CHAPTER V

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL

Mark Shorer opines that narrative technique is the mode of existence of the narrator.

He says:

When we speak of technique, then we speak of nearly everything. For, technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it. Technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying meaning and finally of evaluating it.¹

Techniques of narration in fiction pertain to events, occurrences, action, verbal representation and method of story telling. Following the classification of narrative offered by Gerald Genette, in 1972 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan discriminated between the elements of narrative history or story, recite or the text and narration.

Rimmon-Kenan says:
Story designates the narrated events, abstracted from their dispositions in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events...whereas story is a succession of events, text is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. 2

What is remarkable in the technique of narration is that the narrator at no point withdraws and make amendments to what he has said. The Joycean ideal of refining the artist out of existence cannot be dramatized by its rhetoric.

Technique manipulates the story in the form of direct vision. The artists with a view to narrowing the range of their human enquiry must delimit their stories. The great advantage of the technique in history is that it is vividly portrayed to enable the artist create a world with accepted values and universal experience.

Wayne Booth observes:

The emotions and judgments of the implied author are as I hope to show the very stuff out of which great fiction is made. 3
The African novelist intends to explore the mind and analyze the experiences of his characters in his narrative. His objectivity and discretion when presented through the technique are effective and graceful. The rhetoric plays a pivotal role in making the technique more emphatic. Rhetoric in the West African novel is broadly divided into two categories viz., traditional and experimental. Some of the African writers used indigenous techniques of narration, while the modern African writers experimented with the new novelistic modes for effective presentation and to appeal to the outside audience.

The traditional novelist sounds monotonous in his descriptions of 'things' native whereas the modern writer feels like shaking the certitudes. The writer's success lies in his dexterous moulding of the rhetoric to project his vision to give better perspective of his narrative.

The West African novelists exhibit a degree of uncertainty in recording and analyzing personal and collective experiences of Africans in a world that is not wholly African. In incidents of interior monologue the rhetoric heightens our awareness of idealism. The hero disguises himself and conceals his ideals. The artist uses his characters to explore his own mind. The success of modern artist lies in his ability to share
his own experiences with those of his characters to make them real and convincing. The novelists work from a set of accepted norms and ideals and manage to celebrate the events of the past or present with the rhetoric used as a mode for sharing values.

Time becomes the medium of narrative art. The rhythm of the novel essentially is the rhythm of time: events, movements, beginnings, and closures—all the fictional material is compounded by time. The strength of the narrative depends on the artist's mode of presentation of the events in association with other essentials of narrative. These events though not chronologically significant remain in the mind of the reader at a point of time. The writers are conscious of time and resent the event in the sequence of time. The treatment of time in literature differs from the logical scientific construct of time. The elements of time like measurement, order, and duration stand as a yardstick for the artist.

The concern for family and native values in the tradition-bound African society is reflected in the change the society is undergoing. Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart popularly called the 'roaring flame' feels depressed to look at his son, Nwoye who has inherited the qualities of his
grandfather, Unoka. Nwoye being lazy, improvident and quite incapable of thinking of tomorrow makes Okonkwo feel:

Perhaps he was not his son. No! He could not be.
His wife had played him false. He could teach her!
But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son? At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness. He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed and immediately Okonkwo's eyes are opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.4

In Flora Nwapo's Efuru, when Efuru's daughter Ogonim falls sick, she grows tense and even fears her own possible death.

What will I do if I lose her?" she thought. "If she dies, that will mean the end of me." It was then that she remembered what the dibia told her and Adizua
when they went to him after the birth of Ogonim.

Dibia after breaking the kola saw that something was wrong. He was not sure what it was. He had asked them to come again on Eke day and before that day: they heard that he was dead. "What did he see?" Efuru asked herself. It was only now that Efuru thought seriously of what Dibia told her and her husband more than a year ago. And she was very frightened.... She saw herself walking behind her husband with their presents for the dibia on her head.

She remembered how the dibia greeted them.  

The narrative with conventional beginnings operated within a loose temporal and spatial orientation forms the main mode of narration. The novel with temporal order moulds the consciousness of the readers. The prominence of the intention of the author can be understood from the events selected and their organization in time sequence. The possible apparent ambiguity can be avoided through the idiom of expression. Modern fiction fuses the present with the past to make African fiction most relevant and highly contemporaneous.
Fictional modes like dream, journey as metaphor and flashback also help in plot construction. The first temporal factor in fiction is the artistic blending of dual patterns of narrated time and narrative time. The other aspect of time in a novel is history, the events of the past. It is super text, an added dimension of the novel. The implications of the relation between the event and narration would result in the possible interpretative assimilation and evaluation.

The novels of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka though are primarily social criticism the writers have employed irony and satire to interest the outsiders. They are a new kind of fiction of the anthropologist and novelist. They are neither novels of history nor pieces of propaganda but works of art in their own right. The African novelists exploring the human condition try to analyze African experience and situation in terms of private dream and public concern, in the time sequence. And finally experience defined in terms of time becomes the end product of the exposure of narrative.

So also African novel is not static, a pensive caricature of the past, presented by the novelist. African novelist is also an artist, with a sense of history architecting and shaping the destiny of African society. Most of the African writers fully
conscious of their history use the usable past in their works. African writers with a deep sense of commitment trace the impact of colonization on the contemporary society and try to relate it to the present.

The writers view the pre-colonial past as a prelude and the colonial past as an interlude, ultimately to culminate in the synthesis of the past and the present to recreate future. In fact the modern African novel is one of the reconciliations, transformations of social selves through the discovery of the essentials of African cultural tradition. Authorial intervention is most common in West African fiction which is highly functional.

In the words of Emmanuel Obiechina the integrative in which background and atmosphere are interlaced with the action of the narrative must be regarded as Achebe's greatest achievement. Achebe's novel is didactive with profound message and experimental by African expressions and speech rhythms and Pidgin English and by being 'innovative' in the use of native techniques of narration.

Chinua Achebe's rhetoric in the opening page of Things Fall Apart establishes the norms to justify the stature of Okonwo, the protagonist and to localize the principal character,
and to describe the prowess of Okokwo by indirectly saying that Okokwo threw Amalinze, the Cat, a great wrestler of Umuofia. The physical description of Okonkwo in just few words, not giving elaborate descriptions speaks of Achebe's craftsmanship. To contrast the two - Amalinze and Okonkwo - it is said:

*Amalinze was willy craftsman while Okonkwo was as slippery as fish in water.*

Achebe has dexterously used proverbs and sayings reflecting ancestral wisdom in the conversations in his narrative. His intention is to capture the dynamic spirit of the Igbo traditional society. Okonkwo is able to recreate a self-enclosed world with norms of glory and self-repentance.

*Things Fall Apart* is viewed as an ethnographic document, a study in characterization and for some it is a struggle between modernists who have become loyal to the white man and traditionalists. Because of ethnological details the novel is viewed as a manifestation of oral literature. Achebe's frequent use of adages, proverbs and African imagery evoke the native ethos in the novel. In the Igbo society it is said that men of tile are revered.

Elders say:
If a child wash his hands he could eat with kings.\textsuperscript{7}

In Achebe's third novel \textbf{The Arrow of God}, the narrator who is an elder of the village Umuaro, begins with Ezeulu's watching the arrival of the new Moon. He tells that the sighting of new Moon is the prerogative of the chief priest who afterwards proclaims the date for the New Yam Festival. The dramatization of action of Ezeulu and spiritualizing of the event make the reader curious about African customs. The chief priest represents the spiritual authority in the African traditional society. But he is exceptional by his queer behavior and eccentricities.

Ezeulu assumes the role of a shepherd protecting his villagers.

\textit{when an adult is in the house, the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether.}\textsuperscript{8}

Ezeulu becomes mentally derailed when he goes against his village and the will of the chief deity, Ulu.

\textit{Think of a man who unlike lesser men always goes to battle without a shield because he knows that Bullet and matchet strokes will glance off his medicine-}
boiled skin, think of him discovering in the thick of battle.⁹

Ezeulu's inordinate ambition to become one of the lords of his village and his queer desire to withhold the date for the New Yam festival and thus not allowing people to harvest their crop, intrude into the domain of Ezeulu. The rhetoric used in the conversation between Ezeulu and Nwaka is quite interesting. The proverbs in the Igbo traditional society in the words of Achebe are like palm oil with which words are eaten. The proverbs packed with ancestral wisdom are drawn from oral literature material.

Nwaka says:

*Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that.*¹⁰

Even the dialogues in the narrative are in the form of proverbs. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* abounds in such proverbs.

*A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.*
The sun will shine on those who stand before it, shines
on those who kneel under it.

A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.

Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.

A child cannot pay for its mother’s milk.

In Buchi Emecheta’s The Slave Girl the narrator
comments on the unfolding of the events of the story depicting
how Ojebeta miserable to lead ended in great distress. In chapter
thirteen the narrator says in the concluding paragraph:

...the irony was that the process would eventually
come full circle and people would reject their English
names, but that was to be in the days of independence
after the end of colonialism. That was in the future.11

The slave girl is too speculative and narrated in
Chapter fifteen:

It never occurred to her that the big house would be
sold or that, if she had married Clifford, she might
have become a changed person with the different
values who would not have felt so alien in a luxurious
house. What was the point of speculation?12
In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, the description of Sissie's voyage to Europe and her experiences are autobiographical of the artist. Sissie's inner voice reflects the artists' vision. In fact the modern Sissie's voice mingled with lyrical interludes prove that Ama Ata Aidoo is not just narrating the experience but also revealing it through the subjectivity of Sissie emerging from her own experience.

Oral traditions which include folk tales, proverbs, myths, riddles and local legends which form an integral part of African life and culture go in the making of African literary tradition. Oral traditions reflect local pride, national interest and the traditional way of life and legends strengthen social life and morality. Legends spread culture and keep the tradition alive. Legendary figures by their accomplishments set models to the society to emulate. Some have attained even the status of demi-gods and gods in African mythology. Legendary figures have become a part of the history by virtue of their prowess believed to have engaged African spirit beings in a dual battle for weeks. Few Africans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that resisted colonial cultural domination and encountered the white administration have become heroes of worship.
African popular folk tales too as part of oral literature are didactic and help in keeping the age-old traditions and practices and the native faith. Folk tales are more familiar and interesting to the native audience than scriptures. African folk tales interest children and younger generation when narrated effectively by their elders highlighting African virtues and strengths of traditional society and especially when accompanied by dramatic and musical performances and when the storytellers inspire them to participate physically and verbally. Riddles of Africa evoke rich African imagery. Though sometimes they sound vulgar, they appear to be puzzling by being metaphorical. Riddles sharpen the wisdom and reflect people’s basic concerns and interests.

In African, traditional society ceremonies and communal celebrations are meant to cohere people. All actively participate in public celebrations. There is naming ceremony at the time of birth of a child and title-taking ceremony when titles are conferred on individuals in a title-society and second burial ritual on the third day after the death of an individual. Africans involve their neighbours at the time of betrothal and while settling bride price and there is communal ‘uni’ celebration while sending their daughter to her in-laws.
As per the tradition, the parents of the bride before marriage consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out if the marriage would be successful. The entire village participates in the celebration of the marriage and close relations and neighbours decide the bride price to be given to the bride’s family. Also the would-be bridegroom presents Kola nuts, alligator pepper to the parents of his bride as a mark of good will. The bride price in the traditional society gets enhanced with the education of a girl.

In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* Aku-nna’s father upholds the tradition of the bride price.

> He had named her Aku-nna meaning literally ‘father’s wealth’, knowing that the only consolation he could count on her from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to. Aku-nna on her part was determined not to let her father down. She was going to marry well a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price.¹³

People believe that since she married Chike violating the norms, she died after delivering a child, who was ironically
christened Joy. And Aku-nna's death is ascribed to her going against the age-old traditions and the people of Ibuza narrate her story only to emphasise the taboos of the land.

_If a girl wished to live long and see her children's children she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold that existed for a very long time._

In African traditional society the kindred after the death of an individual perform on the third day Second Burial ritual inviting the entire village for feast and singing ad dancing. But the individual with swellings on body is not given normal burial. He is thrown in evil forest as the twins are thrown in evil forests to die. For the community regards persons without any deformity.

At the time of the Second Burial ceremony of Ezeudu, a great warrior in the village Umuofia, there is much shouting, firing of guns and beating of drums and frenzied dancing. They decided that,
Ezeudu was to be buried after dark with only a glowing brand to light the sacred ceremony. Darkness was around the corner and the burial was near. Guns fired the last salute and the cannon rent the sky. And then from the center of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was a dead man's sixteen-year-old son who with his brothers and half brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart.15

African traditional society celebrates public festivals like Pumpkin Leaves Festival a purification ceremony before the sowing of Yam seed and New Yam Festival before the harvest of Yam seed crop involving the entire village.

In Things Fall Apart, yam symbolizes masculinity. Okonkwo believes that,

*Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a*
very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out that disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.\(^{16}\)

The Umuofians celebrate the new yam festival for three days. On the first day it is celebrated with great joy in the household offering sacrifice of new yam and palm oil to their ancestors. On the second day a great wrestling match is held in the village of Okonkwo. On the third day they honour the winners in the wrestling match by drumming big drums, singing and dancing.

*Who will wrestle for our village?*

*Okafo will wrestle for our village.*

*Has he thrown a hundred men?*

*He has thrown four hundred men.*

*Has he thrown a hundred cats?*

*He has thrown four hundred cats.*

*Then send him word to fight for us.*\(^{17}\)

Egungun festival is celebrated in the memory of ancestors. People believe that the spirits of their ancestors in the 'mmo' world still influence their survivors and the
community in general. The villagers wearing masks in various forms representing their ancestors perform a ritual dance. In certain communities women also join the dancers.

Witchcraft is part of the accepted supernatural landscape of Africa. The practicing witch doctors are believed to protect the innocent rural folk from evil spirits. They are the privileged class in the traditional society endowed with mystical powers. In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's wife follows 'Chielo', the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, when she takes her daughter Eginma to the shrine of Agbala for the treatment.

*In ordinary life Chielo was a widow with her two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market. She was particularly fond of her daughter Ezinma. Any one seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied when the spirit of Agbala was upon her.*

African writers have used African imagery for authenticity and characterization and to signify aspects of African cultural tradition. While the red kola nut symbolizes long
life, and white kola nut good luck, beer symbolizes friendship.

For Africans Ani, the Goddess of earth stands for fertility and sky for fecundating rain, rigidity, fate and death.
REFERENCES:


7. Ibid


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


14. Ibid. pp. 176-177


16. Ibid p.30
17. Ibid p.46
18. Ibid p.44

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