

A Mythical View on Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*

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Abstract

*Myth is a fundamental tool used in creative writing to promote the cultural elements of a writer's background. As a social element, myth adopts the human and subhuman accounts of events in a given society while expressing a particular reality or truth about human experiences within the created order and the supra-sensible world. In African literature, myth serves as a literary material which depicts some social values such as norms, culture and tradition of a given society. This study reveals how Amos Tutuola utilized character complexities and mythical elements to showcase the socio-cultural space of Africa in his play; *The Palmwine Drinkard*. Anchored on the Cultural Materialism Theory, the study posits that, the use of cultural materialism aids in narrating the complexity of mythology and its relationship as a social element with literature. In conclusion, the study reveals that the human society produces the textual elements that constitute the socially oriented literary creativity.*

Keywords: Mythical, View, Socio-cultural, Society, Yoruba and Traditions.

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Received 29 Nov. 2024; Accepted 18 Dec. 2024. Available online: 30 Dec. 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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1. 0. Introduction

Literature which dates back to the creation of man, is known to diversely have a social function which answers many social questions that dwell on “tradition and convention, norms and genres, symbols and myths” (Wellek and Warren 89). It is instituted that literature deals with the reflection or refraction of life through any imaginative and beautiful creation in words, which is capable of providing enjoyment, entertainment, information and education to the audience. As a reflection of life, Chinua Achebe sees literary art as man’s constant “effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given him; an inspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination” (Achebe 96). The imagination is what is revealed in literature through characters' imitation of the real-life social issues to portray a fiction that suits the author’s intentions. In this regard, literature serves as a social phenomenon which is preoccupied with social realities in an uncommon sense while upholding social norms and values through character portrayal. These social values include: traditions and norms are cultures that guide the social being.

Similarly, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren explanation of literature dwelled on man's “imitation of life, life in large measure and a society reality, even though it uses natural world, and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation (Wellek and Warren 89). Though literature has the power to shape society, its subject matter is boundless drawing themes from diverse sources like mythology, history and contemporary life, or the writer's imagination, among others. Myth is one of the social elements that adopt human and subhuman account of events in a society. According to Idowu, myth serves as “a vehicle conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man’s experience in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man’s relation to the supra-sensible world” (Idowu 84). It could serve as a literary material that continues to be largely determined by experiences in the real world. In affirmation to this, Ikenga Metuh reveals that "myths definitely do tell us about certain realities including religious truths, people’s understanding of their environment, their geography history, medicine and their social and political institutions could very easily be revealed in their myths" (Metuh, 27-28). Hence, myths are mirrors used to communicate the views of the people with reference to the existence of man, gods, universe, their fears and aspirations in life.

Tracing the origin of myth, scholars reveal that the word ‘myth’ is derived from the Greek mythos, which means ‘word’ or ‘story’ (Madu 232). The story's- root word explains the connection of myth with the past narratives of people. In the African nomadic society, myth can be described as one of those "traditional story, orally passed on from one generation to the

next, believed to be literally true by the culture that produced it, about gods and goddesses, heroes, heroines, and other real and fantastic creatures, taking place in primeval or remote times" (Mercatente xiv). The gods and heroines modified the concept of myth as it gives accounts of the origin of the world of mankind and of other phenomena, whether of human life or external nature. Notably, in the religious practices of the ancient Greek, myth is known to capture the activities of the gods and heroes, and the total body of the divine and cosmogonic legends. This explains that the plight that confront man, is explorable in myth. As such, myth in its comprehensive sense can be perceived as revelations of divine powers determining the course of natural events.

In Africa, myth cuts across the nation specific rural communities. It dwells with the careful "observation of things encumbered with all that they may suggest to a dramatic fancy. It is the common root and raw material of both poetry and science, and also of art. The Hebrew, who denied themselves a rich mythology, had no science or plastic art; the Greeks who indulged in... myths, were the founders of science and philosophy. Myth is the natural prologue to philosophy" (Plato 139). It becomes necessary that literature should adopt its cultural elements to promote its writer's background. Howbeit, the mythological concept surmounts an endless viewpoint.

Considering man's relationship with his environment, Isidore Okpewho defines "myth as a set of ideas about man and his environment" (Okpewho 1). He maintains that the environment is the brain source of a society's mythological orientation. Looking at the traditional practices and its relevance, myth in African literature plays a unique role of giving "details of ceremonial ritual and establishes the rationale for events and observances and their historicity" (Malinowski 19). The rituals are the society's celestial connects that can explain how divine powers shape the course of natural circumstances.

2.0. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Cultural Materialism Theory as its foundation, a theoretical movement that emerged in the early 1980s alongside New Historicism, an American approach to early modern literature with which it shares similarities. Coined by Raymond Williams, the term refers to a "theoretical blending of leftist culturalism and Marxist analysis" (Barry 8). Cultural materialists focus on specific historical documents from a society and examine how hegemonic forces appropriate canonical texts, such as those by Shakespeare and Austen, to reinforce or inscribe particular values within the cultural imaginary.

Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield identify four core elements of cultural materialism: historical context, close textual analysis, political commitment, and theoretical methodology

(Dollimore and Sinfield 73). This approach emphasizes uncovering how institutions like the church, state, or academia perpetuate ideology. By analyzing a text's historical and political dimensions through close textual analysis, cultural materialists highlight dominant hegemonic structures and identify opportunities to challenge or subvert them.

Cultural materialism, with its focus on issues such as myth, tradition, gender, sexuality, race, and class, has significantly influenced literary studies. In this research, the theory is applied to Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* to explore how cultural materialism reflects the socio-cultural landscape of African society while delving into the intricate politics of mythology.

The choice of cultural materialism as the theoretical lens for this study stems from its ability to contextualize the socio-cultural dynamics of African society as portrayed in *The Palmwine Drinkard*. This approach highlights the complexity of mythology in literature and its role as a social construct. Myth is analyzed as a reflection of the socio-political and historical conditions of the environment from which it emerges, offering insights into its broader cultural and political implications.

3.0 The Mythical View of Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drunkard*

One of the major thematic preoccupation of Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* is the idea of mysterious events which supersedes the human natural philosophy. Through the use of exaggerations, Tutuola presents his narrator as one who has the capability of performing any task. Ordinarily, one would wonder how the narrator, whose "father gave me (the Palmwine drunkard) a palm tree farm which was nine miles square and it contained 560000 palm trees, and this palm wine tapper was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of Palmwine every morning, but before 2 O'clock, I would have drunk all of it" (Tutuola 7). Here, the drinking capacity of the narrator is a shock to human drinking capability. Thus, the exaggeration by the author makes one wonder how one could devote himself to a flirting drinking spray. Similarly, one sees the mysterious childbirth process which supercedes the human imagination as the narrator explains how his wife gave birth. In his revelation, the narrator explains that "one day, she followed me to the farm in which I was tapping the Palmwine, and to my surprise when the thumb that swelled out touched a palm-tree thorn, the thumb bust out suddenly and there we saw a male child" (Tutuola 31). In this scene, Tutuola's familiarity with fearful mysterious stories turned out to beget his overturn of the nature birthing processes. Thus, the Palmwine drinkard's child could come out of the wife's thumb instead of her womb.

Moreover, Amos Tutuola's literary expression came with numerous African Yoruba elements. These elements are oral traditions such as riddles, jokes, folklores, chants, among others, which

helped build his mythical creative writing. Majority of the folktales Tutuola used in *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, exist in the Yoruba oral tradition. As such, many of the sizable collection of Yoruba tales in Tutuola's narrative yields striking episodes. For instance, the celebrated passage in which a "beautiful complete gentleman" (Tutuola 18) leads a woman far into the forest where he disassembles himself and returns the borrowed parts of his body to their rightful owners and pays rent until he is diminished to a humming skull, is recorded in at least seven various versions in Yoruba folktale collections. Similarly, there are numerous variations of the tale involving an all-providing magical object, which initially produces an abundance of food but later creates an abundance of whips. Many other tales and motifs also feature prominently in Tutuola's story. Some of them are the quarrel between heaven and earth, the carrying of a sacrifice to heaven, and, the tiny creature that makes newly cleared fields sprout weeds.

In the narrative, the death as a rite of passage in African cosmology is treated very trivial and often outsmarted by its victims. That is why Tutuola makes death to own a house and a yam farm, and must cultivate, eat and secure a healthy way of life and to stay away from hunger. Even in the Deads' Town, the palm wine drinkard eventually locates his dead tapster, "BAITY," after a ten-year search. There, it is "forbidden for alives to come" (Tutuola 96), but the alives are nonetheless tolerated. The author describes the Deads' Town saying it is an accommodation with "both white and black deads" living there (Tutuola 100). The communal life influences the Deads' Town gifts and gifting like in the world of the living. The drunkard reveals that "he [tapster] told me that he could not follow me back to my town again, because a dead man could not live with alives ... and said that he would give me anything that I liked in the Deads' Town" (Tutuola 100). The tapster's gift is in line with the gains humans benefit from the ancestors on observing the cultural rites.

Critically observed, in all the tales, Tutuola captured animals behaving like humans and also superhuman beings like demons, ogres and deities. In this character complexity, Tutuola's story narrator is described as "a god and juju-man" (Tutuola 10), and another scene, he reveals that he was called "Father of gods who could do anything in this world" (Tutuola 17). Tutuola's recreative art takes the ideas of Yoruba myths on divinity and impose it on the narrator who is capable of using "one of my juju and at once, I changed into a very big bird" (Tutuola 10). Although with the universality of this tales in Africa, the style and use of these tales by Tutuola, makes the storyline unique. In affirmation, Melville Herskovits reveals that "it will be instructive for one who reads the narratives in this volume to go to Tutuola's books with the motifs and orientations of the tales given here in mind. He will find them all" (Herskovits 11). Perhaps an overstatement, the folktales known to the Yorubas, are also popular to other West

African peoples and cultures. Tutuola's tale of self-dismembering in "complete gentleman", is popular not only among the Igbos and Ibibios of Nigeria, but also among the Krio of Sierra Leone.

With numerous traditional elements in *The Palmwine Drinkard*, the author plays the supernatural role of controlling nature and things within its space. That is why the narrator could "command the ropes of the yams in his garden to tighten him there, and yams in his garden to tight him there, and the yams stakes should begin to beat him also" (Tutuola 12). Based on this context, the complexity that Tutuola's narrator exhibits as a god, man and *Palmwine Drinkard* serves as an embodiment of a mythical being. That is why Alice Werner reveals that tales of human beings who sojourn into the secret world of ghosts and return back to the world of the living, "are not uncommonly present in many folktales but also are believed in as actual occurrences at the present day" (Werner 22). Therefore, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a finished product on the Yoruba oral tradition with much doses on divinity and its human possibilities.

Conclusion

African literature is known to adopt myth as tool for socio-cultural inclusion. Through the varying African myths, the stories and narrations on the difficulties bordering on the origin and nature of the world, man and existence is generally reviewed. These cosmogonic tales such the ones captured in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, deal with the treatment of the origin of the world and other phenomena contained therein through man's journey to the celestial world. In conclusion, the study reveals that human society produces the textual elements that constitute literary creativity and encourage social globalization.

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