The Broken Pot: An Existentialist Study of *The Narrow Path*

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Abstract

Culture represents experiences, values, behaviour, skills and traditions among others; that we have received from the previous generation, that is, from our forefathers. Culture is what they have learned in life and found as good, workable and beautiful; hence they have passed it on to the next generation so as to maintain a good life. However, our comptemporary Yoruba society has changed so drastically from what it used to be, the old social institutions that ensured the continuity of certain cultural practices have become irrelevant. Using a structuralist approach to studying *The Narrow Path*, this essay explores the narrative of a maiden who loses her virginity before marriage and the consequences of her action. Structuralism tries to bring together a variety of approaches under a unified program in the study of any cultural activity. These approaches include an examination of the social background from which a product (e.g. a tale) comes, just as we have seen the anthropologists do; an anatomy of the tale to work out the abstract structure of relationships between the various units of its composition (especially the symbols) and most importantly an effort to demonstrate the psychological problem within the culture which the tale is trying to resolve by way of a confrontation between these constituent symbols. However, Existentialism states that because of the world's absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the Absurd. Thus, this paper argues that the influence of modernity on the Yoruba culture gave birth to the loss of certain cultural values as seen in the film.

Introduction

The term culture defines the totality of the way of life of a people, this includes their norms, values and belief system (Eagleton, 2004:1). The concept of culture is etymologically derived from nature and transcends the ordinary by metaphorically transposing the affairs of the spirit. Culture represents experiences, values, behaviour, skills, and traditions among others that have been received from the previous generation; our forefathers. Culture is what has been learnt in life and found as good, workable and beautiful. Thus, earlier generation try to pass it on to the next generation so that they should also have a good life.

This definition is descriptive and general; it can apply to any culture. It says that our culture is about the ideas we hold, such as, what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. It also talks about culture as our values, e.g. love for the neighbour, honesty, righteousness, obedience, equality and friendliness among others. Thus, whatever value is emphasised in each society is an important part of the culture. In some cultures competition is emphasised; while in some, fellowship; others may attach importance to cooperation or individual performance cooperation. Rules and norms that include what are appreciated and what are not allowed in a society, are part of the culture. Peoples behavours in times of happiness or sadness, when meeting and leaving one another; actions and reactions during death or birth, wedding ceremony, visitation, greetings, among others, are all part of culture.

Existentialism has its central proposition in existence which precedes essence. Given this, the most important consideration for individuals is the fact that they are an individual - an independently acting and responsible, conscious being ("existence") - rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories the individual fits ("essence"). The actual life of the individual is what constitutes what could be called their "true essence" instead of their being an arbitrarily attributed essence others use to define them. Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning for their lives. Thus, Austin Cline in his article, "Angst, Dread, Anxiety, and Anguish: Themes and Ideas in Existentialist Thought" wrote:

> As a general principle, existentialist philosophers have emphasized the importance of psychologically critical moments where basic truths about human nature and existence come crashing down upon us, upsetting our preconceptions and shocking us into a new awareness about life. These "existential moments" of crisis then lead to more generalized feelings of dread, anxiety, or fear (http://atheism. about. com/od/existentialistthemes/a/angst.htm).

Film and Culture

The video film, like most arts, mirrors the society, and when made with required passion and sensitivity, it is capable of changing the society. Every film is a by-product of specific cultural and traditional realities which inform its meaning as well as structural methodology (Ekwuazi 1987:26). Lerner (1975:10) observes that a film helps create awareness about existing realities of a people, therefore, the cultural index of any film is an important factor in reading and understanding it. Ancient cultural practices abound in Africa and can serve as sources of thematic exploration as well as plot narratives in African films. Adagbada (2008:184) observes that films permit a larger readership than the text for the dialogue and pictures make it fascinating, even to the non-lettered and non-speakers of the language used in the film.

Theoretical Framework

Every movie is derived from specific cultural or traditional realities which inform its meaning as well as its structural methodology. Therefore, the cultural index of any movie is an important factor in reading and understanding it, since culture is defined as the totality of the way of life of

a people which includes their norms, values and belief systems (Ekwuazi 1987: 26). Many scholars have interpreted various video films including the one for this study, in line with their socio-political readings and adaptations from written texts to screen. The focus on the socio-political themes of films, as well as the form of adaptation rather than their cultural inclinations, has been over emphasized (See Adagbada: 2008; Adewale: 2008; Oni: 2008). Hence, there is the need to shift focus from the socio-political and adaptation to the structural which takes other forms of analyses, including the psychological into consideration. Ahmad (2008), in his essay, "*Ko Se e Gbe*: A Sociological Metaphor Displayed in an African Film", focuses on the positive role that indigenous films play in bringing about national development by inducing positive changes in the mental and moral disposition of the citizenry using the structuralism approach to the study.

Structuralism has been observed by Ong (1982) and Okpewho (1992) as perhaps the most complex school of thought to have emerged in the study of various aspects of traditional culture. The complexity stems largely from the fact that this school tries to bring together a variety of approaches under a unified program in the study of any cultural activity. These approaches include an examination of the social background from which a product (e.g. a tale) comes from, just as we have seen the anthropologists do; an anatomy of the tale to work out the abstract structure of relationships between the various units of its composition (especially the symbols), somewhat in the spirit of formalists; and most importantly an effort to demonstrate the psychological problem within the culture which the tale is trying to resolve by way of a confrontation between these constituent symbols. This last effort would put structuralism squarely within the camp of the psychoanalysts. But the distinguishing quality of structuralism, remains its interest in the structure (whether social, compositional, or psychological) of any cultural phenomenon.

Levis-strauss is known to be the forerunner of structuralism and a lot of structuralists' analyses of African oral narratives and American Indian tales have been done. Structuralists claim that because they are looking far more deeply at the internal problems raised by a tale than other scholars are inclined to do; their conclusions are bound to be out of the ordinary and certainly differ from the rather superficial meaning that the storyteller tries to ascribe to the tale. Some people think structuralists are simply playing fanciful games with language, but it may not be. According to Okpewho, perhaps the major problem with the structuralist approach lies in the fundamental premises on which it rests, which is that myth of/or storytelling – like other forms of communication in language – operates at an unconscious level. Levi-Strauss states categorically at the beginning of the first volume of *Mythologiques* that he will try to prove, "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (1970:14). Then, Okpewho concludes:

> It is quite true that structural analysis has presented us with some rather challenging ways of examining the deep and fundamental human issues raised by oral literature. But any approach that underestimates the level of conscious skill at work in the narrative performance has missed the basic point about that art. Some of the more recent analyses along these lines have endeavoured to show that Levi-Strauss and his followers could have done better by taking into account the element of artistic organization in the oral narrative (181).

Synopsis of *The Narrow Path*

The Narrow Path is a film adaptation of Bayo Adebowale's novel *The Virgin*. The story revolves round a beautiful village damsel, Awero, who is admired by Lapade, desired by Odejimi but raped by Dauda. Eventually, she was betrothed to Odejimi. However, hell is almost let loose when it is discovered that Awero is not a virgin on her wedding night. Two communities are set against each other, but with the timely intervention of the woman at the centre of the storm, the warring men allow reason to prevail.

The film is geographically located in two rural and agrarian communities, Orita and Agbede. Temporally, the film points to the time of pre-independence when many villages and small towns lack basic infrastructures that are taken for granted today. *The Narrow Path* is a film with so many messages. First, it is a judgment on the moral issues of premarital sex and its consequence. Second, it takes a look at the age long tradition of virginity test in local communities. Third, it frowns at unnecessary rivalry that may arise as a result of competition between men. Fourth, it brings the issue of rape to the front burner, interrogating its physical and psychological effects on the victim. Fifth, it is a spotlight on the role of women in ensuring communal peace in their societies. Sixth, it examines the role of education in the development of any society. Corruption on the part of government officials in the course of discharging their duties among the largely illiterate people and how ignorance can give room for exploitation is shown in the film

More importantly, however, is the fact that the film is a repertoire of Yoruba culture, philosophy and beliefs. It shows the Yorubas, like every other African culture, as a tribe that thrives on communalism and enjoys being their brothers' keepers. Shot on high quality film technology and with a beautifully crafted script, *The Narrow Path* shows the role of understanding rather than rage in settling issues. It assents that jaw-jaw is better than war-war. Finally, the film emphasizes the important roles of women, though marginalized, in bringing about communal peace. The film is dedicated to all African women who play peace keeping roles in traditional communities.

Existentialism in *The Narrow Path*

In existentialism, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called "the existential attitude" or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world. Soren Kierkegaard proposed that each individual—not society or religion—is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely "authentically"(Stewart, 2011:357). Existentialism comes to bear in the film in the sense that actions and subsequent reactions are seen in vivid display. The film is about a young maiden, Awero, who is interested in hanging out with Dauda, her suitor who comes from the city with gifts and the subsequent fatal occurrences of rape and shame shows that she has to bear what life or fate brings across her way.

The Yoruba traditional society is well structured and we find this in the film. The suitors of Awero did not go to meet her parents to ask for her hand in marriage; rather, they sent family representatives to the parents of the would-be bride. The wife must have been taught a lot of do's and don'ts in the family of the man she is getting married to by her mother or a family member. Also, certain traditional rites must be done before, during and after the marriage

ceremony. These include celebration on the night preceeding the day of the ceremony, featuring songs and dance by friends, family and well-wishers. The day for the marriage ceremony has many activities: the family of the husband-to-be would come and ask for the hand of the bride in marriage and the marriage ceremony begins from there; the children of the community sing and dance to the community expecting to receive the bride, carrying the virginity mortar which is taken to the groom's house.

On getting to her groom's house in the night, while celebrations are still going on outside, the wife is taken to her husband's room for the first intercourse which is expected to be her very first in life, and the husband is expected to come out with a blood-stained white hankerchief. This is always welcomed with a loud ovation and happiness, after which the real celebration begins. Thus, the new bride is treated like a queen for keeping her virginity till marriage. If the reverse is, however the case, the bride is sent back to her people, with the groom's family demanding for every penny spent on the ceremony.

Angst and Despair in *The Narrow Path*

Angst is often described as a drama an adolescent is troubled with during his/her developmental years. This adolescent trouble or self-loathing is often tied to sexual attractiveness. Both males and females often worry that they will not find a partner or enjoy romantic unconditional love because of who they are. As adolescents face the prospect of adulthood where they must take control of their lives, the dread of facing life alone and the fear of freedom and responsibility often lead to depression.

Angst is a German word which simply means anxiety or fear, but in existential philosophy it has acquired the more specific sense of having anxiety or fear as a result of the paradoxical implications of human freedom. We face an uncertain future, and we must fill our lives based on the choices we make. The dual problems of constant choices and the responsibility for those choices can produce angst in us. The term angst was used as a reference point for the individual's confrontation with the impossibility of finding meaning in a meaningless universe and of finding rational justification for subjective choices about irrational issues.

Angst is said to be before "nothing", and this is what sets it apart from fear that has an object. While in the case of fear, one can take definitive measures to remove the object of fear; in the case of angst, no such "constructive" measures are possible. The use of the word "nothing" in this context relates both to the inherent insecurity about the consequences of one's actions, and to the fact that, in experiencing freedom as angst, one also realizes that one is fully responsible for these consequences. There is nothing in people (genetically, for instance) that acts in their stead—that they can blame if something goes wrong. Therefore, not every choice is perceived as having dreadful possible consequences (and, it can be claimed, human lives would be unbearable if every choice facilitates dread). However, this does not change the fact that freedom remains a condition of every action.

In *The Narrow Path*, we see Awero as an individual with an independent mind who chooses to be attracted by Dauda who brings gifts from the city for her while the other two suitors keep

fighting themselves. She is not bothered about others but herself, though she does not have other intentions than to receive gifts from the city.

Despair, in existentialism, is generally defined as a loss of hope. More specifically, it is a loss of hope in reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of oneself. For instance, if a person is investing in being a particular thing, such as a bus driver or an upstanding citizen, and then finds hope or aspiration compromised, he would normally be found in a hopeless state. For example, a singer who loses the ability to sing may despair if she has nothing else to fall back or rely on for her identity. What sets the existentialist notion of despair apart from the conventional definition is that existentialist despair is a state one is in even when he is not overtly in despair. As long as a person's identity depends on qualities that can crumble, he is in perpetual despair as is the case of Awero.

Awero finds herself in a state of despair after being raped by Dauda which is a consequence of her actions. She is no longer the lively maiden that she used to be. She becomes reserved and keeps to herself for she does not know who would believe her story. All her parents' persuasions to make her disclose her problem proves abortive. Instead, she keeps talking to herself, crying daily because of her impending shame. She becomes confused and loses hope in her future.

Conclusion

Every culture is dynamic and the changes that exist in different cultures have effects on the cultures. For instance, in *The Narrow Path*, Dauda, the city boy, deceives Awero with his gifts and eventually rapes her. The unsuspecting Awero is being carried away by city gifts and is deflowered in the process. This generates a lot of anguish for Awero and later degenerates into a war between two communities. Awero, with her family, is put to shame as Odejimi sends her home without listening to her explanation despite several attempts by Odejimi's younger sister to percify him.

The society, having been polluted by people like Dauda can no longer remain the same because the other youths now have a reference point in Dauda who went scot free after raping Awero. Other children taken to the city too will definitely come back to impart city knowledge on others in the village. Dauda is only one of these several city people.

Structuralism, as discussed earlier in this essay, looks far more deeply at the internal problems raised by a tale than other scholars are inclined to do, their conclusions are bound to be out of the ordinary and certainly differ from the rather superficial meaning that the storyteller tries to ascribe to the tale. Thus, this essay concludes that the existentialist nature of human being and the evolvement of every society as affected by the contemporary world are major factors in the changes inherent in our world. Because of the world's absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with absurdity. The notion of absurdity has been prominent in literature throughout history. In the case of Awero, she wanted to enjoy her youth by collecting gifts from Dauda but she was given more than the gift she wanted, so she has to face the consequence of her actions which her "wants" bring along. She goes through many psychological traumas after the deed has been done but is she guilty or innocent?

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