



The Use of Symbolisms in Selected Magic Realist Novels of Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri and Biyi Bandele-Thomas

Wadinga WANDAMA

**Department of English
University of Jos, Nigeria
Email: wandadinga@gmail.com**

ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of symbolisms used in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*; Ben Okri's trilogy *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* and Biyi Bandele-Thomas' *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond*, *The Sympathetic Undertaker and other Dreams* and *The Street*. This paper shows how the symbolisms used by these writers operate to give a deeper meaning to the texts, which is useful for an interpretation of the novels. This study reveals that Tutuola's use of symbolism often expresses the condition of cultural hybridity in his characters; Okri's use of symbolism in Dad's endless fights with enemies, thugs and spirits is symbolic of man's relentless struggle for survival and existential meaning to life. While the use of symbolism in Bandele-Thomas' use of symbolism, often serve political functions in the selected novels.

Keywords: symbolism, hybrid, metafictional

INTRODUCTION

In literary studies, symbolisms are essential in understanding the significance of action, character and events within the plot of a story. Therefore, it is important that this study examines the use of symbolism in the novels under study. Symbolisms often highlight many encrypted meanings which are hidden in narratives. Understanding symbolisms tend to foster a better appreciation of the narratives. According to Cuddon, "in literature an example of a public or universal symbol is journey into the underworld... and a return from it. Such a journey may be an interpretation of a spiritual experience, a dark night of the soul and a kind of redemptive odyssey (884)". Tutuola and Okri adopt this symbol in their novels as their characters embark on journeys to the underworld either to find somebody dear to them, or embrace the experience of their own destiny. Bandele-Thomas focuses more closely on the political, social and psychological experiences of his characters.

DISCUSSION

In Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the narrator marries women and bears children by them. The boy born to him in *The Palmwine Drinkard* is endowed with supernatural powers while being a glutton and very destructive at the same time. This half bodied child grows unnaturally and soon has the effect of subduing the narrator's personality. He forcefully makes his parents carry him along against their will and completely usurps his father's supernatural powers. It is only the enticement of Drum, Song and Dance that make him descend from his father's head. When they are finally able to get rid of him, the narrator's self actualization continues to progress. The narrator in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* marries the superlady but their son resembles his father with half his body while the rest of his body resembles his ghost mother. The effect therefore is that he pleases his father

half way when he behaves like a human but displeases him greatly when he behaves as a ghost and consequently he also displeases his mother when he behaves as a human. This becomes the cause of tension for his parents who would prefer that he completely behaves like each of them. This can be interpreted as symbolizing the dilemma of the African. The African is often at the crossroads being born into a traditional culture and yet being unmistakably a product of a highly modernized culture. Eurocentrism lives side by side with tradition in the 21 century, therefore Africans often keep a balance between the demands and expectations of both worlds, at times pleasing one to displease the other or marrying both at the same time. The half bodied baby in *The Palmwine Drinkard* comes out his mother's thumb and immediately displays unpleasant supernatural abilities which frighten his parents. This is like the advent of colonization in Africa which began with slavery. Tutuola considers this an ugly occurrence and he stresses the disadvantages of this historical fact in his novels because he mentions that in those days there were several kinds of wars. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* it is jealousy and the outbreak of war that have exposed the narrator to the danger of being captured by enemies. After the grueling journey in the bush of ghosts, the narrator laments that: "this is a great pity that I was lost in the Bush of Ghosts for twenty four years with punishments and when I came out of it I am caught and sold again as a slave, and now a rich man buys me and he is going to kill me for his god. (*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* 169)". The fact that Drum, Song and Dance relieved them from the half bodied baby; is an indication that Africans found solace in their traditional customs. Even in African American history it is recorded that the slaves often sang work songs which they composed or remembered to ginger their spirit so as to endure the hard labour. Tutuola uses a portrayal of physically hybrid characters to express the bipartite nature of this combination of cultures through symbolism. The experience of slavery and colonialism displaced the worldview of the African until gradually, changes came about with education and assimilation. It is important to note that this symbolism arises in *The Palmwine Drinkard*. The impossibility of the superlady's son to please both of his parents signifies that it is hardly possible for the African to pay full allegiance to one culture alone. The contemporary African is a product of an increasingly hybrid culture.

In Okri's *The Famished Road*, Dad's boxing career is symbolic of man's indomitable spirit. Dad's transformation from a village boxer to a suburban boxer takes place as a result of necessity and it is symbolic of the struggle for survival and adjustment to changes in life. Dad begins boxing because he is looking for a way out of poverty in his family. This struggle is physically excruciating and emotionally exhausting for the family but remaining poor is not an option. Dad often returns home smelling of sweat, cement and salt from carrying load in the muddy market. When Dad's rent expires and the debtors become aggressive, Dad becomes the night soil man in order to make extra money for the family's upkeep. This job makes him feel humiliated but it pays the bills and Mum appreciates his anger about their condition and the sacrifice of his pride for the love of his family. Dad's fight is not only with poverty but also political and spiritual oppression. Dad fights with political thugs and fighting ghosts. Physically he suffers immensely, only to become engaged with another fight, more daring than the previous one. After each recovery, Dad discovers a new philosophy about life. Each fight is a journey he engages to discover the depth of his inner powers as heir to the priesthood of the road. After each fight, his dreams become grander. Though he cannot read, he derives knowledge from the books he makes Azaro read to him. He dreams of toppling the colonialists and becoming the president. In *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad tries to follow his dreams but the betting shop man had run with Dad's proceeds from his fight with the warrior from the land of fighting ghosts. In this novel, Dad's major antagonists are spirits. His quarrel with Mum is caused by a demon girl and Mum's anger pushes her into madam Koto's domain. After Dad and Azaro escape from a labyrinth of the forest, Dad continues in a struggle to win back Mum's affection. Mum's return continues to pose a problem because Madame Koto's mythic influence makes Mum unnatural. She disappears into the forest and reappears with luminous cowries, precious stones and jewels. More striking is Madame Koto's invisible presence in their little room, in her bar and in the streets. The spirit of the dead carpenter haunts the entire neighborhood demanding for a

descent burial from the people who had known him. Political oppression tries to suppress Dad before he boldly buries the carpenter despite the relentless threats from the Party of the Poor.

In *Infinite Riches* Dad wrestles again with oppression from the Party of the Poor who report that he buried the dead carpenter. While in the prison, Mum joins the struggle by abandoning her hawking business to raise an army of angry women demanding for Dad's release. Her heroism transforms her into celebrated personality by the family and her neighbours. Dad's experience of police brutality ushers him into another realm of mythical discovery. The appearance of the new god Dad invokes while experiencing the agony of injustice, becomes a refining process for his spiritual enlightenment. Dad enters a realm of silence only making short speeches until his spirit is awakened by the old of the forest. The struggle continues for Dad as he searches for avenues through which he uses his newly acquired sensitivities to understand the significance of the things he hears, sees and feels. Life becomes a cyclical rhythm of unending struggles. The ending of one struggle heralds the beginning of another. In Okri's trilogy, the constant building of conflict resulting from the incessant struggles that Dad Mum and Azaro must be engaged with, is an indication that man's existence is riddled with obstacles that must be overcome before happiness is attained. Very often, happiness is illusive and can only be attained for a period in time before another struggle begins again.

In Bandele's *The Man Who Came in From the Back of Beyond*, the plot structure of the novel and the metafictional function of the story turns back to the relationship between Maude and Lakemf. The entire novel is a story within a story. The eccentric Maude tells Lakemf lies about his entire life, while his student, Lakemf, believes everything he has been told. At the end of the novel, Maude tells Lakemf that the whole narration was actually the manuscript of a novel written by his younger brother. The final revelation which discloses that Maude's presumed biography is actually a faux, this is significant because it symbolizes the assertion that literature, even though a fabrication, is capable of transforming an individual in positive ways. This is because Lakemf's reflection about his life makes him take a turn, for the better. This story pays attention to the development of human character and the affirmation of the dignity of man by reflecting on the negative or positive repercussion of the choices being made by the characters. Bandele lays emphasis upon the existence of man as a social; political; and psychological being. The dysfunctional Abednego family in *The Man who Came in From the Back of Beyond*, is brought to focus to warn against the kind of upbringing that flouts decorum and thrives on verbal abuse. The change experienced by Lakemf proves that although the story is a fabrication, it is capable of making him reflect about his lifestyle. In *The Sympathetic Undertaker and other Dreams*, the crux of symbolism lies in the description of the Zowabian nation. It is described as a dream country. In this country a privileged few, who despise the majority, refuse to allow them access to the shore where they can find boats and canoes to let them float above the river of unhappiness. Soon, the same privileged people build an electrified wall that hinders the others from getting to shore and acquired airplanes to transport them over the wall. Slowly, the electrified wall crumbled but the people realized that the privileged few had looted everything and destroyed whatever they could not steal. When the people made do with the only thing that was left – that is the sand – the greedy ones returned to forcefully take over the reins of power. These descriptions are cryptic references symbolizing the state of Nigeria's political history. The change in governments from civilian to military because of coups and counter coups has presented a history of wide spread corruption which resulted in a clique of people in the reins of power, denying the majority their basic rights as citizens of the country. As the President of the Zowabian government – called Babagee – meets with the press to answer questions about the country's affairs, two characters are portrayed as demanding answers about Babagee's dictatorial government. These characters are the labour militant and Mr. Karpov from Radio Moscow. Both characters are bundled out of Babagee's press conference before they throw stones, which break some glass in the conference venue. This act of literally throwing stones symbolically implies that the Zowabian government is living in a glass house. The idiomatic expression, advises that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. The idiomatic representation also implies that the labour leader and the Russians have hypocritical tendencies;

therefore they are vulnerable if they act aggressively. It also means that the government is a fragile structure.

In Bandele's *The Street* the character of Abiodun, Dada and Midé are symbolic of the new generation of Africans living in diaspora. Many of them are aliens to their homeland though they are not unaware of their origins. This group of young people, live among other youngsters also living in diaspora from different parts of the world. They are mingled with children born from mixed ancestry such as Nehushta. Brixton serves as the melting pot where they meet and the street in Brixton, serves as a popular platform where they give a voice to their philosophies and frustrations. Abiodun also known as the heckler, picks a quarrel with anyone he finds speaking on any issue at all on the platform: "The Heckler locked horns with these mavens, gurus, roshis, lamas, shamans, revolutionaries, avatars, seers, illuminati, diviners, prognostics, prophets and those who considered themselves the street clerisy (*The Street* 13)". These characters symbolize a young generation in search of a meaning and purpose to life. The failure to find such, leads many to drug abuse and a general lack of direction in life. A character such as Dada, got fired from his job with *Cathy Magazine* and after discovering that Nehushta is bisexual, spends his time smoking marijuana, sleeping and playing video games. Nehushta started as an actress, a film critic and later a painter/drug peddler. Abiodun abandons his job to begin heckling when he found out that his homosexual lifestyle had infected him with HIV. Uncle Bode, also known as "Chief, Prince Bode Mabodunje M.sc. Ph.D. MLL. MQD OFR (133)" is symbolic of the hypocritical politicians who ruined Nigeria only to stay abroad and criticize the ruling government for doing same. The narrator explains Uncle Bode's disposition in these words:

The particular fixation I take to the present situation in Nigeria, Uncle Bode was saying, is that we have a wild monster claiming to be the head of state. It's an unpardonable insult. I can never allude to him as head of state. It makes my blood jump each time I ruminate about it. It is just because he is a soldier, be that as it may, nor because he's perpetrating yet once again the archaic hegemonic interests of the feudalist phenomenon, it is just the very fact that here is someone who has been part and parcel as it were of the most corrupt regime the country has ever been *calamitized* (emphasis mine) with, now succeeding in this whole musical chairs of Chinese whispers where the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing (138).

His wealth and assets abroad were all gathered from plundering the wealth of Nigerians. He exiled abroad only to criticize the new government for refusing him more access to more stolen wealth. Uncle Bode's eyes are fixed on the prominent leaders in government, forgetting the masses that bear the brunt of the consequences of corruption in high places. According to Vito Tanzi, "corruption reduces public revenue and increases public spending. It thus contributes to the larger fiscal deficits, making it more difficult for the government to run a sound fiscal policy. Corruption is likely to increase income inequality because it allows well positioned individuals to take advantage of the government activities at the cost of the rest of the population (np Tanzi 25, Jan 2016). Narrating in the future present, the narrator reports that Uncle Bode would suffer from a heart attack because his son would renounce him to join Hare Krishna Ashram and he would have a strong longing for home. Uncle Bode would return to a heroes' welcome from the same people whose future he had mortgaged to the International Monetary Fund. This is an indication that the masses are forgetful and gullible towards corrupt leaders. This point is reiterated in Okri's *Famished Road* after the Party of the Rich returned to Azaro's neighbourhood with more promises. Azaro marvels that the people have forgotten so soon that this same party had poisoned them with bad milk.

CONCLUSION

These symbolisms are used as markers wherein the reader is required to use the tool of interpretation for analytic purposes. Fictional characters reflect a fabricated ontological realm which break the frame to immerge into the readers own reality. It is true that literature is a fabrication, but not of lies as some may conclude. With the right tool for interpretation and appreciation, literature is highly potent in

engendering wisdom in promoting the dignity of man as a physical, social, political and psychological being.

WORKS CITED

- Bandebe, Biyi. *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 1991.
- . *The Street*. London: Macmillan, 1999.
- . *The Sympathetic Undertaker and other Dreams*. London: Heinemann, 1991.
- Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms Fourth Edition*. London: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 1991.
- . *Songs of Enchantment*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1993.
- . *Infinite Riches*. London: Phoenix House, 1998.
- Tanzi, Vito. "Corruption Arpond the World, Causes Consequences, Scope and Cures"
<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/wp9863.pdf> [accessed 25, Jan 2016].
- Tutuola, Amos. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. New York: Grove Press, 1954.
- . *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Ibadan: Spectrum 2007. First published 1961.