

Storytelling in african literature essay examples

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Introduction

Oral literature in many societies has been a vehicle for preserving culture and memories. Traditionally, from the lips of an adroit narrator to the ears of keen listeners and eventually to their hearts, oral literature has played a major role in the traditional African set-up. Africa has acquired a unique place in world literature due to outstanding use of storytelling technique in their written literature. Africans have valued great storytellers and stories since time immemorial.

Most of Africa literature is deeply rooted in oral traditions. Although ancient writings also exist in African literature, storytelling and oral literature takes a special place (Courlander 34). Oral traditions form one of the greatest sources on information pertaining to the rich African culture. Use of tales, folks and songs is an integral part of African oral traditions. This explains the connection between the use of storytelling technique in most works of novelists and writers from Africa. The orality of African culture has had a big influence on the writing of most novelists who hail from Africa. This unique style has continued to be nurtured by majority, if not all of the big names in literature who come from Africa (Courlander 67). The utilization of the story telling technique or direct inclusion of African traditional folktales is quite palpable in the works of great novelists such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Idris Ali (Egypt), Sebbar (Algeria) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya) among others.

In most African communities, storytelling was a very common cultural aspect. Stories were told around fire places by the elderly especially in the evenings. Oral traditions, among them story telling was used as a tool for

passing historical information about the community from one generation to the other. This tool was used to pass some moral lessons to children (Jones 56). It was a strong educational device that was used to teach children good from the wrong. As most of these great novelists from Africa grew up, storytelling had not been eroded as it stands at the moment. The technique of storytelling has easily been carried to written work and also in theatrical performances of most plays. It is in the recent past with the introduction of written and electronic literature that most African communities have abandoned this cultural aspect. For example, Chinua Achebe grew up in Ogidi village which is located in the eastern part of Nigeria where all children gathered around the fire place to listen to stories. This tradition was deeply entrenched in to Achebe's life and this is the reason why he never forgot his heritage even in his written work. This writer has always been able to capture the interest of his readers through the story telling technique which is quite clear in most of his novels.

All novels with an African origin use this technique to give their work an African touch. There is no single piece of literature from Chinua Achebe or Ama Atta Aidou that does not use these device (Jones 78). These writers may assume the role of storytelling in their novel or may pick a character within the novel and dedicate that role to her. For instance in Ama Atta's novel: *The Dilemma of the Ghost* uses this tool although through a character in the book. In the book there are two characters named first woman and second woman who play the role of narrating the tale about the dilemma ghost. Through the use of folk songs, proverbs, parables and songs, the two women pass tenets or doctrines of oral traditions from one generation to another as

their role in the community . However; in this case they pass the tenets to the audience or readers of the novel.

One of the most famous books in African literature is Things Fall Apart written by renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe is considered as one of the greatest story tellers in African literature and Things Fall Apart has been cited as an exemplary piece of literal art across the globe. The greatest aspect of Things Fall Apart would however have to be the author's mastery of the story telling technique. Things Fall Apart is actually a narrative about African colonization by Europeans but the story is told from the colonized people's view point. One of the descriptions of this is given in the following text form the book where Achebe states that: " The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (78).

The novel was published in the year in 1958 and recounts the adventures of a village warrior and hero, Okwonko who gives a description of white missionaries arrival to his traditional Igbo village an also the impact that these Europeans had on the African society and life at the turn of the 19th Century

In the book, Achebe uses the art of storytelling to comprehensively represent the pre-colonial Igbo community's oral aspects. He embeds a lot of proverbs and folk tales in his work to further solidify the story telling aspect. In the book, Achebe, states that " Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are

eaten." (pg 4) In fact, *Things Fall Apart* not only presents an individual's portrait that is Okwonko, but also presents the portrait of an entire village and indeed a portrait of an entire civilization.

In terms of storytelling, *Things Fall Apart* appears itself to be a kind of a ritual that is integrated fully into the people's communal life. Chinua Achebe presents his Igbo culture story wholly but within his novel's boundaries that he himself has set. The meaning of this is that despite the inclusion of various stories in the book, *Things Fall Apart* however falls under the category of a fully fledged novel.

What Chinua Achebe actually does is to theorize his story, that is, he presents a demonstration and discussion of a story's functions within the Igbo's community and culture. It is this theorizing of storytelling that inadvertently affects how the audience interprets the story. Because of Achebe's mastery of the story telling art, he makes sure that whoever reads the story, whether he is an America, European or Nigerian is touched by the story telling technique that has anthropological, realist or pedagogical function. The story telling technique shows the life texture in a seemingly lost civilization and also underscores some other wider themes that contribute to the novels overall structures and patterns.

So how does the story exactly function in *Things Fall Apart*? First Achebe through this work shows the nature of storytelling as an essential craft rather than as a liberal art. For example, in one detailed scene in the novel, Okwonko, the main protagonist daughter, Eznima is telling stories with Ekwefi, her mother. This is actually a process that happens between all three wives of Okwonko and their daughters. From, this we can make an

assumption that it also takes place across all households in the Igbo community. “ Low voices , broken now and again by singing, reached Okwonko from his wives, huts as each woman and her children told folk stories” (pg 96). This particular scene in fact shows the audience Eznima initially learning how to narrate stories in accordance to a specific prescribed form. When the daughter Eznima interrupts her Ekwefi, her mother urges her to be patient assuring her that her question will be answered soon by the story being told.

In another scene, the daughter astutely makes a point to her mother that the story should at least have a song. Her mother gracefully accepts criticism in the process revealing the vitality of ritual forms adherence when it comes to telling tales. The story is actually an Igbo folk tale about a greedy tortoise, (68-70). In the end, Eznima attempts to tell her own tale and from this; her inexperience in the art of storytelling is displayed through her confusion when trying to figure out how to tell her story. In this particular scene, Chinua Achebe represents the art of storytelling as a precise inherited craft that is essentially passed down in the communal life’s daily rhythm. It also gives credence to the notion that all worldly human cultures try to create narratives or stories as a mode of making or giving sense to various things in the world.

In this play we observe that story telling is actually an element of the traditional African theatre. Additionally, after going through this award winning piece of work, we get to know a technique that most African writers use when telling their stories. This technique is that they utilize the fact that in various non-literate communities found in Africa, storytellers were the one

who preserved the history. Therefore, in this novel, the author puts herself in the place of a story teller and preserves the history of the community when narrating. Through her narration we feel that she holds a place that is privileged and central to the maintenance and preservation of the culture of the entire community. Aidou relies on the history of the community and through her narration we observe that this novel is both an educational and entertaining device.

In the novel, Ama Atta Aidou utilizes African storytelling oral tradition. For instance, the following Nana's speech " My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier/Now what shall I tell who are gone," (p. 19) portrays how language is used by the author and other African writers to exhibit ties to oral tradition. Furthermore, we observe that in this novel she augments the narration with audience interaction, dramatic action, song, music and dance. These are techniques that she skillfully uses to make her work appear more appealing to the readers. Additionally, the author's use of music, song, and dances in the play depicts a technique of storytelling in African literature. The other African writers also utilize these techniques in their storytelling. " The Dilemma of a Ghost" is essentially related to an exceptional storytelling technique called dilemma tale. Dilemma tale is actually a description technique that predominantly arouses serious and deep examining debates of political, social and moral concerns, which challenge individuals in their day to day experiences. This technique therefore poses moral significance queries that are difficult for us to answer.

Things Fall Apart and The Dilemma of a Ghost are therefore very good examples of how African literature writers use the storytelling technique to

reflect the African culture orality through use of vices such as traditional folktales.

Works Cited

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