

Narrative Innovations in Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*

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Abstract: In *Arrows of Rain*, Okey Ndibe raises questions that must be answered, issues that must be addressed and calls that must be heeded, in Nigeria's political, judicial and social environments. What distinguishes Ndibe from other Nigerian writers on the same subject of inept leadership, corrupt and inefficient judiciary, and generally-bankrupt society is his deployment of an uncommon style in addressing common problems.

Keywords: Narrative, Innovations, Leadership, Judicial/Judiciary, Nation-State.

1. Introduction: Narrative Modes

Every literary text has a story. The message could be in verse (as in poetry) or through dialogue in Acts and Scenes (as in drama) or by straight composition (prose). One of the major distinguishing feature of prose from poetry and drama is the idea of narrative/narrator/narration. This feature remains whether the prose work is fiction or non-fiction. In this paper, our concept of narrative will be in accordance with "literary theoretical approach" which partly defined it as "a fiction writing mode whereby the narrator communicates directly to the reader" (Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia).

Among classical classification of narrative modes, two are prominent - the first person and the third person. In the former a "text is presented from the point of view of character, especially the protagonist, who tells the story of himself". As a result of this, the story in this case is told from the first person singular 'I' or first person plural 'we'. In the third person narration, the story is told from an impersonal narrator who is, or may not be, affected by the events in the story. Here, the narrator could be omniscient (knowing everything all the time about everybody, everywhere, anyhow), or limited.

2. The Nigerian Novel and Narrative Techniques: A Few Examples

Nigerian fiction has employed the above narrative perspectives at different times to serve their creative purposes. The subject matter of inept leadership, corrupt and inefficient judiciary, moral decadence and economic butchery, has been a preoccupation in Nigerian literature. After the early Nigerian novel, which concentrated on cultural authentication, and the failure of the Nigerian leadership to live up the expectations of independence, the Nigerian novel started decrying the social, economic and political malaise that has become the malaise of the country. The massive corruption, self enrichment and election violence of the first Republic and the impending coup found voice and prophecy in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). Chief Nanga, a bush politician and former school teacher, joins the political class and is made the Honorable Minister for Culture. He becomes, in the novel, the mirror or the arrowhead through whom the reader sees the greed, aggrandizement and self-centeredness of the ruling class.

Abubakar Gimba's novels, especially *Innocent Victims* (1988) and *Sunset for a Mandarin* (1991), are tabloids for x-raying the intrigues, corruption, highhandedness that go on in Government establishments. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* (1970) and Femi Osofisan's *Kolera Kolej* (1975) depict the impotence of the intellectual when duty calls: duty of salvaging their country; duty of exemplary character; duty of financial prudence; duty of ethical revolution.

In the above novels (and more), the narration is in the third person omniscient. The narrator not only tells what he knows and sees, as it affects him and/or others, but also what other characters may not know he knows. The narrator interrogates both their verbal utterances as well as their internal renderings. This

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narrator tells the story of everybody. Achebe's *A Man of the People* is a good example. That is why the narrator can report the conversations (internal and external) of every character.

3. Narrative Innovations in *Arrows of Rain*

Okey Ndibe, journalist, critic, poet and novelist, is also singing the song of failed nationhood. In *Arrows of Rain* (2000), a young lady who is raped runs into the sea and gets drowned. Bukuru, the 'madman', who is at the scene and who tries to rescue her is suspected, arrested, detained and tried. Bukuru becomes the pivot through whom the reader is taken through the political, judicial, social and moral landscape of Madia, the fictional country, in that novel. The political class (civilian or military) is bereft of ideas on how to manage the affairs of the nation. The economy is raped (by the same people who carry out the physical rape of innocent girls and prostitute women alike). The Judiciary is tied to the whims and caprices of rulers and, therefore, dispenses justice in accordance with the dictates of the State. What is present is dearth of values; values which would have moved the society forward.

Ndibe may not have raised significantly new issues. However, his narrative style may have deviated from the commonly-employed third person omniscient view common in/with most Nigerian writing/writers. Ndibe's story is told through/by two narrators- Bukuru and Femi Adero. The novel is divided into three parts:

Part One titled "Mist" covers chapters 1-5.

Part Two titled "Memories" covers chapters 6-23.

Part Three titled "Malaise" covers chapters 24-25.

Part one deals with the unnamed girl's suicide, Bukuru's arrest, arraignment and detention. The insecurity of the common man, the inability of State security and judicial apparatus to protect the common and helpless citizens for whom these agencies were created in the first place come in here. In this first part of the novel, the story is told by Femi Adero in the third person.

The second part tells the story of Bukuru - his birth, familial background, education, work and the journey to detention. In Bukuru's story is Iyese's, is Isa Bello's (The Head of State and Commander-in-Chief), among others. Here the story is told in the first person, that is by Bukuru. It is a first person narration with a difference. Apart from himself, the protagonist knows all of all and other characters only as he is told him by them. For example, even though in Bukuru's story we find Iyese's, her story is told by herself. The narrator only reports what he has been told. The implication is that the narrator has no penetration into the inner consciousness of other characters beyond their own verbal information. Their stream of consciousness, their inner fears and desires, their aspirations and dreams which are not related and/or connected to the narrator cannot be conceptualized. It is a limited narrative viewpoint.

The third part of the novel tells the story of Femi Adero, the journalist with the privately-owned newspaper, *Daily Chronicle*. The narration here is by Adero himself in the first person. Again, it is straightforward telling: no in-depth analysis of events or circumstances, no internal rendering of any kind. In summary, the narrative structure of *Arrows of Rain* is:

Third person (limited) - First person (limited) - First person (limited).

One could say that Ndibe's adoption of this narrative procedure is because of his emphasis on 'telling'. In a glaringly authorial voice/influence, we read:

I can't even say I fully understand my own motives in writing this story...Once upon a time I would not have been able to tell this story without first being at peace with my motives. I would have agonized endlessly, the narrative dead in my hand. Alas, I no longer have that luxury...But is the story I have to tell.... I want to reckon on my journey and Madia's, to calculate the cost of things done and things left undone. (*Arrows of Rain*, 54. *Emphasis mine*).

So the telling, the calculation "of things done and things left undone", the intersection of the life of the narrator (author?) and Madia (Nigeria) is of more import to the author than any other consideration, including linguistic innuendoes.

Again, the choice of narrative structure could be borne out of the author's career background. It has been stated that Ndibe is a journalist. He has written for "The Guardian", an elitist, fearless privately-owned newspaper in Nigeria which has been at the vanguard of positive and responsive governance. Presently, Ndibe runs a column on Nigeria's "Daily Sun" (another privately-owned newspaper) on Tuesdays. Anyone familiar with Ndibe's journalistic temper will see him in his narration. He is generally impatient with irresponsible government and governance. He believes government should be primarily concerned with development of infrastructure and welfare and security of citizens. Many times, his views have put him in collusion with State Officials.

Ndibe's editorial and journalistic thread (in presentation and purpose) seems to have found its way into *Arrows of Rain*. His story is thrown at the State, to let the oppressors (who misuse the instruments of power) today and tomorrow know that there shall be no escape. Part of Bukuru's covering note on his memoir (story) to Femi Adero reads:

Against the power of State, I can only throw this story. I know it is a feeble weapon. But it is the only weapon I have. A time will come when those who today sit on the heads of others will themselves be called to account (54. Emphasis mine).

Ndibe has never known any other weapon other than the pen in decrying the evils in the society. The narration, as indicated earlier, follows a familiar path to achieve a familiar authorial purpose.

To Osundare (2001), Ndibe makes use of the trope of madness to tell a gripping story. He compares Bukuru to Ayi Kwei Armah's and Bessie Head's narrative choices in *Fragments* (1974) and *A Question of Power* (1974), respectively. The questions are: Is Bukuru really a madman or is taken to be mad? Is Bukuru relating events and incidences that only him knows or sees, not discernible to other members of his society? For example the daily parties at Honourable Rueben Atta's place, his days at the Newspaper, his encounter with Isa Bello at Iyese's place, his testimony at the court, the carnal orgy of the Cabinet Ministers and the Prime Minister himself on the day of the coup, etc. These incidences are not and could not be reported upon by an unstable mind. More importantly, these incidences took place before the event that took Bukuru to the beach.

A window into Ndibe's narrative innovation is how discourse on some of the issues in the novel are presented. In most African/Nigerian fiction, the issue of female subjugation/gender war is presented through the matrimonial setting. And in a situation where the wife sees divorce as a route to abandonment or rejection of her humiliation, she moves to a worthier and, seemingly, more dignified means of existence. For example, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1986) and Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1982). In *Arrows of Rain*, Iyese leaves her matrimonial home because of her husband's infidelity only to become a prostitute. She becomes an object of brutality, rape and harassment in the hands of Major Isa Palet Bello, her sexual customer who eventually murdered her. The same instruments of power that Bello uses against Iyese, is what the Commander and other soldiers of the Vice Task Force employ in humiliating and denigrating others - prostitutes and non-prostitutes. So in *Arrows of Rain*, female subjugation is operated through the machinery of power, through the wielding of public positions. This is unlike Ada's humiliation by her husband, Francis, in *Second Class Citizen* or Okonkwo's overbearing authority over his wives in *Things Fall Apart* (1962).

4. Conclusion

Ndibe raises no new thematic issues in his novel, but under the 'guiding principle' of the *Arrows of Rain*, - "a story never forgives silence", the author uses two journalists as narrators to bring out the poignancy of a failed Nation-State.

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