

SYMBOLIC STRUCTURATION IN BEN OKRI'S *STARBOOK*

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Abstract

Ben Okri is one of the outstanding writers in contemporary African Literature. His writings have continued to engage literary critics in fervent intellectual debates and critical studies. This study critically discusses the various aspects of symbolic structuration in Ben Okri's *Starbook*. Previous studies on this work have concentrated on the elements of magical realism, thematic structures of meaning and the narrative strategy. This study therefore, is aimed at drawing critical attention on the symbolic structuration as a vital force in text proliferation and interweaves of structural pattern. In absence of this symbolic structuration, the entire argument of Ben Okri's *Star Book* collapses. This study will examine the various aspects of symbolic structuration from archetypal perspective.

The Concept of the Symbol

A symbol is 'a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself' (Abrams 311). It is important to add here that a symbol needs not be a word, phrase or an object because actions too can be symbolic. Hence Raymond Firth, quoted in Akwanya, specifies the symbol as 'objects or actions that represent other entities in virtue of some arbitrarily-assigned conceptual relation between them' (*Verbal Structures* 115). The symbol therefore does not aim at reproduction but at representation and even in that there is concealment and yet a revelation of what is symbolized. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle says that through this means, 'the infinite is made to blend itself with the finite, to stand visible and, as it were, attainable there' (209). Symbolism is and has always been a permanent technique but today, it has become self-conscious.

D.H. Lawrence quoted in Strelka comments,

Symbols are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and soul, and not simply neural (Strelka "Comparative Criticism" 15).

This self-consciousness apart from being a reaction against the literature of realism is what distinguishes the symbolism of the modernist text from that of the realist.

Different words at different times have been used synonymously with symbolism. Such words include imagery, allegory, emblem, metaphor and so on. All these according to Hinderer are 'modifications of the symbolic' ('Theory, Concept, and Interpretation of the Symbol' 89). He also sees allegory as a kind of flattened out symbol. But Lewis sees a clear difference between allegory and symbolism, hence he

writes, 'the allegorist leaves the given-his own passions-to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real' (45). The basic attribute of the symbol is that it means something. However, its distinctive feature is its plurisignation or multisignificance. Hence Akwanya describes the language of symbols as 'a language whose functioning involves a 'surplus value' (*Structures* 115). The multivalence of the symbol results from the principle of the analogy, out of the manifold correlative chains which accumulate meaning' (Hinderer 96). Ernst Cassirer quoted in Hinderer understands symbolic form to mean 'every energy of the mind...through which an intellectual content of meaning is connected to a sensory sign and becomes inwardly a part of it' (85). Cassirer finds such forms in language, mythos, and art.

In spite of the difficulty in giving a meaning to symbols, Frye made the most extensive and productive attempt by classifying symbols according to their levels or phrases. With the classification of the theory of the symbols, 'the conception of the symbol is not narrowed down but unfolds, it is not isolated of recognition, a sign which means that which is put into it, 'it attains a numinous character hence we talk of mystical, archetypal, or religious symbol' (83). And it is on this note that symbols in Okri's *Starbook* will be looked at mostly from the archetypal perspective.

Characters as Symbols

The characters in *Starbook* include human and animal characters and most of them are symbols of ideas.

The Prince, the hero and protagonist of the novel, is a symbolic character. As Furst tells us, 'the romantic hero has become an archetypal figure in literature. His psyche has repeatedly been analyzed, his genealogy traced, his persona categorized into various prototypes, and his relationship to society scrutinized' (40). Frye on his own identifies him as one who is 'superior in degree to other men and to his environment' (33). At its mythical phase, the romantic hero becomes an archetypal symbol whose birth and infancy is often exceptional or even miraculous. Thus about the birth of the Prince we read, 'the soothsayers at his birth predicted for him an unusual life. He will be a king and a slave, they said...the most puzzling thing the soothsayers said, however, was that he would die young in his old age or that he would die old in his youth' (Okri 4). The Prince's village is surrounded by this 'myth-infested forest' (5) and because of this he is suspected to belong to another realm hence 'he was a child of heaven, one of those children from another place, who was destined to live long' and as such 'he was left alone to do as he pleased, so long as he did not express a wish to die' (4). Furst goes further in her analysis of the romantic heroic by arguing forth:

The romantic hero does still fulfill the traditional heroic role. First, his attractive appearance often makes him a sort of 'homme fatal'. Almost invariably he is a gentleman, a member of the leisured class at ease financially. Both his handsomeness and his freedom from mundane concerns

raise him to the level of an idealized, glamorous figure sharply distinguished from the characteristics modern anti-hero with his petty subsistence level anxieties, his frequent physical imperfections, his embroilment in the grotesque, messiness of daily living (42).

As a typical hero of romance, the Prince embodies all these qualities. He is the heir to the throne. As a sort of 'homme fatal', most of the young girls who see him fall in love with him. Some suffer greatly, others unwell, and 'one died of a kind of fatal happiness' (Okri 5). From this we have seen the Prince as both human and divine. Following Fry's thought, 'the near the romance to myth, the more attributes of divinity will cling to the hero hence the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world' (187).

The Prince becomes the soul of the kingdom, 'if he dies before a certain age, the kingdom will perish, if (he) does not fulfil his obscure destiny no one will fulfill their simple destiny and the land will perish' (Okri 54). When the Prince becomes severely sick, all the people in the kingdom gather to keep vigil 'as if the illness of the Prince were the illness of the world' (65). But of course, the illness of the Prince is the illness of the world of the text hence they pray 'holding up their lanterns for the Prince encouraging him to get better, so that the land would be whole again' (16). Again, after the Prince's recovery from his near-death sickness, his father the king, appears to him in a dream and instructs him to find the Maiden of the tribe of artist, to be a servant to her father, to study the daughter and marry her. Though this is not going to be an easy task, the ultimate goal is 'your children will eventually be the saviours of the land' (277). As a universal Prince who is the hope of the people we read that when the tribe of artist gets to know about the Prince's illness, '... the whole land was in dire judgement, for if the Prince should die it was said that the land will die in his death and the white wind would conquer for ever' (364). Therefore, the battle between the Prince and the Mamba is not just a fight between two persons rather a fight between two kingdoms, one good the other evil. And the victory of the Prince over the Mamba is a symbolic restoration of the kingdom. Here the Prince as a romantic hero shares some qualities with the epic hero.

The Maiden, the idealized heroine of the romance is also an archetypal symbol. In the text, she is the daughter and only child of the legendary master of the tribe of artist. She is described as been plain, shy, awkward, hardworking, and not beautiful nor attracted to any young man to the worry of her mother who would complain that 'she is not from here. She will not stay long. When she has found what she is looking for she will return'. The effect is that they must delay her discovery hence 'delay her discovery becomes the theme of her life' (77-78). But this Maiden as we get to know has something invaluable beneath the plain, shy and awkward appearance: she is also the soul of the tribe of artist. Her inability to produce her own healing art at the necessary time, and her later production of the image of a dying prince when the tribe has no king let alone a prince and a dying one at that raises

doubt. However, in the midst of the whole outrage, fury and ridicule, we come to know through the Maiden's father's speech that she is a symbol. Thus:

And when the daughter came to him troubled about it all, he smiled at her gently and said with distracted eyes. 'The minute people are unjust to you they have already lost the fight. The moment they attack you they have lost the war' (219).

In other words, the fate of the Maiden is inextricably bound to the fate of her tribe.

As an archetypal symbol, through her a prince is born to inherit the throne and reconcile the people hence she is like:

The Virgin, the Feminine Ideal, for whose sake the hero, and the heroic in every man, bestirs himself to confront dangers and attain the goal... and the Happy, which is to say femininity in its repellent and frightening aspect (Wheelwright 232).

Hence the Maiden is a menace to the Mamba.

Another symbolic character worthy of note is the Mamba. He is a hunter who comes to be known and addressed as the Mamba after a brutal fight with the Mamba snake in which he also defeated it. Mamba is a poisonous snake that belongs to the cobra family, and this hunter who has come to be known as the Mamba suggests that there is something sinister about him. Apart from the fact that he defeated the poisonous mamba, he is depicted as being devilish. He is the antagonist and following Frye's thought about the antagonist in a mythic romance, 'the enemy will take on demonic mythical qualities, and is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world' (187). Thus the Mamba as an archetypal symbol becomes dangerous to the tribe when the Maiden refuses to acknowledge him, being the overall winner of the contest, as her husband. We have been told that 'warfare was anathema to (the tribe), because it reduced the number of artists in the world' (Okri 98), but this is encouraged by the Mamba to show the devil in him. When the Maiden poses the riddle of the shadow as the only criterion for her to choose her husband, it becomes a puzzle to the suitors except the Prince who at that time is a secret pupil of the Maiden's father. The Mamba disappears and during the course of his disappearance, his parents die each after screaming and wailing that their shadows have been loaned to, and stolen by a shadow (375). Because of his absence at the burial rites of his parents, 'it was said that he had gone seeking for unusual powers in the deep dark places of the world, and had traded the lives of his beloved ones for invincibility, for power over the known and unknown, the strange and the innocent that spooked him' (376).

When the Mamba notices the new pupil as his enemy and rival he challenges him to an open contest. The new pupil who is also the Prince defeats him without striking him even for once and 'the masters declared this one of the greatest works of art they have seen in a generation' (387). Thus the Prince wins without fighting and like the mythical Messiah defeats the mythical serpent or 'Satan-in-serpent' to use Milton's phrase in *Paradise Lost*. The fight between the Prince and the Mamba, the

'so many self-inflicted wounds' (387) suffered by the Mamba and his sinking to his knees and prostrating when he heard the great wonderful sound of laughter in the clouds could be interpreted or seen as an allegory between Christ and Satan because as Hinderer pointed out, 'the anagogic symbol mostly leads observers into religious associations' (90). Also F.Th. Vischer, in Hinderer realized that the mythical is symbolic only for the 'educated free conscience' (87). Thus, it will not be wrong for us to take the Prince, the Mamba and the Maiden as Christ, Satan and the Virgin respectively. To this effect Eliade Mircea in Strauss maintains that 'symbol, myth and image belong to the substance of the spiritual life...they can be camouflaged, mutilated, degraded, but...they will never be rooted out' (*Descent and Return* 3).

Symbolism in Objects and Elements

Apart from some characters that are symbolic, there are some objects and words in *Starbook* that are also symbolic in that they "can be isolated for critical attention" (*Frye* 70). Among them are heron, the masquerade, the gap, and the flower.

The heron is one of the families that make up the ciconiiformes family of stork like birds. Therefore, in its literal level, the heron is simply a bird. But as Wheelwright noted, 'in their symbolic role, the different between the real and fabulous animals is blurred by the fact that even real animals tend in a mythopoeic setting to develop fabulous qualities' (233). The qualities of this bird which the Prince enjoys observing include its 'ability to be great and small, visible and invisible, majestic and minor, tall and insignificant' (Okri 34). The heron begins to play its symbolic role when the Prince watching it becomes 'a test of his concentration, his ability to maintain interest in that which deliberated oozes boredom... emanates plainness, in order to be successful invisible, and within that condition, wonderfully happy' (35). Thus the bird becomes a challenge to the Prince. We are told that while the Prince is watching the heron a masquerade appears on the scene and 'the more attention the Prince paid to the great spectacle the more the heron was effaced from the world, the heron began to pale into insubstantiality as the masquerade becomes more awaresome' (37-38). This divided distraction continues until the Prince falls asleep and has a dream, where the masquerade is devouring the world. In the dream, the Prince also sees the heron and it is only 'when the Prince regained his loyal gaze on the heron, seeing it as a radiant thing in a dying space, the prime living thing in a dead world, only then did the masquerade begin to diminish' (42). In this instance, the bird has come to represent a kind of savior like the mythical brazen serpent in the wilderness. Thus, the heron continues to develop its fabulous qualities which fascinate the Prince hence it is called 'his personal bird-spirit' (28) whose principles he follows to make 'himself indistinct and indistinguishable and manage to wander among the tribe of artists without drawing attention to himself' (289). This principle is later raised 'to the pitch of enchantment' (299) when the Prince becomes a servant to the Maiden's father.

The masquerade against this backdrop symbolizes falsity and chaos. It is a symbol of destruction and havoc (37). In another place, we read that the dance of the masquerade begins to break down the real world (38). The masquerade even tries to devour the heron because it changes all things destroyed by the masquerade. But in its attempt to do this, we read:

The masquerade got all mixed up and so confused that it began a war against itself as it became self-entangled trying to kill the white heron sailing along nonchalantly, unaware... that anything out of the ordinary was going on (43).

This episode can on the other hand be likened to what happens between the Prince and the Mamba. Since the heron is called the Prince's personal bird-spirit, the masquerade can equally be the Mamba's personal spirit, since he ended up like the masquerade, 'combusting into wild red and fiery green flames from which he could not be rescued' (415).

Also in the text, the question of gap is apprehended as a symbolic structuration. "Even the most abstract and complicated symbol can' as Herman Broch quoted in Hinderer correctly remarks, 'be traced back to a natural and naturalistic nucleus' (93). This natural nucleus of the symbols can also be termed the 'banal nucleus' (93). This banal object according to Akwanya is 'the object that bears the accent of that profundity being designed accordingly as its symbol' (*Discourse Analysis* 217). And as 'these flashes of insight are endless, it is often (seen) as if the work exists for the symbol, as if it is generated by this symbol' (*Discourse* 217). Hence in *Starbook*, it appears that the work exists for, and is generated by the question of the gap and what it stands for.

In its first appearance in the text, the gaps are notices by the Prince after the vision of the sailing yellow boat at the bank of the river. He wonders whether they are substances or mere spaces because they are everywhere, even on people's body and they do not know it. However, the gap when presented as a question before the council of elders is given another interpretation. The elders see the gaps talked about by the Prince as that which has been lost to the white wind hence they reply that their 'fountain is secure, the house is stable' (275). At another level, the gaps are taken to be the incompetence of the elders by the elders themselves and because of their guilty conscience, the gaps begin to oppress them in their dreams and they begin to plot evil against the king (279-282). In other words, the gaps are now being that can question the right or wrong behind every motive. This metaphoric word continues to be extended to mean a route hence the Prince has to jump into the same gap the Maiden stepped into to get the tribe of artist and to her father's workshop. The Prince later realized that 'the gap might be the reason why his emissaries had been unable to find the tribe of artists' (307), thus their inability to find the gap becomes an obstacle to fulfilling a mission. Moreover, jumping into the wrong gap is not a fantastic as stepping into the right one hence when the Prince and the Maiden at various times jumped into the wrong gaps, they are devoured and captured by the spirits of the

white wind and the gap is called 'a gap fiery with the dark light of an agonizing destiny' (409), therefore 'gap that leads to the torments of his enslavement in an alien land' (354). In page 337, the gap leads no longer to the tribe of artist but 'into the infinite endlessness'. The gap also becomes a hole of black fire (335). And finally, 'the gaps begun to devour the kingdom' (411).

Since symbolism involves ambiguity, which leaves no room for outright interpretation to the symbol, we can agree with Julia Kristeva's literary theory of intertextuality which establishes a symbolic connection between the gap here and that which is created in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which tragically leads to Okonkwo's suicide. As Obierika laments, it came gradually until it devours their land. Thus the gap is the vacuum created by the white wind and because the people did not know it, it devours the kingdom.

Flower is another image that is symbolic in *Starbook*. From Book One of the text, we see how flowers are used as objects of beauty as the maidens play and build a bed of flowers for their princes. In the text, flowers are not only objects of beauty; they also mean love, death, and a lasting legacy.

When the Maiden is given a flower by an old man in her dream which he said came from the stars, although she accepts it reluctantly, the moment she smells the fragrance of this flower, her life and some things around her altered. And we read that:

The flower would never wilt, never die, but sometimes it became invisible and was lost, and it would reappear again, depending on how she was feeling. That flower, along with her only child, was the legacy she passed on to the next generation (369).

The flower now has manifold meaning. It becomes her love since it never withers nor dies to the extent that it is passed to the coming generation. Flowers as symbol of love as used in the text do not end here. For we read in page 340 that one day the new pupil without saying a word gives the mother of the Maiden a bunch of flowers he has picked under the moonlight. It should be noted that we have earlier been told that 'relations and friends of the Maiden were wooed too, indirectly, with gifts from the suitors' (143). In this way, the action of giving a bunch of flowers becomes symbolic as Akwanya maintains 'one of the ways to understand symbolic language is a language of which only the less important component of the meaning is conveyed by the words, while the greater portion is elsewhere' (*Structures 115*). The effect of the action is that 'the mother of the Maiden noticed his tender beauty, his trail and slender body ... and fell into admiration of him' (340). In other words, the bunch of flower is the Prince's love given to woo the mother of the Maiden, and the result is that the parents of the Maiden 'talked about him' that night.

In another instance, after the Prince has made himself known and the Maiden could not see him again among her father's statues, in a state of hopelessness 'she wandered through the forest, picking flowers of every colour, singing gently a song of

happy death while she did so' (393). She neither sees nor hears nor is she aware of anything happening around her. She begins to sing a farewell song to all things. Then 'she fell silent and rose and, holding the flowers in her hand as an offering to the goddess, she began to walk towards the river, away from life as she had known it' (393). The plucking of the flowers signifies the Maiden's love for the Prince and her psychological attachment to him. And since she cannot find him again, she offers the flowers to the goddess as she walks towards the river.

Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper is to demonstrate that the concept of symbolic structuration forms a cardinal aspect of discourse formation in Ben Okri's *Star Book*. In this study we have closely examined the various aspects of symbolic structuration in terms of characters, objects and elements of discourse. We discover that symbols are universal element of literary discourse. The striking thing about the use symbols in this work is that it is imbued with new vitality which enables the text to sustain its argument.

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