

A STRUCTURALIST READING OF IFEOMA OKOYE'S *BEHIND THE CLOUDS*

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Abstract

A distinctive quality of humans throughout history has been the continuous quest to unravel meanings out of the multifarious, stupendous, marvelous and immense gifts of nature. Man has continued to search for meaning in life – trying to comprehend both his world and himself better. As a result, the human mind has consistently expressed itself in various forms in order to articulate nature more correctly. Structuralism emanated out of one of those natural currents of human thought. This paper attempts a structuralist reading of Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind The Clouds*. It first creates the background by explicating structuralism and its salient features as a critical concept in literary studies. It discusses the structuralist major interests and pre-occupations in the course of interpreting literary works. It then moves on to analyze *Behind The Clouds* by investigating the operational structures the writer has constructed within the narrative. It explores the systems by highlighting the narrative's functional units and interpreting their significations and relationships. The paper essentially argues that the narrative is premised on a feminist framework and therefore marked by gender perspectives which are mediated by African culture. It concludes by endorsing the continued relevance of structuralism in the interpretation of literary works even in the 21st century irrespective of the ever-rapid shifts in thought.

Introduction

Richard and De George in the Preface of *The Structuralist: From Marx to Levi-Strauss* explains that structuralism is a term that "cuts across traditional disciplinary boundaries" (xi) being found

in linguistics, anthropology, literary criticism, psychology and philosophy. With regard to literature, structuralism has been a major focal point among contemporary intellectuals of literary criticism. Criticism is a "philosophical enquiry into the nature and value of imaginative literature" (Daiches, 289), and structuralist critics believe that since writing is a system of signs, literature can best be expressed with the assistance of linguistic categories. As it pertains to language, literary structuralists, in agreement with linguists, uphold the primacy of language to men and that, in whatever form, it should be recognized and appreciated as a complex instrument of human thought. They maintain, also, that it is through language that the human person is defined. They as well insist on the duplicity of meaning in language; that is, that language is always making reference to something else – since it is often imbued with multiplicity of meanings.

For these reasons, among others, structuralists try to establish the relationship existing between the writer and the language he employs in constructing a literary piece. They try to probe meanings – x-raying the different possibilities of meanings; they explore suggestions and counter suggestions. Because they accept the fact that a word has limitless possibilities, they seek to find out the layers of meanings that are produced when a number of words are combined by a literary artist. It is this type of critical study that Roland Barthes, a major practitioner of structuralism, terms "semio-criticism". Richard and De George point out that Barthes, "...is interested primarily in language – how it is used and how it functions – and in probing what writing, literature, language are" (xxii). Nwabueze buttresses this view when he explains structuralism as "...a rhetorical approach which studies language and literature as a system of operational structures, systems of relationship which endow signs to items with identities and shows us the way in which we think." (7)

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that the structuralist's

pre-occupation is in finding out **how words become literature** just as Roman Jakobson pointedly states that the core issue involved in this regard is in finding out, "**what makes a verbal message a work of art?**" (85). Barthes himself also admits that

...the world has never stopped looking for the meaning of what is given it and of what it produces; what is new is a mode of thought (or a poetic) which seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means. (153)

Since the writer's use of language constitutes the central focus for the structuralists, they invariably investigate in literary works the type of language "that is very much alive, with this singular life of its own." A type of language which is struggling to digest and express "new objects, new feelings, new aspects..." (Daiches, 292) They highlight the uniqueness embedded in the poetic use of language in order to find out what extent the poetic language of the writer is effective and what qualities that are working in a particular work of art.

Essentially, structuralism as an analytical concept has developed a systematic approach of explicating literary works. As has been pointed out, it seeks to find out how literary works are organized, how distinctive literary elements function in works as well as exploring the varied ways different authors have conveyed meanings and not necessarily **what** meanings they have conveyed. It is basically concerned with structure and has a close affinity with structural linguistics. Jean Piaget in his book **Structuralism** explains that a structure is:

...a system of transformations and that the notion of structure is comprised of three key ideas: the idea of

wholeness, the idea of transformation, and the idea of self-regulation. (quoted in **A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature**, 283)

Furthermore, Guerin et al explain that, "central to the idea of structuralism is the idea of **system**: a system: a complete, self-regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic structure" (286). In her contribution, Dorathy B. Selz expresses the view that structuralism "is a study of the laws of composition in both nature and of man's creations" (quoted in Guerin et al, 282).

In ***Behind the Clouds***, Ifeoma Okoye creates a woman-centred world and goes on to weave out interactions and relationships which her major character, Ije Apia, goes through because of her being childless. It is the process of these interactions and relationships that define the characteristics of her heroine. The writer pursues the thesis that childless women are treated unfairly in many African societies. She indicts the general African society – reproaching medical practitioners, relations of married couples and prayer houses for their exploitative roles, mothers-in-law and the rest of them, for their unwholesome attitude towards women who have no children. As a feminist, Okoye accomplishes her female aesthetic through the use of words, sentences and structures of language which are employed in order to represent her cultural analysis of the childless woman in Africa.

There are certain laws – 'the laws of composition' as mentioned above, that underline the artistic construction of narratives. This is to say that the sequence of narratives most often, follow a particular pattern. The structure of ***Behind the Clouds*** indicates that the initial distinctive mark of the sequence is shown in the introduction of the major subjectivity of the novel, Ije Apia, during her visit to the hospital. This is the expository stage of the narrative. It is at this expository point that we are introduced into the major conflict of

the narrative. The objective of her visit to Dr Melie's Clinic – her desire to have a child after about six years of marriage is a vital issue in the entire narrative. Therefore, this search for a child is the cardinal function, and the narrative develops around this cardinal function. The search constitutes the nucleus of the narrative and it is that which provides the narrative its main framework and as well triggers off the subsequent actions. Even the preceding events of the narrative that have been presented as flashbacks are all connected in a way to this central motive.

Thus, the most part of the narrative comprises units which are unified under the major function. For this, a large amount of the material that makes up the narrative has to do with information concerning "the different subjectivities that are involved in the action" (Akwanya, 40). These account for the other smaller narrative units which have their own cardinal functions. For instance, we are furnished with the story of Beatrice who gives herself away to a false prophet in order to have a child. There is also the story of Ije Apia's mother-in-law with the rest of Dozie's relations. The interference of the latter group particularly helps to heighten the tension of the narrative. Virginia is, as well, a narrative agent and constitutes an integral aspect of the narrative. Her arrival to the scene becomes also a nucleus that continues the narrative fragment – contributing significantly to the development of the cardinal function. The stories of Dozie's mother and her relations, that of Beatrice and Virginia, serve as catalysers to the major function, which is the search for a child. As catalysers, they trigger off narratives which equally have their consequences. Specifically, these units serve a singular purpose of expanding the type of the cardinal function. In this respect Akwanya points out that, "In contrast to the cardinal function, catalysers only succeed one another, with no internal relations between them. But they are tied to the cardinal function, and may speed up, slow down, or defer the conclusion of the

narrative." (136). In ***Behind the Clouds***, the appearance of the catalysers play an integrative role; in other words, it serves the purpose of binding the units together.

Another pertinent aspect of the structure is that in the narrative, there are INDICES which integrate and co-exist in the subject: Mrs Apia. We find that the writer has described her in various ways in order to present a specific view point in line with her conception of the true identity of the African woman. Here are some examples:

TEXT 1 She (Ije) did not want to discuss her own problems with Beatrice, so she thought it unfair to encourage her to continue discussing hers. (4).

In her discussion with Beatrice at Dr Melie's Clinic, Beatrice remarks,

TEXT 2 You are behaving like an English woman, Ije... Remember you're dealing with a Nigerian. In Nigeria men maintain women and not the other way round. Dozie will not respect you for it. (6)

During their last visit to the village, part of her encounter with her mother-in-law is narrated in this way:

TEXT 3 A little later, Ije went into the kitchen to help her but she turned down her help a little unkindly. All the same, Ije did not leave the kitchen. She sat down on a low stool and watched her mother-in-law. (40)

In the above texts, we find apt indices which say so much about Ije Apia. For example, in text number two, the term – "English woman" could be seen as a symbolic node which groups other signifieds that include: enlightened, decent, educated, and modern. The totality of the indices on her in the entire narrative seem to portray her in a specific light which has attracted such comments from critics as that of Nnolim when he says that Ije Apia is:

...too good a wife to even exchange a harsh word with the wicked mother-in-law. Where insulted, she returns love. To neither mother-in-law who obviously sees no good in her nor to Virginia, who intrudes into her family with obvious crudity and extreme bad manners, does she ever give a piece of her mind. In addition, she is shown to be nothing less than a saint in skirts. (1989, 33)

However, our attention should be drawn to the writer's deliberate use of many precise descriptive modifiers on the major subject. We find that there are much of specified referents. Through the use of these distinguishing, individuating qualifiers, the writer draws the distinctions between her and other subjectivities. She explores this particularly in the relationship that exists between the major subject and the oppositional subjects, portraying in the main, the healthy relationship the former tries to maintain in spite of the tortuous and humiliating experiences she is passing through and the unreciprocal gestures from others. All these come together to reinforce "the handful of brush-strokes that make up the character portraiture" (Akwanya, 155) of Ije Apia. Again, her apparent naivety, her seeming, powerlessness and condescension should be seen as being contradictory. This is because beneath these, we find in her an inner strength, her will power and strong resolve to seek solution to both her personal and family problems coupled with those of the people around her.

When viewed from another perspective, we perceive that such a presentation by the writer has some other peculiar consequences on the narrative, one of which is that the major subject Ije, conceives as being emotionally and psychologically healthy to relate peacefully with the other subjectivities in spite of her situation. It is such desire to promote friendly relationships that keeps her still connected to

the group. This disposition not only serves as a source of bonding, (being a positive strategy that helps to knit up people in any given society) but also serves the purpose of fostering the discourse. Added to this, the chief character's stance and peaceful disposition highlights a central issue that is embodied in the mission statement of African feminists which is explained by Ogunyemi in this way:

The Nigerian (African) novel by women is part of this palaver tradition. Enconced in it is a conciliatory spirit, in spite of the controversies, the palava. Women have to buttress the cause of peace and progress in Nigeria, because, when all is said and done, we still have to live with our fathers, uncles, husbands, sons, friends, lovers, and other male relations. (106)

The writer also provides us with INFORMANTS. These informants tell us about the nature of the environment (place), the quality of enlightenment and level of sophistication of the characters. The type of home furnishings and mannerisms of many of them give an indication that they live in a modern society. Again, through the use of informants, we are made to experience the mood of the story as well as gain insight into the world-view of the African people.

The structuralists also seek to analyze culture as language. They postulate that culture is "a general system of symbols, governed by the same operations" and that the unity which is inherent in this symbolic field, which is culture, "in all its aspects, is a language" (*Daiches*, 157). In *Behind the Clouds*, we find the existence of cultural modes of perception and ideological codes especially those that pertain to motherhood and childlessness. In these respects, Ogunyemi in *Afrika Wo/man Palava* points out that motherhood is "a mixed blessing for the Nigerian (African) woman" a childless woman is "an anomaly, an enigma, fearfully witchlike," and "childlessness is considered tragic..." For Nwahunanya,

the woman is a tragic victim of her social and cultural environment and,

...because of the patriarchal nature of many... societies, as well as their equation of womanhood with motherhood, the usual cultural prescription... is that the man should remarry, on the often unproven assumption that the woman is the guilty partner. (193)

It is against this background that the writer constructs the humiliating and tortuous experiences of Ije Apia. The people's erroneous notions can be read from the mother-in-law's utterances:

- I. Dozie's mother in her letter to her son has stated with conviction that: "...highly educated girls were in most cases wayward and often childless, they were also headstrong and disrespectful..." (40)
- II. During her encounter with her daughter-in-law, she called her "all sorts of derogatory names. She said her childlessness was a punishment for her unchaste life as a spinster" (42)

These statements clearly particularly expose the people's conception of a childless woman in a typical Igbo society which stems from the African patriarchal set up that is structured in a way that promotes the subjugation of women, even by fellow women.

In addition, the extreme defense strategy which a childless woman adopts in order to stay afloat is encapsulated in this confessional statement by Beatrice:

The baby is Apostle Joseph's... I don't regret my action. My infidelity has saved my marriage, for my husband was on the verge of sending me away and taking a new wife. If my marriage breaks down now at least I'll have a child who will look after me in old age. *A Childless*

woman in our society does not realize the extent of her handicap until she grows old. (62) (emphasis mine)

From another perspective, we find the derogatory remark a submissive wife can attract from people around her. This is exemplified in Apostle Joseph's revelation to Ije Apia concerning her person:

God has revealed to me everything about you.
You're a virtuous woman, a loving wife, *who's as faithful to her husband as a dog is to its master. (55)*
(emphasis mine)

The above text reveals the level of subordination that exists between a man and a faithful, submissive wife in a typical African family. The inferior status of the woman is expressed severally in such derogatory terms by equating her submissiveness with that of a dog to its master. The writer portrays this with her careful choice of linguistic items. For instance here, we should note that there is a breach of selectional restriction rule because "woman" who is /+human/, /+rational/, /+worthy/, is made to collocate with "dog" which has the features /+nonhuman/, /+irrational/, /+less value/. The writer has done this in order to bring certain vital messages to the reader's attention. These include pointing out that a woman's faithfulness and respect for her husband is usually undermined and not appreciated. The inherent humiliation in this instance is quite evident. In addition, she buttresses the point that it is from the use of such subjugating and oppressive discourses that the female person is subdued.

The writer makes use of pattern repetition in order to achieve rhetorical emphasis. An example is shown in the text below. During Ije's mother-in-law's visit to Enugu, she enquires from the housemaid,

Teresa is your madam still sleeping?... I don't blame her. Why can't she sleep for hours on end? Has she

any work to do? Has she any children to look after?
(58)

Apart from repetition, the text is also heightened through the use of parallelism. The five sentences have a parallel structure and are in paradigmatic relationship with one another since they belong to the same category. The parallel structures are evident in this form:

- i. she (is) still sleeping.
- ii. she sleeps for hours on end.
- iii. she has no work to do.
- iv. She has no children to look after.

The above are related synonymously under the general semantic features /+idleness/, /+valueless/, /+indolence/. For this reason there is an intra-textual cohesion between them.

But, employing the feminist authorial voice, the writer debunks this notion by portraying the immense value of the modern educated, enlightened, decent African woman, who, irrespective of her being childless is very useful because of the nature of the significant roles she plays in her home and society. An example is seen in Ije's response to one of Dr Melie's question on why they deferred having a child after marriage. She explains:

My husband had not finished his course at the university. He was having some difficulty paying his fees and could not combine his studies with going to work. I had to keep two jobs in order to help him pay his university fees. That was in London. My jobs were difficult ones. My husband and I therefore decided it would be too much for me to hold down the jobs if I became pregnant. We had to defer starting a family until later. (7)

According to Levi-Strauss, the sentences in the above text are

related in a "symmetrical series". This is because one part of the series presents the incapacities of Dozie, while the other part presents the capabilities of his wife, Ije. It consequently exposes the structural inequalities between them whereby the woman is depicted as a more committed and contributing individual who sacrifices so much for the welfare of her family. The series can be represented in this form:

Dozie	Ije
* Had not finished his course in the university.	* Kept two jobs
* Was having some difficulty paying his fees.	* The jobs (I did) were difficult ones
* Could not combine his studies with going to work.	* Paid Dozie's university fees.

It is in such ways that Okoye assigns both social and economic values to her protagonist. Throughout the story, the writer artistically constructs the female identity through her. Hence we find many instances where Ije Apia exhibits her steadfastness, resourcefulness and supportiveness. In exploring her accommodating virtues and very respectful nature, the writer is in a way highlighting also the reformatory impact of education on the modern African woman. In this regard, Ogunyemi upholds that, "what the market place does for women, education can now do for the emergent woman." (59) The narrative is generally patterned in an ironic structure. This ironic mould is principally evident from the way the expressed fear of the heroine at the beginning of the narrative fizzles out at the end as the victim becomes the victor while the accusers turn out to be the accused. The initial conflict is resolved through the verbal conflict between Dozie and Virginia, the imposter "new wife", towards the end of the narrative. In point of fact, the arrival of Virginia to

the scene should be seen as the watershed of the narrative. After her arrival, the story moves downwards towards denouement. As the truth is unraveled, as erroneous notions are corrected, particularly with regard to the fact that sterility is not only akin to the feminine gender, the writer brings to the fore the fact that male fecundity can equally be questioned. The issue of male impotence can also be seen as a metaphor for the sterile nature of men in both the family and the general society which makes them not able to contribute much towards the progress of humanity. Moreover, employing irony here also, the writer deflates the universal concept of virginity as encapsulated in the name Virginia which denotes purity. These are examples of some of the inherent contradictions from which the writer has created meanings, so as to principally contradict the many misconceived postulations that have been entrenched in African culture especially pertaining to women and childbearing in marriage. The series of events within the narrative are inter-related, each action succeeding one another in a way that, together, they propel the movement of the story. The sequences are connected internally and coherence is achieved because the reader is able to follow the logic of the sequences.

From the foregoing, it is important that we go beyond the normative knowledge of works which have been written by feminists. When this is done, new meanings will invariably emerge. This is in line with the structuralists belief that "surface events and phenomena are to be explained by structures, and phenomena below the surface. The explicit and the obvious is to be explained by and is determined in some sense of the term – by what is implicit and not obvious." (*Daiches*, xii)

Again, Percy Lubbock goes further to insist in her book, *The Craft of Fiction* that:

It is their books (the fictional artists') as well as their talents and attainments that we aspire to see – their

books which we must recreate for ourselves if we are ever to behold them. And in order to recreate them durably, there is the one obvious way – **to study the craft, to follow the process, to read constructively.** (emphasis mine) (quoted in ***Critical Approaches to Literature*** Daiches, 288)

Therefore, ***Behind the Clouds*** should be seen as a complex discourse with layers of meanings which highlight pertinent issues that especially border on gender relations. The narrative pursues salient themes and at the end, meanings run across it. As a writer who has written within the constricting confines of patriarchal space, Ifeoma Okoye has shown that there is evidence of the existence of relevant patterns which reveal a general attitude of people towards the childless woman. She therefore, subtly, recommends positive attitudes that can replace the wrong notions and debilitating modes of behaviour especially as they affect the childless woman in any African society. More significantly, in order to make her theme assume universal relevance, Ifeoma Okoye creates a semiotic space that goes beyond the obvious linguistic codes that are prevalent in the text. It is for these reasons that Ogunyemi surmises that “their (the feminists) palava is never cheap talk. As counterdiscourse, it serves as a crucial prelude to, and an agency for change in communal behaviour. ” (106)

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