



## SYNTAGMAS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY AND ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL ESSENCE IN WALE OKEDIRAN'S *TENANTS OF THE HOUSE*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines the use of human sexuality for socio-economic and political purposes in human society and interaction as recreated in different syntagmas in Wale Okediran's *Tenants of the House (T of H)*. The method of research is qualitative and textual: an analysis of some of the linguistic and literary features of the novel based on de Saussure's concept of syntagma. The Internet and library research were used to gather materials for the theoretical background and review of scholarship. In T of H, sexuality not only influences some characters to behave or respond in certain ways, it is also deliberately deployed to undo others and achieve selfish ends. The syntagmas of sexuality and its application in the novel show in some grammatical structures, character delineation, events and setting portrayal. In T of H, the novelist graphically represents the socio-economic essence, use and implications of human sexuality in the Nigerian society in particular and the world in general.

**Key words:** Human sexuality, sex, syntagmas, socio-political essence, T of H, Wale Okediran

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### INTRODUCTION

Wale Okediran is a Nigerian writer of renown. He has won several local and international literary competitions for poetry and fiction. Although he is a professional medical doctor, he is more famous for his writings and participation in politics, having been a former President of Association of Nigeria Authors (ANA) and a one-term member of the Nigerian House of Representatives from 2003-2007. *Tenant of the House* (henceforth *T of H*) won the 2010 Wole Soyinka Lumina (African) Prize for Literature. The novel is a blend of fiction and historical facts and events, a genre of literature called *faction*. It explores the politics of corruption and intrigues by law-makers and the executive arm of government.

The use of sex to survive and achieve some ends and the influence of human sexuality on the human mind constitute major *syntagmas* and *leit motif* of the novel. *Syntagma* is a linguistic term popularized by Ferdinand de Saussure to denote a string of interrelated language features and the arrangement of larger non-verbal structures like events and characters, which are packaged in the envelopes of language. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how certain syntagmas evoke the spirit, use, essence and effect of sex and human sexuality.

Human sexuality refers to sex, the aura of sex that human beings exude, the physical sexual characteristics that one possesses which affect one's

sexual personality and others' sexual attitudes to one. It is also used sometimes to denote issues surrounding or emanating from sex, like gallantry, courtship, marriage, relationship, etc.

### Theoretical Background

This essay is based on the concept of 'syntagma' and 'syntagmatic relations' by Ferdinand de Saussure and its subsequent expansion by other linguists. Saussure laid the ground work for the very widely used concepts of *syntagma* and *paradigm* in his seminal work published posthumously in 1916 (Sampson 36-55; Beaugrande 6-33). According to de Saussure,

In discourse, on the one hand, words acquire relations based on the linear nature of language because they are channel together... The elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking combinations supported by linearity and syntagmas...The syntagmatic relation...is based on two or more terms that occur in an effective series. ...

The notion of syntagma applies not only to words, but to group of words, complex units of all length and types (compounds, derivatives, phrases, whole sentences). (123-4)

Although some terms here are similar to aspects of syntax, *syntagma* is not the same as *syntax*. As Saussure differentiates them, "not every syntagmatic fact is classified as syntactic, but every syntactic fact belongs to the syntagmatic fact and is classified as syntactical" (137). Several other linguists also explain syntagma as "a structurally significant combination of two or more units in a language" (Richards, Platt, and Platt 369). According to an on-line source,

A syntagma is an elementary constituent segment within a text. Such a segment can be a phoneme, a word, a grammatical phrase, a sentence or an event within a larger narrative structure, depending on the level of analysis. Syntagmatic analysis involves the study of relationships (rules of combinations) among syntagmas. At the lexical level, syntagmatic structures in a language is the combination of words

according to rules of syntax for that language. At a higher level, narrative structure feature a realistic temporal flow guided by tension and relaxation. Thus, for an example, events or rhetorical figures may be treated as syntagmas of epic structures. ('Syntagma' Wikipedia 3)

(Bold emphasis mine). The sense of *syntagma* bold-faced in this definition is relevant to this essay. David Crystal and R.L Trask equally define *syntagma* in this perspective. Crystal and Trask add that "the term is sometimes used to refer to a class of ASSOCIATIVE responses which people make when hearing a stimulus word, viz. those which fall into a different WORD CLASS from the stimulus, in that the response word could precede or follow the stimulus word in a sentence..."(Crystal 471; Trask 304-5), as in the collocative association of 'sheep' with 'black' or 'man,' 'dark' with 'night,' etc. For example, if we say *a black---*, or *a dark---*, these two structure may evoke or stimulate 'man' and 'night' respectively. When we combine them, we have the syntagmas *black sheep* or *a black man* and *a dark night* respectively.

*Syntagmas*, therefore, are grammatical structures, words, phrases of different types, clauses and sentences with their associative and contextual meanings, and the evocative patterns of literary features: the juxtaposition of events and episodes to convey specific meanings and the intentional delineation of characters to achieve some semantic or stylistic effects. In this essay, syntagmas of sexuality and its accompaniments are examined. What then is sexuality?

The term *sexuality* has been defined from diverse angles. It is "the condition of being characterized and distinguished by sex" (*Freeonline Dictionary* 1). APA sees sexuality as "a broad area of study related to individual's sex, gender, identity and expression, and sexual orientation" ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)). Another source says that "human sexuality is the capacity to have erotic experiences and responses." It also means how someone is sexually pulled to another person, "which is determined by their sexual orientation" (Wikipedia.org). Central to sexuality is sex, whether as an intercourse or as a biological marker of gender. So, one's sexuality is the totality of one's

sexual personality, how others view the personality, the way one uses the personality and how the aura of sexual personality influences others and one's environment.

*Syntagmas* of sexuality in *T of H* adumbrate, suggest, imply and clearly state human sexuality and such sexual issues as wooing, courtship, gallantry, marriage, prostitution, jigoloism, homosexuality. These are itemized and discussed against the backdrop of the concept of *syntagmas*.

#### Brief Review of Related Scholarship

*T of H* has elicited responses from a number of literary critics and analysts. During its public presentations in January and February 2010, notable critics and public commentators: Odi Ofeim, a renowned Nigerian poet and critic, Adimora Akachi Ezeigbo, an award-winning female Nigerian writer, Ayo Banjo, a leading African linguist, Olusegun Mimiko, a Nigerian State Governor, Abike Dabiri, the author's fellow law-maker, Reuben Abati, a famous columnist and editorial member of the *Nigerian Guardian*, etc commend the literary qualities of the novel (Salawu1). Abati, for instance, assessed it as follows:

*Tenants of the House* is an artistic portrayal of the enduring challenge of leadership, not just in Nigeria's tottering political space, but also in Africa...

In Okediran's *Tenants of the House*, we are introduced to a terribly disoriented society, where there is much conflict between rhetoric and action, appearance and reality, individual and society, and this is reproduced not only among the political elite, but also at all the strata of society...(2)

According to Lanre Ogunyemi, *Tenants of the House* is a political satire... The book exposes the political class and the backstabbing and selfish interest in the law-making chamber of the country" (1). Similarly, Carmen, reviewing *T of H* on line, says that *Tenants of the House* is melodramatic. "The novel describes a dizzy sound of rapidly changing political loyalties, widely extravagant sums of money casually changing hands in brown envelopes, politicians whose actions make the readers waver between disgust and sympathy" (Carmen 1), a view shared by

Abubakar Ibrahim too (1). Ibrahim's presents Samuel Bakura, the hero and narrator, as follows:

Gradually, Hon. Samuel, who is 'reputed to stand on principles and very honest, to boot,' is revealed as an unscrupulous man who wouldn't mind using his privileged position to steal a Fulani beauty, Batejo, from her illiterate Fulani fiancée, Gidado. Gidado refuses to give up without a fight, leading to a violent confrontation that sees the lawmaker in the *sharo* ring, to square off with Gidado in the traditional Fulani flogging contest. For Batejo's love, no sacrifice was too much for the Honourable. (4)

The impression this gives is that Batejo, the lovely Fulani girl in the novel, belongs to Gidado, her kinsman. However, this is arguable. All men in the novel have equal right to aspire to have Batejo as wife. She was yet to be Gidado's wife when Sam first saw and fell in love with her, which is why her family offers Sam and Gidado a level playing field for them to compete for Batejo. Sadly, however, Sam is defeated in the fierce feast of flogging called *sharo* in Fulani culture. Most of the *syntagmas* of sexuality examined in this essay revolve round Sam Bakura and his socio-political activities and indulgences. *Syntagmas* of sexuality in *T of H* manifest in the use of grammatical structures such as words, phrases and clauses, character delineation and in a number of events and settings.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE SYNTAGMAS OF SEX AND SEXUALITY

##### Grammatical Syntagmas of Sexuality

Many grammatical *syntagmas* of sexuality are used in the novel. Although the grammatical *syntagmas* are connected with the delineation of characters and events, few isolated cases are depicted below:

Agnes had left me four years earlier. I could not find a replacement in Abuja, try as I might. The ladies were there but no relationship lasted. Young and predatory, they sought to milk you for what you were worth. And then they moved on. Only a mature one would settle down, I thought. And Elizabeth was mature enough. (7)

Here, the narrator expresses his loneliness and love-lorn heart. Abuja girls are unreliable. So, he has

hopes for Lizzy as 'the one who is to come' as a replacement for Agnes, his divorced wife. Below is another example:

Elizabeth, still sitting said, "Sam, this is Honourable Linus Wenike, Member representing Bayelsa State. A very close friend." She patted his thighs seductively and suggestively; my heart missed a beat (9).

The syntagmas in bold prints suggest a compromising attitude of sex and foreplay by Lizzy. The next example is also explicit: "No, no, no, I don't need such things. No stimulant whatsoever. A sex stimulant? Chai, my girlfriend has assured me that I am as strong as a horse. Unless I want to kill her, I cannot use any external aid" (96).

We see more of the grammatical syntagmas in character and event portrayals, as depicted below:

#### Characters as Syntagmas of Sex and Sexuality

Many characters in the novel are patterned to coexist as syntagmas of sex and the deployment of sexuality to achieve some personal socio-economic ends. Honourable Elizabeth Bello, alias Lizzy, and Batejo, the red Fulani girl, Angelina who is sent as espionage to the House Deputy Speaker and the jigos in Abuja, one of who called up Lizzy for a date, are apt examples of the syntagmas of sex and its uses by both sexes for socio-economic purposes.

Lizzy employs her enticing sexuality to influence some male members to have her way: "Rumours swirled around Lizzy's name. The soft-sell magazines wrote of her romantic linkages with one minister and two senators. But I couldn't care less. I wanted Lizzy. I needed Elizabeth" (8). Sam is so enamoured to Lizzy that he admits as follows:

I find it difficult to think of little-Lizzy in her usual **tight-fitting outfit** as a gun-owner. I had often ogled her youthful and enticing body **with male intent**. Lizzy's **smooth face belied** her thirty-five years and **her shapelessness** did not in any way suggest she was a single parent with two kids. (2)

The syntagmas that are bold-faced are descriptions of Lizzy's sexuality. The phrase 'with male intent' is a euphemism for sex or concupiscence. "Lizzy had obviously inherited not only her father's natural good looks but also his strength and independence of mind, traits she needed to survive in the murky

waters of the male-dominated world of politics. No party chieftain could browbeat Lizzy; she was direct, combative and hard" (3). The narrator thus depicts Lizzy's good looks with sexual appeal as well as some of the masculine traits that she wields, so much that he dreams of Lizzy: 'I fell asleep and had a dream in which Lizzy said, "I will spend three nights with you at Nicon Noga Hotel, but you must read this." She then handed me a note, smiling bewitchingly all the time' (05).

Batejo is a character syntagma of quintessential beauty who sweeps Bakura off his feet at first sight:

One particular girl caught my attention. She could not have been more than nineteen years old. Slender, she had **wide eyes** and walked as if she did not quite touch the ground. She swung her **wide hips** gracefully and effortlessly, a milk gourd on her head, her hands by her sides. Her **long, silky black hair cascaded down her shoulders in a beautiful Fulani braid generously decorated with beads of many colours**. Most delightful of all was **her pointed nose and sonorous voice**, which pealed out in the bucolic settlement as she played with her friends. (145-146)

Easy on the eyes at a distance, she was at close range an **indisputable beauty**. I gazed unabashedly at her **delicate well-proportioned hips** as she sauntered towards us. **Tall and light-complexioned**, she wore a bright yellow wrapper, red brassiere and braided hair decorated with lots of brightly coloured beads. She had large red earrings, a red handbag and a small red transistor set.

She was asked to come and sit by me so I could dictate certain facts to her. As she did, I caught a whiff of her **powerful fragrance**. Her **pointed nose and thin lips** suggested a Caucasian provenance. Suddenly the girl's voice brought me back. She told me her name was Batejo, which in her native Fulfulde meant 'red girl.' (149)

This long excerpt evokes the sense of sex and delectable femininity that Batejo epitomizes. Consequently, Bakura decides to marry her:

Ardor welled up in my heart again as I glimpsed Batejo's aquiline nose and fair features afresh. An irresistible wave of longing swept over me. **I must marry this girl, I said in my heart, and in the next few months.** She greeted me with impressive warmth. (170-2)

There are also other Fulani characters, male and female, are further portrayed in some graphic syntagmas of sexuality (170-4).

Another character presented in the syntagmas of sexuality is Honourable Linus Wenike, Member representing Bayelsa State. A middle aged man, Linus is "tall and burly. He wore an expensive, tight-fitting brown silk shirt that accentuated the muscularity of his wide chest. On his neck was a glittering silver chain" (9). These characters that are thus portrayed in sensual images generate further syntagmas of sexuality in different events and settings.

#### Events and Settings as Syntagmas of Sexuality

Many events in the novel depict sex and the pursuit of it. These are demonstrated in several of Bakura's meetings with Lizzy and Batejo and the heterosexual contacts of other characters. In one of Hon. Bakura's visits to Lizzy, the enchanter, she introduces the Speaker to him in a very casual, intimate and insinuating manner:

Lizzy introduced me to the Speaker, not by formally intoning his full names and office – Right Honourable Yaya Suleiman, Speaker of the House of Representatives – but simply said, Yaya, **my man**, this is Sam. Sam, Yaya is **my very close friend...**

When I asked Lizzy later what she meant by referring to the Speaker as a very close friend, she told me to mind my own business. "Sam, I have **a private life**. Don't you forget that. And that is the way it's going to stay...

Her blunt declaration hurt me. I had grown to like Lizzy. She was **petite and convaceous**. (7)

'My man' and 'my very close partner,' in this context, are euphemistic syntagmas for my *boyfriend* or *sex partner* and 'I have a private life'

means that 'I have my secret sex life that must remain secret.'

In another meeting, Lizzy introduces Linus Wenike, as a "very close friend" and then "she patted Wenike's laps 'seductively and suggestively' to Sam's amazement and curiosity.

During the 'impeachment project' against the Speaker, Lizzy, who is supporting the President to remove the Speaker, uses shameless seduction to sustain Hon. Sam's support because she needs his support desperately:

Over your former request," she said as she approached me again. Giggling, she unbuttoned the top of her night gown to reveal her perfectly formed breasts. Smiling wickedly, she lifted her left breast towards me. "Come Samuel, you have always wanted this. (66)

Hon. Lizzy, as delineated here, is an adept seducer and user of her sexuality for her selfish ends.

Furthermore, the Senate President pays Angelina to act as a spy on the Deputy House Leader just to unveil some secrets to blackmail him. Angelina sleeps with the Deputy House Leader in a double deal, posing as the Deputy Leader's mistress who gets well paid by him and, at the same time, functioning as a secret agent for the Senate President:

As Angelina left the Deputy Leader's residence in the legislators' quarters, a taxi with the colours of the Abuja Leasing Company was waiting for her at the corner leading to the Senate President's house. In the taxi, she brought out her mobile phone, tapped out the numbers rapidly and made a call. Gleefully and quietly she said, "Sir, it's done. I have all the information you want. Where do we meet?"

The taxi sped and eventually came to a halt an hour later in front of a grey duplex building in the highbrow Abuja area of Maitama. As instructed, she handed over two tapes and the memory stick from a digital camera to a secretary waiting for her in the office. In return, she collected a fat white envelop. (164)

Interestingly, this novel balances the scale by showing that men also sell their sexuality. When

the trend of events yokes Hon. Lizzy and Sam together again at Lizzy's house in Abuja, a gigolo calls up Lizzy to know whether she needs his services. Lizzy then reveals pointblank that "Many rich single women keep gigolos. They hate to get involved with men who will give them a headache. Far cheaper, far safer, far, far more emotionally comfortable to have their needs met on demand. Paid for, no complications... (208).

Other event syntagmas of sexuality are the series of contacts that Sam has with Batejo, her red Fulani girl, which culminate in his conversion to Islam and undergoing *sharo*, the ceremony of public competitive flogging of suitors by fellow suitors in Fulani culture. Sam Bakura engages Batejo with a ring (188) and thereafter looks forward to his conversion to Islam, which, from all indications, will not be easy. But Batejo encourages him with the emollient syntagmas of love: "Batejo, gently fiddling with my handset, also laughed. "You say you love me. Make the sacrifice, forget the differences between the two religions and cross over to me," she said, with smiling eyes and a tender touch to my shoulder" (187).

Besides Batejo, Sam has Lizzy to contend with in his arena of affection and sex. Lizzy, in a belated resurgence of love for Sam Bakura, will not let Sam have Batejo. This episode with its setting is presented in some melodramatic syntagmas:

Has the girl given you something to eat? Love potion inside *fura da nunu*? You, Samuel, son of Bakura, descendant of two generations of Christians, reduced to a whimpering romantic mess by a nineteen-year-old girl? Converting to Islam? (206)

Forget this Fulani girl. Choose a wife with the full weight of your brains, not through a haze of *fura-da-nunu* infatuation. (207-208)

However, Sam insists on Batejo or no one and Lizzy keeps dissuading him, even right now offering herself as an alternative to Batejo: "Sammy dear... I am ready to settle down... with a compatible soul like you. We have so many things in common, I Lizzy and you, lover-boy, Samuel" (209).

Look Sam, em... em... I am fond of you, very fond, you know that. I am sorry I was a bit hesitant in the beginning. I wasn't sure of your intentions, but now..." She paused

for a painful moment. "I need you, Sam, I need a strong reliable man whom I can trust after my failed marriage." Two large tears rolled down her cheeks...

But Samuel, I like you very much, I really do and on a serious note, I have a feeling that what you are doing is not right. You changed your faith without your mother's blessings and now you want to subject yourself to a sadistic and barbaric if not dangerous ceremony, all because of a nineteen-year-old girl? (286-287).

In spite of Lizzy's new mellow, humility and avowal of love, Sam still defiantly insists on having Batejo, not Lizzy anymore. Few days later, Sam converts himself to a Muslim to facilitate his winning Batejo for a wife, a development that infuriates Lizzy so much that she swears to stop Sam at all costs. Desperate, Lizzy resolves: "Sam, you cannot marry this tomato-faced Fulani girl, full stop! I, Elizabeth Kande Bello, will do everything in my power to stop you" (289). In spite of her threat, Sam goes ahead to participate in the gallant *sharo* that has been arranged for him, the very last hurdle to cross and win Batejo:

The *Sharo* ceremony, as practiced by many nomadic Fulani ethnic groups, is a public flogging event which is a test of endurance before a young man can marry. During the ceremony, usually held twice a year in the market place, young men who are contesting for the hand of a maiden in marriage are expected to undergo severe flogging in public without flinching. (292-293)

In the *sharo*, Bakura gets himself flogged silly and ludicrously in an anti-climax of public surrender and humiliation, an excruciating and disappointing anti-climax for him and the readers. But why is the author this unsympathetic to Bakura at this point? This anti-climax is predicated on previous syntagmas of love, wooing and a marriage proposal between Batejo and Sam, on the one hand, and Lizzy's resolve to frustrate Sam, on the other hand. Indeed, while Sam is writhing in pain from the skillful, vengeful flogging that Gidado powerfully administered on

him during the *sharo*, Lizzy is right there having her last and longest laugh!

#### CONCLUSION

In this essay, the syntagmas of sexuality in *T of H* have been examined against the theoretical backdrop of de Saussure's concept of syntagma. It has been demonstrated that syntagmas of sexuality manifest in grammatical structures like words, phrases, clauses and sentences, and in characters, settings and events. Thus *T of H* is not only (or just) a political novel, but also a novel that deals with the all-time universal issues of sex, sexuality and its deployment by both sexes for personal and group's socio-economic and political ends, a phenomenon popularly called 'bottom power' in Nigerian English, which is also one of the themes of Tanure Ojaide's *Matters of the Moment*, another contemporary Nigerian novel published a year before *T of H* (Afejuku and Ekundayo 127-8). The syntagmas of sex used in the novel reflects the Nigerian background of the novel and the universal use of sex to achieve personal socio-economic ends.

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