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THE INFLUENCE OF ORAL TRADITION AND THE NATIVE IJAW IN GABRIEL OKARA'S *THE VOICE*

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ABSTRACT

Much before the spread of literacy in the 20th century, texts were preserved by memory and recollected or recited portions from them when the occasion arose. Africa's oral literature takes the form of prose, verse and proverbs and the texts vary in length from the 'epic' which might be performed over the course of several days to single sentence formulations such as a 'proverb'.

Keywords: Myth, folklore, proverbs, language, culture and tradition

Gabriel Immomatimi Gbaingbain Okara's novel *The Voice* is set in the immediate post-independence period. Okara depicts the early years of Independence when the politicians simply take over the methods of the colonial administration with improving the lot of the people as a whole. Gabriel Okara presents a vivid account of a fictional place in West Africa where the customs depicted and the language used is unmistakably of West Africa.

Looking at the presentation of myth and folklore in the novel, it can be said that despite the influence of the colonizer's language, religion education and way of life on the natives of the land, yet the colonized have their own staunch notions and beliefs which are not forgotten. In the novel *The Voice*, the messengers set forth towards Okolo's house they converse with each other:

"First Messenger: My right foot has hit against a stone.

Second Messenger: Is it good or bad?

First Messenger: It's bad." (24)

In the novel, when Tuere keeps to herself and does not flirt with boys though she had a hunger-killing beauty, the people of Amatu consider her 'a girl of strange behavior'. Moreover they openly call her a witch when her mother and father died one after another within a few weeks and after every young man who proposed to her dies one after the other. As in a traditional society, a non-conformist was considered an outcaste so did the people of Amatu consider Tuere

"They then from the town drove her." (32)

On Okolo's journey to Sologa one sees the inhabitants of the boat calling out to their Gods to rescue them from danger. In the novel as it began to rain, the forty to fifty years killed woman raised her voice invoking the name of Benikurukuru, her clan's deity

"Benikurukuru! Benikurukuru! How? Have you come to take me? How! Have I in something defaulted? A sign show. Anything you ask I will sacrifice. Only show..." (62)

It was also believed that if a person committed a crime and did not confess to it, then the person would face disaster in the near future—either by wrath of the clan’s deity or unnatural events. In the novel when Okolo is accused for having sheltered the betrothed girl Ebiere, he is asked to swear and invoke God

“Hear O Amadosu! Something has fallen on my head which I do not know how to remove..... Things of the ground, also, hear and the head also hear!” (31)

Typical of the traditional African society ruled by a group of elders, men of status and power whose decision ruled the clan. The elders came one by one to Chief Izongo’s house and when they had sat in a semi-circle facing Chief Izongo; Izongo called them each by his Praise name as it is usually done at gatherings and when something was to be discussed:

Izongo : Yes. I am lightening. Nothing stands before lightening. What is yours?

Second Elder: You are asking me? I am Water.

Izongo: Water!

Second Elder: Yes! I am Water. Water is the softest and the strongest be.” (112)

Okara also presents a society whose firm belief is in the will of the Creator Woyengi and in the concept of Re-incarnation. The cripple, Ukule tells Tuere

“What you came with from Woyengi will happen to you, whatever you do. So I do not fear. I ask Woyengi to make me a cripple, so I am a Cripple...When I die, I will return as a man.” (115)

Foremost among the prose forms in African Literature is the myth. Like myths everywhere, African myths typically explain the creation of the universe, the activities of the Gods at the beginning of creation, the essence of all creatures and the nature of their relationship with each other. Next in importance is the legend, intended to enhance the listener’s understanding of the constitution of the universe. The African legend has much in common with the epic as both focus upon heroism. The folktale, another prose form is usually reserved as means of ‘night-time entertainment’. They are often

employed in terms of social commentary and instruction but at the same time serve as a potent means of affirming group values and discouraging anti-social behavior.

Gabriel Okara makes an experimental use of English language, semantically, syntactically and even grammatically. He makes a frequent departure from the normal English sentence pattern. In the novel *The Voice*, the Subject-Verb-Object order of the English language is altered to the Subject-Object-Verb pattern.

“If my left foot against something hits as I walk, It’s a warning be.....He always of change speaks” (35)

Another prominent aspect that features in the novel is the literal translation from Okara’s mother tongue Ijaw thereby making the English sentence construction very unusual.

“Faces, a man of faces glistening with sweat in the moonlight stood, talking and arguing. Grim faces like the dark mysterious forest afire with flies.” (13)

Okara attempts to get around the English language in which the African’s cultural experience is being communicated by forcing himself to think of his sentences in Ijaw and then translate them literally into English so that they remain Ijaw in symbolism, syntactical structure, idiom and reference.

“I cannot a bad thing do to you and you cannot a bad thing do to me. My inside told me I should all these things say to you because I am now a cup be which has been over-filled with water.” (28)

Okara moulds the English language to bring out the local flavor, the thinking and speaking habits of the people. Some of the words seen in the novel are “caring-nothing”, “know-God people”, “knowing-nothing footsteps”, “making-people-handsome day” and “never-happened before things” There is an domination in terms of the use of figures of speech in the novel such as metaphors, similes and personification and many times the verb takes the place of the adjective in the novel.

“Shuffling feet turned Okolo’s head to the door” (44)

"The embers move and glow like a new appearing sun or a going-down sun." (49)

In Gabriel Okara's essay *African Speech, English Words*, Okara says:

"I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English." (52)

And in the novel *The Voice* instead of using words like 'soul' or 'spirit' he uses the word 'inside' and 'shadow'. He avoids the former in order to convey an essentially Ijaw world view. O.M.P Juneja in his book *Post Colonial Novel-Narrative of Colonial Consciousness* says:

"In English, words like 'inside' are connotative of digestive system ...but in the novel *The Voice*, Gabriel Okara solves this problem by building up these concepts of 'inside' within the novel itself." (126)

Although the reading of the novel leaves one baffled, one gradually discovers that what one is reading is not the usual syntax of English as per the norms of British English, but it is Ijaw translated into English

"...the pursuing feet of the world stopped and the shout of triumph from the ground reached the eye of the sky and all the town shook." (30)

Various parts of the human body such as 'eyes', 'hands' and 'chest' acquires special meaning in the novel. The attack on Okolo is described in the following manner:

"Okolo and the men fell to the ground. Hands clawed at him, a thousand hands, the hands of the world." (15)

Similarly words such as 'chest' and 'eyes' are used for people who flow with the tide, people unable to take a stand, unthinking they seem to have given up morals and values for the trinity of 'gold, iron and concrete....Everybody who is inside is filled with money, cars and concrete houses.' Tuere challenges the people of Amatu in the following manner:

"Doesn't shame fall on your head, you man without a chest, for saying, you want to burn a woman's house." (21)

Verbs such as 'knowing', 'walking' and 'staying' do not remain just physical activities but acquire a specific cultural dimension, as Okolo addressed the people who came to his house:

"If you are coming-in people be, then come in and the running feet came nearer, the caring-nothing feet of the world." (27)

Conclusion: Thus by adapting Ijaw syntax and lexical parameters to English and by situating a word in a culture specific discourse, Okara exploits the full potential of both English and Ijaw language. Gabriel Okara can be seen as one of the many African writers who have acquired a double literary inheritance. Apart from having mastered the English language, native writers of Africa have their ears tuned to the rhythms and expressions of the native Ijaw. Okara has adopted a mid-way. He uses the English language but has modified it in a way to express his own cultural specifications thus bringing about an Ijawization of the English language.

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