of the individuals of a society is projected into the different situations which befit the conception of the hero. Of course, for these situations to only befit the conception

of the "hero", and not the common man, the hero must have special abilities - which may be spiritual, mental or physical - above those of all the other men around him. Azuonye also points out that:

> …excellence is not enough to distinguish a man or woman as a hero. A hero is essentially a man who applies his superior endowments to the defense of the security and honour of his people in time of crisis. And quite often, he is the selfless lamb of sacrifice who submits offerings or lays down his life in the pursuit of a common cause. Indeed, it is this self-sacrificing virtue, more than anything else that immortalizes the hero in the memories of his people (p. 21).

Emenyonu (2020) presents a cyclical diagram of the hero in the Igbo novel which he calls "The hero in Igbo traditional society" (p.56). In Emenyonu's diagram, the hero begins with the phase of "Normalcy" where he holds a positive image and is "hardworking, ambitious, broadminded and patriotic". This phase however does not remain but transitions into the "Delusion" phase where the hero encounters a personal misfortune or tragedy that brings a form of separation from his people and leads him to acquire a negative image. Here, the hero becomes selfish, insensitive and opportunistic and he begins to commit villainous acts in accordance with this new image. However, a sudden change of insight and perspective brings remorse from which there is a search for his "old self". This leads to the phase of the "Confused Image" where the "Hero's negative image pervades with occasional flashes of his old good self. The last phase is "Transition" where there are measures towards a "reunion" and "return" where "order is restored but total harmony is never achieved. This last phase leads back to the initial phase of "Normalcy" from which the cycle begins again (p. 56).

Some of these events in Igbo novels may not follow the exact pattern created in this diagram but there is no denying that the descriptions made here are very glaring in them, especially in the story of *Omenuko*. In the novel, Omenuko learns a trade in the typical Igbo way as a young apprentice under Omemgboji. His ambition and hard work soon pay off as he begins to amass wealth. This wealth, however, is

short-lived, as in a single tragic accident, Omenuko loses all his belongings to the river Igwu. His next act is an evil and selfish one as he sells his slaves in order to get back home. He goes into self-exile in Mborogwu and although a villain in his village, Omenuko becomes a hero in Ndi Mborogwu. While at Mborogwu, Omenuko demonstrates a level of wisdom and competence which Eze Mborogwu, for some reason, cannot find in others in the village. Eze Mborogwu, before he dies, wills his authority to Omenuko till his son, Obiefula, is old enough to take his title as a chief. Omenuko's wisdom and attitude endears him to the people. The people come to hear him speak and some offer him their servitude as a form of payment for his help. His image in the human conscious is projected as one whose wisdom solves problems. His popularity among the people dwindles and he is reminded that he is not part of them. In the course of time, the man who has become a hero, is now in conflict with his society.

Ugonna (1984) further expands on the hero figure by describing their situation as a dilemma. There is usually an ambivalent attitude of the Igbo characters in the novels. Ugonna says that:

> They need heroes to help them out of individual and communal difficulties and at the same time they are unwilling to submit to the dictates of the hero. They want heroic miracles without hero worship, not realizing that we can hardly have one without the other. In this matter, we are like the proverbial fowl that has picked up the thorny egu (caterpillar) which it could not swallow because of its thorns and could not let go because of its succulence.

This dilemma puts the hero in constant conflict with his society and frequently alienates him from its members.

This hero figure is also seen in the character of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*. Okonkwo in a bid to be different from his lazy and weak father, begins to work very hard at a young age and he gains the support and sympathy of the people of Umofia. His rise as a hero begins roughly from the period when at 17 years old, he defeats Amalinze the cat who has not been defeated before in a

wrestling match. This competition is instantly compared with the fight that the legendary founder of their village had with spirits for days in the forest. Okonkwo also fights and wins several wars in defence of his community, and earns titles. He is one of the nine dreaded and respected *egwugwu*, the spirits of the ancestors, each representing the nine villages that make up the Umuofia clan. They sit in judgement to settle disputes among members of the clan. Unfortunately, Okonkwo's temper and fear of being thought weak are his greatest undoing. Misfortune befalls him as he accidentally kills a member of his village and is exiled for a period of seven years. He then comes back and finds a society different from the one he left and as a man trying to preserve the culture of the society, he is in conflict with the society which has accepted the inevitable changes brought by colonialism. In his temper, he kills a messenger of the white man and hangs himself, thereby laying down his life for the sake of peace in the community.

The character of Okonkwo is not very different from the character of Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* who is the chief priest of Ulu; the highest deity in the clan. Even though he is respected by most of the people in his clan, he also finds himself in conflict with his people. He comes out to say the truth about a conflict between his community and the people of Okperi which causes a judgement in favour of Okperi. When he is put in prison by Captain Winterbottom, his people do not come for him for two months and he is cared for by foreigners to his village. He then decides to punish his people by delaying the coming of the new yam festival. Events build up and culminate in a quarrel with the community, followed by the death of his son, Obika, and the gradual loss of the influence of his deity, Ulu.

This same feature of the tragic hero appears in in the works of another Igbo novelist, John Munonye. According to Ogu (1984):

> Munonye's heroes generally are presented in isolation, facing their fate as they make their choices, often guided by certain moral sense which ultimately brings them to disaster. They and their problems present us a series of faltering uneasy attempts to match the desires of the community. Most often, this delicate balance act falls apart as the tension flares up, leading to the destruction of the isolated individual (p. 90).

In Achebe's newer novels, however, it seems that the characteristics of each of the boxes in Emenyonu's hypothetical diagram are not embodied in one character but are scattered among major characters. Certain elements in the boxes at some stages of the diagram are a bit more profound in some characters than the others.

In Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Odili is a bachelor who is favoured by his former teacher Chief Nanga, a man who is seen as a hero among his own people. Odili in contrast, also appears as a hero to the reader. Odili makes rash decisions in confronting Nanga, when he discovers that Nanga has slept with his girlfriend - a development which could have been avoided if Odili had told Nanga the truth about his relationship with her. As a result of this conflict, Odili turns against Nanga. Nanga on the other hand, continuously makes scandalous decisions for personal and political gains. At the end, both suffer misfortune along with other members of their respective parties. Odili is lucky to escape with his life after being beaten by a mob; a resolution is reached but things are no longer the same as the novel ends with a military coup. Incidentally, both characters are soon driven by different selfish motives but interestingly, while Nanga is celebrated as a man of the people, Odili suffers neglect by the society.

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, also exhibits this feature. Chief among the major characters are Chris Oriko, Ikem Osodi, 'His Excellency' Sam, and Beatrice Okoh. All of them begin as hardworking and patriotic people only to develop into different characters as the plot unfolds. The three friends, once known as the 'three green bottles', start as young patriotic men, but the acquisition of power turns Sam against his friends and they in turn, have to lay down their lives for the country of Abazon. Chris goes on self-exile for fear of his life, while Sam's fear and withdrawal from his friends and from the public, can also be seen as a form of self-imposed exile. Sam is driven by insensitivity and terrible decisions which lead to his assassination in a military coup and his body buried in a shallow grave.

Although not on exile, Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo, in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, leaves his community for a while to study in Britain, returns home and is reintegrated into his traditional society. At the end, he makes a wrong decision and takes further wrong actions that lead to his downfall.

Emenyonu's analysis of *Ije Odumodu Jere* reveals more profound semblances with *Omenuko*. Odumodu is also involved in various conflicts in the fight for a throne in a foreign land and almost pays for it with his life. While Omenuko loses his goods in the river Igwu, Odumodu suffers a similar fate in a shipwreck. Emenyonu (1973) also finds a close semblance in content, between chapter ten of *Ije Odumodu Jere* and chapter 4 of *Omenuko*:

> The dying king of Finda wills his throne to Odumodu, a foreigner in the same way that Chief Mborogwu bequeaths his throne to Omenuko, an alien and a fugitive from justice. In both cases, the people conspire to work against the dead kings' wishes. The heir apparent of Finda tries to have Odumodu assassinated while in Mborogwu, the chiefs rise in rebellion against Omenuko and make attempts on his life (p. 17).

In both cases, they leave their homes of birth to reside in foreign lands where their presence and activities are no longer welcomed as before, leading to the narrative structure of exile and return.

The Plot Structure of Exile and Return

Exile in Igbo literature is usually caused by negative circumstances which affect the hero or other characters in the story. In most cases, the major character takes an action which is offensive to his community and he is exiled for a period of time or for the rest of his life as punishment for his deeds, or as a process of the purification of the community from the act of abomination. Although Omenuko flees his community, he later returns for a resolution of the matter. Emenyonu makes note of a moral evolution in the mind of Omenuko, as in a bid to reconcile himself with his relatives, he says the following while in exile:

> I am not a citizen of Mborogwu and I have also been rejected by my original homeland … The primary thing I should do now, is to seek a reconciliation with both human beings and gods whom I have greatly offended and sinned against, and establish links with them (p. 14).

Emenyonu (1973) says that the events which lead to *Omenuko*'s homecoming are very important because they bring a neat resolution to the plot. He is of the opinion that:

> It provides for the novel, its circular structure as it shows a point of return from exile. (This has become a common characteristic of many later Igbo novels. Cf. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Agunwa's *More than Once*, etc.) It is consistent with the author's view in the preface of the novel that 'no matter how successful a man may be in a foreign land, he cannot fail to realize eventually that there is no place like home (p. 59).

It is always difficult to stay in a foreign land over a long period of time as shown in the Igbo novel and this is why every indigenous member of an Igbo community does his best to live within the laws and traditional requirements of his society in order to prevent misfortune befalling him and his family. Every central character in all the novels referenced here, suffers either a time of exile or isolation through circumstances that stem majorly from conflict.

Both Omenuko and Okonkwo are absent from their villages because of their crimes. Ezeulu is punished with imprisonment for two months due to his resistance to societal changes while Odumodu lives in Finda for years and almost assumes kingship but is resisted because of his identity as a foreigner. In the case of Chris and Sam, they isolate themselves for fear of their lives but never return home. While Odili is not exiled to a foreign land, he is no longer settled at home as moves from place to place, working hard to undermine Nanga's ambitions. This leads to the near fatal error of disguising himself – an exile of identity – in order to attend Nanga's rally, for which he is discovered and beaten almost to the point of death. These times of isolation usually force a period of reflection in the mind of the hero, where decisions are made either to change and accept their current state, or to plan a retaliation against the people or situations that put them in that situation.

Behind the progression of the plot structure is also the constant use of proverbs to enhance the meaning and thought process of every decision taken by characters in the Igbo novel. For *Omenuko*, the principal means of communication to drive home

every discourse and decision taken is through proverbs, thereby justifying Achebe's statement that "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". Among the Igbo, it is part of their culture to eat boiled or roasted yams with palm oil and this enhances the taste of the yam. In the same way, proverbs enhance meanings in utterances in the course of dialogues. Achebe's novels also make use of proverbs in dialogues, songs and folktales to teach children morals, values, culture and the tradition of their communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the wealth of contributions made by the Igbo narrative plot structure Pita Nwana's *Omenuko* and other Igbo written narratives cannot be overstated. Today, amidst the discussions about the continuity and sustainability of the Igbo literature, these literary writings will continue to flourish as precedents have already been set to establish it on the world stage.

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