



# The figure with recurrent presence: the defiant hero in Nigerian narratives

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**ABSTRACT.** Nigerian narratives always reveal corruption, disillusionment, mythological entities, political instability, cultural backgrounds and traditions of the tribes and nations used as context. Textual resources advertise literary works as realistic. In general, the recurring presence of the characters in these narratives is almost ignored. Unlike earlier interpretations of the Nigerian narratives, this essay is based on the theory of Frye's five mimetic modes or categories. Based on the analysis of *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), this article examines the defiant hero as a recurring presence in Nigerian narratives. In fact, the hero is a character of resistance, which, in many ways, is in conflict with the laws made unbearable for others. The article also shows how the character, revealed by the constant manifestations of the structure of the primary activities of the hero of narratives such as myths, gradually and systematically hides in later narratives of mimetic modes through the emergence and influence of realist art. Similar processes in which the hero is involved are abundant in many Nigerian narratives. The insights revealed by these discussions serve to rethink previous critical views on these texts.

**Keywords:** Frye's mimetic modes, the defiant hero, Nigerian narratives, *The Interpreters*, *The Famished Road*.

## A personagem com presença recorrente: o herói desafiador nas narrativas Nigerianas

**RESUMO.** As narrativas Nigerianas sempre revelam a corrupção, a desilusão, as entidades mitológicas, a instabilidade política, as formações culturais e a tradição das tribos e das nações utilizados como contexto. Os recursos textuais anunciam as obras literárias como realistas. Em geral, a presença recorrente das personagens nessas narrativas é quase ignorada. Ao contrário de interpretações sobre as narrativas Nigerianas, esse ensaio baseia-se na teoria de Frye referente a cinco modos ou categorias miméticas. A partir das análises de *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) e *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), esse ensaio examina-se o herói desafiador como uma presença recorrente nas narrativas Nigerianas. De fato, o herói é uma personagem de resistência, o qual, em várias maneiras, encontra-se em conflito com as leis insuportáveis colocadas pelos outros. O ensaio também mostra como a personagem revela-se pelas manifestações constantes da estrutura das atividades do herói nas narrativas primordiais, como mitos, e sistematicamente se esconde gradualmente nas narrativas dos modos miméticos posteriores através da emergência e influência da técnica realista. Semelhantes processos nos quais o herói está envolvido são abundantes em muitas narrativas Nigerianas. As percepções reveladas por essas discussões serviriam para repensar os precedentes pontos de vista críticos sobre esses textos.

**Palavras-chave:** os modos miméticos de Frye, o herói desafiador, narrativas Nigerianas, *The Interpreters*, *The Famished Road*.

## Introduction

Except for recent studies on the Nigerian novel (SULLIVAN, 2008), patterns of imagery posited and how central characters help to put them forward in Nigerian narratives have largely been ignored. Such patterns include crime and punishment, exile, wandering, death and revival, all of which are worked out in any narrative through their characters. The same characters serve as images, with the huge responsibility of displaying meaning. Actions are no more tied to characters than characters to meaning and, in a related manner, any more than meaning to action. Linkage helps in creating meaning, and ultimately, the figures

that any character displays. It is in support of this fact that Frye tells us that “[...] [o]f all images in literature, the most important are characters, the personalities that do most to mediate between the author and his public” (FRYE, 1990, p. 71).

The figure of the defiant hero, whose presence is establishable in a good number of Nigerian narratives, including *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), is one of them.

But why bring *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) into critical focus at all, let alone picking this article's bearing from them before following leads to other narratives? Similar to most Nigerian narratives, *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA,

1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) have received their fair share of critical pronouncements. The two literary works have been regarded as odds to Nigerian literary tradition (AWOSIKA, 1997; DELLAL, 2003; SMITH, 2005). While some critics viewed *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) as reflecting the historical realities of Nigeria as a nation through the *abiku* trope (GATES JR., 1992; OGUNSANWO, 1995; JONES, 1998; MOH, 2001; SOLIMAN, 2004; MCCABE, 2005; FULFORD, 2009), Hodges (2007, p. 5-20) identifies the recurrent trope of return in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) for analysis.

### The figure of the defiant hero

The presence of the defiant hero and its descent from the very first mode, myths, where his figure is clear and distinct, to the other modes, including those in which the above works are found, where this figure acquires density and enigma, would be analyzed through textual interpretation. Considering the set of patterns listed above, the figure of the defiant hero is the most compelling and fascinating of all, owing to its capability to establish not only an image, a symbol, or a figure, but also to its potential for establishing others (thanks to the fluidity of the power to delineate meaning in the (central) character(s)) and on account of its readiness to augment the clear emergence of traceable patterns around characters in a narrative. Taking its bearing from *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), current article takes a unique critical position when compared to extant studies on Nigerian narratives. This boils down to the fact that, save the imagery identified in these works, authors' biographies and intentions, or other historical indices would not be a factor necessary for generating meaning and arriving at a suitable critical analysis of these two works and other narratives examined.

One more thing is needful before we proceed: Frye declared that the poet does not handle abstractions, actual propositions, but thought-forms which usually bear images that are rather united by metaphors than by logic (FRYE, 1963, p. 57). The most crucial way this unity by metaphor is enhanced is through the characters helping to initiate the coming-to-be of a figure, in this case, the defiant hero. The character is the prompting force that intensifies the progression of the narrative where, dialectically, the personalities and events are linked up through the characters' actions, like those of defiant hero. Taking the figure of the defiant hero as a case in point, current essay would like to demonstrate how this linkage is performed and how he traverses the

mythic, romantic, 'high' mimetic, 'low' mimetic, and 'ironic' modes outlined by Frye (1957, p. 33-34). The respective features of these modes would be discussed in due course.

The defiant hero enunciates a figure inasmuch as he provokes an apprehended total structure 'frozen' into a unit (FRYE, 1990, p. 11). In fact, he sets in motion a certain pattern, a *mythos*, recognizable enough to be given a name. A most important characteristic of the figure of the defiant hero is that the process of yearning for freedom gives him form and shape. Whether he achieves this freedom or not is not what actually matters; what seems essential is that one finds him in a setting where a reigning ego holds sway. As a consequence, he is pressed to a corner where he has to exercise his will either by disobeying or by aggressively challenging the *status quo*. This attracts some reverberations. In fact, his disobedience places him in opposition, conflict and resistance to that which is normal and which people have generally taken in their strides. The figure the situation projects may be recovered from *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) and some Nigerian war fiction or narratives. Despite his attempt at resistance, his will is nonetheless subjugated and managed by another, a personality or society or their agents who ensure that his narcissistic tendencies and desire for nobility are crushed and incapacitated.

In *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), a work located in the high mimetic mode where the central characters are leaders, and in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), featuring the 'ironic' mimetic mode, in the central character who is inferior to other men and to their environment, and is in bondage and in pain, the realistic technique has played a very significant part in shrouding this figure of the defiant hero and its recurrent presence across convention and genre from one generation of artists to the other (FRYE, 1990, p. 24). In *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), for example, Sagoe, Joe Golder, Sekoni, Noah and Lazarus and in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), Black Tyger, Azaro, his family and all those who are helpless in the overwhelming presence and display of power by the oppressive members of the Party of the Rich in the last and the political class in the former are implicated in this figure and, accordingly, help in positing it in varying degrees.

The trauma the ghetto-dwellers, with Black Tyger's family as a prominent unit, go through seems intolerable going by the efforts they make to fulfill their desires or pass by the intractable obstacles they are confronted with in *The Famished*

*Road* (OKRI, 1992). A point comes when they refuse to bear their subjugation anymore and they protest. And they also prevail. By protesting and, accordingly, allowing their wishes to prevail as regards what they want done in the circumstances, they proclaim that they want to be free of some sort of yoke, a socio-political yoke. For instance, after they burned the van of the Party of the Rich for having distributed poisoned milk which ignites the arrests made by the police and intimidation by the thugs, violence sweeps through the community of the ghetto-dwellers. The police and the thugs are agents of power, before whom the ghetto-dwellers come under the influence of the image of the defiant hero. There is more to the response of burning the van than meets the eye. By this remarkable response, they symbolically respond to all the atrocities unleashed on them by the politicians, to the needless unbearable sufferings they have tried in vain to escape from and to the sweet promises made to them by the political class, turned into a mirage. So the dwellers defy the political order of the day. Azaro's mother, whom the party thugs ask to quit her space in the market since she doesn't belong to their party, is one of those caught in this difficult situation. Notwithstanding, Azaro's mother continues her petty-trading; this time, not as a stationary, but as an itinerant, trader. It sparks off a 'sobbing' session for her as it marks a new but hard beginning for her petty trading (OKRI, 1992, p. 168).

Although her husband does not sob when faced with a similar circumstance, he does not feel less pain when he says "What sort of an animal's life I have!" (OKRI, 1992, p. 171). Beginning with a tirade that includes "[...] his vicious day, [...] how idiots had been ordering him around and thugs bossing everyone and [...] how he felt like giving up his whole life" (OKRI, 1992, p. 172), he tells his family what an awful day he has had in the hands of party thugs. There is yet another unobliging and confining demand made on him at home by the landlord, leading him to experience the feeling of impotency. The landlord daring his tenants to contest his 'magnanimity' sets the stage for them to be drawn to bondage. However, this daring approach also prepares some of his tenants, like Black Tyger, for defiant attitudes. The landlord and the Party of the Rich through their thugs add up to an image of the oppressor whose semblance is that of the matadors of the underworld. The atmosphere is further captured by Tyger's son, Azaro, when he describes his father as one who "[...]" was trapped there [...] (OKRI, 1992, p. 200) as shame and humiliation eats into his psyche. From this state of affairs where his impotency is clearly manifest, he seems to channel his distaste for his condition through an unconventional

means by resorting to using his bare fists at the slightest provocation in resistance, in some deflective form, to the prevailing order. Perhaps, he judges that only his bare fists could survive him in a society where crudeness and injustice prevail – the society that has produced him. The use of his fists is almost legendary, not only in fighting the political thugs but in fighting another sort of enemy: poverty. By taking on the resultant effects of the corruption of the political order, unemployment and poverty, he sets himself against inhibitive elements of his day. On another occasion, he says "[...]" we may be poor, but we are not slaves" (OKRI, 1992, p. 203). With these instances of verbal and physical confrontations to the political and social goings-on, he marks himself out as the most physical hero of resistance in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) next to Azaro, if not equal.

But his nonconformist stance is still at the level of an undercover, for he never really assumes the status of a full rebel on account of his inarticulateness as a character. Such inarticulateness is also apparent in his words, besides his fist. An exchange between his wife and himself thereafter appears to serve as a retort to the landlord long after he was gone after demanding his rent:

'Let them spy,' Dad said, 'but I won't vote for that useless party.'  
 'I know, but don't tell them.'  
 'Why not? Am I a coward?'  
 'No.'  
 'Then I must say what I believe.'  
 'But you heard what the landlord said.'  
 'Let the landlord drop dead!'  
 'Lower your voice.'  
 'Why?'  
 'Spies.'  
 'Let the spies drop dead too!'  
 'But I am afraid for us.'  
 'There is nothing to fear.'  
 'But I am afraid.'  
 'What right has the landlord to bully us, to tell us who to vote for, eh? Is he God? Even God can't tell us who to vote for. Don't be afraid. We may be poor, but we are not slaves' (OKRI, 1992, p. 203).

This is his most expressive denunciation of the overwhelming forces that tend to eclipse his being and will. He seems to have the prospects of being a leader of those who would oppose the norm, but he does not really live up to this image as his inarticulacy counts hugely against him. Now, what he fails to be at the group level, he succeeds in becoming at the personal level: one who distastes repression and finds a way of standing up to it even if it means standing alone.

However, he is not alone. In *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), the photographer's photos of the rush

for the rotten milk distributed by the Party of the Rich, of the riots, of the fights and of violence unleashed afterward on the ghetto dwellers do not please the Rich Party members. They imagine that the photographs give them of them and their activities a demeaning image to the public; so they try to muzzle the photographer's activities through their thugs first by vandalizing his studio and second by threatening to kill him. He, hereafter, runs and carries out his activities underground without abating in his tempo. Apparently, he is an escapist; but his escape is to enable him, in a more subtle mode, to defy his oppressors.

The Party of the Rich, their thugs and agents are not only a threat to Jeremiah the photographer, but to Dad, Mum, Azaro, Madame Koto and the ghetto-dwellers in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992). In all, Dad and Azaro stand out clearly. While Dad, with words, and, to some extent, Mum, with sobs, dare the politicians, the ghetto-dwellers, apart from the singular instance of the riots, accept their fate with equanimity and subservience. Madame Koto takes a similar stand to those of Tyger's co-tenants, though in her case, she takes the back seat as she joins the Party of the Rich. No evidence, however, is found of her lending an audible voice of support to those harassing the poor. But Tyger is not prepared to listen to excuses – he promptly commands his son to see Koto as one of the enemies of the family. At this instance, Tyger presents an interesting view of his opposition to the people who control the affairs of the day. He holds that one does not need to be in the forefront of the contemporary oppressing machine to be resisted or avoided. To him, whatever is oppressive should either be resisted or avoided and that it is a generational thing – father to son, and from son to son's son as long as life goes on. On Koto's part, what seems to have coaxed Koto into the hands of these politicians, great sales and good things of life, also make her a defiant heroine in turning her back to hateful gossips, outright denunciation of her intercourse with the powerful members.

Azaro, who has been Koto's luck-bringing barboy, also assumes the image of the defiant hero. Although a contrast to his father, in many respects he is another significant image of the defiant hero. He is a child, the other is an adult; his opposition is mounted from the ethereal, the other's is from the corporeal; his opposition is two-fold – his father and his spirit companions, his father's is just one – the politicians and their agents; he bears the trauma occasioned by the opposition calmly, the other bears it vociferously and ferociously; his nature is devoted to two worlds: the physical and the spiritual, Tyger's is devoted to the physical alone; and, lastly, in the

future that closes up at death, the son would be returning to the otherworldly domain while his father would go to the dust. These distinguishing features have a telling effect in the manner they both respond to forces confronting them as social beings and which they resist. A point of illustration is Azaro's self-confession of his distinct nature when his mother, bewildered by suffering, wishes to die:

I remembered her face when she nearly died just after my homecoming. I remembered that it was because of her bruised face that I had chosen to live, to stay, in the confines of this world, and to break my pacts with my spirit companions. One of the many promises I made before birth was that I would make her happy. I had chosen to stay, now she wanted to die. (OKRI, 1992, p. 228-229).

The choice to stay alive is, at best, a resistance to his spirit friends and, at worst, an action motivated by different shades of stimuli, a prominent one being curiosity. So in choosing to stay alive and, by that move, stay the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, he leaves a space amongst his friends in the nether world and occupies one in the physical realm, attracting the consequences of lifelong torment and disconcertedness.

In *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), the same approach of resistance occurs; though, this time, it is not to a socio-political order but to a religious one. Noah, who would have been the crown of Lazarus ministerial proselytizing, would have occupied the vacancy for the twelfth apostle in Lazarus' church. But then, he recants. While Lazarus's regret for Noah's repudiation is calmly borne as Azaro's mother does in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), characters such as Sagoe and Egbo are not much like Azaro in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), neither like Noah and Sekoni in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), in terms of resistance. The former characters make much of their situation by talking, in being loquacious, with some broods to spice it up in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972). Brooding helps them retain the displacement of their status as heroes with rebellious motives that are not given proper vent to.

Sekoni stands clearly as an opponent of the corrupt *status quo* both in expression and in action in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) as Black Tyger does in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992). As a Chief Engineer in an air-conditioned office, looking over applications, putting up rosters, signing up bicycle allowances, joining in committees and many more basic and nonprofessionally-related duties, besides a mass of corruption, he asks to be given more challenging ones. Considered to be out of his mind, a very queer person amongst conventional and

corrupt people, he is granted his wish but in a manner that would see this wish fizzle into the air. The inexpensive locally fabricated but able Ijioha electricity project he builds is rejected by the service and called "junk" (SOYINKA, 1972, p. 27). In the course of resisting the stings of corruption, he develops a psychiatric problem. Despite the similarity with Tyger, Sekoni cuts also an image of contrast. While Tyger uses his fists, he uses his engineering expertise. When we place Tyger's speech ineloquence by Sekoni's, the latter's damning speech impediments, stuttering, which aided his easy verbal dismissal by an unlearned village head at Ilugun, what emerges is a big difference that reveals how impactful his speech challenge is. In spite of these, his unyielding aspect and nature is towards the corrupt bureaucratic class in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) as provocative as the politicians' inhumanity to Tyger in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992).

Sagoe's Voidancy philosophy is a metonymic representation of noncompliance, with which he finds a voice in a world that takes delight in hushing people in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972). Although he is repressed when he gives fifty pounds for the journalistic job he gets at the *Independent Viewpoint*, a party's news organ, he seems to have something to cling to in order to hold out, something like a deflective mechanism, while standing against the pressure to do things immoral in his workplace. His philosophy of Voidancy which drags him under the image of the defiant hero is an example of this mechanism.

We glimpse at this image of confrontation after he resumes work. He carries out an investigation to which Sekoni's death may be linked, the story titled: *Who Engineered the Escapade?* which, with all the indisputable facts, could not scale through the editing stages into circulation. Derin, the Chairman of the medium, asks them to 'file it away' (SOYINKA, 1972, p. 94). At Sagoe's request to send the report to another news medium, Nwabuzor replies by calling his opposition to the group's working norms, 'ideals':

'Sagoe, look, I have been in this game for thirty years. Believe me there was a time when I held these ideals. I moved from one paper to the other, leaving in a flurry of righteous indignation. But look man, journalism here is just a business like any other. You do what your employer tells you. Believe me, Sagoe, just take my word.'

Sagoe took the manuscript. 'I am sending it to the other papers.'

Nwabuzor shook his head with the hopelessness of it. 'But Biodun you are in our employ. You used our time, this is our property.'

'Not if I resign.'

'No no, there is no need. Look, the other papers won't touch it. I tell you. The same process will take place and they will realize that a gentleman's agreement has been made over it.'

[...] Just forget it. I know you think you owe some loyalty to your friend; believe me, you don't. In the end you'll find it's every man for himself.'

'That certainly is a large view to take of life' (SOYINKA, 1972, p. 95-96).

It is from around this atmosphere of work and the inability to reconcile himself, his inner to the outward realities that flood his consciousness and which also suppresses and weighs him down that the Voidancy philosophy sprouts. Voidancy, therefore, materializes from the background of repression and attempts to defy it. All other notable jobs that would have been done in his entire career in that publishing firm are, in the treatment of this first major work, taken care of in the same way as his principles are assimilated into the ethics that the *Independent Viewpoint* operate by. Nwabuzor's attempts at re-education and reindoctrination of Sagoe into their peculiar ethics of journalism reasonably toned down observable manifestations of resistance. Of course, it unwittingly replaces them with displaced, shrouded, and sedimentary ones. He himself has fallen below what Sekoni exhibits because he has been rendered helpless and impotent long before Sagoe joins him.

Also evident in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) in the actions of Egbo who never ceases to be tugged and bogged down, haunted, and tormented by the memory of Osa stool he rejected because of the wealth and power it promises, and for which he is at present, torn between two opinions to make good of, is a figure of the defiant hero. Perhaps, the habit of drunkenness, a 'cover' to which Egbo and Sagoe are so totally reduced to, more than anything else, accounts for, partly, why they hold out for long in their resistance. In the same manner in which Jeremiah the photographer, who is haunted by policemen and thugs in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), so is Egbo by the Osa stool in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972). Within the same genre, this 'cover' effaces itself and is accorded the same regard the Celebes accord opium, to which they have become slaves, holding their will in some impenetrable imprisonment in Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

Thus far, the image Azaro, Tyger, and Mum, in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) and Noah, Sekoni, and Sagoe carve for themselves in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), as defiant heroes, is as far-reaching in Nigerian narratives as they are also profound. Amongst the Nigerian narratives where

the hero is superior to his environment and that of other men, like in myth, the defiant hero can be identified. At this point, he has not acquired denseness of meaning, but the potential for that is there nonetheless. Let us, first, locate him in non-Nigerian narratives. In the highest mimetic mode, the presence of this figure of the defiant hero is evident, in its clearest and easily identifiable terms, in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (AESCHYLUS, 1990) where Prometheus refuses to be assimilated while opting out as an odd piece of a god by stealing fire for man's aid in the family of gods. In this family, and Prometheus is well aware of this fact, the order and power that emanate from Zeus by which all other gods must abide, is sacrosanct. Still in this mode, and in a Nigerian narrative, we find him in the *Myths of Ife* (WYNDHAM, 2002) in the characters of Odudúwa and Orisha. Through the Promethean prism, we also locate Sundiata in *Sundiata* (NIANE, 2006) of the second mimetic mode, in the African literary tradition, where he is a superman, but not a god and is a supernaturally aided man-leader who, in refusing to be assimilated to the power ruling his own town, chooses to be an outcaste and a rebel like Prometheus and the Judaeo-Christian Moses. Sundiata returns later to rescue the land from the hands of an oppressor. Such characters as Sagoe, Sekoni, Egbo, Noah in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and Azaro, Tyger, Mum, Koto, in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), are, though a great gulf apart, significantly illuminated in the above works, as they also are greatly blurred because of their humanity and historically time-based settings in the two literary works.

The presence of the hero in the high mimetic mode, say in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), where the hero is a leader and is gifted above all others and refuses assimilation in Nigerian narratives, has tended to identify with a far earlier presence in the *Myths of Ife* (WYNDHAM, 2002) in such characters as Odudúwa and Orisha with a chasm of realism, as an artistic technique, occasioning the gap existing between the first narrative and the second. Odudúwa refuses to give up the bag he steals from his brother when he was asleep, preferring to die through transformation while in possession of it. However, the blurs that render characters indistinct due to active influence of the technique of realism of most realistic narratives is on this wise: while Azaro, Black Tyger and many others could be humans, recognisable like us and operating at our own level of experience with

tangible corporeal natures and features, Arámfe and Orisha are gods who have descended from heaven, an ahistorical place, to dispatch Arámfe's errand. An issue of note is that the refusal of one (Odudúwa) to be assimilated into the ego of the other (Orisha) aids us in identifying what characters posit the figure of the defiant hero. The difference between both groups of character is that the realistic technique beclouds the former characters from proper assessment and the former's equality with the latter ones. Here, the displacement of this figure can be said to have taken place. In fact, it is this quality of insistent refusal, defying his elder brother, that marks the hero out for nobility and upon it rests the tragic magnitude.

The shaping principle of resistance is still ascertainable from various Nigerian narratives alongside the *Myths of Ife* (WYNDHAM, 2002). The Father of gods' resolution defying all odds to fetch his palm-wine tapster in Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (TUTUOLA, 1963) is a case found in the second mimetic mode, where the hero, as a superman aided by charms or charmed instruments, commences a long journey to the Deaths' town. In *Sundiata* (NIANE, 2006), where a real human domain is painted, but not the realm of gods, this figure is been slightly displaced, with better clarity. One notices that its displacement in this work is much reinforced but so minutely demonstrated, within the Nigerian literary tradition in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a high mimetic work, and other low mimetic works like Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007), Iyayi's *Violence*, Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), Sefi Attas *Everything Good Will Come* (2007), and others, including the works, *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), analyzed in this essay.

To explain this in clarity further in realist works, some analysis would have to be undertaken. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo as a leader, an Igbo hero, is distinct from others and, like Sundiata, returns to take his rightful place in his clan without knowing that the "[...] clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another [...]" (ACHEBE, 1958, p. 121). Yet, unlike in Sundiata's case, where what causes his running away is man, the sorcerer Soumagorou, what constitutes the cause of the exit of Okonkwo is the law. The law would later turn out to be that which contests for his peace, confronts his beliefs and person, and accounts for his fall. The repulsion he has for the new order and the law this order brings is so heightened that even when others

have begun to see some method in the madness of the white man, a mild way of saying they are cowed by the white man's rule of law, Okonkwo is never so inclined and remains so until an opportune moment presents itself for him to revenge for all he detests in the white man and the brutal treatment received in the hands of the *cotma*. Compared to Sundiata, Okonkwo is a degree lower, with no element of wonder, miracle, and magic or supernatural enablement which we find in the Sundiata. Granted that he is a leader like the other, he is a different sort of leader, one whose characteristics verge on real humans and not what occur in legends. By being so life-like, Sagoe, Noah, Azaro, Black Tyger of both *The Interpreters* and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), without losing the image of one who resists an abnormal *status quo* and whose types could be found in Nigerian narratives and more, displacement, according to Frye, could be said to have set in (FRYE, 1957, p. 156-58). This displacement, the donning of metaphorical and simileic identity with some characters found in myths and romance by characters in realistic works, is so disguised that it is contextualized, true to pressures of the realist technique, in the norms of the Igbo group of Nigeria and in such socio-historical contexts of colonialism and empire expansion that our history books took account of. In Okonkwo, therefore, we can locate an Azaro, a Black Tyger, a Sagoe and a Noah.

Chimamanda Adichie's Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), around whom there is a stringent atmosphere both at her family's residence and Aunty Ifeoma's, displays this figure, too. In the former's abode, her confrontation manifests psychologically under her father's severe religious codes that must be obeyed without complaints. In the latter, it is more in form of possessing a staying power in the face of lack and, second, in form of outward and outgoing disposition toward a member of the opposite sex as she gives vent to her desires and lets her inculcated moral guards down.

Interestingly, the same set of codes Kambili's father sets down and expects everyone to abide by implicates what the white man does in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where he is to be seen as a desperate 'father'-figure who expects everyone from Mbaino to Umuofia to obey without disputations under the guise that

[...] we have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue (ACHEBE, 1958, p. 139-140).

His coming marks the subjugation and humiliation of the people he meets. He brings his 'justice' to a

people who already have their own justice system, expecting them to be on their knees to allow the alien concept of justice to reign. The people must all stand before the white man's strange notion with their wills bowed and wilted. This is where the tragedy is hinged, for it is Okonkwo's inability to allow himself, as he supposes Umuofia would be, to go through the shameful rudimentary details of this circumstance that makes him the hero of resistance that he is. He takes his life after killing the court messenger that has come to threaten and order them to stop the meeting at the market square in the name of "the white man whose power you know too well" (ACHEBE, 1958, p. 146). Now, his resistance in the scene where Ikemefuna is killed and that exhibited at the market square are almost similar, but totally different, clouding further, as it were, the simple construct of the figure of the defiant hero we find in the works of the first and second mimetic modes of the Nigerian literary tradition. The first looks up to a native code of feminineness while the other draws inspiration from fear of past treatments from fellow men. Man becomes not merely an opposite concept, woman or femaleness; it appreciates in meaning and is plumbed into a symbolic depth, befuddling Okonkwo's thinking. To him, there is a level of endurance beyond which a 'man', who is not a woman in Umuofia's perception, ought no longer to bear.

Stepping down a little lower to the low mimetic mode, where the hero is neither superior to other men nor their environment, we locate Oshevire, who, in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), unlike Okonkwo, is neither a leader, nor a god, in Frye's categorization, but a commoner who is common enough to possess a parcel of land he bars Toje, an avaricious usurper, from forcefully snatching away from him. For this, he swaps position with Prometheus, Sundiata and Okonkwo. He is not willing to bow to some bully's ego and for this he is arrested and kept in jail to rot through Toje's bribery and other machinations. Toje's insistence through bribery and every other conceivable acts of wickedness that Oshevire should rot in jail serves dual purposes: the usurpation of the disputed landed property and the trying of his hands on his Oshevire's wife, severally violating her in the process. These all go to exemplify this figure of the defiant hero. The restraints he wishes Oshevire physically is what Toje gets reproductively. The knowledge of this contributes immensely to the disaster that rocks Oshevire's family, who as a husband, dies in the hands of unsuspecting soldiers within twenty-four hours of his release from detention. This image of the defiant hero in Oshevire resonates in such characters as Kola, Sagoe, Dehinwa,

Egbo, Lasunwon, Golder, Noah, and others in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and Tyger, Azaro, Mum, and Madame Koto in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), all of whom are, by far, much more educated and experienced in worldly matters than Oshevire. In all these peculiar and special features of the characters that may be compared adequately with Oshevire, in both *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) and the generality of the Nigerian literary tradition, the career of the figure, of the defiant hero in response to a reigning ego, though fuzzy in this mode, is present and can be outlined, giving this *mythos* a very pungent display and evocation. At the lower rung of Nigeria's literary tradition there is prevalent the reign and supremacy of just one ego, say from 1970 to 2000, the representations of the figure of the defiant hero are as submerged as it is somewhat evident. Others must be totally or partially subservient and subjugated. Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) and Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972) possessing the same historical indices – those of war, authoritarian rule, the atmosphere of apprehensiveness, and the cosmology of chaos – also present before us an instance of the supremacy of a singular ego.

Toje's violation of Oshevire's wife in *The Last Duty* (1976) compares Ngozi's by her own biological father with the stern warning not to tell her mother in Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007). The powerlessness and her reaction to this state of powerlessness, which is not confrontational and rebellious and to which one can attribute apparent defiance, interestingly, opens to us a vista of the obverse of the obvious – this latent hibernating obstinacy and defiance that she pours all her soul's contents into by escaping pain. She is nonetheless a defiant heroine standing out against whatever she suffers in different guises: in confrontation with James; in verbal fight-back with Nnamdi; in escape – to London – to James; and, still within London, in escape from James to Providence. The image of Egbo in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and Azaro in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) indeed hover around her, the only major difference being that she is a low mimetic character like Azaro in contrast to Egbo.

Similar responses to the situation of the defiant hero yet abound in other works of the low mimetic mode of the Nigerian literary tradition like Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), though sometimes with variations as in Iyayi's *Violence*, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2007) and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002). Zilayefa in *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) discovering that her mother's farmland has been scorched of any sort of botanical habitat and that they are rendered

penniless with no means of subsistence decides to search for an opportunity that will rescue her from her "colourless existence" (AGARY, 2006, p. 21). She hopes that "[...] if love came with escape, it would be a bonus" (AGARY, 2006, p. 23). Village life is hell for her as "term time" (SOYINKA, 1972, p. 216) is hell for Joe Golder in *The Interpreters*. Zilayefa's situation differs from those of the other heroes because, rather than humans standing as the reigning ego against which she strives to defy, it is a nonhuman, the situation of poverty, degradation, and impoverishment that she resists. Rather than fight the agents of these forces of restraint, in a manner somewhat unconventional of a hero, she escapes to the city laying hold on love and sugar-father's benevolence to get out – a thing that Enitan in *Everything Good Will Come* (ATTA, 2007), Hagar in *Waiting for an Angel* (HABILA, 2002), Ogbemudia in *Violence* (IYAYI, 1979), even Azaro in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), and many others in spite of many temptations, do not have recourse to.

The atmosphere of apprehension in this work is the same in *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), *Song of Enchantment* (OKRI, 2003) and *Infinite Riches* (OKRI, 1998) and other stories of the collection, *Stars of a New Curfew* (OKRI, 1988). In the second and third works, the heroes posting this *mythos* put up a revolt that takes the form of protest as Erika King's and Zilayefa's take the form of escape. The form of escape from castration through confrontation is what we find in Iyayi's *Violence* where a collection of individuals who have been held under the reign of a singular ego – the employer, just as the 'interpreters' who under the invisible ego of society, no matter how hard they try to free themselves in *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972), decide to say 'no' to it. All these bring illumination to the fact that castration could be personal, group as well as communal defiance.

In *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), the figure of the defiant hero has been made possible by the critical operation of first attempting to see beyond the most plausible activities of the characters eras. These works have created their own material contexts for verisimilitude out of their eras. The more characters are recognizable as humans, as historically ascertainable human-likeness, for that matter, the more they plumb themselves deeper into exploring and exemplifying the figure of the defiant hero with Prometheus, Sundiata, Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Egbo, Tyger, Azaro and many others, in that mythic order, as models, effusing interesting illumination as a close reader analyzes packets of relations with the benefit of hindsight.

All these examples add up to something: that as the presence of the figure enunciating the figure of the defiant hero progresses and journeys from clarity to obscurity and imprecision, these being in direct consonance and concurrence with its movement from Frye's schema of myth – the first mimetic mode – to latter ones, realist literature, narratives tend to assimilate into themselves images from modern social situations and conditions of life. These narratives are but a few. Many more instances abound in the Nigerian narratives, proving to us that such critical remark that *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992) bear social, cultural, ethnic, and historical determinate data relies too much on what a text appropriates and assimilates into its poetic frame, but which is not the context of that text. The assimilation of these properties is something that happens by contingency and as such cannot be termed the substance of representation. These works, as one may see, carry within the spaces of their pages an enduring image that is rooted in Nigerian narratives.

### Final considerations

We have seen in this essay, with a reliance on Frye's concept of five mimetic modes/categories and with a bearing taken from the analyses of the central character(s) of *The Interpreters* (SOYINKA, 1972) and *The Famished Road* (OKRI, 1992), how the recurrent figure of the defiant hero in Nigerian narratives shows forth. The said figure is both revealed through the recurrent presence of the structure of his actions in narratives of the first mode like myths, and, later, concealed via the realistic technique of latter narratives. Under the hold of this technique, human characters, settings, and actions help to keep this figure from apparentness and easy visibility, whereas in the mythic mode, where this figure first surfaces as gods, fantastical settings and actions bare his figure. Besides other structures or patterns such as those that include crime and punishment, exile, wandering, death and revival, which qualify as themes and into which further research could inquire, the ultimate deduction from the foregoing is that similar processes, where the defiant hero is involved, flourish in many more narratives belonging to the Nigerian literary tradition, and that it offers us considerable insights with which to rethink earlier critical viewpoints on these set of texts analyzed.

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