

Comic Revisionist Writing of Yoruba Folktales: An Analysis of Death Descriptions in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*

Prasad Gowda TS*

Ph.D. Scholar Dept. of English Bangalore University Jnanabharathi, Bangalore, India

*Corresponding author

Prasad Gowda TS

Article History

Received: 23.03.2018

Accepted: 01.04.2018

Published: 30.04.2018



Abstract: The present study analyses Amos Tutuola's novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which is based on Yoruba folktales, and makes an attempt to explore the elements of traditional Yoruba culture that have persisted through time, as well as the history of change in Yorubaland that led to the writing of this novel. His writing, Mr. Tutuola says, is rooted in his village, in the folk tales he heard as a child and collected as an adult. The paper in particular deals with death references in the original and its adaptations in the present text which in turn is infused with humor. The paper also attempts to look into people's need to treat such a grave subject as Death lightly.

Keywords: humor, death, folklore, culture, oral tradition, Incongruity Theory.

INTRODUCTION

An overview of the African Yoruba culture and Tutuola may emerge necessary in this context. Africa is known for its mixed tribes and their oral traditions. Yoruba, a tribal land located in West Africa, is one such tribe which is rich in its folklore culture consisting of folktales, songs, dance, proverbs, rituals, and ceremonies. Folklore has always been a great resource for any African writer. Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian writer born to Yoruba Christian parents, is immensely influenced by the Yoruba culture. All his writings are based on Yoruba folklore. His writing, Mr. Tutuola says, is rooted in his village, in the folk tales he heard as a child and collected as an adult."

He explains, "Old people would tell tales in the village. Every night people would tell folk tales. During those days in the village, people had rest of mind. People were happy. After they returned from the farm, after dinner, people would sit in front of houses. As amusement, people told folk tales, how people of days gone by lived, how the spirits of people lived. So we learned them." Tutuola is much concerned about his culture and he incorporates it in his writings in order to keep the culture alive. Tutuola explains, "I noticed that our young men, our young sons and daughters did not pay much attention to traditional things or culture or customs. They adopted, they concentrated their minds only on European things. They left our customs, so if I do this they may change their mind.... to remember our custom, not to leave it to die.... That was my intention"

Link between the novel and Yoruba tales

Amos Tutuola's first novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is rooted in the Yoruba oral tradition where story-telling is a significant art form. Tutuola revises the traditional folk stories and uses them to suit the present. There are varieties of tales in Yoruba Culture. The most common type is the *alo* story. By definition, "Alo is a lie!" [1]. Basically, Alo stories are fictional and also a "divergence from what ought to be." Another feature of *alo* stories is that though they have happy

endings, the stories are full of undesirable consequences of rebellious or socially intolerable deeds. Alo stories are restricted to be told in daylight for women and children when men go out to work. Another type of tale is the long tale or romance which is told by men and which deals with a series of adventures undertaken by a single hero in the bush.

The present novel, *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, can be connected to both *alo* and *long* stories. In the story, Drinkard, the protagonist, does nothing but drink palm-wine ominously, whole day and night. When his palm-wine tapster dies, he undertakes a journey to find him. In the most significant of his early exploits, the palm-wine drinkard rescues a young woman, whom he will eventually marry, from a family of "Skulls" that has captured her and held her prisoner. Together, the couple moves into the bush country, crossing the borders of various kingdoms inhabited by odd creatures, such as "Wraith Island," "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town," and "Red-Town," where they suffer numerous delays and hardships. When they finally reach "Deads' Town," ten years after the protagonist started his journey, the drinkard learns that his dead tapster cannot return home with him "because a dead man could not live with alive." The initial occupation of Drinkard is only to drink palm wine which can be described as a deviation

from social norms. His journey into the land of the dead, his encounters with God, ghosts, and other different creatures throughout the journey and the ways in which he deals with them are socially impossible. Like an alo tale, the present story also has a happy ending. Drinkard first explains how one should not live through negative examples and finally instructs how one can correct them by accepting the supremacy of God or Heaven. The story, like a long tale of the Yorubas, is full of heroic adventures by drinkard, a single character in the bush. There are many other specific Yoruba folk tales and myths retold in the novel which are discussed as follows.

One such Yoruba folk tale is “The Man Who Arrested Death.” It is a story of a man called Gbekude who is a miser. He lives alone in the village as he does not want to share anything he possesses. For example, he has had an orange tree and he never lets anyone pluck a fruit from it. Despite his scolding and warning, the children would pluck the fruits and make him annoyed. To end this, Gbekude visits Ikumekakako, the dreaded Babalaw who gives him a piece of cloth which he had made into a charm, to be tied to the orange tree. Anyone who climbs the tree will get stuck there forever. The next day, Death comes to take him. Gbekude cleverly traps Death by requesting Death to climb the orange tree to get him a fruit as his last desire. Since Death gets stuck to the tree, people in that village never die. The same story is revised in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. On his way to find his dead tapster, Drinkard meets an old man who sends him to trap Death. He cleverly escapes from Death’s attempts of killing him and succeeds in trapping Death in a net. Another tale is “Stubborn and the Helpful Spirits.” It is a story about a man called Kiigbo Kiigba who is stubborn; he never listens to anyone or considers anyone’s suggestions. His village is inhabited by both the living and spirits of the dead between whom there has been a dispute. To avoid this dispute, they make a rule that spirits shall roam on certain days whereas people will stay at home. But Kiigbo, since he is stubborn, dares to go to work when the spirits are out. The spirits were kind that they would come and do whatever the man does. They dig his farm when he digs, they plant Yams when he plants. One day, Kiigbo digs out a yam just to see if it is ready to be harvested, but, by that time the spirits have dug all the yams which are not ready to be harvested. The funny part is that when the man hits his head in sorrow, the spirits also start to beat his head. This story is also recycled in one of the chapters of the novel. Drinkard, on his way back home happens to stay in the new town of the red people where he farms with his magic seeds. A man called “GIVE AND TAKE,” who is the head of all bush creatures works for Drinkard, and steals the crops of the red people. When they blame Drinkard, he protects him from their anger by killing them.

The Yoruba cosmology rotates basically around beliefs in gods, ancestors, death, spirits and

taboos. According to Yoruba belief, death is not the end of life but a transition. Life continues after death but in a different domain and with a different life style. As death is not considered as the end, the idea of death is also not treated seriously. All these ideas are incorporated in Yoruba folktales. In the folk stories mentioned above, we can see the presence of death and spirits and they are treated lightly. The present novel, where these tales are retold, also treats death and spirits in the same fashion. Not only is it treated frivolously, laughter emerges from such treatment. The paper in particular deals with death references in the original Yoruba text and its adaptations in the present text which is infused with humor. The paper also attempts to look into people’s need to treat such a ‘grave’ subject lightly and examines how humor emerges from it, using a theoretical frame.

Theoretical frame

There are many humour theories. Among all the theories, the incongruity theory is usually emphasized more. The idea of Francis Hutcheson expressed in his *Thoughts on Laughter* [1725] has become a key concept in the evolving theory of the comic: Laughter is a response to the perception of incongruity. According to him, the object of comic amusement is incongruity. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that the perceived incongruity is between a concept and the real object it represents. There are some presupposed norms or frameworks which govern the ways in which we think the world is or should be. And the deviation from such a norm is normally the key to comic amusement. According to the incongruity theory, humour occurs when concepts or rules are violated or transgressed. This theory is accepted largely for its help in uncovering the appeal of humour one encounters daily. In this respect, this theory is valuable.

DISCUSSION

The novel is full of humorous adventures of Drinkard where he keeps encountering ghosts, spirits, and other creatures throughout his journey; the ways in which he deals with them is humorous. First thing which he meets is Death. Drinkard is supposed to capture death in order to learn the location of the dead tapster from an old man. He finds death, stays a night with it, avoids death’s attempts to murder him in his sleep, and finally manages to fool and capture Death. Generally, we are afraid of death and we always try not to think of it. We also believe that no one can escape Death. Here, Drinkard violates this idea and goes to the extent of searching for Death in order to capture it. In one of his further adventures, Drinkard and his wife will be compelled to dance with three spirits—Dance, Song, and Drum. In another instance, they even sell their death.

We had “sold our death” to somebody at the door for the sum of £70: 18: 6d and “lent our fear” to somebody at the door as well on interest of £3: 10: Od

per month, so we did not care about death and we did not fear again [2].

Such socially unacceptable forms of transaction and behaviour which cannot be witnessed in the real world amuse people. According to the Incongruity theory, humour emerges from the incongruity between two different attitudes towards death. In his next encounter, Drinkard meets a “curious creature” who appears to be a handsome man from whom he is supposed to rescue a young lady, who had fallen into his clutches believing that his was the real beauty. But, basically this “complete gentleman” is just a skull; he had borrowed all his bodily limbs from different sources and returns all of them until he becomes a bare skull [3]. Here, the form of the creature appears to be more funny than scary. Though people believe in ghosts and spirits, they think that spirits come in their own form or by possessing someone’s body to haunt somebody. This act of the spirit who remains as just skull and borrows bodily limbs for rent is therefore novel and funny.

According to one of Yoruba beliefs, the dead ancestors haunt their people by taking birth in them, troubling, dying soon, and again taking birth in them. One of the instances in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is based on this myth. “‘ZURRJR’ which means a son who would change himself into another thing very soon” [4], who is born to Drinkard and his wife, torture them by eating food and drinking palm wine prodigiously. The child who possesses strength and cruelty starts attacking people and burning their houses. Drinkard, seeing this bad character of his child, burns him to ashes. But the child rises from the ashes in a disfigured form, “half-bodied baby”, and tortures his parents again. The humorous part is the way the child takes birth and grows. The thumb of Drinkard’s wife swells, and a child spurts out, and already speaks like a ten-year-old, and grows to a height of three feet in hours. The child’s unusual way of taking birth and growing, his father’s act of killing his own son unable to tolerate his misdeeds, and the way it rises from the ashes which are opposite to things as they happen in real life creates laughter.

In one of the episodes, we see the drunkard and his wife who had been swallowed by the “hungry-creature”, managing to come out of his stomach with the help of his juju, which can do anything for him. He explains, “As I was in his stomach, I commanded my juju which changed the wooden-doll back to my wife, gun, egg, cutlass and loads at once. Then I loaded the gun and fired into his stomach, but he walked for a few yards before he fell down, and I loaded the gun for the second time and shot him again”. In Red Town too, he kills a gigantic creature:

Its head was just like a tortoise’s head, but it was as big as an elephant’s head and it had over 30

horns and large eyes which surrounded the head. All these horns were spread out as an umbrella.” [5-8]

Here, the appearance of the gigantic creatures and the ways in which Drinkard kills them which can only be seen in an imaginary world evoke laughter instead of fear.

After escaping from the hungry creature’s stomach, they enter “Mixed Town” which has a native court where he is asked to judge a case after having got permission to stay there. The case is funny and it goes like this: “There was a man who had borrowed some money from his friend but refused to refund the money as borrowing money is his livelihood. So the money lender sought the help of the debt collector who was bold and whose profession was to collect debts. When the collector went and asked the debtor to refund the money he had borrowed from his friend, the debtor refused to pay again. Finally both of them started to fight. After fighting fiercely for an hour, the debtor stabbed himself with a jack knife and died. The debt-collector, who had never failed to collect debt from debtors, also stabbed him. He says that “if he could not collect the money from him (debtor) in this world, he would collect it in heaven”. The funny part is that the man, who was curiously watching their fight, jumps up and falls down at the same spot and dies there as well so as to witness the end of the fight in heaven.” Drinkard is asked to point out who was guilty. Similarly, in another instance, Drinkard and his wife are asked by a stranger to carry a bundle which contains the dead body of a prince and later they are captured and accused of murdering him. But, they are given some enjoyment before the execution. The real killer, out of a desire to enjoy the same treat, admits his crime and gets executed.

If one looks at these particular episodes at a surface level, one may get tempted to use the superiority theory in humour as the frame. Because the common idea regarding this theory is that one laughs at the misfortunes or the foolishness of the others as these misfortunes assert one’s superiority given the background of the shortcoming of others. Similarly, as the acts of the three characters and the murderer appear to be foolish, the superiority theory seems to suit this analysis. But if one analyses the text at a deeper level, the characters do not look foolish because the world which is created here is unreal, and all the incidents which have occurred there are impossible. So one cannot see anything foolish in the unreal world. Nevertheless, the narrator appears to teach some serious things to the real world through this unreal world. And here, one can see the incongruity between the two different worlds (real and unreal) which are brought together because of which humour is produced. In this sense the incongruity theory appears to be more suitable for this analysis.

The world which is created in this text is unreal. And everything that happens there is impossible. Tutuola's world has no connection with the European rational world and Christian traditions. Nevertheless, it can be linked to the real world in that the creation of the unreal world can be seen as a mockery of the real world. This story cannot be considered as a fairy tale and it seems to carry a larger message for the real world. For example, the two characters (debtor and debt collector in the selected episode) that kill themselves while fighting can be read as a mockery of people in the real world who kill one another for various reasons such as money, land, women, caste, religion, etc. In this way, Tutuola's unreal world which is incongruous to the real world creates comic amusement in the readers.

CONCLUSION

The paper has tried to demonstrate how the spirit that drives the story-telling of Tutuola is Yoruba-African, in origin. The comic content of Tutuola's narration has its own root in Yoruba folktale as made evident in the first part of the paper. The comic vision of Death in *The Palm-wine Drinkard* examined in the second half of the paper has also the Yoruba belief ... of death as yet another transitory phase of life.

End notes

1. LaPin, p. 95.
2. *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 67
3. *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 17.
4. *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 35
5. (*Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 79-80)

REFERENCES

1. Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Deads' Town*.
2. London: Faber & Faber, 1969. Print.
3. Bryant, Clifton D. *Handbook of Death and Dying*. USA: SAGE Publications, 2003.
4. Carroll, Noel. *Humor: A Very Short Introduction*. Great Britain: Ashford Colour Press Ltd, 2014.
5. Choudhury, Saradashree. "Folklore and society in transition: A study of The Palm- Wine Drinkard and The Famished Road." *African Journal of History and Culture* Vol. 6(1) (2014): 3-11.
6. Gargan, Edward A. "From a Nigerian Pen, Yoruba Tales." *New York Times* 23 February 1986.
7. Onabiyi, Monilola Abidemi. *The Mythological Icons in Amos Tutuola the Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Diss. n.p., 2011.
8. Omowunmi, eds. *All Folk Tales*. 2009. <<http://www.allfolktales.com/about.php>>