

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THE MODERN SHORT STORY AND THE AFRICAN FOLKTALE TRADITION

by

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NOWADAYS, it is commonly argued that the contemporary artist in Africa should, as part of his moral obligations, provide a collective vision for his society in terms of his art. He should as much as possible try to project through his work, a permanent sense of meaning and direction to the quality of human life within his society. In addition there is also the common belief that no creative writer however eccentric he may be, can completely escape from the established literary traditions of his society. Traditional literary artists in their infinite wisdom recognised and accepted these principles as important criteria in their creative process. In much the same way, modern creative writers in Africa have also come to accept these same creative principles as vital to their creative works, and some of them in their recent pronouncements have even gone further to create the impression that this is the point of identification between them and their creative ancestors of old. Wole Soyinka for example proclaimed in 1962 that "the artist has always functioned in African Society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time therefore for the modern artist to respond to this essence of himself".¹ Similarly, Ezekiel Mphahlele has also pointed out that the artist is after all "the sensitive point of his community and the cultural impacts about him must, if he has the make-up of an artist, teach him to express the longings, failings and successes of his people"² A few years before, Achebe had also asserted that it was the duty of the contemporary artist in Africa to tell the people where the rain actually began to beat them after African Societies had been ravaged by decades of colonial rule.

Like his traditional predecessors therefore, the modern creative artist in Africa is expected to provide moral vision for his people and be a teacher to them. Again, like his traditional forefathers the modern artist is expected to produce creative works which would be relevant and meaningful in terms of the values and beliefs of his society; in other words his work should be a true reflection of the true state of affairs in his society.

I have deliberately invoked these creative principles which guided the traditional creative artist in his relationship with his society in order to point out certain relevant facts for our discussion. In the first place, it is necessary to emphasise that the creative principles of our forefathers are still relevant today, that there has been, broadly speaking, no break between traditional African literature and modern African literature, not only in terms of subject matter and portrayal of the African environment and psychology but also more important in terms of viable creative principles which as I have tried to suggest continue to guide and inspire African creative artists of today

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1. Wole Soyinka: "The writer in a Modern African State" *The Writer in Modern Africa* (The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies
2. Ezekiel Mphahlele: *The African Image* (Faber and Faber, 1962) Uppsala 1968)

In effect, what is being suggested is that the modern creative artist is still part of a long established and viable literary tradition which is still vigorous and continues to exist side by side with the written literature of to-day; and that the artist, if he is sensitive to his culture, should see himself and his work as a continuation of this established literary tradition on various levels.

Too often, young and aspiring writers in Africa, especially short story writers tend to forget this very important consideration. Some of them find it difficult to eschew conscious imitations of Western literary techniques and ways of presentation. They seem to make very little effort to establish or identify themselves with the creative and aesthetic links of the African past. There is, therefore, the potential danger of losing the valuable lessons which African Creative writers can learn from the literary modes of the African past.

How many short-story writers in Africa for example have thought of the very special technical similarities between the traditional folktale and the modern short story? How many writers have thought of the narrative techniques which the short story writer can borrow or learn in terms of the aesthetic principles of the traditional folktale? Undoubtedly the short-story writer in Africa can learn a lot from the oral narrative devices of the traditional folktale. This of course is one way of saying that the short story as handled and conceived by African creative writers even in the written medium has, in a rather fundamental way, direct affinities with the folktale. In other words, to the extent that the short story deals with situations and material drawn from African experience and psychology. I wish to submit that it is, in many respects, a continuation of the oral prose tradition of the past. Moreover, as it has been suggested earlier, there seems to be a common artistic vision and a common artistic sensibility which tend to make these assumptions real.

The purpose of this paper therefore is two-fold; it is first to make it sufficiently clear that aspiring creative writers of to-day owe a great deal of debt either consciously or unconsciously to the past and that they cannot afford to ignore the various levels of creative vision which are embodied in the creative processes of our ancestors. It is for these reasons that I wish to compare the modern short-story (as handled by contemporary Africans) with the traditional folktale in an attempt to draw attention to what can be gleaned from the techniques and aesthetic principles which were usually employed in the performance of the folk-tale.

For a long time now it has been fashionable for people to say that literature should entertain. Others say it should instruct. Some creative writers in their attempts perhaps to satisfy this outrageous public demand have, in their seeming folly, tended either to 'instruct' or 'entertain'. In either case modern literature in some respects has now become a question of emphasis and there is now, so it seems, great deal of confusion in creative circles whether one should write primarily to entertain or instruct or do both at the same time. Of course, the true artist entertains and instructs at the same time. But it is a fact that modern literature especially in the case of pot-boilers, has become notorious for this unfortunate division in its function.

In the field of the short-story for example, where this division seems to be endemic, there has been a radical shift in its area of concern and mode of presentation. The modern short story does not seem to embody any

element of fantasy, because it does not set out explicitly to 'entertain' nor does it set out explicitly to 'instruct'. Its concerns now are with social realities and social criticism. And its mode of presentation accordingly has become more and more realistic and critical than ever. I am not saying that this is bad in itself, but so much has this aspect been emphasised in modern short story writing that one is continually being pushed and confronted as it were, with the 'real thing' being in a way 'instructed' to be critical with reality. We have therefore a situation in which the educated mind in his everyday living is always aware of human degradation, squalor and disease before him; when he picks up a short story—a work of art for that matter—he is also confronted with the same realities, this time in vivid detail. When an educated mind is subjected to this kind of continual confrontation with reality, both in his daily life and in his reading hours, has he no right then to seek refuge in other avenues of escape? Has he no right, for example, to confide in a bottle of beer, drugs and marijuana?

What I am suggesting is that perhaps because of their bent towards excessive 'realism' modern short story writers, have in a way failed our modern society. We have not done much by way of experimentation in our creative endeavours to provide contemporary society with true creative and aesthetic modes of escape. Since there are too many pressures, strains and stresses in our modern society and we are already very familiar with them, it is positively unhealthy for creative writers to join hands with the newspaper, radio and television media in re-echoing such calamities 24 hours of the day.

There are some of us who, perhaps out of loyalty to creative principles tend to look down on the models of say, Ian Flemming. It is true, of course, that *Goldfinger*, *from Russia with Love*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* or *Live and Let Live* — to mention only a few—cannot be properly called works of art, for as far as the actions of these novels go, they are to say the least, sensational, sadistic and normally loaded with a great deal of naked sexual appeal. But no one can deny that Mr Flemming exhibits a great deal of creative imagination in his novels. A creative imagination in which the element of fantasy seems to dominate.

The popularity of Mr Flemming with publishers and cinema directors therefore suggests in effect that the elements of fantasy which dominates his creative imagination appeals decidedly to an aspect of modern man in his quest to escape from the excessive realities he is faced with both in his everyday life and his reading habits. Mr Flemming's success with modern man represents a challenge to writers who possess creative imagination; is it not possible for instance, that the short story writer in his attempt to present real life as lived by real men and women should also think seriously about incorporating an element of fantasy in his literary creations? Should the short story writer of today think that 'realism' is incompatible with 'fantasy'?³ Already in the works of Amos Tutuola and Birago Diop, this blend of realism and fantasy has been isolated by some perceptive critics as one of remarkable features which establish an authentic creative continuity-link

3. A successful example of this blend of 'realism' with 'fantasy' can be found in 'Tanofia' a short-story written by Selma Al-Hassan, which appeared in a Collection of short stories, *The Cowrie Girl and other stories*, (Ghana Publishing Corporation),

between the written prose narrative of contemporary Africa and the oral prose tradition of the past.⁴

In traditional society, one of the fundamental expectations of the creative literary artist was that he should use his talent, whether as creator or performer, to move his audience out of this world for purely aesthetic reasons⁵. He should, through the sheer use of his creative imagination let men forget the miseries of this world and the harsh realities they face in life. Through his imaginative art therefore the literary artist should lead man to forget his daily preoccupation and worries. And, in the process, he should arouse in men the thirst for life, the sudden urge to live, to enjoy and to delight in their existence. In his attempt to accomplish all this, the element of fantasy played a vital role in the imagination of the traditional literary artist.

The truth was that in traditional society literature was regarded as a stimulating agent, and this fact alone was of great importance to the traditional literary artist. It constituted one of his fundamental creative principles. For it was expected of him that his creative imagination should be a delicate balance between reality and fantasy. The more he was able to maintain this balance the more he was acclaimed a successful artist. I am not saying that this balance was always achieved by all artists in traditional society at all the time, but in a rather profound way, it affected the mode of presentation of all literary artists in traditional society.

In his attempt to move his audience out of this world therefore the folktale artist for instance had to maintain a delicate balance between 'reality' and 'fantasy'. By the very process of his performance, the kind of audience he has to deal with and formal techniques he has to employ, the folktale artist had of necessity to be a highly imaginative artist. On the one hand he was very much aware that he had to deal with situations which were familiar to his immediate audience. He had to choose themes which were related to the practical concerns of everyday living and life in general. At the same time the story teller was also very much aware that story telling at any rate in his community was always a dramatic event. A dramatic event in which the folktale artist has to entertain his audience; he has to tell his story in a way which would immediately involve his audience in this dramatic activity. In other words he has to create a psychological atmosphere which would enable the audience to participate in the action of the story both mentally and motionally and, in the process move his audience out of this world in a 'beautiful' way.

In accomplishing all these functions during his performance the folktale artist uses techniques which are calculated to sustain this imaginative balance between reality and fantasy. For example he has to personalise the action as if it actually happened to him or witnessed it while it was happening. On the other hand, his narrative has to be imaginatively conceived in a vivid manner and a lot of visual drama has to be packed into the action of the story so that his audience would be able to see it as if it was happening

4. See the introduction to *Lectures Africaines. A prose Anthology of African Writing in French*. (Heinemann, 1969) Edited & Introduced by Abiola Irete,

5. Obiagelli Peters (Mrs.) "The traditional Literary Artist and his Society". *Conference on Literature and Modern West African Culture* (unpublished, Nsukka, 1972).

on a screen. In this way, his narrative techniques, namely, personalisation and dramatisation are calculated to bring the audience not too close to reality or too far removed from it. In other words the audience may be transported but only within reach of reality.

This situation in the world of the folktale was possible because the folktale artist never forgot his audience; he never forgot the fact that the audience have to participate or be made to be involved in the action of the story; nor did he forget the fact that the tale was essentially a dramatic event which was expected to be acted and as a result visual drama was therefore a principal ingredient. So that in his conception and dramatic visualisation constituted important considerations of the folktale artist.

In this respect—that is in the area of the conception of the tale—there seems at least to be some kind of similarity between the traditional literary artist and the modern short story writer. I am of the opinion that if the short story writer is to be successful at all he should pay particular attention to problems of audience participation and problems of dramatic visualisation in his story. He should, if he is wise, take his relationship with his readers seriously. For part of his success will depend on how, at the time of writing he is able to realize a creative relationship between him and his prospective readers. This, in a way, will involve the problem of how to inspire confidence and make the reader realize that he, the writer, knows what he is talking about, and that the reader is not being taken for a ride. It should also involve the writer's ability to dramatise his action so vividly that his readers will feel obliged psychologically to participate in the action of the story. To do this effectively it means that the writer has to load his story with what I call the basic ingredients of drama i.e. conflict, tension and suspense. Only in this way can a short story writer, like his folktale artist of the past, capture the attention of his reader, win his sympathy and generally make him respond wholly to his story.

There is yet another area where the technical aspects of the folktale can provide further insights for the short story writer. It is common knowledge for example that the use of songs is indispensable to the performance of the folktale. In the Nzima folktale tradition for example there is always a situation in which a member of the audience just before a tale begins may at his discretion introduce a song. This song should necessarily be well known to the audience. Thereafter everybody would join accompanied by a lot of hand clapping.

The purpose of this introductory song as I understand it, is to compel attention and create an atmosphere of receptiveness. It puts the audience in a psychological frame of mind and prepares them to participate in the dramatic event about to be enacted. I am not suggesting that the short story writer should introduce songs for their own sake; perhaps this may be possible but I am not sure of its effectiveness in cold print. However, I am sure that the short story writer can readily appreciate the dramatic function of the introductory song in the folktale: for it is a device for arousing curiosity and heightening anticipation. In much the same way should the short story writer regard his opening paragraph. He should in the opening paragraph of his story employ dramatic techniques in the manner of the song in a way which could immediately arouse the reader's curiosity, his interest and at the same time heighten his anticipation. It goes without saying that these dramatic techniques should be constantly employed to

sustain the reader's interest in various ways as the story progresses just as in the tale where several songs are later on introduced either to break the monotony of the narrator's voice or to heighten a particular dramatic mood or simply to advance the action of the story.

Again in Nzima folktale tradition as soon as the narrator actually begins his tale we are immediately introduced to yet another technique of the folktale—the concept of the story-linguist. The 'story-linguist' as I call him is usually a member of the story telling group. He acts as a 'linguist' to the narrator as he narrates his tale. Between certain pauses of the story teller as he enacts his tale, the story-linguist makes certain comments from time to time. Although these comments are meant to be casual, they are in effect a kind of critical observation on the unfolding drama. He may cause laughter by his comment, or in another context agree or disagree with the narrator as the action progresses

As an observer-critic the story linguist has very real dramatic functions in the performance of the folktale. First he acts as the controlling medium of the narrator's imagination. He makes sure that the narrator does not sacrifice reality for too much fantasy or vice versa. He is there to ensure that there is always an imaginative balance between reality and fantasy so that the kind of truth which emerges is always relevant to life, objective and probable. Secondly as a commentator on the action of the story the linguist adds dramatic intensity to certain situations and in this way always draws the attention of the audience to particular events in the story.

I am of the opinion that the concept of the story-linguist as it exists in the folktale, offers possibilities of stylistic innovation in short story writing. In the past short story writers have tried their hands at the technique of the omniscient author, i.e. the all-knowing author telling the story exclusively from his point of view. Sometimes too they have replaced this with the technique of the first person narrator. Others have combined the technique of author-narrator with an observer character who stands outside the action to observe on the behaviour of the characters in the story. But, to my mind, the short story or indeed the novel for that matter has not as yet introduced an 'observer-critic' with the same dramatic functions as those of the folktale story-linguist, that is, an observer-critic who will act as a check on the author's own vision as well as a controlling medium of the action, character and situation in the story. A kind of observer-critic whose most important dramatic function will be to ensure that not only the action but also the writer's own particular kind of vision at any stage in the story is not far removed from reality or too much steeped in fantasy. In this way it is my belief that the excessive realism which dominates the modern short story will be controlled and a happy balance achieved between 'reality' and 'fantasy' in modern creative writing.

In the main therefore, I have tried to suggest that no creative writer, even if he so wishes, can afford to ignore his roots in tradition because every creative writer exists in an established tradition, and his fame or greatness as a writer will in the end be judged by the depth of originality which he brings to bear on the existing literary tradition; and he will also be judged by the fresh creative insights which he provides to enrich this tradition.

I have also in my attempt to draw a comparison between the techniques of the folktale and those of the modern short story tried to establish that

the short story in Africa has definite roots in our oral traditions especially, the folktale. I have suggested that the modern short story in its attempt to present life as it is, has become so realistic in its mode of presentation that it has lost the creative balance between reality and fantasy which to my mind is necessary for the objective portrayal of truth in art. A clear case for recovery therefore seems to lie in the contemporary African Artist's readiness to go back to our traditional folktale to rediscover certain techniques which will help him to recapture this 'creative balance' in his writing. And when this is done traditional and contemporary expression will be married in one fruitful artistic expression.