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An analysis of Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard*

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Abstract

This paper examined “the palm-wine drinkard.” by Amos Tutuola. Equipped with little formal education, Tutuola used the English language to tell his story using the first person singular ‘I’. He is a natural and one of the first Africa writers to contribute to Western literature. Reading through the novel, there were inconsistencies and disjointed presentations of ideas and facts. These did not however affect his good instinct as it rather turned his naïve ignorance and apparent limitation in language into a weapon of great strength. Tutuola simply opened his wings and rose higher. His feelings and the tools he employed to carry his intentions across to his readers are unique. The saying that ‘one man’s food is another man’s poison.’ is apt. It is more of collections of short stories fused in the making of the novel.

Keywords: beliefs, language, palm wine, style, usage

Public Interest Statement

It has been alluded by some writers that, as an African writer of the English language, there is only less to what a writer can do or say. Tutuola is a Nigerian and the first African to write a novel published internationally. They backlashed him as being: myopic, unenlightened on the rule of the English language and ascribing his style as naïve and a collection of errors. Tutuola’s use of English may have been termed a ‘Yoruba English’ just because of the grammar and choice of vocabulary. However, the novel did not lose its clarity and uniqueness.

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Introduction

English Language in West Africa and by extension Africa, is a language of conquest. It is a language that has come to stay. No wonder, the English language has become a language to reckon with as the national and official language of most countries in West Africa. It is made possible because of the multilingual settings of these countries. The dilemma they have is that one indigenous language cannot serve as the national or official language. This has been advocated for by African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o who wishes to detached himself from the conquest language as seen in his work, "Decolonizing the mind". Others are Obi Wali and Abiola Irene that advocated that African languages be used, to better tell their stories to maintain originality. For them, expressing oneself in his language carries the worth and essence. A writer is not constrained to tell his story whichever way it may get to the targeted readers. African literature, therefore, had been in existence long before the arrival of the English Language Belcher captures this as follows:

Africans wrote not just in Europe, but also on the African continent; they wrote not just in European languages, but in African languages; they wrote not just for European consumption, but their consumption; they wrote not just in northern Africa, but in sub-Saharan Africa; they wrote not just orally, but textually; they wrote not just historical or religious texts, but poetry and epic and autobiography; and they wrote not just in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth century and long, long before.

Pre-colonial Africa literature is numerous. They are mostly folklore, proverbs, riddles, songs, etc. passed from one generation to the next. At some point in time, some elements or items in the songs, proverbs, folklores, e.t.c. are dropped, removed, or modified to capture the essence of the time or season. Oral literature of West Africa includes the "Epic of Sundiata" composed in medieval Mali, and the older "Epic of Dinga" from the old Ghana Empire. Common folklores in West Africa are centered on tricksters that usually involve a small animal who uses wit to survive or outsmart other bigger animals.

If Africans wrote literature text as stated above, how would they then be classified or categorized? Belcher categorizes them into four groups; firstly those whose literature text is written by Africans outside of Africa, secondly are African literary texts written by Africans on the African continent in Arabic, thirdly are those written by the hundreds of African youths whom Europeans sent from the continent every year to study in Europe, lastly, are those written by Africans on the African continent in African languages or otherwise sometimes in African scripts.

From the above categorization, Tutuola may likely be in the fourth group. Like some African writers, he uses the English language in his novel to reflect his thoughts, ideas, beliefs, etc. such as he would use his indigenous language. These involve choosing suitable words to convey his desired meanings and intentions, the structure of the language, and so on. Bamiro concurs thus:

the African user of English continuously attempts to bend the English language to reflect the structures of African indigenous languages and the preference of many Africans for structurally simplified sentences owing, on the one hand, to the

convergence between African languages and the English language and, on the other hand, to the inadequate exposure of many Africans to the English language.

Tutuola writes “The Palm wine Drinkard” based on his little understanding of the English language available to him to portray his Yoruba beliefs and probably to attract wider readership despite the criticism and hurdles. No wonder the novel is laced with inadequacies which may arguably be seen as a style in its right.

Briefs on Amos Tutuola

Amos Tutuola was born in Abeokuta, Nigeria in 1920. He had little formal education from 1934 to 1939 in the Salvation Army Primary School and Anglican Central School in Abeokuta. When death came calling on his father in 1939, Tutuola left school and tried his hands on menial and low-income jobs. Not satisfied and with free time on his hand, Tutuola started writing. In the words of Lindfors “Amos Tutuola began to write out of boredom” (1). He drew poignantly from the oral traditions of his people (Yoruba). His work is in the area of the transformation of modern African literature. After the novel was published, a new term ‘magical realism’ emerged. Magical realism or fabulism expresses a primarily realistic view of the real world while also adding or revealing magical elements.

Synopsis of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*

The novel was written by Amos Tutuola in 1952. It was the first Africa novel written in English outside of Africa based on Yoruba folklores. The story is told about an unnamed man using the first person singular ‘I’. At age ten, being the eldest of his father’s eight children, the palm wine drinkard was already addicted to palm wine. He did nothing but drank palm wine ‘from morning till night and from night till morning’ (7). Due to his addiction to palm wine, his father had to engage an expert palm wine tapster. The father did not stop there, he also gave him a large palm tree farm that produced fifty kegs of palm wine every morning. With the steady supply of palm wine in the house, the palm wine drinkard had many friends who came around and kept him company this, however, was not to last as the death of the tapster made his fair-weathered friends desert him. The demise of the tapster made the lazy drinkard embark on a journey to the land of the dead. His mission was to return with the tapster.

This journey was an adventurous one because it unravels many things and became the focus of the novel. The palm wine drinkard encountered many trials such as fearful and dangerous creatures, wicked and kind beings, hunger, uncertainty, etc. At the end of the novel, we saw the palm wine drinkard returning home without his dead tapster rather he came back with a magical egg given to him by his dead tapster.

Mutual exclusiveness in the palm wine drinkard

Reading through the novel, there are inconsistencies and disjointed presentation of ideas and facts by Tutuola. These disconnects are glaring in the narration where the father of the palm wine drinkard died (p. 8) later at the end of the novel reference is made to his ‘parents’. This would seem to refer to his mother and dead father, except where the Yoruba culture would classify

'parents' to not necessarily be the biological parent of a child. The Palm wine Drinkard is more of collections of short stories fused to form a novel. Especially towards the end of the novel, with the sudden introduction of brain teasers (pp. 111-115), the causes of the famine (pp. 118-119), and many other examples.

Language employed in 'The Palm wine Drinkard'

The language used by a writer can be seen as his signature which sets him apart from other writers. This is not different with Tutuola whose work opened doors for praises and condemnation from writers within and outside Africa. Encyclopedia.com observes that "the palm-wine drinkard became the subject of much controversy because of its frequently ungrammatical, though stylish and vivid, writing." Tutuola would have written in Yoruba but to tell his story and to attract a wide readership he wrote in English. His use of language may not constitute Standard English or Pidgin English. He wanted to identify with Nigerians who used the English language the way it is being spoken in Nigeria by ordinary people. Rodman, cited in Larson opines that the language "written in English but not an English of this world" perhaps he is referring to the Yoruba English which Tutuola uses to help tell his story. Understandably, Rodman may have been dumbfounded beyond comprehension by the way the rules of grammar, misspellings, etc. are broken and flouted. Few examples of such use of languages are:

"small bird which I could describe as a 'sparrow' in the English language". (p. 28).

"pack our loads and started our journey" (p. 55).

"both land and heaven were tight friends..." (p. 118).

Error or Style

The Idiosyncrasy of a writer is evident in the way he pours out his thoughts or feelings. He has a unique touch on his readers that makes them identify with him. Wikipedia opines that "style is about how the writer does it". The uniqueness in writing can be seen in the choice of words, spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing etc. the writer employs to send his message across to the readers. Gardner sees style as the "display of the writer's personality" His personality is therefore revealed by how he uses and employs language at his disposal. Ngara acknowledges also "that language is an exclusively human property consisting of a system of sounds, words, structures, and meaning... an individual is capable of using it in a completely novel manner" (10). If Tutuola's language use will be considered a dialect version of English, then there may be no errors in it at all but the way he chooses to use the language which constitutes his style. Several categories may seem to constitute errors to a reader who is more concerned with the components and rules of language. This is evident in word misuse; combining words; odd repetition; incorrect phrases; punctuation errors; idiom misuse; preposition misuse; and so many others. eNotes.com has this to say on Tutuola's writing, "His style has been called naïve, but might also be called grotesque, fantastic, magical, or charming." Equipped with creativity and not minding his poor grasp of the English language or short formal education, he embarked on writing the novel. The following are some salient points to note:

Vocabularies and Sentence Structures

The word 'Drinkard', checked (p. 40) are miss-spellings.

The deliberate use of the word 'tighted' (p. 12) and 'rentage' (p. 20) these words cannot be found in the English dictionary. Therefore, it makes them odd to be seen or used by the writer. Most of the sentences in "the palm-wine drinkard" start with the conjunction 'But' the sentences that start with this conjunction are unusually long (complex sentences). Sometimes a word-for-word translation from Yoruba to English is done and where there is no substitute in English the Yoruba word is used e.g 'juju'. (meaning mystical power). The omission of the word 'the' is evident whenever the phrase 'whereabouts' is used e.g.

'One fine morning... to find out whereabouts was my tapster' (p. 9).

'he would tell me whereabouts my ...' (p. 11).

Other omissions can be found on (p.17, p. 23).

Figurative use of Language

The Palm wine Drinkard is laced with so many figures of speech as seen below:

Hyperbole to show how addicted the drinkard is to palm wine 'he was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of palm wine... before 2 o'clock, I would have drunk all of it' (p. 7). Anleptis where the drinkard recounted the events that led to his meeting and rescuing the beautiful daughter of the king from the skull. The metaphor to compare and describe the monster as a gentleman and beautiful being. 'I was not created with beauty as this gentleman ... he was only a skull' (p. 25).

The use of alliteration on (45) 'only laughing at laugh's laugh...'

The use of alliteration and pun is evident in the following 'red-king of red-people in the red-town...' (pp. 74-85).

Personification as follows: 'all the cleared-weeds rise up...' (p. 49)

'(Dance) ... she sent for the other two fellows (drum and song) to come...' (p. 84).

So also, the personification of 'Death's house', 'Death's road', etc. (pp. 11-16).

Thematic consideration

The theme of Africanism is referred to as the use of incantations. as seen on (p. 30). 'with his left hand and said that if... the cowrie on her neck could not be loosened...' Mythology as a theme can be identified as Tutuola used the myths of the Yoruba in his novel. Myth as defined by Sunusanar is a traditional story that originated in a preliterate society dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as primordial types in a primitive view of the world (p. 3). Mythology, therefore, is a collection of traditional stories that express the belief of values of a group of people. The stories often focus on human qualities such as good and evil. Some of the beliefs expressed by Tutuola are peculiar and associated with only the Yoruba people or share with others.

To buttress this point, Abidemi observes thus:

The Yoruba cosmogony revolves essentially around the belief in gods, ancestors, spirits, and taboos. For a typical Yoruba man, most of the divinities are supposed to have been men and to have been exhausted for their heroic deeds to the admiration

and affection of the people. Therefore, he believes that in order to maintain the societal status quo, there is a need to maintain a perfect and cordial relationship between himself and the gods, it is this realization that brings about deification.

Like other African societies, the realization to identify with these beliefs is non-negotiable. These beliefs are what made Tutuola a unique writer. He garnished and laced his work with the Yoruba myths.

Conclusion

The Palm-wine drinkard is an interesting folklore novel based on the Yoruba traditions and beliefs. From the title to the last page of the novel, Tutuola captures the attention of his readers as he keeps unfolding one adventurous event to another. Towards the end of the novel, the writer introduces another dimension to his story which involves two brain teasers (pp. 111-115). The novel is action-filled with active language usage. Despite the non-standard English structure, Tutuola's message is well conveyed. He is considered "an innovator as one of the first African writers to contribute something entirely new to Western literature" buttresses Lindfors. His boldness to step into the international scene opened the floodgates of criticism.

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