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ORATURE IN LITERATURE: MYTHS AS STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS IN ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

INTRODUCTION: ORATURE AND LITERATURE

O: I Written versus Oral Culture

The written word has so dominated the transmission of linguistic material in the developed world that for a long time only literature, the written form of verbal artistic production, was thought worthy of serious aesthetic consideration. In the words of a contemporary critic, Julia Kristeva, Western culture, for example, is essentially a culture of the written word, in fact a book culture.[1] However, a vast area of the cultural space of the world is occupied by peoples whose cultures have been nurtured, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth and not through the written word. The oral artistic production from these areas (in the form of folk tales, legends, drama, folk songs, etc.), constitutes a coherent body of linguistic phenomena whose immense value (anthropological, cultural, linguistic, literary, etc.) has only recently begun to be adequately appreciated and explored.[2] The concept of orature which we use to subsume these various oral forms is borrowed from the latest work of the well-known Afro-American scholar, Molefi Kete Asante: *The Afrocentric Idea.*[3]

[1] J. Kristeva, *Le Texte du Roman: approche sémiotique d'une structure discursive transformationnelle* (La Haye–Paris: Mouton, 1970), pp. 142–143.

[2] The first really serious study on oral literature may be said to be V. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated from Russian in 1958, although the study was still within the overall context of book culture. See Also S. Anozie, *Structural models and African poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), esp. p. 252 sqq.

[3] M. K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia University Press, 1987), passim.

O : II Colonialism and Assimilation of Orature into Literature

In contemporary Africa, the written word coming in the wake of the colonial incursion, has successfully invaded the continent's cultural space with the consequence that orature is gradually but steadily giving ground to literature. But if one accepts Asante's thesis, then what is authentically African is still to be found in the oratures of the different peoples of the continent. It would seem that a wholesale replacement of orature by literature at this stage would constitute a radical impoverishment. Literature can thus be presumed to have a lot to gain from orature as source material if it is to strike the innermost chord of the African psyche.

The use of earlier texts as source materials for later artistic creation, a practice covered by the global term of intertextuality, is such a universal phenomenon that some critics have even claimed that a literary creation, however, original it may appear, hardly ever springs into existence *ab nihilo*.[4] Among peoples with a written culture it is literature which begets literature, so to speak, while orature plays this generative role among peoples with unwritten cultures.

O : III Achebe and Igbo Orature

From the foregoing premise it follows that *orature in literature*, consciously or unconsciously practised, is a common feature in the African writer's stylistic trump. Among African writers there is perhaps none who has more consciously and consistently exploited this stylistic device than Chinua Achebe. Most critics and commentators on his works have paid deserving tribute to his use of his people's (Igbo) orature in the com-

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[4] J. Kristeva, *op. cit.* She even uses the term "textual permutation" to describe this practice. See Also M. Arrivé, "Pour une théorie des textes polysiotopiques" in *Langages* 31 p. 61, where the author says that access to the meaning of a text often lies in the intertext, rarely just in the text itself.

position of his works.[5] In this paper we propose to make an indepth study of how Achebe used elements of orature in his latest work, *Anthills of the Savannah*.[6] Our analysis will focus on the formal as well as thematic characteristics of the author's use of orature, that is, how the novel is generated from and structured by the use of myths and legends.

1. ORATURE AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN "ANTHILLS"

1: I The Myths of Pillar of Fire and Pillar of Water

The action and plot of *Anthills of the Savannah* are constructed around two fundamental myths: the myths of the Sun (metaphorically called the Pillar of Fire) and the myth of the Pillar of Water (Indemili). The interaction between these two myths provides the dynamics, that is the logic and symbolic structure of the novel. The action starts with the myth of the Pillar of Fire, which is a sort of metaporical name for the game of political power played out initially according to the male principle and among the men alone. The story opens with a debate on whether or not the President should pay a visit to the province of Abazon whose people had earlier refused to vote for him in the referendum to decide the Presidency-for-Life issue. The dialogic incipit is both anaphoric and cataphoric in its dynamics[7]; it refers to an earlier event which explains the President's present state of anger and it is also speculative in so far as it probes the President's future conduct. A state of equilibrium then ensues and the initial movement in the narrative logic works itself out under the aegis of the Pillar of Fire ethos.

[5] See O. Taiwo, *Culture and the Nigerian novel* (London: Macmillan, 1976) and R. N. Egudu, "Achebe and the Igbo Natrative Tradition" in B. Lindfors (ed.) *R. A. L.* Vol. 12, No. 1 1981.

[6] C. Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Ibedan: Heinemann Educ. Books, 1988); all references are to this edition.

[7] See J.-M. Adam & J.-P. Goldstein, *Linguistique et Discours littéraire* (Paris: Larousse 1976), p. 209 for an interesting analysis of these terms.

The actors in the unfolding drama can be said to be arranged in two opposing camps with the President leading one camp and Commissioner Oriko the other, that is, the Abazonian camp. As long as Oriko heads the opposing camp there appears to be little possibility of a decisive show-down for he is a man of gentle disposition, while his tribesman, Ikem Osodi, is a firebrand in the mould of Okonkwo or Enoch of *Things Fall Apart*. Ikem Osodi then takes over and with him is brought in the myth of the Pillar of Fire for it is he who writes the ambivalent pynegeric to the Sun which is also the myth of origin of the people of Abazon.

The action gathers momentum and assumes a furious pace as Osodi comes more and more into the picture. He decides to debunk the President's deceptive move by meeting the delegation from Abazon himself and giving them a completely different picture of the state of affairs in the Republic. The President however bides his time while teleguiding a series of minor disconfitures for Osodi: he relieves him of his post at the *Government Gazette* and instructs the Police to have a minor brush with him. Behind the scenes the leader of the delegation from Abazon is arrested and thrown into detention. The power game begins to get really hot and the full weight of the state apparatus is brought to bear on the unrepentant Osodi who then plays his last card, as it were, by making a fiery speech before a student organisation. He is then physically eliminated while his friend and colleague, Commissioner Oriko, is hounded and forced into hiding.

At this junction it becomes clear that the power game of politics played under the Pillar of Fire ethos is very dangerous and destructive. It was so in primeval times when the people of Abazon lost out against the Sun and drought and were forced to emigrate southward, and it is still so now that distatorship is reaping a harvest of lives and creating a state of near anarchy. So the myth of Pillar of Water is brought in to create a sort of undertow to the destructive logic of the Pillar of Fire. As the action of the novel draws towards the end the thrust of naked

power begins to wane and that of justice and moderation to wax stronger and stronger. Under the aegis of the Pillar of Water (Idemili), the female principle, a child is born post-humously to Ikem Osodi with the promise of peace, life and a new beginning for all. These two myths outlined above provide the deep structure, the ossature unto which the other minor motifs are grafted at appropriate intervals. One such motif that deserves special mention is the "missing horse" motif. But it is the Pillar of Fire motif in particular which helps to structure the text through a series of anaphoras which act like refrains of a piece of music.[8]

1: II The Missing Horse Motif

State security agents are conducting a search in Beatrice Okoh's residence in the hope of finding incriminating evidence against her friend, Christopher Oriko, who is on the run. During the search, as everything is being ransacked, she asks the leader of the team: "Are you looking for books too?" and he replies: "My people have a saying which my father used often. A man whose horse is missing will look everywhere, even in the roof." (p. 177). Later the save security officer telephones to say: "I know where the horse is. But I don't want to find him. Get him moved. Before tonight." (p. 179) Yet again the telephones saying: "It's not me you should worry about; I can promise never to find a horse. It's the others who are more efficient than myself in the matter of finding horses." (p. 185) And finally there is another call by the same person with the following message: "You asked was I genuine? If by that you mean do I ride horses or do I play polo the answer is emphatic no. But if you mean do I like horses, yes. I am a horse-fancier." (p. 186) In these excerpts the word "horse" first appears as a part of a proverb and stands for any missing item, then it gathers more meaning, contextual meaning that is, and becomes

[8] See *Anthills of the Savannah* pp. 30–33; p. 127; pp. 209–210.

integrated into the logic of the narrative text by standing speci-
fically for the fugitive. The missing horse motif, apart from its
metaphorical and symbolic potential which will be explored
more fully later, is of particular interest, contextually speaking,
because of what it reveals about the dynamics of text genera-
tion. It appears first as a proverb and then as the author exploits
further its generative potential it grows into a metaphor and
finally a symbol as the generative potential is exploited to the
full. It is in its capacity as a symbol that the missing horse motif
structurally completes the tripod of meaning of which the
Pillar of Fire and the Pillar of Water motifs are the other two
legs. How the three motifs constitute the thesis, the antithesis
and finally the synthesis of the overall argument of *Anthills* is
the last focus of our attention and investigation which will be
preceded by an expository discussion of the dynamics of wha
Paul Ricoeur has called the "rule of metaphor".

2. ORATURE AND THE SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE IN "ANTHILLS"

2 : 1 From Myth to Metaphor and Symbol

In his essay on general linguistics, R. Jakobson threw light
on the importance of metaphor as one of the two basic ways
in which man uses language to understand and manipulate his
universe (the other being metonymy).[9] Metaphor is reductionist
in nature in the sense that it eliminates the coupling word "like"
or its equivalents from the statement of comparison. In other
words it aims at implying what straight comparison says expli-
citly. Between the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor there
is a common semantic field which authorizes the Metaphor.
Thus a metaphorical expression like "that woman is a chame-
leon" can be rendered diagramatically thus:

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[9] R. Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: édition de Mi-
nuit, Collection "Points", 1970), p. 6.
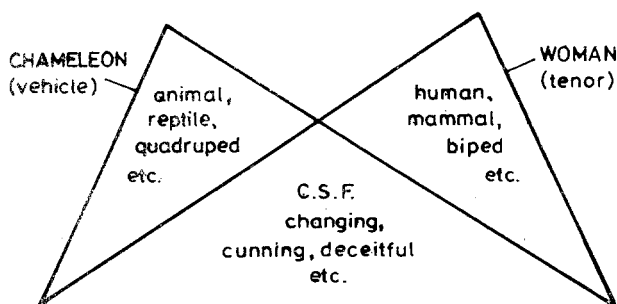
In the above diagram C. S. F. is the common semantic field, and a close look at this field will reveal that the entries here are not the qualities or traits of the compared entities that one would normally consider basic. They are highly subjective perceptions or interpretations imposed on the objects compared, in other words they express the relationship between the speaker and the language (what Grice would call utterer-meaning), and not just between the signs of the language, as in purely semantic relationships. The consequence of this subjective nature of metaphor will be fully explored later.

Furthermore a metaphor can be fresh or stale and it is said to be stale when through repeated usage it passes into the cultural code, that is it is institutionalized. Umberto Eco in his book on the semantics of metaphor devised a formula which could pass for the acid test for determining the freshness or otherwise of a metaphor. The formula runs thus:

$$A \quad \text{vs} \quad B \quad \text{vs} \quad C \quad \text{vs} \quad D$$
$$X \quad \text{vs} \quad Y \quad \text{vs} \quad Z \quad \text{vs} \quad K$$

The horizontal axis is semantic and antonymic; the vertical axis corresponds to the connotative correlations already fixed in the code by usage. If A is replaced by B the metaphor is trivial since it is just a simple substitution by antonymy. When A is substituted by X the metaphor is still banal because the

code already supplies the model. However, when A is replaced by K an unusual metaphor occurs and its force lies in its very transgression of the normal usage.[10] Such a metaphor is rich not only because it can easily enter into the process of text generation and become what J. Ricardou call "productive metaphor" (an example of which was showed in the missing horse motif). In addition such a metaphor can also serve as a powerful vehicle for symbolic expression. This follows directly from the earlier observed personal, even private nature of metaphors, particularly when they are fresh and translate an individual's original perception of a given reality. Since unlike metonymy, for example, metaphor does not rely on actual contiguity for its operation, it can easily bridge the gap between disparate objects and hammer out new unions: herein lies its aptness for symbolic expressions, for carrying a text's message.

2: II Beyond the Polarity of Fire and Water

The basic argument of *Anthills*, the question dramatized by the novel is "What must we do to appease an embittered history?" (p. 220). The myth of origin (the Pillar of Fire motif) is a metaphorical rendition for the destructive consequences of an unbridled power game. In primeval times it resulted in the decimation of the people of Abazon and in their forced emigration from their original homestead "carry(ing) death in (their) eyes"; while in its modern form it has led to the destruction of many lives, including that of the Head of State himself. Fire is the male principle so the power game played on the basis of the male ethos has proved all-consuming. The Pillar of Water motif (Idemili myth) postulates that the male principle needs the female factor to hold it in check and make it productive instead of being destructive. "In the beginning, says the myth, Power rampaged through the world, naked. So the Almighty (. . .) decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to

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[10] J.-M. Adam & J.-P. Goldstein, *op. cit.* p. 146.

the moral nature of authority. . ." (p. 102)[11] In fact as the story draws to a close the female principle seems to gain ascendancy as Elewa, Ikem Osodi's mistress, goes to bed and Beatrice takes over the male function of giving a child a social identity and status, that of naming. It is through naming that man calls individual objects into being by pulling them out of the anonymity of primeval chaos; it is an ordering and a harmonizing function par excellence. It cannot be by chance that the author decided to take this all-important function from man and give it to woman. Besides, the child who is a girl is surprisingly but significantly given a boy's name as if to suggest that a possible way out of the quagmire of "embittered history" for the people is an increasingly more balanced role for the two genders in what had hitherto been a male-dominated arena. Thus, beyond the polarity of fire and water, of male and female principles, lie stability and harmony, symbolized by the fusion of former opposing forces.

Finally the missing horse motif seems to suggest also what the new and healthy relationship in the brave new world will be where "rampaging power" will have been reined in by the moderating influence of justice and morality. Men will no longer ride their fellow men like horses nor use them as puns, as in the game of polo, rather every man will recognize his neighbour's inalienable rights and appreciate in particular his humanity. In short, men would then have become "fanciers" instead of "users" of their fellow men.

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[11] It has been aptly noted that the theme of duality or polarity of male and female principles runs through most of Achebe's works. In *Things Fall Apart* the female principle "Ani" contends with Okonkwo, the personification of the male ethos; while in *Arrow of God* Ezeulu symbolizes the thrust of naked power which the opposing forces of moderation try to hold in check. *Anthills of the Savannah,* if our reading is correct, is certainly "new" in the attempt it makes to break away from the vicious circle of polarities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to show the structural and semantic functions of orature in the novel under consideration. We showed how the myths of the Pillar of Fire and Pillar of Water, as well as the missing horse motif, provide the semantic base on which the novel rests. The three motifs constitute the thesis, antithesis and synthesis of the narrative argument of *Anthills of the Savannah*. The basic question asked by the novel is one of very topical urgency in the country's (i.e. Nigeria's), nay Africa's, chequered political history and the "solution" proffered at the end of the novel suggests that this must be taken as the author's lastest contribution to the burning issues of violence, inhumanity, injustice and instability in our policy. And for the first time in Achebe's fictional world woman unequivacally takes the centre stage but this, in our view, must not be taken as the replacement of one domination by another domination, of one polarity by another polarity; rather the author appears to affirm that ultimate salvation lies beyond polarities, in the fusion of opposing forces, in short in co-operation and team-work.