

The Literary Fantastic in African and English Literature

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Abstract: In her article "The Literary Fantastic in African and English Literature," Terri Ochiagha begins with pointing out that in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Tzvetan Todorov proposed the theoretical frameworks he believed should be the basis of the identification and analysis of a literary work as fantastic. While Todorov's text is only one of the many treatises on the fantastic in literary scholarship, in most of these African prose is seldom a subject of exemplification or analysis. In the rare instances in which such texts are mentioned, they are often and hastily classified as magic realism. Ochiagha posits whether all African writings can be categorized under this concept and postulates that despite the overbearing influence of Western literature and scholarship, African texts should not be categorized by the "fantastic" imprint. Instead, Ochiagha argues for the inclusion of "other" literary texts in the genre of the literary fantastic with an approach that pays close attention to Western as well as Non-Western conventions in the production of this genre. To illustrate her postulates, Ochiagha focuses on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Amadi's *The Concubine*.

Terri OCHIAGHA

The Literary Fantastic in African and English Literature

The fantastic is a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story's strange events. Tzvetan Todorov argues that fantastic narratives involve an unresolved hesitation between the supernatural explanation available in marvellous tales and the natural or psychological explanation offered by tales of the uncanny. However, in fantastic texts, we are usually inclined towards the supernatural explanation. To achieve this effect, writers of the fantastic use a series of conventions, techniques, and thematic areas. The thematic areas that Todorov suggests are the questioning of the limits between spirit and matter (which gives way to other fundamental themes such as pan-determinism and personality multiplicity) and sexual desire (involving its perversions, cruelty, and violence as related to desire and issues regarding life after death). This classification is in accordance with the first rule suggested by Todorov: the classification of specific images rather than abstract categories, thereby rejecting any classification that proposes labels and appearances. He lists the classifications made by Roger Caillois in his book *Au Coeur du fantastique* and Dorothy Scarborough in her *The Supernatural in English Fiction* as flawed. A summary of Caillois's and Scarborough's classifications would yield the following list: the devil and his allies, supernatural life, the ghost, appearances, vampirism, werewolves, witches, invisible beings, animal spectres, the separate parts of the human body, personality disorders, alterations of causality, time and space, regression, death personified, misanthropes, curses, supernatural deaths, the otherworldly woman (seductive and mortal) and the blurring of the barrier between dreams and reality. Without doubt, this is a long list and each category can be further sub-divided. Notwithstanding Todorov's questioning of the utility of the above classification, it is useful for the comparative analysis at hand, as it will be easier to trace specific correspondences and divergences with West African prose. Before I present my analysis, I believe the choice of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* should be explained: a) they are both literary works of renown within their respective canons, b) they have supernaturally-influenced love stories as their main plots, and c) in both novels the questioning of the limits between spirit and matter and issues relating to strong sexual desire cast doubt on happenings that could be given both realistic and supernatural explanations, thus making them inscribable into the genre of the literary fantastic. The obvious differences are their being set in different places both in time and space and the ostensible cultural differences that can be perceived in the characters' interactions among themselves and with their societies.

Elechi Amadi belongs to the Ikwerre tribe, who reside in the southeast of Nigeria, near Port Harcourt. The culture and traditions of this tribe are almost indistinguishable from that of the Igbos, depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. For the Ikwerres, the interactions between men and divinities ensure that "the centre is held" in the community. The moral coda of their society were linked intimately to the fear of the gods and ancestors, who when displeased, tended to strike mortals in their anger. Western readers should however, be reminded that beliefs are not to be confused with their supernatural manifestations as represented in literature. The basis of the supernatural in African literature is summarized in the following: "Girding the village as a tight skirt are the forests, the swamps, the narrow paths leading to neighbouring villages; and beyond these, the unknown, the mysterious. That shroud of mystery hides from view the numerous gods, spirits, ancestors and the unborn. To interpret this other world, there are powerful traditional intermediaries -- the priests and the *dibias*, whose air of spiritual assurance and whose observance of many taboos set them apart, surrounded by a cloud of mystery" (Eko 33).

I now present my analysis of the similarities and differences in the representation of the supernatural in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Concubine* including an overview of the techniques used by Amadi to maintain the cast of uncertainty that forms the core of the literary fantastic in his work.

There are rumours that Cathy and Heathcliff "walk" after death and many villagers testify to having seen them. They themselves had foretold this during their earthly span. Heathcliff hears sighs on desecrating Cathy's grave and Madume shudders when he glances at Emenike's grave after his accident at Ihuoma's compound. In both circumstances, graves represent ominous and ghostly experiences. Dreams are present in both novels, the most notable being Lockwood's supposed dream/vision in which Cathy seeks refuge in the house through the window lattices. In *The Concubine*, Ekwueme has a "vivid" nightmare in which he is lured by the dead Emenike and others to cross a stream, waking up with physical signs of struggle. Both dreams prove almost prophetic similar to the night of Cathy's apparition bears some resemblance to the reports of Heathcliff's death. In the case of Ekwueme's dream, Anyika, the medicine man prescribes ritual cuts on Ekwueme's skin to protect him from further pestering by evil spirits: the presence of the medicine men and diviners makes all the difference. In this sense, various sacrifices are performed to appease the spirits of the dead and the gods throughout the novel.

Stevie Davis suggests sacrificial imagery in *Wuthering Heights*: "We see his [Heathcliff's] blood shed upon the bark of the ash and staining it; his forehead too is stained with blood as if baptismally. In the image of the blood-stained tree, Emily Brontë suggests an analogy to the sacrificial slaughter either of animal or man by which the ancient mystery religions sought to appease the deities" (113) and Cathy sacrifices her life as atonement to Heathcliff. In relation to the aforesaid omens and dreams, there are two incidents in both novels that can be defined as epiphanic in the sense that the two characters concerned are almost certain that their death is nigh, as indeed it is:

Nelly, there is a strange change approaching: I'm in its shadow at present. I take so little interest in my daily life that I hardly remember to eat and drink ... "But what do you mean by a *change*, Mr. Heathcliff?" I said, alarmed at his manner: though he was neither in danger of losing his sense nor dying according to my judgement, he was quite strong and healthy; and as to his reason, from childhood he had a delight in dwelling on dark things and entertaining odd fancies ... "I have neither fear, nor a presentiment, nor a hope of death. Why should I? With my constitution and temperate mode of living, and unperilous occupations, I ought to and probably shall, remain above ground till there is scarcely a black hair on my head. And yet I cannot continue in this condition! I have to remind myself to breathe -- almost to remind my heart to beat! And it is like bending back a stiff spring: it is by compulsion that I notice anything alive or dead, which is not associated with one universal idea. I have a single wish, and my whole being and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it so long, and so unwaveringly, that I'm convinced it will be reached -- and soon -- because it has devoured my existence: I am swallowed up in the anticipation of its fulfilment. (270)

Heathcliff contradicts himself by stating that he does not see foresee his death in the near future, although the above text can be interpreted as his assertion of his afterlife with Cathy, which defies bodily death. He denominates that state he anticipates so fervently, "it" not unlike the "sickening nostalgia for an indistinct place" that the omniscient narrator expresses in regards to Emenike's impressions:

Emenike noticed that the old men averted their faces when the priest appeared to glance at any one of them; so he decided to stare back whenever the priest's glance at any one of them; so he decided to stare back whenever the priest's glance fell on him. His opportunity came before the thought was through his mind. He gazed at the priest and immediately regretted that he had done so, for in the priest's face he read mild reproach, pity, awe, power, wisdom, love, life and -- yes, he was sure -- death. In a fraction of a second he relived his past life. In turns he felt deep affection for the priest and a desire to embrace him, and nauseating repulsion, which made him want to scream with disgust. He felt the cold grip of despair, and the hollow sensation which precedes a great calamity; he felt a sickening nostalgia for an indistinct place he was sure he had never been to. (17)

In novels, religion and its association to myth are ubiquitous. In *Wuthering Heights*, we witness two forms of religion: Christianity (with the extremist Joseph as its most contemptible exponent and professed by Nelly with less zeal and with a blend of local superstitious beliefs) and the mystical religion that Heathcliff and Cathy institute within themselves and with each other. Joseph, notwithstanding his religious bigotry is less than charitable with his fellow human beings, admonishing them inces-

santly and enjoying their downfall, looking for the speck in the neighbour's eye in detriment of the log in his, as it were. Women can be said to be his declared enemies, he sees them as some sort of Eve-incarnate, fiendish devils that lead men to ruin. Ihuoma, although unknowingly, by her physical attractiveness and the halo of perfection surrounding her, lures men to untimely death. Such attractive albeit destructive women -- *femmes fatales* -- are represented extensively in the literary fantastic. There are no characters like Joseph in *The Concubine*. All the villagers strive to remain under the tenets of their religion and live in harmony with the spiritual beings that are very much a part of their common heritage. The only character that dares question the power of the *dibias* and of the gods is the canoe man. Ihuoma wonders whether the gods are not at least partially blind most of the time and Ekwueme openly challenges the sea-king and the rest of the gods to do their worst. Nelly on her part, in her attempt to be the voice of reason in *Wuthering Heights*, ascribes to herself and prescribes to others precepts that she does not often keep, exhibiting an intense selfishness throughout the novel and making less than loving comments towards Cathy, at one point even wishing she were dead so as to spare the rest of them trouble. Her double-dealing and moralistic attitude also brings on too many unpleasant circumstances to all, not as close as she would wish to the Christian principles she tries to preach.

For Cathy and Heathcliff, heaven as a religious concept is perceived in direct confrontation with its meaning in the Christian faith which they so abhor. Cathy asserts that she will never be happy nor fit in heaven as conceived by the Christians but that her utmost desire would be to roam the moors with Heathcliff in eternity. When towards the time of Heathcliff's death Nelly warns him about eternal damnation that awaits sinners, exhorting him to see a priest and change his ways, Heathcliff expresses his contempt for the heaven the self-righteous Nelly wishes him to attain. His notion of heaven is eternal communion with his beloved Cathy, bodily in the grave and ethereally in the spirit. It is curious to note that according to Francis G. Fike their own Christian-opposed religion holds unspoken covenants that do not differ from those expressed in the New Testament, a selfless love that is unconditional and forgiving and which Fike terms *agape*:

An implicit covenant, based on love, exists between Catherine and Heathcliff. The relationship is, in a way, an unofficial marriage. Catherine offers many evidences of her knowledge of this, "Heathcliff is more my self than I am;" "I am Heathcliff." Heathcliff voices his similar conviction when he exclaims at the time of Catherine's death, "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!" Heathcliff also confronts Catherine with the responsibilities and fidelities, which accompany the unspoken commitment to each other: "You loved me -- then what right had you to leave me? ... Because misery and degradation, and death, and nothing that god or Satan could inflict would have parted us, you of your own will, did it." Heathcliff in effect is invoking Paul's description of *agape*: *agape* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That is exactly what Catherine does not do when she is tempted by pride to reject Heathcliff and marry the more attractive Edgar. ... *Wuthering Heights*, then, offers a repudiation of conventional religion to the end of its pages and portrays it moreover as in a progressive state of decay. Nevertheless, the novel confronts us with the implicitly theological nature of its meaning, for it portrays the central Christian reality as being passed out of the lives of the nominally or neurologically religious into the keeping of those who profess the formal religion yet embody that reality in their lives. The two couples whose relationships are characterized by *agape* thus form a kind of church outside church, while Edgar attends the kirk on Easter Sunday, Heathcliff and Catherine have their last tumultuous but honest and moving encounter, during which Catherine gives and asks for forgiveness. On an Easter Monday eighteen years later, Hareton and Cathy are reconciled to each other. (135-48)

The issue of the unspoken covenant above reminds us of the supposed marriage between Ihuoma and the sea-king. Ihuoma first commits infidelity by seeking to incarnate as a human to seek the companionship of men (this somehow reminds one of the incursion of the fallen angels to earth in order to consort with women in the Old Testament). In Ikwerre tradition, spirits and deities formed pacts in their realm. Once the unspoken pact of fidelity was broken between the sea-king and his wife he allows her live, but directs his anger to the men responsible for his wife's unfaithfulness. At the end of Ihuoma's earthly lifespan, she will supposedly return to the arms of her husband, just as Cathy's marriage to Hindley and her subsequent death do not stop her from seeking her final repose in the

arms of Heathcliff in the spirit realm. There are also several instances of blasphemy and irreverent threats to God/the gods in both novels. Davis believes that "Catherine and Heathcliff have assimilated this doctrine of election and damnation to their own anti-Christian religion, whose God is themselves as a single unit of being; whose church is the moor land; whose enemies are pain, human and social animosity, mortality and 'God and Satan' both. This is the blasphemy that lies at the root of their cult" (127).

Religion is ubiquitous in *The Concubine* where the basis of this religion is the fear of the gods and ancestors, which keeps moral order in the society. Villagers find out the will of the gods from divinations and sacrifices are performed whenever the gods are offended or as a mode of self-protection, for the gods are known to be relentless in striking erring human beings in anger: Anyika presides the sick-beds of Emenike and Ekwueme; he is consulted by Madume, Ekwueme, and the latter's parents (on Anyika's own prompting) after uncanny incidents and sacrifices performed in thanksgiving ceremonies (Emenike supposedly recovers from the fight only to die shortly after); after Madume's incident at Ihuoma's compound and before Anyika dares to treat him of his blindness; and finally, a proposed sacrifice which was to have saved Ekwueme from the wrath of the sea-king. According to Eko,

Amadi provides rational motivations and consequences by showing religion as an essential tool for *dibias* to provide faces and names and therefore a measure of control of nebulous fears and of the unexplainable in life. His aim is to draw attention to the integrity, beauty and wisdom of traditional culture, without hiding from the rational modern mind its rigidity, restrictions, limitations and potentials for suppressing and even stagnating originality in some characters. Amadi the scientist makes room for scientific scepticism and objectivity. Yet despite his rationalism he offers no apology for the unexplainable in traditional religion and mythology. His modernism does not negate or rationalize away traditional beliefs in gods and *dibias*, but he provides the reader with added rational information, beyond the grasp of the village man and woman. (8)

Sea-gods/kings are among the most feared divinities in Igbo and Ikwerre mythology. Their remoteness (the sea) makes them less known and approachable and they are believed to be more powerful; hence Anyika's admission of his inability to make the sea-king acquiesce to marry Ihuoma. Male sea deities are, however, not as popular as sea and lake goddesses in African mythology and its expression in literature. They are often depicted as capricious and demanding. They usually incarnated in or associated with very beautiful and successful women who, however, had what could be a grave problem in these societies: barrenness or the inability to remain married. Water deities were known to demand unrelenting worship and costly and colourful sacrifices.

Another point of comparison between the two novels is the treatment of midnight, the bewitching hour. On seeing a ghost in the mirror in her state of mental delirium, Cathy declares that her room is haunted just when "The clock is striking twelve!" (114). The midnight sacrifice scheduled to appease the sea-king is also to take place at midnight: "the spirit of death was known to take people's souls shortly after midnight. That was when Ekwueme died" (216), which concurs with Davis's argument that Cathy's death at midnight is symbolic in the sense that it is "the moment of transition, the crucial turning point at which the threshold between two worlds is doubly crossed" (105). As to the characters, the origin of those in which the supernatural is potently manifest, Heathcliff and Anyika, is far from certain. About Heathcliff, Nelly wonders, "Is he a ghoulish or a vampire? ... But where did he come from, the little dark thing, bred by a good man to his bane? (273). These uncertain origins lead him to be branded "ghoulish," a "devil," and raises questions about his humanity. Daniel Cottom concurs on this: "Thus evoked from the outset, the general spirit of misanthropy concentrated in the history of Heathcliff, who incarnates its unhuman agency in every aspect of his being, from the dubious circumstances of his birth and his disruptive insertion into a family on through to his animalistic, devilish, and monstrous appearance as an object of superstition to Nelly Dean, among others, when he is an adult. 'It' is what Nelly calls him when Mr. Earnshaw brings him back home" (49). As for Anyika "No one quite knew where Anyika had come from. True he said he came from Eluanyim but that was nowhere as far as the villagers were concerned. But by now he had stayed so long in the village that

people had ceased to bother about where he had come from. To the villagers, he was just a medicine man and a mediator between them and the spirit world (5).

Animal imagery is heavily present in the fantastic. Heathcliff is described as a "wolfish man," Lockwood is attacked by a female dog, part of a "hive" of "four-footed fiend" upon his first visit to Wuthering Heights. He mistakes a "heap of dead rabbits" for an "obscure cushion full of something like cats," Catherine is injured by a male bulldog named Skulker, and Heathcliff is more than once called a dog (on this, see Snider <<http://www.csulb.edu/~csnider/brontes.html>>). In *The Concubine*, the gods Ojukwu Diobu, Amadioha, and the Sea-God appear as a vulture, grey serpent, and a cobra, respectively (this kind of snake imagery can also be seen in Amadi's *The Great Ponds* and in many other novels by Igbos, including Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). The hoot of an owl in response to Emenike's cough clearly foreshadows his untimely death. The hoots and presence of owls is universally considered ominous and uncanny.

The sublime characteristics of the moors surrounding the Heights and Gimmerton Kirk is a far cry from the thick African rain forests of *The Concubine*. However, there is something sublime and ghastly near the shrine of Amadioha, and its description does not sound too dissimilar to other sublime settings: "Rank trees bordered the dark path. Some climbers were so thick that they looked like ordinary trees. At the shrine absolute stillness reigned and it was quite cold, as the high majestic roof of thick foliage, like a black rain cloud, cut off the sun completely. Even the wind could only play meekly among the undergrowth" (16-17). High majestic roofs have always been very much a part of the Gothic and it is surprising that it has similar connotations of reaching out to the unknown and the sublime in African literature. The description of the surroundings in the above fragment is characteristic in the West African literary fantastic. Here is an example from Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard*: "The grove thickened as you drew nearer it. The wild pineapples which grew in abundance on both sides of the access path had grown as high as bananas, in the struggle to catch some sunlight through the competing foliage. A huge akpu tree towered above everything else as you arrived at the shrine" (133). Hence a relative similarity can be seen in the darkness and mystic gloom of the settings of the said novels.

The intense and passionate feelings and the unquenchable jealousy of Heathcliff and the sea-god is in tandem with those of the protagonists of other fantastic novels. This can be seen in Heathcliff's revenge on Hindley, Earnshaw, Isabella, and Linton and the sea-god's relentless murder of all the mortal men that dare court his supposed wife. Ekwueme's love, also intense and passionate when coupled with his goodness leads him to his untimely death. In the fantastic this kind of overt feelings are mostly linked with the possible existence of mental and personality disorders in some of the characters. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's monomania with Cathy forms the tragic web that traps the inhabitants of the Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Nelly and Isabella express constantly doubts as to his sanity and the delirium that precedes his demise can be either a result of the ghostly apparitions he claims to perceive or a result of his prolonged fasting and sleepless state. Cathy's ravings and mental state also form the threshold of her death, dark and ghostly apparitions forming the most part of her insane discourse. In *The Concubine*, Ekwueme becomes insane after his soul is "invoked" and a love potion is administered by Ahurole to fix his loving gaze on her to the exclusion of Ihuoma, but his state can be ascribed to the intensity of his feelings and a desperate bid to break free from his marriage. When Anyika administers the antidote to the love potion, Ekwueme confides to Ihuoma that her presence has done much more than Anyika's medicine. Another circumstance common to both fantastic love stories is that neither are consummated save in another realm: in the case of Cathy and Heathcliff this takes place through the mingling of their earthly remains and Ekwueme's passion for Ihuoma is never consummated either, for before that happens the sea-king strikes in anger.

The Concubine appears to be an Ikwerre village novel with a beautiful love story as its main plot and a few supposed manifestations of the supernatural. However, the novel turns into the quintessential fantastic novel when towards the end of the novel, the narrator reveals that Ihuoma is really a

sea-goddess incarnate. After what would place the novel in the realm of the marvellous, Amadi instills further doubts on our minds and the uncertainty is maintained until the end. Ebele Eko believes that "an earlier revelation could move the sceptical western mind early to downgrade the story to children's literature. Ihuoma's incarnation could have been interpreted as superstition or a fairy tale, and would therefore lose the credibility and moral weight to sustain the novel's structure." (137). Amadi provides a supernatural explanation of the uncanny events:

Ihuoma's late husband apparently died of 'lock-chest' but actually it was all the design of the Sea King. As soon as Emenike married Ihuoma his life was forfeit and nothing would have saved him. 'Madume became blind through a spitting- cobra and eventually hanged himself. Many thought his death was the result of an unfortunate accident, a just reward for his "big-eye." I must say I had the same views at the time. But it is now very clear. Madume's real trouble began after he had assaulted Ihuoma while she was harvesting plantains. Added to this was the fact that he had a secret desire to make Ihuoma his lover or maybe marry her. All this was too much for the Sea-King and he himself assumed the form of a serpent and dealt with his rival. ... Just before Emenike died I detected some water spirits among the throng that eventually liquidated him. When Madume came to me for divination once I also stumbled on these water spirits. Somehow their connection with Ihuoma eluded me. The Sea-King himself probably confused me at the time. But now that I have made a definite investigation into the matter everything is clear. "Look at her," Anyika went on, "Have you ever seen anyone quite so right in everything, almost perfect? I tell you only a sea-goddess -- for that is precisely what she is -- can be all that." (196-97)

In spite of the seemingly clear supernatural explanation and striking similarities in both Anyika's and Agwoturumbe's divinations, there is one major difference that again brings up the uncertainty in the reader's and Ekwueme's mind. This difference is that Ekwueme can marry Ihuoma safely after a midnight sacrifice to the sea-king. Ekwueme tries not to believe the divination avowing that "If Ihuoma was a sea-goddess, then he could very well be a sea-god himself, he argued. But religion is a deep-rooted thing and in spite of himself the medicine man's divination haunted him" (199). This is manifest in the way he tries to stay away from the midnight sacrifice. Ekwueme's hesitation can be interpreted as his way of convincing himself of the plausibility of marrying Ihuoma. He somehow lent more importance to it when Agwoturumbe pronounced the uncannily similar diagnosis to Anyika. He and the reader seek solace in the boat-man's scepticism: "Well, you see, people often said that they saw the Sea-King, but I never saw him myself, I always felt the medicine -- men were deceiving them" (212). Ihuoma on her part claims that "These things are strange and almost funny. I certainly don't feel like a daughter of the sea. It is frightening in a way" (201). However, Ekwueme dies after Ihuoma's son, Nwonna, shoots him accidentally with a barbed arrow just before the midnight sacrifice that was to have appeased the sea-god was to take place. This is an ironic and bitter ending to the story. Agwoturumbe had mentioned earlier that as far as he could see, they would all be back safely. Whether the sea-god finally obtained his revenge on Ekwueme, or chance had it that Nwonna's arrow would simply be shot at the wrong time, is left for the reader to ponder on.

In conclusion, the exclusion of "other" literary texts from categorization as fantastic in the Western canon and with African novels categorized as magic realism, the comparison of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Amadi's *The Concubine* suggests the inappropriate view *au courant* in scholarship. Thus I postulate that African texts are in need of re-readings and re-interpretations including with regard to fantastic literature. This re-evaluation can be accomplished in two ways: 1) a re-evaluation employing Western theoretical frameworks whereby such frameworks would have to be reworked themselves against the a priori and built-in view of the superiority of the Western canon and 2) develop stand-alone theoretical frameworks based on African literature owing to the specific characteristics of such literatures. In sum, the similitude of and differences between African and Western literatures point to the need to establish the sovereignty of African literatures and the existence of alternative canons.

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