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**Style as the Woman: a Critical Analysis of Fatima Pam's
*Once upon a Country***

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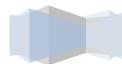
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Abstract

The dynamic nature of language usually brings about differences in its usage among different groups of people as well as individuals. It has been linguistically observed that no two individuals with a common language use it in exactly the same way. This is undoubtedly a question of style or "different strokes for different folks". It is in the given context that this paper assesses the salient linguistic and literary peculiarities of Fatima Pam in Once upon a Country. The features which are arguably unusual or original to the author in this collection of stories include a concentrated use of compound and complex sentences, a generally simplified diction, a diversified register, an omniscient and condensed narrative style that incorporates social comments, a non-linear presentation of events, and the use of proverbs and poetry.

Introduction

Style as a concept in the context of language use is fluid in nature. It has a high degree of adaptability in different linguistic or literary settings.



Style, if assessed from a linguistic perspective, can be understood in terms of how an individual or even a group uses the language resources at its disposal either in spoken or written communication.

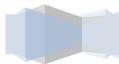
The characterization of style ‘as the woman’ is underscored by an understanding that the use of language is deliberate. Style in this regard is not a passive phenomenon or an afterthought. It is a conscious activity which defines a writer or speaker. When an individual’s linguistic habits have assumed a kind of consistency, then one can refer to them as his or her linguistic style. This can be expressed through the spoken or written medium. It is also in line with Azuike’s submission, that “there must be a conscious writer who makes deliberate distinctive choices of the linguistic features that appears in their discourse” (80).

The organization of an individual’s thoughts in written expressions is arguably a function of the person’s linguistic competence. Fatima Pam’s manner of expression (the organization of the linguistic resources at her disposal) in *Once upon a Country* is peculiarly unique. There is a high degree of deviation from the norm of narration throughout the text. This is the thrust of this linguistic and literary investigation.

Plot

Once upon a Country is a kaleidoscopic presentation of people and events within an imaginary country – Bonny-Land. The story begins with Jackson, a taxi driver in Merry Merry town, heading for the unnamed capital of Bonny-Land with four male passengers: Mr. Williams, Mr. Sunny, Pa Samuel and Casanova. It is an interesting admixture of human archetypes with different attitudes, inclinations and personal problems. From the presentation, each of the passengers is on his way to the capital for a particular cause. Mr. Williams cannot wait to get back to his work with the British firm; Mr. Sunny is on his way to woo back his fleeing wife and to bring back his children; Pa Samuel must bring back his errant son who has refused to help out on the farm; and Casanova, an exceptionally good looking fellow, is going to school. Whatever happens to their dreams or aspirations can only be imagined since their arrival in the city marks the end of their part in the general plot.

Situated within the general plot is the story of Mammy Johnson, a queer old woman in an equally queer house on St. Andréws Street, a section of the city that is always full of activities amidst the slum and dirt of a street that used to



be very clean. The passage of time has taken a toll on St. Andrews and its most “faithful” dweller, Mammy Johnson, a ninety year old woman who lives a lonely, sedentary life on an old cushioned arm-chair on her balcony overlooking the busy street.

“A City Trader” is the story of Julie, a young and healthy mother of three, who trades in children’s clothes in a small stall in the famous “Buy Buy” market. Her life is fraught with the restlessness that characterizes Bonny-Land in addition to troublesome in-laws who are unsatisfied with her three “female” children and want her husband to take another wife. Julie is however neither deterred by this nor by the daily challenges associated with trade: tricky conductors, jealous co-traders, and offensive customers.

Pa Raymond and Mama Raymond is an amiable couple in the story “Tender Hearts”. Their house is a refuge for troubled hearts like those of Emilia and Emmanuella whose husbands have deserted them. Vince (Mr. Samson Everest) is Emilia’s husband whose drunkenness ends his first marriage to nurse Muriel. Emilia turns out to be a fighter like Muriel, thus forcing Vince out of his matrimonial home. Stanley, Emmanuella’s husband, on the other hand, writes her a letter to inform her of his new-found love.

Reverend Blake is a missionary to Bonny-Land from the West Indies whose major concern is his parishioners that he can only comfort with words from the Scriptures, seeing that he does not have answers to all their questions nor solutions to all their problems. Reverend Blake himself needs answers; for he is appalled by the wickedness of man. Thus, he delights in sitting by the seashore to look at nature’s beauty.

Chief Godwin is a prominent but promiscuous politician in the story; “A Politician”, who is hell-bent on defeating his opponent for a second tenure in office. His warm disposition, charming smiles and attractiveness even at sixty endear many people, especially women, to him. Notable among his retinue of girlfriends is Melinda, a psychedelic, beautiful, twenty-five year old woman “who had just finished law school” (98). She is a big threat to Chief Godwin’s thirty year marriage to Susan, since he contemplates having Melinda for a second wife. Things however take a different turn when Henry, his polygamous friend, dies of a heart attack. He decides to remain monogamous thereafter, to the surprise but pleasant delight of his pious wife.

“A Passage of Time” chronicles the affectionate relationship between Sylvia, ‘a brilliant journalist and writer’ and James, a medical doctor, who both



experience good and bad times together and apart as lovers. They share their childhood and teenage years together before momentarily parting ways for the US and England respectively. Life for the duo with other citizens in Bonny-Land becomes increasingly challenging as the ruling government and the opposition enter into a power tussle which eventually degenerates into a coup and a civil war. Sylvia gets arrested and detained for her role as a reporter during the crisis. She is to be released in an exchange for two top military officers and eight prisoners of war from the government side. The exchange is however truncated by a gunshot which wounds her. She is left in the forest because it is presumed that she has died. James and his friends however revive and save her life. Afterwards, she leaves for the US and tours other countries as a writer. She later returns to James with their daughter to the joy and amazement of James who has, hitherto, not known of her conception after the gunshot incident.

All of these stories constitute the subplots of the novel, even though each one can function effectively as a short story, if taken alone. But taken together as an organic whole, the narrative presents different facets of life in a nation, spanning the colonial days to the post-colonial era. In this sense, the novel can also be viewed as presenting the history of a typical African state from its pre-colonial, superstitious past up to the post-independence phase.

Pam's Linguistic and Literary Peculiarities:

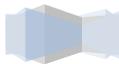
1 The use of Compound and Complex Sentences

Fatima Pam is very much at home with the use of compound and complex sentences. She is an elaborate narrator, stating in exhaustive terms any information that is relevant to the description of a character or situation. These elaborate presentations are usually captured in compound and complex expressions.

a. Compound Sentences

In a compound sentence, two or more clauses are linked on an equal basis so that neither clause is dependent on the other. These independent clauses are joined by coordinating conjunctions or coordinators like 'and', 'but', and 'or'. The stories in *Once upon a Country* are replete with these sentence structures as exemplified in the following:

He could see that they were getting impatient, but he was not going to move his vehicle without one more passenger.
From "A Journey"; p. 2.



The extract is related to Jackson, the taxi driver, who is never disturbed about his passengers' impatience, as characteristic of many commuters. The description is given through the use of two independent clauses that are joined together by 'but'.

1. He could see that they were getting impatient.
2. He was not going to move his vehicle without one more passenger.

Another description which is presented in a compound structure is about Mr. Williams:

He had been the first to arrive, and had come as early as five o'clock so as not to miss the early transport to the city – page 3.

This single sentence can neatly be split into two independent structures thus;

1. He had been the first to arrive.
2. [He] had come as early as five o'clock so as not to miss the early transport to the city.

b. Complex Sentences

The use of complex sentences in *Once upon a Country* is arguably excessive. As noted earlier, Pam is undoubtedly a natural narrator who endeavours to capture the complexities of life with descriptions – an effort which in turn brings about a concentrated use of complex structures.

A complex sentence has two or more clauses placed in an unequal relationship so that one is grammatically dependent on another. The subordinate clause usually constitutes an entire element of the main clause. Subordination is enhanced by the use of subordinators like 'when', 'as soon as', 'that', 'if', 'although'. The following sentences are examples of the plethora of complex structures used in the entire story:

But then this was in the early sixties when such journeys from far away towns and villages to the capital were never pleasant or comfortable – pp 1-2.

In the next example, a whole paragraph is a single complex sentence.

However, Jackson was not the only driver to be there early; the motor park was already alive with drivers and motor



park boys helping the drivers call out their destinations to would-be travellers, as the latter walked to and fro anxiously trying to get a vehicle to take them to their destinations – p. 2.

The following complex sentence has two independent clauses with a single subordinate clause;

After keeping with them for two days, Pa Raymond and Mama Raymond spoke to her and tried to console her; but she was still in a daze – p.71.

1. Pa Raymond and Mama Raymond spoke to her and tried to console her – main clause
2. She was still in a daze – main clause

After keeping with them for two days – subordinating clause of the first main clause.

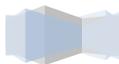
Pam is however not totally averse to the use of the simple sentence. Its usage in the stories is however very minimal compared to the prominence given to those of compound and complex sentences which are ‘foregrounded’.

Her Diction and Register

Another feature of Pam’s style in *Once upon a Country* is her choice of words. Although register places a kind of restraint on a language user as to what appropriate lexical items to use, the words so selected are solely dependent on the writer or speaker. No two writers use the same range of words in their compositions even if they draw from similar fields.

Pam generally uses familiar words and terms in her reminiscent presentation of life in Bonny-Land. These words usually have the colouration of the different aspects of human life, albeit avoiding the overt technicalities that often characterize some of those aspects. However, some words used in the stories still ‘defy’ a simple characterization but are not excessively used to warrant a special consideration.

Apart from a generalized simple diction, the words are drawn from different spheres of the multifaceted and complex constitution of Bonny-Land, the imaginary country. Pam draws her diction from politics, religion, business,



transportation, intimate or filial relationships, journalism, and the military, traditional beliefs as well as from the day-to-day routine of the populace.

Religion

The stories in *Once upon a Country* are inundated with Christian religious expressions, quotes, words or beliefs. This receives a greater emphasis in the story "Reverend Blake". The religious register is brought to the fore in the following extracts:

He tried to recite Psalm 23, Psalm 91, and Psalm 121, but because he was so gripped with fear, although he would never have admitted it, he kept forgetting the words and mixing the Psalms up – page 26.

His [Pa Raymond] famous words of advice were always "God will take control, and this too will pass away" – p. 69.

Reverend Blake is presented as a burden bearer considering the care and concern that his parishioners bring before him. However, a particular verse of scriptures usually comforts his heart:

...Then the words from the scriptures suddenly came to him. "Don't let your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me" – page 85.

Apart from the numerous Christian expressions and scriptural quotations, some other words and phrases with religious connotations are worth mentioning:

"prayer meetings" – page 96; "strong Christian background" – page 96; "spiritual strength" – page 97; "parish" – page 80; "repent" – page 80; "Bibles" – page 80; "Church members" – page 80; "scriptures" – page 79; "Parishioners" – page 78 and "Reverend" – page 78, among others.

Traditional Beliefs and Ideals

Closely related to the use of Christian register in the text are words and structures that convey typical African traditions and beliefs as enumerated below:

"Cannibals", "cannibalism" – page 21



“Juju men” – page 21. This phrase is repeatedly used in the story “A Journey”. To make matters worse, an old owl started hooting mournfully on top of the tree near where the car had stopped” – page 22.

It is a general African belief that owls are harbingers of bad omen as captured in the following authorial explanation:

Furthermore, he [Jackson] did not like the way the owl was hooting over his head. He was a superstitious man, and in his village it was said that it was a bad omen for an owl to be hooting, especially over one’s head – page 23.

Transportation

Life in Bonny-Land is boisterous. That is, there is much activity especially in the capital city. The daily routine of the people involves movement from one point to another. The concept of travelling is characterized by rural-town, intra-town, or intra-street movements, depending on the activity being carried out.

The story “A Journey” is replete with words and expressions that are typical of human movement from one point to another as the following examples portray:

The journey to the capital was always long and unpleasant. The roads were untarred and dangerous, the holes on them numerous and the dust left behind from moving vehicles overpowering especially in the dry season – page 1.

The italicized words ‘journey’, ‘roads’, ‘untarred’, and ‘moving vehicles’ clearly depict transport.

Other transport-related words and phrases identified in the text include the following:

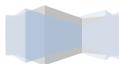
“driver” – page 2; “slowed down” – page 29;

“car park” – page 2; “sidewalks” – page 36;

“passengers” – page 2; “pavements” – page 36;

“travellers” – page 2; “pedestrians” – page 36;

“motor park” – page 2; “local bus” – page 47;



“taxi” – page 2; “bus conductor” – page 50 ;
“driving career” – page 5; “garage” – page 51;
“safe journey” – page 6; “motorists” – page 120;
“steady speed” – page 13; “driving license” – page 120;
“accident” – page 28; and “car particulars” – page 120, among others.

Politics

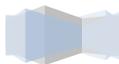
Political issues are conspicuously interwoven in the plot structure of Pam's *Once upon a Country*, giving it the currency that is characteristic of a contemporary political milieu, especially in the African context. We do not, however, know the continental location of Bonny-Land but can only infer an imaginary African locale from the characters and their experiences.

Politics is given prominence in the story titled “A Politician” which chronicles the hopes, visions, escapades, challenges, weaknesses and other qualities of Chief Godwin, a popular politician in Bonny-Land. The following excerpts provide vivid insights into his life and political inclinations;

He, Chief Godwin, was a politician and had other kinds of problems. His main preoccupation was how to get as many votes as he could, from the people of Bonny-Land and win against his opponent by hook or by crook if the need arose – pages 87-88.

The words and phrases related to politics are italicized. Similar lexical items, phrases and expressions identified in the text include

“the masses” – page 88; “nomination” – page 92;
“political arena” – page 88; “candidate” – page 92;
“... one who had won elections” – page 91; “campaign” – page 92;
“a member of the ruling party” – page 91; “power and wealth” – page 112;
“second term” – page 91; “corrupt politicians” – page 113;



“supporters” – page 91; “the president was a dictator to the core...” – page 116;

“the incumbent in his zone” – page 91; “opposition party” – page 116 and “Government supporter” – page 127, among others.

The following excerpt ultimately captures the thrust of the political concerns in the text:

The new breed of politicians were definitely not concerned with the welfare of the impoverished masses. These politicians were greedy, oppressive, and determined to grab power and money by any means – page 112.

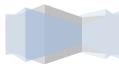
It has been noted that other lexical fields apart from religion, transportation or politics are explored in *Once upon a Country* which are not elaborated in this article. These include such fields as Journalism (in the story “A Passage of Time” page 107), Business (especially in “A City Trader” and “Mammy Johnson”, pages 31 and 47 respectively), Intimate/Filial Relationships (which cut across the different stories but particularly in “A Passage of Time” and “A Politician”), Medicine and the Military (in “A Passage of Time” respectively).

Narrative Style:

a. Omniscient Point of View

The author adopts the omniscient point of view to narrate the events and human activities that characterize life in Bonny-Land. The authorial narrator is all eyes and ears as well as in all places at all times to provide an up-to-date account of the activities in both village and city. This deftness of description and presentation in a bid to take readers into the world of her characters however puts more action on the narrator than the characters themselves. The narrator hardly ‘allows’ or ‘permits’ the characters to speak for themselves since she is not only everywhere at the same time, but must also be their spokesperson including the expressions of their thoughts, fears and dreams. This leaves little room for dialogue in the stories; hence its use in the text is scanty and even countable.

The condensed and elaborated descriptive technique of the author arguably makes the work more of a historical documentation than the vivacity that characterizes living in any given community or society at any given time.



This position can be strengthened by a critical consideration of the title, *Once upon a Country*, which would no doubt reveal that the work is a presentation of events that transpired in Bonny-Land at some point in the past. Such a presentation can be categorized as a 'reminiscent' point of view. This is more so that "once upon a time" is usually the opening phrase of many folktales or stories in the past which are told in the present.

The historical perspective ascribed to *Once upon a Country* in this article is further given credence by the consistent use of the past tense. The entire stories are presented in the past as the following lines exemplify:

The journey to the capital was always long and unpleasant
– page 1.

The capital was slowly waking up from its slumber. In some homes and houses people turned this way and that way on their beds or mats, not sure whether they should get up or sleep for another ten minutes or half an hour or even for another full hour – page 31.

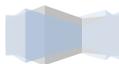
Additionally, actions which usually give any literary work some measure of urgency and currency are equally encapsulated in past progressive tenses as identified in the following sentences;

His grandfather with the help of his walking stick was speeding faster than anyone else towards the door and with the walking stick he pushed everyone in his way aside, and was the first to get out of the house, to the amazement of everybody, considering that his grandfather always complained of rheumatism and pain in his legs – page 15.

The author however deserves some commendation for the dexterous consistency of using the past tense to narrate not just a simple plot story but multiple plot stories – there are seven stories in all and each story has its own attendant sub-plots. This clearly reveals a peculiarity or singularity that no doubt characterizes her narrative style.

b. Social Comments

Apart from the general description of places, people and events, the narration in *Once upon a Country* is severally interspersed with some universal thoughts, maxims or reflections on humanity. The author's personal



philosophy of life is usually ‘betrayed’ through these social comments. In “A City Trader” for instance, the author bares her thoughts on human vicissitudes in the following excerpt:

But, then that is the lot of most mortals be they rich or poor. Even those who have everything that money can buy still do not find rest, as they think of one imaginary calamity which could befall their wealth or worry unnecessarily about their health. Indeed most human beings cannot find rest until the sun sets on their lives. However, the few wise ones who have learnt to rest safely in God’s hands find rest indeed.

But, let us get back to Julie...pp 48-49.

The above passage shows that the narrator has digressed from narrating the events to pause for a thought on human life, and then gets back to the narration. A similar comment is made about life within the same story. The narrator directly addresses the audience in this instance,

Yes indeed, Julie is right. Life is indeed for the living and life is beautiful. Whatever your position in life, whatever status in life you find yourself in, and whatever job you are doing do it well, and thank God for it; because you are not here by accident, you were destined to be here. So, make the best of every little bit of your life and enjoy it – page 60.

The above comment has the tone of exhortation, encouragement and motivation – a deviation from the conventional way of presenting a fictional story. Similar general comments appear in parts of “A politician” (see pages 97 and 101 for examples).

c. Non-linear Presentation of Stories:

The general plot is fragmented and the presentation of events is fleeting. It may be appropriate, albeit arguable, to categorize the text as a collection of short stories since the major connecting line seems to be the country – the prominent actions and events are situated within the country.

Moreover, the people and events in the novel are presented in a panoramic and abrupt manner. No particular character receives a central authorial

attention except that they are prominent within the different stories. In other words, none of the characters can correctly be branded as the protagonist or the antagonist of the entire collection of stories. This, no doubt, derives from the title of the book especially with the phrase “once upon” showing the passage of time, events and even people.

The stories are not only detached from one another but are also presented in a non-chronological order. It can be argued that this is a reflection of the sporadic challenges which the characters often experience. In addition, the personae are not fully developed, which is no doubt the consequence of the meager use of dialogue in the different stories. There is however a unifying link that connects the plots of the different stories – the imaginary country of Bonny-Land.

d. The Use of Proverbs

Proverbs or adages are universal in application since they state general truths or give pieces of advice. However, the ones used in *Once upon a Country* have strong African leanings. They are sometimes even qualified as ‘African’, thus giving the work a predominant African setting. The following are some of the proverbs or adages identified in the collection of stories;

Like the African saying; “All lizards crawl on their stomachs but no one knows which one has stomach ache – page 12.

This proverb is used to explain the fact that nobody knows the thoughts of others just as Mr. Williams is oblivious of the thoughts of the other passengers in the car as identified in “A Journey”.

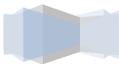
As the African saying goes “The cow that has no tail, it is God that drives away the flies from its body” – page 38.

This is an acknowledgement of God’s providence for the destitute.

A child, who will not allow his parents to sleep, will also not be able to sleep – page 64.

Melinda was very much in tune with the proverb that says, “If one has to eat a frog it has to be a fat and juicy one – page 99.

e. The Use of Poetry

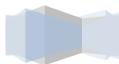


Two stories in the collection, “Tender Hearts” and “A Passage of Time”, have poetry woven into their plots. The two poems are pastoral; extolling the beauty of nature as well as drawing attention to it as a palliative measure to heal a broken or troubled heart like Emmanuella’s, or a forlorn lover like James.

Conclusion

The concept of style as it relates to an individual's linguistic or literary habits has been assessed in this article which analyzes Fatima Pam’s *Once upon a Country*. This categorization of style is a reference to some or all of the language habits of one person: a selection of language habits or linguistic idiosyncrasies which characterize an individual’s uniqueness. It is usually impracticable to try and discuss all of a person’s speech or writing habits (even for a defined and very limited period of time or body of text). Therefore, the concentration is on those features in a person’s expression which are particularly unusual or original.

Fatima Pam’s linguistic and stylistic peculiarities which are arguably unusual or original to her as identified in *Once upon a Country* include a concentrated use of compound and complex sentences, a generally simplified diction, a diversified register, an omniscient and condensed narrative style which incorporates the use of social comments, a non-linear presentation of events, the use of proverbs and poetry. This is however not an exhaustive investigation into her style as the article does not take her other works into account. It is hoped that the linguistic and stylistic features identified as typical of her in *Once upon a Country* may provide a framework for further analysis of her works.



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