

Thematic Concerns in the African Short Story

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Abstract

Although suggestions have been made that the African short story and the traditional folktale belong to the same genre, reputable scholars renounce such a notion, claiming that the African short story is rooted in reality and, therefore, does not draw any moral. Motifs in the African short story are tantamount to the needs, aspirations and anxieties of the characters. This paper highlights two themes underlying the African short story: (1) the conflict between tradition and modernity and (2) the city, which is ever present in African literature. Tradition and modernity are locked in never-ending conflict, never coming to terms with each other. The city, on the other hand, according to the authors, has not improved the lot of characters, but has, instead, swallowed and entrapped them with false hopes of wealth and happiness. In this paper, reference is made to exemplary stories depicting the conflict between rural values and modernity, and the effects of the lure of the city.

For the past four decades or so, the short story genre has been thriving in Africa. But critics gave very little notice to the creation of the indigenous short story, dismissing it as not having any literary value because short stories tended to appear in popular magazines and were, therefore, rated very low on the literature totem pole, and short stories by Africans were regarded as the work of apprentices in creative writing. They were also scorned as being too derivative of the European or western model. The African short story, however, has gained more and more popularity, especially in African countries where English is spoken. African short stories have found their way into major anthologies used by colleges and universities in the United States.

The reputable Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, and others, suggest that a difference exists between the African short story and the short story as it is defined in the West. This is of course applicable to the modern mode of the short story. Also to Achebe (and Innes), both the novel and the short story in Africa have "drawn from a common oral heritage" (Achebe & Innes, 1985). Stephen Gray, however, does not draw any distinction between the short story, the myth, the fable, and the legend (1985, p.8). He perceives these classifications as being mutually inclusive. He declares that they are interdependent and coexist and are always available to the writer. Another critic, J. de Grandsaigne, rejects such notions by saying that it is not possible to grant wholehearted support to what Charles Larson's statement that "the modern short story in Africa belongs to an oral tradition centuries old and still very much alive in Africa today" (1977, p. 7) or to Gary Spackey's that "the contact between oral literature and the short story have been – and must remain minimal" (de Grandsaigne, 1985, p. 10). De Grandsaigne suggests that it is essential to keep in mind the distinction between the tale and the African short story.

The tale can be defined as a loosely plotted story with an avowed moral purpose, free from formal constraints, bringing real or strange happenings as it chooses, emphasizing events more than characters, and keep close to oral tradition.

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The short story, on the other hand, models itself closely on reality (and therefore does not necessarily draw any moral). It follows a well-defined pattern and sheds all superfluous elements. The difference between the tale and the short story is not a matter of length but one of form and content.

Again, it needs to be stated that the two genres – the oral tale and the short story – are quite different. While the story-teller held, and may still hold an honored place in traditional African society, the short story writer has not; but, fortunately, it is gaining more and more popularity. Motifs in the African short story are generally needs, aspirations and anxieties. Also, the old and new ways of life are never reconciled: instead they are engaged in perpetual conflict.

Themes underlying the African short story include:

1. The city
2. Rural life
3. Colonialism and its implications
4. War and its results
5. Religion and witchcraft
6. Love
7. Political corruption
8. Hunger and poverty
9. Treachery
10. Race relations

F. Odun Balogun¹ lists similar topics: art, religion, tradition and culture to urban life, politics, apartheid, and life's the ironies (1992, p. 24). Instead of dealing with all of these topics, this paper focuses only on two major issues surfacing in the African short story: the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the city up to the early 1980s.

The Conflict between Tradition and Modernity

There is a perpetual conflict between tradition and modernity. As already been mentioned, the needs, aspirations and anxieties of the present age dominate the African short story. This is consistent with the statement made by Ulli Beier that "by far the greatest number of African writers are interested in depicting present-day situations and problems. The past and traditions hold little interest to them" (1964). There are very few stories which deal with subject matter relating exclusively to the past and not many center only on traditional values. Generally, tradition is considered in its relationship with modernity. In the African short story, the old and the new order of things never come to terms with each other; instead, they are locked in never-ending conflict whose outcome is always negative.

In "The Ivory Dancer" by Cyprian Ekwensi, the traditional authority of the village chief turns to oppression and tyranny. When the young dancer in the story stubbornly refuses to agree to the chief's plan, he has her threatened with retaliation by one of his wives: "You know your mother . . . how poor she is! Without that farm, she is useless! Of course, those Iroko trees which your father left behind. . .the matter is still being debated. The chief can still decide against you" (1966, p. 57). The dancer and her troupe use their talents and skills to serve the village tradition, but in this story they are directed to provide some kind of exotic entertainment for a rich Hollywood film-maker.

In this story, modern values do not fare any better. In spite of all their education (a religious one for that matter!), the Chief's wife and her schoolboy lover become cheats and thieves. The young village woman, Akunma, sacrifices the prospect of real happiness, according to tradition, by spurning her betrothed Chibo, a village young man entirely devoted to her, and becomes infatuated with a shallow college student. In "The Coming of the Dry Season" by Cyprian Mungoshi, the news of the mother's imminent death in the village does not prove important enough to keep the son away from the pleasure of a weekend in town (1981, p. 45). Unfortunately, his failure to fulfill his filial duties makes him feel so guilty that he does not find any peace or oblivion in sex and drink. In the end, the mother figure, on which tradition places the most cherished value, turns to a nightmare. Instead of leading him to redemption, guilt and remorse take Moab Gwati on the way to complete degradation. Maurice Chishimba's hero, in "Weekend of Carousal, "does not act differently when he violently abuses his mother for arriving unexpectedly from the village: "Why can't you stay at home in the village . . . You asked for my permission to come here, did I not refuse? I don't know if it is madness that made you people believe that I have grown a moneytree here" (1965, infra 68).

Other short story writers, such as Abioseh Nicol, Kwabena Annan and Barbara Kimenye, bring their humor to bear mainly on the present-day world: tradition, however, does not remain unscathed. In Nichol's "The Truly Married Woman" (de Grandsaigne, 1985), "the white missionaries are so naive that they fail to see that the woman who is about to marry, the

. . . red, red rose That in your beautiful garden grows,
Which never has been plucked before. So lovelier than any other. (177)

This so-called "red, red rose" is a woman in her mid-thirties, with slightly streaked grey hair, a mother of three who has lived happily but in "sin" with a man for twelve years. On the whole, in the African short story in English, neither the old nor the new order of things constitute a satisfactory solution to the hero's or heroine's dilemma. On the contrary, tradition and modernity act as opposite poles between which the hero is continually thrown back and forth. In order to escape such an unbearable situation, he or she then seeks refuge in a new world – that of the town – which to him or her appears to be a kind of no-man's land, an in-between place between traditional and modern life. But what he or she finds in the city is not an Eden but a world plagued with the very ills and contradictions from which he or she was trying to escape in the first place.

The City is Ever-present in African Literature, Especially the Short Story

Urbanization has been on the increase on the African continent in the last two decades. It is not uncommon to see sprawling ghetto-like townships invading modern Africa cities. Ezekial Mphahlele's comment concerning South African writers can be applied to those of nearly every African country: "they keep digging their feet into an urban culture of their own making" (1962, p. 246).

A pristine nature is an illusion and so is the paradise of rural life, even in Africa. Be it in the short stories "Certain Winds from the South" by Ama Ata Aidoo, "Something to Eat. . ." by Eric Ng'maryo, or "The Return" by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the worm is already in the fruit. Either as a distant threat or as a dreaded next door rival, the town is always present in the villager's life and mind. It makes imposition on the rural economy, and it lures away village young people who are attracted by false hopes of money, pleasure and an easy life. But once people have entered the city, the gates are shut on them: there is no way out anymore. The young woman, in "In the Cutting of a Drink" by Aidoo (1979/79), is found by her brother after she spends twelve years in Accra, promises to return to her parents' home at Christmas, but she does not give any hint that she will settle permanently in the village. In order to rid himself of his guilt, the protagonist in Charles Mungoshi's "The Coming of the Dry Season" (1981, p. 45) flees the city; but it always looms on the horizon of his aimless walk and, in the end, he does not strike out into the bush but circles round the city like a punished dog round his master.

Some characters have never lived in the country; for example, for the delinquent in Alex La Guma's "Blankets," the drunk in James Matthew's "The Portable Radio" or the crippled and blind boy in Leonard Kibera's "A Silent Song," the city is no paradise. According to Gaston-Bart-Williams in "The Bed-Sitter," it is in the city that "The path of a poor and lonely African youth . . . is precarious and accessible to agony, humiliation and, above all, a perpetual crucifixion" (Beier, Ulli, 1964, p. 36).

Notes

¹F. Odun Balogun sheds some light on theoretical issues relevant to the African short story in his book *Tradition and Modernity in the African Short Story: An Introduction to Literature in Search of Critics*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that reference has to be made to nature not qualifying as a good primary caregiver either, even with those who wish to live and die in the country, like Kamau in Ngugi's "The Return," for example. The land is exhausted, "barren like the crocodile's back, bare like the bottom of a monkey" (Ng'maryo, "Something to Eat . . ." in *Joe Magazine*); it only brings out "sickly-looking crops" (Ngugi's "The Return") on which even a handful of people cannot feed (1975, p. 49). In the African short story, with very few exceptions, such as Mulikita's "The Tender Crop," Earth is a protective force, the keeper of the past and tradition.

On the contrary, Earth is unfriendly and ungrateful even to those who love her most; so that in the end, people have no other choice but to abandon her. Eventually, they join the anonymous labor-force of the city, or worse the obscure and silent armies of the poor and deprived of the ghettos which surround the prestigious residential urban areas. "Restless City" by Ekwensi is a story depicting the city. It is indeed in the city that people come to grips with their destiny in a bitter struggle, where cultures clash in violent conflict. It is through this confrontation that the African short story shapes its own vision of the world.

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