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Blending Genres in the Palm-Wine Drinkard: Myth, Orality, and the Modernist African Novel

K. N. Uma Devi*, V. Jennifer Rani

Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS) Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamic blending of myth, oral tradition, and modernist narrative techniques in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, positioning the text as a pioneering work in the formation of the African novel. Drawing on the rich reservoir of Yoruba folklore, the novel reconfigures indigenous storytelling modes within a written, English-language framework, thereby challenging Western literary conventions. The study explores how myth functions not merely as thematic content but as a structural principle that shapes the episodic, cyclical journey of the protagonist. It also highlights the influence of orality, evident in repetitive patterns, formulaic expressions, and communal modes of narration, which disrupt linear plot development and conventional realism. By situating the text within modernist discourse, the paper argues that Tutuola's narrative resists rigid genre classifications, instead creating a hybrid literary form that negotiates between tradition and innovation. This fusion ultimately redefines the boundaries of the novel and asserts a distinct African aesthetic that privileges cultural memory, performative storytelling, and imaginative freedom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) arrived in the British literary world through the advocacy of Dylan Thomas, who praised its "brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching story" in terms that said as much about what English literary culture found exotic as about what the novel actually is. Tutuola's novel -the first Nigerian novel in English to achieve international publication -is organized around the journey of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* into the Dead's Town to retrieve his deceased tapster, and the adventures he encounters along the way: a figure called the Skull who hires himself out as a "complete gentleman"; the town of Wraith-Island; the Faithful Mother of the White Tree; a series of supernatural beings and impossible environments that are rendered in a prose style that is neither the formal English of educated Nigerian writers nor the vernacular English of the uneducated but something specifically Tutuola's own -a dialect of English that has internalized the syntactic and rhythmic patterns of Yoruba oral narrative and produced from that internalization a formal instrument unlike anything in the existing literary tradition. The novel's generic hybridity -its blending of Yoruba oral tradition, European literary conventions, and a prose style that belongs to neither tradition entirely -is the subject of this chapter. Tutuola has been both celebrated for this hybridity and criticized: celebrated by Western readers for the freshness and vitality of his prose, and criticized by Nigerian literary intellectuals -most prominently Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe -for a lack of formal sophistication and an inaccurate rendering of Yoruba mythology. Both responses, this chapter

*Corresponding author: offrec24@gmail.com

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argues, miss the specific achievement of what Tutuola has done: the production of a new literary form from the encounter between oral and written traditions, between Yoruba mythological imagination and the English prose novel.

Oral Tradition and the Logic of the Journey Narrative: The Palm-Wine Drinkard's journey is organized by the logic of the African oral narrative tradition -specifically the Yoruba tradition of the hero's journey into the supernatural world -rather than by the logic of the European novel's plot development. Events follow each other by association and accumulation rather than by causal sequence; each encounter is complete in itself rather than a step in a developing narrative arc; the protagonist's character does not develop in the sense that the European Bildungsroman assumes development but remains constant -a constant capacity for engagement with the supernatural -across the novel's varied episodes. Walter Ong's analysis in *Orality and Literacy* (1982) of how the structures of oral narrative differ from the structures of literate narrative -the oral tendency toward aggregation rather than subordination, toward situational rather than abstract thinking, toward the agonistic and the participatory rather than the distanced and analytical -provides the theoretical framework within which Tutuola's narrative logic is most clearly legible. His novel does not fail to achieve the structures of the European prose novel; it achieves the structures of the Yoruba oral narrative in the medium of English prose, and the result is a formally distinct achievement that requires its own analytical framework rather than evaluation against the standard of a tradition it was not trying to inhabit.

The Incomplete Gentleman and Colonial Mimicry: The episode of the Skull who presents himself as a "complete gentleman" -who hires himself from market to market, attracting the admiration of a young woman who follows him as he progressively returns the body parts he has borrowed until he is only a skull -is the novel's most concentrated figure for colonial mimicry and its consequences. The "complete gentleman" is an ironic appropriation of the colonial ideal of the properly dressed, properly mannered European-educated African: a figure whose completeness is borrowed, whose appearance of civilization conceals a fundamental incompleteness, and whose attractiveness to the naive young woman is a figure for the seductions of the colonial model. Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial mimicry -the way in which the colonial administration simultaneously demands that the colonized resemble the colonizer and ensures that the resemblance is always imperfect, always marked by a difference that maintains the colonial hierarchy -is applicable to the Skull episode in an inverted form: Tutuola's Skull is the colonized subject's image of the colonizer, a figure whose impressive appearance conceals an absence of substance, whose completeness is a borrowed construct rather than an inherent quality. The episode is funny and frightening simultaneously, which is the specific tonal register of Tutuola's best writing: the comic and the macabre inhabiting the same narrative moment without either cancelling the other.

2. CONCLUSION

The Palm-Wine Drinkard remains one of the most formally original novels in the African literary tradition, and its originality is inseparable from its hybridity: its location in the space between the oral and the written, between the Yoruba mythological imagination and the English prose novel, between the local and the global. Tutuola does not resolve this hybridity into a clean synthesis; he inhabits it with an inventiveness that produces something genuinely new -a form of fiction that belongs to neither tradition entirely and that has enriched both by demonstrating what their encounter can produce when neither is simply subordinated to the other.

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